

“The Outlaw of Kindness”: An Exploration in Moral Reasoning in Child Readers of *Robin Hood*

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Abstract

Traditional moral philosophies have withstood the test of time, and people all over the world continue to employ Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism and Immanuel Kant's deontology as theoretical frameworks for judging human behaviour in moral terms. This paper brings together moral philosophy and literature in its attempt to understand how the 12-year old respondents who participated in this experiment deployed utilitarian and Kantian modes of moral evaluation to morally evaluate the folk hero, Robin Hood, as represented in J. Walker Mc Spadden's Robin Hood (2000). Bearing in mind the views of psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, who theorised that children reached a higher level of moral reasoning around the age of 12, this study required the respondents to assess Robin Hood's moral conduct with the intention of discovering the basis of their appraisals, and in the process, their own moral codes. The paper concludes with the argument that literature makes for an especially potent pedagogical tool for exploring and developing moral thinking and moral knowledge in the young.

Key words: *Deontology, Moral reasoning, Utilitarianism, Robin Hood*

Introduction

Traditional moral philosophy has played a seminal role in shaping knowledge and ideologies in the West. The three main schools - ontology, teleology and deontology - have been the cornerstones of Western moral philosophy even as they have been critiqued and refined over time to ensure their continued relevance in the modern world. Of the three schools, it is the classical utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), and the

deontology of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) that have anchored this paper, an experiment in moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is here understood as the process by which one determines what is right or wrong. Moral reasoning can be considered the “underlying cognitive architecture” that produces moral evaluations (13Cushman and Young), and this study turned to utilitarianism and Kantianism since the operative tool used to bring this “underlying cognitive architecture” to the fore was

a novel whose eponymous hero, Robin Hood, is a morally ambiguous legend celebrated for using the wrong means to achieve a right end.

The union of moral philosophy and literature in this study takes place against the backdrop of the theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, whose insights on moral development in children have dominated work in this field. The approach adopted here is qualitative, and the findings are presented in the form of a descriptive summary of the arguments proffered by the child respondents. The paper concludes with an attempt at making a persuasive case for the use of literature as a pedagogical tool for promoting moral thinking and awareness in the young.

Moral Reasoning and Moral Philosophy

As sentient beings, humans are believed to be endowed with moral agency, an “understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs” (55 Pasupathi and Wainryb). Moral agency, in turn, makes us capable of performing morally relevant actions, “actions with implications for principles of justice and care” (56). It has been the focussed task of traditional moral philosophy to define and refine concepts such as moral

agency and morally permissible deeds, and it has long sought to “fashion a rational procedure from which individuals may act rightly and by which they may judge the rightness of the actions of others and themselves” (Voice 125). Kronman argues in favour of a rational approach in moral matters stating that “reason has a positive, internal role to play in moral life” (1755), for even the most virtuous of people can “prove deficient” in critical situations (1756). When this happens, it is reason that comes to the rescue for “reason provides needed supplementation, correction, and support, adding a depth to moral life that no set of habits, however virtuous, can supply” (1756). Moral reasoning being such a crucial life skills, it is little wonder that the modern world continues to revert to traditional moral philosophy for knowledge about moral principles and moral conduct.

Utilitarianism and Kantianism are two of the most renowned schools of normative ethics, and they have withstood the test of time. Utilitarianism is a teleological doctrine based on the principle of utility, one where “a conception of the good is given prior to and independently of the right (or the moral law)” (Rawls 222). For utilitarians, whatever maximises utility is right. Bentham had argued

that human behaviour is motivated by the desire to gain pleasure and to avoid pain, and that because these desires govern all we do, they alone should be the standard against which moral behaviour can and must be judged. Since pleasure was the 'good' that utilitarians aimed for, whatever maximised pleasure and/or helped to reduce suffering was 'right'. Mill, on his part, formulated the hedonistic 'Greatest Happiness Principle' as follows: "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce [unhappiness]' (II, 2)" (qtd. in Smith 146).

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant opposed this hedonistic philosophy with his deontological theory which emphasised doing the right thing for the right reason, namely duty. This is not surprising given that the etymology of deontology is itself "science of duty" (Wood 46). Kant's conviction that only actions that arise from the motive of duty could be considered moral led him to formulate his famous principle of the Categorical Imperative consisting of four maxims that had to be satisfied before an act could be considered morally permissible. Overall, "The moral law for Kant was to "act only in accordance with that maxim

through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law'" (Wood 61).

It is not difficult to understand why utilitarianism and deontology are perceived as being antithetical to each other: where utilitarianism stresses the role of the consequences of an action irrespective of the motives that brought it about, deontology privileges the intentions that underlie an action irrespective of the consequences. As Paul Smith explains it, Kantianism and utilitarianism work differently, the former working from the inside out, and the latter from the outside in:

Kantian ethics and utilitarianism relate the concepts of the good and the right in opposite ways. Utilitarianism starts from a conception of the good (pleasure, happiness or preference- or interest-satisfaction), given independently of morality, and uses it to try to work out the right (actions, rules, policies and institutions). Kantianism, in contrast, starts from a conception of the right, of morality, which enables us to identify which ends and means are permissible, prohibited or obligatory. It denies that the good can be conceived independently of the right. (167-68)

Selected Text

J. Walker Mc Spadden's *Robin Hood* (2000), was selected on the premise

that the hero's actions lent themselves to a debate on moral behaviour using the frameworks of utilitarian and Kantian morality. As opposed to the use of brief story situations, famous examples of which include the Heinz Dilemma (Lawrence Kohlberg)¹ or the Jim and Pedro story (Bernard Williams)², this study opted to use a novel whose protagonist had a dubious reputation as an altruistic outlaw. Also, as a full length narrative, *Robin Hood* gives its readers the kind of access to the protagonist's interiority that no one-paragraph anecdotal story can. One could consider the example of Clare, Gallimore, and Patthey - Chavez who proposed an instructional method that combined reading comprehension with moral education for a research project, as a part of which, they observed a fourth grade teacher use the popular children's novel, *Charlotte's Web*, to enhance her students' moral awareness to increase the students' understanding of characters' motives and feelings (329). As she began to focus on the moral elements in the book, she succeeded in getting at least some of her students to rethink their initial perception of Mr. Zucherman as a villain for wanting to butcher Wilbur the pig, (the novel's protagonist). This is just one example of how longer and more developed narratives such as the novel score over one-paragraph story situations in

moral reasoning studies: they provide a much wider canvass and a more credible context for understanding a character's moral choices. *Robin Hood*, like *Charlotte's Web*, was hence thought to be a worthwhile text for child readers to explore from a moral stance.

Objectives, Sample Group, and Methodology

The underlying premise of this study was that inviting children to assess the morality of Robin Hood, a figure perched precariously on the cusp of right and wrong, would not only reveal their ideas about ethical behaviour, especially in utilitarian or Kantian terms, it would also bring to light the rationale that had formed the basis of those ideas. In accordance with this theory, the study sought to explore moral reasoning in 12-year olds with regard to the character of Robin Hood to ascertain whether and in what form the child participants deployed utilitarian or Kantian moral principles to evaluate the protagonist's moral conduct. Towards this end, the child participants were asked to submit written responses to five open-ended questions about Robin Hood, and were given a week to complete the exercise to ensure that they had the time to think deeply about the questions, and answer them at their pace.

The questions for the study were drafted bearing in mind Don Locke's word of caution about moral reasoning studies with children:

The crucial question is not whether the experimenter, or his or her critics, regard the target behaviour as moral or immoral, but whether the subject does, and to answer that we have to consider what would count as a moral judgment for that individual, by examining how the subject understands or conceives of morality. In cognitive-developmental terms, this is to investigate the form of moral reasoning. (18)

It needs to be mentioned that although *Robin Hood* was a prescribed text, the premature closure of the academic term because of the Covid-19 pandemic had prevented any discussions on the novel at school. Only a few pages had been read aloud by the teacher, and in the absence of any formal teaching of the text, it can be assumed that the moral views expressed by the children were almost entirely their own. To ensure that no other adult mediation interfered with the children's 'natural' moral reasoning, parents were instructed to refrain from discussing the questions and/or answers with their children. The list of instructions provided to the respondents assured them that this was not a test, that their answers

would not be scored, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they were free to write as much or as little as they liked, and without worrying about errors of spelling or grammar. It was made clear that the objective was not to judge them or their views but only to understand the reasons for their evaluation of Robin Hood, whatever that might be.

At the time of this study, the respondents had just completed grade six at a Steiner School³. Age was of supreme importance since the 11-12 age group has a special significance in the stages of moral development as outlined by Piaget and Kohlberg. Both psychologists considered moral development important enough to have theorised about it. They claimed that moral development occurred in a series of stages that were fairly universal; thus, changes in a child's 'moral sense' would occur as a natural result of progressing from one age group to the next. Differences in terminology and in their systems of categorisation notwithstanding, their interactions with their young subjects led Piaget and Kohlberg to conclude that 12-year olds tended to adopt a more flexible and subjective approach to morality having realised that rules and moral laws are constructed, not given, and hence open to challenge and interpretation. As Lerner

explains, when children become more autonomous in their approach to morality, they develop “an increasingly critical spirit of verification” together with “a sense of active and individualized choice of what is deemed fair by the child himself” (257). Punishment for breaking rules is now viewed as just or unjust in the light of many factors such as the circumstances in which an act was performed, the magnitude of the offence or the crime that was committed, and most of all, the intention with which the act was performed. As they reach this higher level of moral reasoning, children also become aware that the law, as an external system of justice, can come into direct conflict with moral values that individuals construct for themselves. In other words, children realise that our moral codes are not always in harmony with the laws society creates for itself. Overall, children also become capable of more abstract and complex moral reasoning processes once they reach the age of 12.

Lastly, 12 year-olds were selected also because, compared to younger children, they are better able to posit their arguments in writing. One could consider the case of Maftai and Holman who used children between the ages of seven to nine: they had to request the children to *draw* their idea

of morality to supplement the written responses because few children were proficient in writing (5). Using slightly older children helped circumvent that problem.

Limitations of the Study

The sample size of 16 children was one of the limitations of this study. Secondly, the open-ended nature of the questions did not allow for as precise a result as one would have got in a quantitative-based study, or a study that used 'yes-no' or multiple choice questions. Nevertheless, it was felt that descriptive responses to open-ended questions would be of greater value since the primary objective here was to explore the *process* of reasoning not to measure the product of reasoning. A third problem was that using written responses alone precluded the possibility of probing deeper into the responses received even though it had the advantage of giving the respondents time to think before they pronounced their moral judgements.

Findings

The findings of the study have been presented in the following sequence:

(i) the question posed (ii) a brief explanation about the rationale behind asking the question, and (iii) a summary of the responses to the question.

Robin Hood is a legend because he stole from the rich and the corrupt to share his wealth with the poor. In your opinion, does this make him 'good' or 'bad'? Give reasons for your answer.

This question was intended to identify what kind of moral reasoning was adopted - utilitarian, Kantian, both, or neither. The virtue-theory approach was also considered in the rare instances that it was employed. Virtue ethics, the third of the three normative ethical approaches besides utilitarianism and deontology, was founded by the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. It is a character-based approach to morality that dominated the Western tradition of moral philosophy until the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century. Amongst its main propositions is that morally upright individuals will make the right moral choices because they are morally upright. Thus, where teleological morality centralises the consequences of an act, and deontological morality focuses on the motives that underlie an act, virtue theory highlights the character of the agent who performs the act.

For the purpose of this study, responses were categorised as utilitarian if the child gave primary credence to the consequences of Robin Hood's actions, which more often than not was the benefit to the

poor. If the motive was privileged irrespective of the consequences, or if the child expressed a conviction that stealing was inherently wrong, the response was considered Kantian. In accordance with these parameters, five children expressed clear utilitarian-based answers, six had adopted a Kantian approach, two children incorporated both schools of thought, and one child did not give a clear answer saying, "It depends on how you look at it: his actions or his intentions." Two children provided reasons that could not be classified as either utilitarian or Kantian: one argued that Robin Hood was good because he stole from the rich and the corrupt, while the other declared that Robin Hood was good because he saw the "flaws" in society.

Overall, the utilitarians in the group lauded Robin Hood for working for the greater common good while the Kantians expressed the conviction that he was wrong to steal. The belief that stealing from the rich to help the poor and the needy was justified seemed to rest on the assumption that the rich were unworthy of their wealth. This was an idea echoed by two of the child respondents who claimed that the rich had not earned their wealth through hard work or fair means. In contrast, one respondent took the view that at least some of the rich might have made their money

through honest methods, adding that while it was wrong to steal from them, it was alright to steal from the others who were corrupt. Yet another child expressed the view that “it served them [the rich] right”, again implying that having wealth and being corrupt were perceived as being synonymous with each other. A rather pragmatic approach was adopted by a child who pointed out that “the rich don't use all the money they have while the poor need it.” Two children made an attempt to link Robin Hood's actions to the social context:

one appreciated him for seeing the “flaws” in society, and the other asserted that Robin Hood's actions had led to an “evening out”, or a more equitable redistribution of economic resources.

Was Robin Hood right or wrong to steal from the rich and the corrupt, and break the law to avenge the injustice that was done to him specifically? Explain why.

Robin Hood was orphaned when his parents died as a result of being imprisoned on false charges by his father's enemies, namely Fitzwalter who had “defrauded him out of his lands”, the Sheriff of Nottingham, and the Bishop of Hereford (Mc Spadden 2). Two years later, while on his way to an archer's tournament, Robin Hood accepted a dare by the Head Forester (who had usurped his father's place),

and ended up killing the king's deer. An altercation with the Head Forester then led to Robin Hood shooting him dead. In this instance, Robin Hood's hatred for the Head Forester had almost certainly affected his judgement, and the turn of events that led to him becoming an outlaw. Many of his later acts of defiance were directed at the Sheriff and the Bishop whom he despised for causing the death of his parents. The question posed sought to understand whether the children realised that Robin Hood's actions, even if for the greater common good, were at least partially the result of a desire for vengeance against those who had wronged him. However, the children seemed not to have considered the latter half of the question, and their answers were mostly limited to explaining whether and why Robin Hood was right or wrong to steal and break the law.

Eight children tilted towards a Kantian paradigm by arguing against stealing and breaking the law, two gave utilitarian reasons, four were somewhat ambiguous in their answers and gave reasons that could not be clearly classified as utilitarian or Kantian, and one child was partly Kantian in arguing that Robin Hood was motivated by the noble desire to ensure that others did not suffer like he had even but still asserted that Robin Hood was right to steal from those who had wronged him. One of the

children combined all three- utilitarian, Kantian and virtue - theory perspectives - in her response.

Most of the children either reiterated their belief in the inherent immorality of stealing, or in the utilitarian conviction that the beneficial consequences of Robin Hood's actions compensated for his questionable methods. However, there was a decrease in the utilitarian reasons, and greater ambiguity in the responses on the whole, perhaps because this question necessitated thinking about Robin Hood's actions in relation to matters such as revenge and the law. Some children argued in favour of retributive justice, stating that Robin Hood was right to seek vengeance either against those who had wronged him, or the rich and the corrupt in general because they deserved it. One child observed that Robin Hood did not steal indiscriminately; he only stole from those who had "treated him unfairly", which is why his actions were justified. Of the four children whose views were neither clearly Kantian nor utilitarian, one child noted that Robin Hood's motives were right although the means he had used was wrong, and that this made his actions immoral in the final analysis. A realistic view of how circumstances can affect moral choices was adopted by a child who argued that since Robin Hood had been "tricked" into

becoming an outlaw, he had no other choice than to continue on that path. Some children believed that breaking the law was necessary to fulfill a good purpose; as one child put it, if Robin Hood had to establish "a well-dwelling society", he had no choice but to "work outside the law." Another child claimed that breaking the law was "the only way to allow equality," and that if Robin Hood had not done what he did, "then the poor would remain helpless." One of the children offered an alternative to breaking the law, contending that if Robin Hood had taken up his problems with the King, he would have remained on the right side of the law. A two-fold justification was proffered by a child who argued that Robin Hood was right to steal from those who had "wronged" him, but who also noted that his motives were unselfish. The child who integrated all three approaches in her answer claimed that Robin Hood did what he did for "the most pure" of reasons: his actions were aimed at restoring normalcy in the world around him, and there was an innate goodness in him that did not allow him to take more than he needed. Such responses indicated that children of this age were capable of examining a situation from more than one perspective, and of using more than one argument as the basis of their moral assessments.

Would you agree with the view that Robin Hood was forced to become an outlaw? That he had no choice? Give reasons for your answer. (Before you answer this question, please refer to the text about the circumstances under which Robin Hood became an outlaw).

This question was a 'prequel' to the other questions because it required a critical assessment of the circumstances that led to Robin Hood becoming an outlaw to begin with, irrespective of the morality of his actions thereafter. In particular, it necessitated an evaluation of the Robin Hood's behavior when he encountered the Head Forester on his way to the archer's tournament.

Nine children said that Robin Hood did have a choice while six said that he did not. One child merely stated that was Robin Hood was became an outlaw when he decided to attend the archery tournament and encountered his enemies.

The children who believed that Robin Hood *had* a choice argued that he could have averted a confrontation had he "kept his calm," had he "walked away," or had he just ignored the Head Forester. According to one child, Robin Hood should have known better than to break the law. These responses illustrate a mature awareness of how refusing to give in to a provocation

can avert unnecessary conflicts and regrets in the future.

Of those who believed that Robin Hood had no choice in the matter, two respondents took a practical view of the situation in stating that he was compelled to flee after killing the deer and the Head Forester, for not doing so would have resulted in certain imprisonment, torture, perhaps even death. A belief in retributive justice was reiterated by a child who stated that Robin Hood did what he did because he felt morally obliged to avenge his father's death.

Two children exhibited an awareness of the role that circumstances played in making Robin Hood an outlaw. One child declared that Robin Hood had gotten himself into that situation. Another child declared that Robin Hood had simply "landed in that spot." Both answers revealed the children's recognition of how destiny can place us in unexpected situations, and compel us to make choices we might be unprepared to make. This thought coincides with Martha Nussbaum's belief that making the right moral choices is often a matter of "making a judgement suited to the occasion, made at the right time, perhaps even said in the right tone of voice" (127 Voice).

Only one child used a virtue-theory approach in emphasising how

character traits such as pride and anger had incited Robin Hood.

Do you believe that Robin Hood and his followers should have been pardoned by (a) the Sheriff and (b) the King? Say why or why not.

This question required the children to view Robin Hood's actions from the perspective of the ruling authorities of the land, for which they needed to adopt a more objective stance than they had used thus far. Although all the children did not answer both parts of the question, their responses still demonstrated their ideas about right and wrong when perceived not from the position of the agent performing the action but from that of an authority figure responsible for maintaining law and order, and with the power to inflict punishment or permit a reprieve as he or she saw fit.

Six of the 15 children who answered this question were convinced that Robin Hood should have been pardoned while four children thought otherwise. The remaining five children differed in their views about who Robin Hood should have been pardoned by, limiting their evaluations to either one of the two, the Sheriff or the King.

The reasons provided in favour of Robin Hood being punished or pardoned as the case may be were

varied. Three children stated that Robin Hood should have been pardoned on utilitarian grounds, namely, that he was "helping helpless souls." Two of the children invoked notions of personal injury, deciding who should have pardoned Robin Hood depending on whom he had insulted or wronged and to what extent. Thus, one child asserted that Robin Hood and his men should have been forgiven by the King because they had "they had never directly disrespected or insulted them." They also thought it understandable for the Sheriff to not pardon Robin Hood: after all, the two were "sworn enemies," and Robin Hood had openly "disobeyed" the Sheriff. Similarly, another child admitted that the Sheriff could not have pardoned Robin Hood after he had insulted him. One child, however, argued that the Sheriff should have forgiven Robin Hood since the latter had not harmed him "knowingly."

Some of the children upheld unconditional respect for the law. They affirmed the death penalty "as per the rules" for the following reasons: Robin Hood was an outlaw; he was "most wanted," and he had behaved like he was above the law. Some children invoked ideas about mercy and forgiveness: one claimed that the Sheriff, being a leader, should not have over reacted since "Everyone

should have a chance,” another asserted that the King and the Sheriff had a duty to uphold the law but they should have given Robin Hood a chance, and simply warned him “not to repeat his mistakes.”

One child made a distinction between the past and the present, proposing that Robin Hood could have been punished when he first became an outlaw but that he should have been forgiven after, in the light of the good he was doing. A philosophical approach was adopted by a child who wrote that the Sheriff had no moral right to pardon or punish Robin Hood since he was himself a corrupt man. This mature point of view highlighted a moral code according to which those in positions of power and with the authority to dispense justice, have a greater responsibility to be moral in their own conduct before they judge another's moral conduct.

Do you believe that Robin Hood deserves to be considered a hero? Say why or why not.

This question sought to invite an overall assessment of Robin Hood's actions in the light of his enduring legacy as a noble-hearted thief who used his skills as an archer and swordsman to fight an oppressive regime, and then generously shared the riches acquired with the poor.

Amongst those who believed that Robin Hood should be perceived as a hero, eight children gave purely utilitarian answers to support their views, two children combined utilitarian and virtue-theory views, one united utilitarian and Kantian morality, and one child integrated all three parameters, utilitarian, Kantian, and virtue-theory. Two children clarified that it depended on perspective: Robin Hood could be considered a hero by the poor, not the rich. The two children who thought that Robin Hood was not a hero gave no reasons to support their opinion, and one child was convinced that Robin Hood was a hero but did not say why.

The utilitarian answers emphasized the happiness that Robin Hood had brought to the poor, or the greater common good that he had worked towards. The child who incorporated all three schools of moral philosophy explained that Robin Hood should be considered a hero because his motives were unselfish (“Robin Hood didn't really want respect or to be a dictator. All he wanted was equality among men”); because his actions led to the greater common good (he saw what “the flaws in our world was and tried to fix it”); and because he was brave enough to try and reduce the “gap in society” which others were also aware

of but were too cowardly to act upon. One child took a remarkably sensitive view of the situation: she pointed out that everyone makes mistakes, but that Robin Hood should be considered a hero because he did not allow himself to be consumed by his guilt; instead, he overcame it to do something that changed people's lives.

Literature and Moral Development

Based on their research into the intersection between moral psychology and moral philosophy, Cushman and Young found that "ordinary people's mechanisms of moral judgment share core features with longstanding philosophical theories" (10). The present study showed that like adults, children also base their moral evaluations on such longstanding schools of moral philosophy as utilitarianism and deontology. However, even as the respondents displayed a wide variety of reasons within these frameworks, one child stood out for consistently referring to Robin Hood as a literary construct. As it happens, this was the child who had called Robin Hood "the outlaw of kindness," the phrase that is the title of this paper. While her perspicacious responses and her literary competence were commendable in themselves, they served as a reminder that readers can only appraise fictional characters as imaginative constructs

mediated through language and narrative techniques that are unique to a genre such as the novel. In her very first responses revealed how focalisation shapes a reader's perception: she remarked that in stories, "we express the perspective of the protagonist and never highlight the antagonist's point of view, unless in the end of the story and there is a sudden plot twist." In response to the third question she admitted that she could not say with certainty whether or not Robin Hood had a choice in becoming an outlaw because she needed to know the "back-story" in order "to understand where he stood." Her awareness of the stylistic elements came to the fore again in her fifth answer in which she referred to the "charming" representation of Robin Hood, "which marries with the story in the most playful and honest way." I refer to these answers at this juncture because it brings us to the contentious issue of using literature as a tool in moral studies.

Not everyone agrees with Nussbaum's argument that literature, by virtue of developing the "narrative imagination," is vital for cultivating humanity (44). Paul Voice, for example, takes particular offense to Nussbaum's theory that literature succeeds where moral philosophy fails, contending that she needs to provide more evidence "to convince us that there is

something intrinsic to the literary text which allows it to capture the moral in way traditional moral philosophy cannot” (126). Many contend that literature might not always be effective in bringing about moral development when one considers how it can itself engender or reinforce prejudices, stereotypes, and unacceptable ideologies such as racism, sexism, or casteism, to name a few. In the final analysis, a lot depends on a reader's meaning-making ability and interpretive skills.

Even so, all things considered, literature, whether mimetic or non-mimetic, does make for an especially powerful tool for explorations into moral reasoning. The potential that literature has to offer percipient insights into human behaviour has been attested to by the large body of research that has affirmed its possibilities for developing empathy and 'theory of mind'. Readers of literature are rarely just told what someone did; they are taken through the processes that led the character to choose a specific course of action. A reader's moral evaluation is thus more likely to be grounded in more mature evaluations of a character's motives because of the “back-story” those motives are rooted in. Can one identify with Jim (from the Jim and Pedro story), or with the husband in the Heinz dilemma the way one can identify with Robin Hood, for

example? What do we know of Jim and the husband except for the bare details? How discerning or thorough can the resulting moral judgements be? Also, while stories like the Jim and Pedro story or the Heinz dilemma can only reveal an individual's moral code, they do little to illustrate the complexity of human nature, to enhance sensitivity to another person's reality, to engender tolerance for differences in moral values, or to develop the kind of knowledge and skills required for moral development.

Conclusion

A study in moral reasoning in children through the use of literature has value at more than one level. Insights derived from a study like this could function as an aid to moral epistemology (moral knowledge). Even if moral epistemology cannot always enable us to tell right from wrong, it is still advantageous even in its most modest form, as Aaron Zimmerman argues: “At best, we can hope to provide moral people with a better understanding of their knowledge, while supplying the ignorant and incompetent . . . with an account of their deficiencies” (3). Moral epistemology, in whatever form or in whatever measure, resulting from moral reasoning work with children, can be rewarding for both teachers and students. Once teachers know what their students think and why, they could lead them into more complex

discussions about moral behaviour. The resulting benefit for child readers could be a greater awareness of themselves and others as moral beings with the power to exercise moral agency of their own, but only as long as moral knowledge is not conflated with moral indoctrination. As Duska and Whelan write, "Moral development, then, is not a process of imprinting rules and virtues but a process involving transformation of cognitive structures. It is dependent on cognitive development and the stimulation of the social environment" (7).

Academic environments are perhaps just as important as social ones, if not more so, especially for children. The child participants of this study demonstrated well enough their propensity for and skill at moral reasoning even without the active mediation of a teacher. Their performance begs the question, 'How much more refined their innate capacity for moral thinking could become through guided interventions by discerning and sensitive teachers?' The opportunity a classroom affords to debate moral behaviour and moral judgements in the presence of a teacher and one's peers is invaluable precisely because it is not likely to be found elsewhere. Of course, much depends on the knowledge, experience, skill, disposition, and values of the teacher in question, for

good texts alone may not bring about the kind of cognitive dissonance likely to lead to moral development. Instruction in the form of assisted performance where a teacher adroitly brings into focus developmentally appropriate questions and helps her charges wrestle with them may be a key requirement. (Clare et al. 337)

Moreover, as Arlene Pillar reminds us, "development of moral judgement" may not even fall within the purview of a teacher, and even if it does, using literature to foster moral development can only succeed if the teacher under whose guidance a literary text is explored has the desire and the ability to tackle the "thorny issue" of morality (148).

Locke explores the crucial question about the ultimate aim of moral reasoning studies, asking whether changes in moral reasoning will help children act rightly and recognise the application of the judgements they have formed in their own lives. He believes that developmental changes in moral reasoning must lead to visible changes in behavior. He is not sure, however, whether a causal connection can be established between moral reasoning and moral conduct since there has been no conclusive evidence on this issue thus far. Still, lack of concrete evidence is no reason to give up the

effort to explore moral reasoning in children, or deprive them of the opportunity to develop skills as vital as moral thinking, especially through an aesthetically appealing, and psychologically complex medium such as literature.

End Notes

1. The Heinz Dilemma was put forth by Lawrence Kohlberg in his moral reasoning experiments. It tells the story of Mr. Heinz who steals a highly over-priced life-saving medicine for his wife from a druggist's store on failing to raise the money for the drug. At the end of the story, readers are asked what they think of Mr. Heinz, and why.
2. The Jim and Pedro story was posited by the philosopher Bernard Williams to critique utilitarianism. The story asks what Jim should do when faced with the option offered by Pedro, an evil commander who has taken some villagers hostage: Jim can shoot one innocent villager and save the remaining 19 villagers, or refuse to shoot the one and consign all 20 villagers to death. The story invites a debate on the consequences of Jim's decision.
3. Steiner Schools, also known as Waldorf Schools, follow the educational philosophy and pedagogical methods laid down by the Austrian academician Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925).

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