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Play Dough and Plato: Finding Harmony in the Childhood Experience

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**PLAY DOUGH AND PLATO:
FINDING HARMONY IN THE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

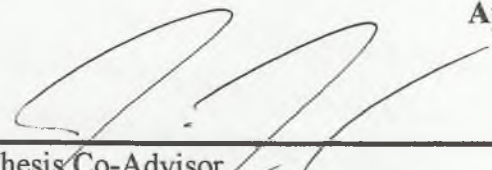
Hannah Breece

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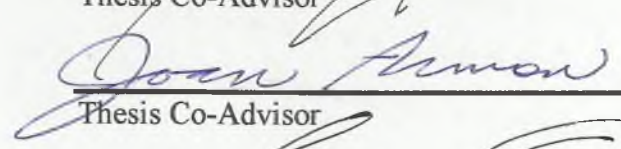
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: PHILOSOPHERS FRAMING THE DEBATE	5
CHAPTER 3: PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION	16
CHAPTER 4: A CLOSER LOOK AT STORY TIME	29
CHAPTER 5: CREATING STORIES FOR IDENTITIES UNDER FORMATION	43
WORKS CITED	48

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The proper way to educate children has been debated for millennia. How and what children should know by what age, though still hotly debated, has come to resemble a science. Teachers are expected to produce students who know a long list of information and skills, and in looking at standardized requirements and in listening to teachers talk, those expectations seem to expand and change faster with each passing year. However, standardized tests and benchmark requirements are arguably insufficient to cover the entire childhood experience. Of course, math, reading, writing, and science are important, especially to later life, but there is more to a person—child or adult—than that.

People clearly have varying talents and interests that make them unique, but there are also elements beyond that—a wisdom about life and human nature, an appreciation for certain things like truth, goodness, and beauty Is this knowledge not equally important to living a good life? How do we learn the core academic skills as well as the virtues of character that we need to be successful adults? This knowledge, I would argue, comes primarily from the ways in which we grow up learning how to *see* the world around us, how to respond to our situation. They are not lessons in straightforward facts and methods; they are lessons in observing and questioning—a unique style that cannot be committed to memory in any way other than practice and experience. Ultimately, they are lessons in critical thinking, and they are lessons in *seeing*. After all, the way that we see the world is intimately related to the way we form and project our identities through

our words and actions. Ideas shape our outlook. What ideas are most conducive to human flourishing?

In this paper, I will argue that philosophy—or at least elements of it—is a crucial part of a child’s education and moral development, and that it is something that can be made particularly accessible through children’s literature. The imagination is seldom as active as it is in childhood, nor are many experiences in childhood so standard as listening to and creating stories. Stories mimic life. They capture elements of the human experience that amuse, baffle, and inspire us. The idea of a story itself is a dialogue between our expectations and the plot, as Harvard professor of psychology Jerome Bruner writes (Bruner 15); stories serve as paradigms for actions and responses. They are part of the foundation of education. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre eloquently summarizes the close relationship between narrative and childhood development in *After Virtue*. “Deprive children of stories,” he writes, “and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their worlds. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources” (MacIntyre 216).

What should the content of stories—of education—be, though? And, at what age are certain ideas and lessons appropriate? Childhood is a fleeting stage of life leading up to adulthood. It is no secret that it is a period of immense physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth. In what ways can and should it be fostered in order to raise intelligent, thoughtful individuals who appreciate the human experience? Through the examination of theories from prominent philosophers from Plato to the present, as well as 20th and 21st

century education and child psychology experts, I hope to identify common themes and suggest a framework that addresses concerns about not only ensuring access to the full childhood (and human) experience, but also about preparing children to be successful adults.

To start, it is important to define what exactly I mean by “philosophy” when I discuss it as part of a child’s education. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s third entry is a good place to start: “The branch of knowledge that deals with the principles of human behaviour; the study of morality; ethics. Also: practical or proverbial wisdom; virtuous living” (“philosophy”). In this paper, I am concerned with philosophy as it encourages us to ask questions about the nature of human life—not only what we are able to see and appreciate that is outside of ourselves (e.g., things, nature, and other people), but also our own thoughts and actions, our understanding of good, evil, beauty, and love. In this sense, “seeing” moves beyond the purely academic and into a realm more closely connected with the art of living well.

Although fully understanding any of these ideas and experiences is difficult, if not impossible, even for the most experienced philosophers (not the least because there are always others with differing views), the *skills* of a philosopher are those of a critical thinker—pausing, examining, analyzing, discussing, reformulating. These are essential skills, regardless of philosophical inclinations. They shape how we think, which is at the core of our being; our thoughts define our actions, our personalities, our outlook on life. What is more important to both functioning as a member of society and appreciating what it means to be human, then, than learning to think well?

While philosophy and learning to think well are crucial, however, I am also concerned with elements of our human experiences—certainly enriched by philosophical thinking—that are beyond critical thinking and purely intellectual pursuits. Some experiences are not best understood by analytical methods. Rather, there is something more intuitive, perhaps best described as ways of *seeing* or *perceiving* or *feeling*. These are experiences provided, unsurprisingly, in hands-on experiences, but arguably through stories, as well. These perceptions are sparked by specific details, whether in experience or in imagined experiences (e.g., through the arts and narrative), yet at their core relate to big philosophical ideas, such as Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. This is an idea that I will address further in my discussion of educational philosophers Nel Noddings and Maxine Greene.

CHAPTER 2: PHILOSOPHERS FRAMING THE DEBATE

A number of philosophers have weighed in on the issue of childhood education, its value, and its implications. Here, I will explore two of the most recognized and relatively opposed views from centuries past—Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Despite their many differences in opinion, both are concerned with the child’s soul, with his or her development as a *human being*. Certain knowledge might be necessary, but both place greater emphasis on the act of *living* as opposed to many of the purely academic paradigms seen in modern classrooms—often reinforced by state-mandated competency testing. In different ways, both Plato and Rousseau take childhood development very seriously.

The arguments presented below provide a foundation from which the more scientific and applied accounts of education can be compared. The juxtaposition of the older, philosophical perspectives with modern science and theories will, I believe, illuminate a sense of the human element (or, as Plato might say, the soul) as it relates to physical health, core knowledge, and especially literature. There are a number of modern educational theorists who, like Plato and Rousseau, seek the education of the child beyond the purely academic core studies. The intention of these approaches tends to focus on the child as a whole person and address the development of virtues and ways of seeing the world.

Although far removed from the contemporary classroom setting, Plato and Rousseau remain deeply concerned with and contemplative of the human experience and what it

means to live a good life. Without being weighed down by the pressure of standardized tests, class structure and layout, and other pragmatic matters of classroom management, these philosophers offer an idealized description of education that specifically targets the moral and social development of the individual student. Far from being a checklist of proficiencies, they are representative of a holistic education that they believe will ultimately lead to flourishing.

Plato

Plato, one of the oldest and best-known philosophers of all time, did not neglect the important role of education in forming good individuals and ultimately creating the perfect society. Indeed, MacIntyre's contemporary concern about preparing children to act in the world echoes, to a great extent, the concerns at the heart of Plato's writing. MacIntyre realizes that the narratives that we learn and embrace become part of our identities—who we tell ourselves and others we are, and the hopes and beliefs that shape our actions and personalities. In this view, stories suddenly become of utmost importance. If this logic holds true, then the stories we tell become the identities we take on, and the identities we take lead into the actions we make. Our actions are not usually isolated, affecting ourselves and others with the consequences—positive and negative. Following this line of thought, our positive stories can lead to positive social action, and our negative stories can lead to negative social actions. So, what are we telling ourselves, and what are we telling our children?

These questions are at the heart of Socrates' discussion of childhood in Plato's *Republic*. In Book II, Socrates shares with his peers a plan that he believes will create the

ideal city. His plan particularly concerns the people, and notably, much of his emphasis is on education and conditioning, especially the education of children. Children are seen as adults in the making, beings who must be trained in a way suited to making good future citizens and especially good future leaders and protectors of the state. This education, according to Socrates, should consist of stories from an early age (Plato 54; 377a) and a training in music and gymnastic (Plato 82; 403b-d).

This approach to education is intended to develop the whole person, both mentally and physically. Though written nearly 2400 years ago, the discussion remains relevant; human nature has arguably changed very little, physical development and exercises remain important to education and healthy living, and mental development, particularly in respect to the impact of narrative, continues to shape discussions about education. Of special interest to me here is the far-reaching impact of narrative, which, of course, is no longer limited to stories and songs, but can be found in television, newspapers and magazines, and even videogames. Our consumption of media and our interaction with others tells a social narrative about collective values and expected behavior. At the heart of the discussion that started millennia ago were the same concerns that we encounter today about what it means to live a good life. While the paradigm can be expanded to modernity, some elements remain the much the same, like the traditional story time—something that Socrates starts discussing early on in *The Republic*.

“[F]irst we tell tales to children” he says. “And surely they are, as a whole, false, though there are true things in them too. We make use of tales with children before exercises” (Plato 54; 377a). In this way, children’s minds are nurtured and their ideas are

conditioned as soon as they begin to understand language. As Socrates notes, young minds are “most plastic,” and therefore, “each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it” (Plato 54; 377b). Because children are so impressionable, each story a child is told ought to be a “fine tale” that is “approved” (Plato 55; 377b-c). “[W]e must do everything,” Socrates concludes, “to insure that what they hear first, with respect to virtue, be the finest told tales for them to hear” (Plato 56; 378e). Here, Socrates recognizes that to be a certain person, one must see or perceive the world in a certain way, and the narratives we hear and embrace shape that perception. There is a connection between the stories we hear and the characters that we admire, the way that we see, and the person we want to be.

In addition to stories, learned actions are important. We learn by imitation, so it is necessary that people “imitate what’s appropriate to them from childhood” because “imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought” (Plato 74; 395c-d). For Socrates, the imitations most important to an education are music and gymnastic.

Included in the first, music, are “speeches and tales” (Plato 76; 398b) as well as “song[s] and melod[ies]” (Plato 76; 398c). The style of speeches and tales can be of two kinds: one as told by a “real gentleman” who cares about the nature of the characters he must portray (Plato 74; 396b-c) and one as told by someone unlike the gentleman—“the more common he is, the more he’ll narrate everything and think nothing unworthy of himself” (Plato 75; 396e-397a). Songs and melodies are also of several varieties—such

as those appropriate to soldiers in battle (Plato 77-78; 399a-b)—and purposes—such as a sense of grace and knowledge of what a “fine product” is (Plato 80; 401d-402a).

Of special interest to Socrates (and to my argument) is the approach of the gentleman narrator. In his speeches and tales, Socrates says, this kind of narrator will happily “imitate the good man most when he is acting steadily and prudently,” but he will be more reluctant to imitate one who lives by vices, not wishing to “represent himself as an inferior” and feeling “ashamed” to do so, not identifying himself as an individual with a non-heroic character (Plato 75; 396c-d). That is, the gentleman narrator is conscious of his actions—real or pretend—and what they mean and what they can produce or in what they can result (e.g., pain, hurt feelings, assistance, comfort, etc.). The relationship between the more educated or less “common” and lowly reader/ narrator and the characters in the story, then, is a close one; something internal rejects the notion of even acting the part of a person unworthy of admiration, even though the narrator may be a truly virtuous person in reality. The refined, well-educated individual shows not only a sense of conscience, therefore, but also recognition of the power of narrative for children as well as adults.

The combination of powerful narrative and youthful impressionability is of special interest. The passages presumably compose a substantial portion of *The Republic* because Socrates and/ or Plato recognized something in human nature that is curious and imitative. Individual observation and contemplation alone can result in changes in understanding (generally, though perhaps not always, characterized as growth or development). Education—from the one-on-one parent-child moments to the full

classroom setting—therefore, speaks to this nature, and narrative is no small part of this educational experience. This makes the stories that people hear—whether in the context of a book, a television show, a videogame, an online posting, or any other medium of communication—critical to evaluate, especially if they, in any way, impact the way in which a person behaves (and they all arguably do).

In discussing children as future citizens in *The Republic*, education can be seen as a matter of the well being of the city. In order to create the ideal city, therefore, citizens must be shaped at a time when their personalities are most supple and minds are most impressionable. This suggests some degree of external human power in determining the future through individuals. At the same time, *The Republic* also proposes education as an approach for the internal development and well being of the individual—essentially care of the individual soul. After all, the discussion about the republic, itself, was raised as a way to more easily observe the individual because the city is larger (Plato 45; 368e-369a). The city is representative of the soul, and the groups of people Socrates mentions—specifically the guardians—are representative of parts of the soul.

“Now I, for one,” Socrates says, “would assert that some god gave two arts to human beings for these two things, as it seems—music and gymnastic for the spirited and the philosophic—not for the soul and body, except incidentally, but rather for these two. He did so in order that they might be harmonized with one another by being tuned to the proper degree of tension and relaxation” (Plato 90; 411e-412a). Inner harmony through the proper balance of music and gymnastic is important to the individual *as an individual*, just as proper education for guardians and other important figures is essential to the

health of the state. *Both* the individual and the state are valuable, and narrative plays a central role in understanding both.

It is this framework—the harmony between music and gymnastic, between body and mind, between individual and community—that will create the framework for my reading and analysis of subsequent philosophers and experts. My special focus will be on finding that harmony through literature and/ or as it affects moral development.

Rousseau

In contrast to Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s approach is more explicitly concerned with the well-being of the individual student. In *Emile*, Rousseau proposes an education from the early days of childhood to full maturity in adulthood that he believes is more conducive to raising conscientious and truly happy individuals than existing educational models. In the course of his book, he takes a unique approach in proposing that formal education—reading, writing, and mathematics—be put off until the child is nearing the teen years. In this way, he believes that children are able to fully experience childhood without being prematurely preened and treated as adults, and therefore, they are better equipped to handle the more “adult” matters because they are appropriately mature. Rousseau presents his approach by creating a fictional child, Emile, for whom Rousseau acts as governor.

“Living is the job I want to teach [Emile],” Rousseau states in his opening chapter (41). “Our true study is that of the human condition... We begin to instruct ourselves when we begin to live. Our education begins with us” (Rousseau 42). Our human experiences and the lessons that we learn about ourselves, our abilities, and the world

around us are priceless and timeless; they prepare us to learn the academic and social ideas *and* meaningfully apply them.

For Rousseau, playing is an essential part of early childhood education. While they may learn from their own games in the process, Rousseau is more concerned that children enjoy their childhood because the time is fleeting and because the child likely “will not reach the age of manhood” (Rousseau 79). Therefore, pure academics and reason should be postponed, especially since “[c]hildhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it” (Rousseau 90). No child is born thinking the same way as adults; that is learned, and the learning is an essential stage that ought not be rushed.

Although high child mortality rates are no longer the norm, at least in the United States whose academic system is serving as my model of comparison, Rousseau’s point is still valid. Children may not die early deaths that make energy and time spent on education seem wasted because it can serve no practical, applied purpose; however, childhood does not last long, even in its full span. The argument to enjoy that stage in all of its wonder and apparent magic is still relevant. The curiosity and joy that children find in the world around them will not last, and it will seldom return in later life; there is arguably value in preserving and fostering it while it does last. Furthermore, there is something to be said for the value of an education that is not rushed or crammed with purely academic matters; these leave less room for the child to explore and develop a sense of curiosity that motivates further learning.

Rousseau also starts his education of Emile in part with a gymnastic training similar to the one that Plato proposes. He believes that in developing one’s strength through

physical activity, one learns how his or her body works and how to use it (Rousseau 78). He even goes through an elaborate example of taking Emile to the park to run races with other children to win little cakes, from which he expects Emile to learn how his body functions, how to judge distances, and how to work for what he wants (Rousseau 140-143). These are lessons in living and functioning, not in performing mental feats.

In a remarkable divergence from Plato and modern elementary education, Rousseau very intentionally avoids books and fables, calling reading “the plague of childhood” (Rousseau 116). He asserts that children already remember important lessons simply by observing everyday life; a child’s memory is not idle without books because “[e]verything he sees, everything he hears strikes him, and he remembers it” (Rousseau 112). Furthermore, Rousseau argues that fables, which are written with the intent of teaching a lesson, are ineffective tools for educating children. “Fables can instruct men,” he says, “but the naked truth has to be told to children... I say that a child does not understand the fables he is made to learn because, no matter what effort is made to simplify them, the instruction that one wants to draw from them compels the introduction of the ideas he cannot grasp” (Rousseau 112-113). Rousseau recognizes the power of narrative, but rather than finding opportunities for growth within their words, he sees them as misleading factors that ought to be avoided until the child has learned enough about living to understand the meanings behind them.

Upon reaching adolescence, Rousseau believes that Emile is naturally more inclined to think about others beyond himself and that he is more capable of reasoning and taking the appropriate lessons from stories. While *Emile* is a rich text with a number of maxims

outlining the proper approach to raising a child, many of which align with the music-gymnastic model that Plato set forth, my primary concern is Rousseau's treatment of books and the imagination. Rousseau is concerned by the difference between reading and experience:

Your children read. From their reading they get knowledge they would not have if they had not read. If they study, the imagination catches fire and intensifies in the silence of their rooms. If they live in society, they hear odd talk; they see things that strike them. They have been well persuaded that they are men; therefore, whatever men do in their presence serves as the occasion for them to investigate how it applies to them.

(Rousseau 218)

Rousseau goes on to emphasize the importance of good models for the child to follow. In this way, the child's firsthand experience is emphasized.

In a sense, books become the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, a metaphor Rousseau himself employs about the postponement of most lessons for fear of taking on "the tempter's function" in giving certain kinds of knowledge (Rousseau 96). Rousseau does not deny that there is knowledge within the pages of books (and other lessons, for that matter). Rather, he argues that knowledge is not yet suitable for the audience. For Rousseau, the imagination is the catalyst between knowledge or ideas and dispositions (and, consequently, their related desires and actions). Knowledge and ideas exist, and every individual will acquire elements of that body of information (factual and fictional) in the course of his or her life. In an effort to promote individual integrity and prevent desires from growing beyond reasonable limits, however, the imagination must be properly attended. After all, "[i]t is the errors of the imagination which transform into vices the passions of all limited beings" (Rousseau 219). A person must first be able to

understand and care for oneself before being drawn outward by the imagination to attend to others—what they want, need, and, especially, think. Healthy development is an outward movement that should not be prematurely influenced by too many voices. A properly cultivated imagination—one that is developed once the necessary personal understanding is achieved—allows an individual to be “transport[ed]... out of himself” in the right way, and to be sensitive (Rousseau 223) and empathetic (222).

Although Plato’s and Rousseau’s approaches to education or human formation clearly differ, especially concerning the use of stories and the primary directional thrust (e.g., from nature and inward development out compared to education from the outside intended to harmonize with nature), the two do agree on one element that particularly captures my attention here: the student is valued as a human individual whose identity is under formation. Students are not evaluated *en masse* for adequate achievement of specific tasks. Indeed, even Rousseau, who delves into great depth over even the smallest lessons, does not evaluate Emile for his accomplishment of specific tasks on a checklist, but on his development as a whole person—“Living is the job I want to teach him” (Rousseau 41)

CHAPTER 3: PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION

Given the great number of educational approaches, each of which have their own merits and shortcomings, questions still remain. How and what should children learn, *really*? Is there a way to make them into the best possible adults by training them in a certain way at a certain age, as Plato suggests? Or should they be left to explore at their own pace and to fully enjoy childhood, as Rousseau suggests? There even seems to be more tension over education today with increased concern over our competitiveness globally. If we compare ourselves to others internationally, it is usually in terms of competencies in core subjects. How do those measure a human life, though? And, in what ways can we find a balance between the unique human element and the practical and necessary measurable competencies?

In general, approaches to education can be placed along a spectrum with varying expectations of and from teachers and the curriculum. On one end of the spectrum are theorists who favor a core knowledge approach that standardizes concepts for students to learn and master, often in an effort to foster a more homogenous—and therefore *equal*—intellectual climate. E.D. Hirsch, a proponent of “national content standards” for core academic subjects (Hirsch 3), is one of the voices at the forefront of this approach. On the opposite end of the spectrum, represented by those like Maxine Greene, is a highly student-directed approach that puts students in more control of determining the direction

of study. Somewhere around the middle of the spectrum are those like John Dewey and Nel Noddings who maintain a curriculum but encourage more exploration on the part of the student; that is, the student's experience is more guided than strictly directed. Though not exhaustive, this brief overview maps the primary schools of thought on educational approaches that I will discuss the most.

E.D. Hirsch

In a startling introductory statement to his book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, E.D. Hirsch writes, "Although our political traditions and even our universities may be without peer, our K-12 education is among the least effective in the developed world" (Hirsch 1). In fact, he points out, "[s]cholars from abroad who study American schools are astonished that our children, who score very low in international comparisons, are actually as competent as they manage to be" (Hirsch 1). These jarring observations indicate a shortcoming in education that few—from either side of the spectrum—would deny; however, Hirsch claims that these shortcomings are the result of "long-failed Romantic, antiknowledge proposals" (Hirsch 2)—that is, the more student-centered philosophies.

In looking at the opposition between members of different parties across the spectrum, Hirsch identifies some of the rhetoric at the heart of the debate, including:

- Traditional vs. modern
- Merely verbal vs. hands-on
- Premature vs. developmentally appropriate
- Fragmented vs. integrated
- Boring vs. interesting
- Lockstep vs. individualized

The nature of such language, he goes on to argue, creates biases for the parents, who obviously want their children to be engaged and excited about their education (Hirsch 8).

Unfortunately, Hirsch claims, the approach that parents are inclined to choose is not the effective one, despite the fact that they are supposed to be the most natural.

Historically, “human affairs are rarely brought right by letting them take their natural course,” which is exactly what these modern schools (a “post-Enlightenment aberration”) are attempting to do (Hirsch 77). Citing several psychological and neurophysiological studies, Hirsch claims that the traditional, core-based approach actually better fosters development. “Learning builds on learning,” and “readiness for secondary processes is not a matter of natural development but of *prior relevant learning*” (Hirsch 222). The teacher-directed approach, despite its synthetic appearance, especially in the language set out above, is therefore the more efficient alternative; it communicates concepts and competencies *and* it equalizes intellectual status and opportunities.

Equalizing students’ foundations is one area in which Hirsch’s approach aligns particularly well with Plato’s. In *The Republic*, a substantial motivation in educating children is to create good adult citizens and leaders, which is something that Hirsch himself notes (Hirsch 72). Education is closely tied to becoming a good citizen, and it unites those individuals when it comes time to govern the state. Likewise, Hirsch sees knowledge as a uniting force between people that helps them to understand a common culture and a way to equalize them in dialogue with one another. In several of his books, Hirsch writes that “economic effectiveness and social justice require all citizens to share an extensive body of school-based background knowledge as a necessary foundation for

communication and participation in society” (Hirsch 14). A standardized educational background shared by individual citizens prepares them not only for activity in the classroom, but importantly, well beyond the classroom.

The “parental” rhetoric, on the other hand, is precisely Rousseau’s argument. Throughout the book, Rousseau the tutor manipulates the situations Emile faces such that they are age-appropriate, hands-on, and orchestrated to appear to Emile not like a lesson but as a real-life experience. For example, to teach Emile a lesson about justice and interacting with others, Rousseau the tutor allows Emile to keep a garden; however, the plot also belongs to the gardener, Robert, who happened to be growing melons, and upon discovering that his work has been “ruined,” becomes upset and gets rid of the beans that he later discovers Emile had planted (Rousseau 99). Emile, of course, is upset by the destruction of his work, and Rousseau and Robert work to make a compromise for garden space (Rousseau 99). The point of Rousseau’s masked lesson in justice for Emile is to “make him feel that he has put his time, his labor, his effort, finally his person there,” to gain a sense of ownership that is lost and then regained through negotiation (Rousseau 98-99). It is essentially experiential and individualized learning to its fullest extent, and it is in life lessons that only distantly relate to the traditional core studies—almost the exact opposite of Hirsch’s model.

John Dewey

Like Hirsch but writing nearly 60 years earlier, John Dewey in his *Education and Experience* also notes the distinction between two opposing models of education. He defines these two opposing views of education as “development from within” versus

“formation from without” (Dewey 17), which would be parallel to Hirsch’s explanation of a modern/ “post-Enlightenment” model versus the traditional/ core knowledge model. Unlike Hirsch, however, Dewey is opposed to the strictly traditional model of learning because it lacks “active participation by the pupils” (Dewey 18), and the “learning process” becomes associated with “ennui and boredom” (27). In a rather depressing line, he writes, “Theirs is to do—and learn, as it was the part of six hundred to do and die” (Dewey 18). The allusion to the Tennyson poem here juxtaposes traditional classroom scenes with Tennyson’s images of the “valley of Death” to where the soldiers are forced to march and face a horrible, deadly battle—certainly not what anyone would like to think about education.

Disquieting imagery aside, however, Dewey’s ultimate point is that firsthand experience—albeit only “*quality*” firsthand experiences (Dewey 27)—is best able to educate by bridging the experiential gap between adults and children. Students in traditional programs do have experiences, he writes, but they have a “defective and wrong character” that does not facilitate “connection with further experience” (Dewey 27). The “principle of continuity of experience,” he believes, is the foundation of learning—“every experience lives on in further experience” (Dewey 27). When experiences build upon each other, they build our character and attitude, help us to understand what it means to be human, and aid us in finding “ways of meeting and responding to all the conditions which we meet in living” (Dewey 35). To simply assume that a checklist of core competencies will prepare an individual for later life “is a

mistake,” Dewey continues; the necessary knowledge will be gained from proper application in similar conditions—that is, experience (Dewey 47).

Ultimately, core studies are essential, but they must be taught in a hands-on way that directly engages students and allows them to build upon what they have learned previously. Like Rousseau, Dewey wants the child to learn something for him- or herself and for the education to be guided and manipulated in a way that allows that. Similar to both Plato and Rousseau, Dewey also stressed the importance of both mental and physical development, stating that “[w]e have still to learn from the example of the Greeks who saw clearly the relation between a sound body and a sound mind” (Dewey 63). He goes on to argue that, “even the young” should have “brief intervals of time for quiet reflection,” as well as physical activity in order to understand the way that the parts of the body work and to maintain health.

Nel Noddings

Nel Noddings, an educational philosopher of the past several decades, dedicates some time to writing about critical thinking and moral goodness. In her *Philosophy of Education*, she discusses the importance of “pedagogical neutrality” in presenting topics to students in order to promote “critical thinking in the moral sense” (95). The teacher’s aim should be “to help students to understand that flesh-and-blood human beings hold these views—some of which are repulsive—and to give them a sense of both the possibility and tragedy of human encounters” (*Philosophy of Education* 95). Important to pedagogical neutrality, however, is the understanding that it “is not the same as moral or intellectual neutrality” (*Philosophy of Education* 95). That is, teachers as individuals are

still entitled to opinions, and they may share some of their “beliefs and reasons with [their] students” (*Philosophy of Education* 95); however, the goal is to encourage students to see multiple perspectives and decide for themselves.

Although this particular proposal is not directly related to reading (or, in the paradigm above, its converse in direct experience), it does speak to her view of critical thinking for students. It also shows the value that she places on immersing students in thoughtful life experiences, helping them to explore what it means to be human—to know that there are tensions and disagreements and that not everything is comfortable or easy to understand. What is especially interesting about her overall approach is her emphasis on integration. She believes that critical thinking should not be limited to certain classes or lessons. “We rob study of its richness when we insist on rigid boundaries between subject matters,” Noddings argues, “and the traditional disciplinary organization makes learning fragmentary and—I dare say—boring and unnecessarily separated from the central issues of life” (*Educating* 8). When subject areas are more integrated, students are able to make more of their own connections and otherwise engage more with the material in a way that can apply to the way they live their lives—finding similarities, asking questions, approaching problems.

In *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*, Noddings seeks to prove that such integration is possible by showing how the big philosophical and theological questions can arise and produce fruitful and applicable conversation even in math and science classes, at least in high schools given the current format of the curriculum. This is where stories come into play. For example, she writes, “When students are introduced to

rectangular coordinates and graphing, they should also hear something about their inventor, Rene Descartes, and his attempt to prove that God exists” (*Educating 2*). Given context from the story, students can then engage in discussions about the existence of God or gods in a way that also relates to the subject. It is a way to add interest and context to a subject that is otherwise presented in a more fragmented manner and isolated from everyday experiences. “The idea,” Noddings states, “is to acknowledge students’ longing for connection and meaning, to show the vitality of mathematical thinkers and thinking, to break away from the humdrum of the traditional curriculum” (*Educating 6*).

With this approach to critical thinking and interdisciplinary engagement, Noddings seeks to provide a deeper meaning to education for students:

One would think, looking at today’s high schools and even at educational treatises, that the purpose of life (for teenagers) is to get into a good college and that the meaning of life is entirely bound up in material success. Far too little discussion centers on the dignity of work and the interdependence of people who work in a variety of fields ranging from vegetable growing to law. Children should *not* be taught that education is a means to escape the work of their parents. That same work may or may not be appropriate for them—just as it may or may not have been appropriate or satisfying for their parents. Rather, one purpose of education should be to develop an understanding and appreciation of existence, of life lived fully aware—‘wide awake,’ as Maxine Greene (1978) puts it.

(*Educating 14*)

Education, therefore, should be more than a checklist of competencies in a few core subjects. What is more, education happens well beyond the confines of traditional classroom walls, subjects, and books. Noddings, in fact, proposes a curriculum that would expand upon the standard core subjects to include years of lessons in living and understanding our roles and relationships with others in the larger world, and a central component of that curriculum would be practice (*Educating Moral People 112*). That is,

throughout the student's school career, he or she would engage in activities that provided hands-on experience intended to lend a more comprehensive understanding of a particular role or stage in human life, as well as the relationship dynamics involved; Noddings provides examples of high school students helping in a preschool or kindergarten class, and then later in a nursing home (*Educating Moral People* 112). While Hirsch justifies a core model with the goal of equalizing student capabilities, that alone is not enough for Noddings. For her, education should prepare students to embrace their humanity and the nature of their world. This is achieved by learning how to think and to integrate not only multiple subjects, but diverse perspectives on and experiences in living.

Maxine Greene

Finally, on the far end of the spectrum, is Maxine Greene, whose proposed educational model is highly student-centered and designed to promote critical engagement at all stages. It is especially inclusive of the arts—literature, poetry, music, dance, drawings and paintings, etc. In *Variations on a Blue Guitar*, Greene calls for a “communal self-awareness” that looks both at the impact of “mass culture” and at “the moral issues raised by works of art and the questions into which they may feed” (*Variations* 105). She is especially concerned with the way the imagination and moral conscience work together:

[I]n the kind of world in which the imagination is alive, people have the capacity to look through one another's eyes, to take one another's perspective upon the world... For me, moral concern begins with that kind of connectedness, with reciprocity, with the imagination needed to experience empathy. It is enhanced and deepened by what some of us

call the ethical imagination, which I want to believe can be released by encounters with the arts.

(Variations 108)

According to Greene's proposal, then, the imagination is at the heart of both individual morality and an understanding of part of the human experience; it connects us to one another. The imagination also plays another important role, though. When engaged, it serves as a motivating factor for students—it helps us to seek meaning in our lives and in the things we encounter. In *Landscapes of Learning* (the exact passage, in fact, that Nel Noddings cites and the concept where the two agree) she borrows Alfred Schutz's term for this—"wide-awakeness," which is, according to Schutz, "a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements" (*Landscapes* 162-163). Beyond a passive understanding of what it means to be a human being, wide-awakeness is an active awareness, a "concrete" idea about life and not an "abstraction" like "the True, the Beautiful, and the Good" (*Landscapes* 162-163).

In a framework like this, the imagination becomes the guide. For Greene, it can simulate an experience and evoke feelings of compassion, empathy, joy, and sorrow without direct experience; the imagination need only be sparked—which is where Greene argues that art comes into the scene. It is through the experience of these feelings—sparked by art—as well as our subsequent understanding of those emotions and others' roles in the world that allow us to develop the ability to better exercise them in relation to others. In this way, we are more attuned to the needs of those around us, more aware of our humanity and the fragility of our lives. To put this learning to best use, for Greene,

means contemplating and *applying*, which is perhaps why she hesitates a bit regarding concepts like Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. They can become thought traps that lead the individual astray, or at the very least, distract him or her from the direct experience of living. Thinking about big ideas like that can become involved and, as seen in Platonic dialogues, for example, become an exercise in sitting and talking, agreeing and disagreeing—but not exactly *acting*.

This is not to say that the big questions are unimportant or should be left out of education entirely, however. Questions about our values and relationships with others must continue to animate discussions of morality, and narrative is one medium through which this can be accomplished. “We are appreciative now of storytelling as a mode of knowing,” Greene writes, “of the connection between narrative and the growth of identity, of the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness” (*Releasing the Imagination* 186). Reading and hearing stories can spark the imagination to ask important philosophical questions in a less abstract way. Greene gives the example of slavery in the United States to support her claim. “[W]e may read about the history, demographics, and economics of slavery [...], but we may also read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and in the course of achieving it as meaningful, find ourselves possessing a new perspective of slavery, perhaps also a stunned outrage, perhaps also more about our own lives and experiences of loss [...] Literature does not replace historical description, but engagement with it does tap all sorts of circuits in reader consciousness,” including ways that those ideas apply to our own lives (*Releasing the*

Imagination (186). In this case, the reader (or, as the case may be, listener) arguably engages ideas about the big ideas—especially Truth and Goodness here—but it is in an applied way that clearly connects the importance of those ideas to the way we understand our own identities as U.S. citizens and individuals interacting with others.

Looking Toward an Alternative

Preparing individuals to act in the world is essential, and I would argue that exposing children to big questions and providing them with opportunities to explore those through both imagination and personal experience are essential to raising thoughtful and conscientious individuals. A humanistic approach that considers the development of the individual mentally, physically, and spiritually—as well as competitively concerning core competencies—is one that best promotes flourishing. Each of the models above presents ways to improve the existing education for today’s youth, ranging in emphases on core competencies and in a kind of worldly wisdom. A few questions remain, though. Where do we draw the line for what is enough pragmatic academic learning? When education is reduced to a graph, how do we address a curve that is forever increasing and for which, globally, there will always be strong competition? I would argue that there comes a point when stacking and cramming core competencies feels forced and robotic. In this kind of situation—almost game-like in many ways—competitive advantage must come from somewhere else, lest we be caught in a cycle of “more, more, more” that I fear would be the case if we followed Hirsch’s model for too long. More is not always enough, but differentiation just might be.

Above all, I think, it is imperative to not lose sight of the human element, and that is where I see the best opportunity for differentiation. Education is not and should never be a matter of forming more capable, efficient, powerful—a.k.a., *profitable*—human capital to be traded in the world market. We must acknowledge and address these utilitarian realities, of course, but they should not overshadow the other side—humanity, the *soul* within each and every child and adult. I think some of this comes from contemplation of the big ideas—especially as we come to appreciate our lives as they are and as they can be—and from an understanding of the nature of human life, which includes not only our relationships with nature and ourselves, but with others. Who are we in the world? Why do we believe and act the way that we do? Our relationships are dynamic, with one relationship challenging assumptions made by another (e.g., a friend questioning someone’s consumption and disposal habits... What is the relationship between the two? What is the relationship between the individual and the environment? How does an individual define him- or herself through consumption?), so recognizing their power and how they can provide elements of an individual’s identity are essential. We are more than what we are capable of doing, and the complexity must be embraced, even in its unquantifiability.

CHAPTER 4: A CLOSER LOOK AT STORY TIME

Of the traditional and “modern” approaches discussed above, I believe each could work well if properly executed, and combining elements of each might even work, too. However, consistency over time and use of that specific program is key, and that might be the hard part to execute. It would require enough policy makers, curriculum writers, school administrators, teachers, and parents to come to agreement, which would be time-consuming, at best. This is why I am fond of Thomas Wartenberg’s proposal to integrate philosophy into the existing curriculum, not too different from either Noddings or Greene. While my proposal differs from what he presents in his book, *Big Ideas for Little Kids*, in several aspects, I do agree with the logic behind his program, which has taken some of what Noddings and Greene have said and turned it into a small, tangible practice.

Philosophy for Kids

Wartenberg, a professor of philosophy at Mount Holyoke College and one of the leading voices in the childhood philosophy arena, makes clear the connection between philosophical adults and naturally inquisitive children. He suggests that instead of being just the “great bearded old men” that have come to represent them, philosophers can just as easily be seen as “an overgrown child” who has kept a “youthful attitude of posing questions about the world” (Wartenberg 5). Having been inspired by his young son’s thought-provoking questions, Wartenberg believes that “trying to maintain philosophy as the exclusive domain of the old—or those of at least college age—is a serious mistake...

that has deep implications for our lives as human beings and for the society in which we live” (Wartenberg 5). Children’s natural curiosity and creativity should be encouraged in a way that allows them to develop critical thinking skills, he argues, not as a new and individual subject, but integrated into the existing curriculum (Wartenberg 6-7).

Wartenberg approaches this through stories, which are an integral part of not only early education but human lives in general, as psychologists and philosophers, alike, suggest.

Wartenberg’s method revolves around the teacher choosing a text to read with a class, group, or individual student and then completing a lesson plan for it that essentially outlines several discussion questions for the teacher to ask or to guide class discussion before, during, and after the reading (Wartenberg 51-53). While Wartenberg shares an approach broken into simplified steps that teachers, even those not well-versed in philosophy, can follow to start a philosophical discussion based around the children’s book, he and his students have also compiled a library of pre-made lesson plans for popular children’s books which he shares in his book and on his website. Such questions include, for example, “What makes someone an artist?”, “Does a contest always have to be a race?”, and “How should the judge choose which painting is the best?” to guide an aesthetic discussion following the reading of a book entitled *Emily’s Art* by Peter Catalanotto (Wartenberg 131-132). As another example, for a discussion on altruism following a reading of *The Giving Tree*, questions might include “Do you think the boy is selfish? Why or why not?”, “What about the tree, is it selfish?”, and “Why do you think the tree is not happy after giving the boy its trunk?” (Wartenberg 101).

Regardless of the method one uses to guide discussion, though, Wartenberg's ultimate purpose is to fit philosophical thinking smoothly into the existing classroom practices, and most importantly, into a practice that the students enjoy. Like Rousseau, Dewey, Noddings, and Greene, Wartenberg is wary of traditional, "teacher-centered" models that turn "*acquisition of knowledge*" into the primary goal of education (Wartenberg 16). He is attuned to the fact that children find great joy in stories, noting that story time in class is one of children's favorite activities. Because of their enthusiasm, they learn many "language-arts skills almost by osmosis" (Wartenberg 11). Therefore, Wartenberg believes that philosophy for children can "mobilize their natural curiosity and help them to *discover, express, and support* their own answers to questions that concern them" (Wartenberg 17). To do so through literature recognizes both children's learning preferences *and* the power of literature on childhood development.

Given all of this, an educator must ask him- or herself what goes into all of this and to what end. What is the potential for the discussion to become too methodical and structured, especially in such a way that the students are not engaged or their ideas and questions are stifled? Might it be better to allow silent time for them to process the ideas on their own, or should that be used in combination with discussion questions? If the discussion questions become the focus, what happens to the value of the literature in itself? That is, does it or could it make literature become merely a tool for analysis? Where should balance be between literature and experience? These are all important questions to consider, and finding the answer with philosophers and educators does not always lead to a definitive answer.

Given the demands of standardized testing results, including more hands-on experiences and/ or story times with discussions may not even be practical to expect in classrooms, at least without some restructuring. Assuming that time does allow for both, though, turning to the questions above is no easier. There is certainly potential for any discussion that is remotely scripted to become excessively structured and unsupportive of students' creativity, cultural heritage, socioeconomic background. Furthermore, avoiding excess structure requires experience, often through training, which can still result in attachment to methodology. Then the question about art for art's sake becomes central. Is it wrong for children to encounter literature in the classroom just for pure enjoyment and whatever ideas they may draw from it unconsciously? Too many questions may well lead to associating reading with a sense of fatigue, as if even listening to a story is a chore. If story time ceases to be enjoyable, then Wartenberg's whole idea is moot. Furthermore, stories surely cannot replace the learning that takes place through experience, so with the limited time for flexibility that teachers in reality have, the teacher (or the curriculum writers) are responsible for determining the appropriate balance and, ideally, finding complements between the two.

Story Time and Development

Therefore, because philosophers and educators can have equally well-grounded but still opposing perspectives on the role of literature and philosophical discussion, and because finding a balance between the two could pose even more difficulty, bringing in additional perspectives from the sciences seems like a logical next step. Developmental

psychologists Howard Gardner, Jerome Bruner, and Bruno Bettelheim all weigh in on childhood education, especially as it relates to narrative.

Gardner

Howard Gardner, a psychologist and professor of neuroscience at Harvard University, wrote *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* in 1999. In it Gardner outlines what he sees as the best approach to education based upon learning patterns and key themes. Although narrative is something that he discusses, and he defines it as one of several “entry points” (which include logic, aesthetic, and hands-on, among others) to reach students of varied strengths, interests, and backgrounds, what he writes about the big ideas is of greater interest here. Not a proponent of strict core knowledge approaches, Gardner’s approach comes close to aligning with Noddings’ and Greene’s; however, unlike Greene, Gardner asserts the importance of the big ideas.

“I believe,” he writes, “that three very important concerns should animate education,” and these are truth, beauty, and goodness (Gardner 16). Unlike Greene’s perception of these as abstract ideas, for Gardner, these three concepts are not only culturally and historically significant, but they are central to the human experience:

The understanding of striking examples of truth, beauty, and goodness is sufficiently meaningful for human beings that it can be justified in its own right. At the same time, however, such an understanding is also necessary for productive citizenship. The ways of thinking—the disciplines—that have developed over the centuries represent our best approach to almost any topic. Without such understanding, people cannot participate fully in the world in which they—*we*—live.

(Gardner 18)

In contrast to Greene’s fear that these three ideas are too abstract and not conducive to “wide-awakeness,” Gardner maintains that they are essential to our understanding of

everything else that we encounter. Instead of isolating us from one another by the contemplation of abstractions, Gardner finds that those contemplations color all that is around us; truth, goodness, and beauty not only enrich our understanding of our lives and the world around us, but they are central to it.

Given his preference for the incorporation of the big ideas, Gardner's skepticism for the traditional education is unsurprising. He sees "'core knowledge' or 'cultural literacy,'" as "an idle pursuit ... [that] conveys a view of learning that is at best superficial and at worst anti-intellectual" (Gardner 24). While he is not opposed to familiarity with the spectrum of topics in the traditional K-12 education, he believes that long lists of topics for students to plow through and master is ineffective. Instead, Gardner elevates the role of questioning in education, stating that "knowledge and, more important, understanding should evolve from the constant probing of such questions" (Gardner 24). Questioning and exploration are fostered in one way (using one of his multiple intelligences categories) through analogies, similes, and metaphors, which he believes, "illuminate the less familiar topic in terms of the more familiar," and encourage the active engagement of the students (Gardner 199-201). The students can evaluate existing examples and then make their own to further see for themselves the "virtues and limits" of such comparisons (Gardner 201).

For example, Gardner has several paradigms that he returns to for each of the modes of learning, and these include Darwinian evolution, Mozart's career, and the Holocaust. For his discussion of teaching with analogies and metaphors, he brings up Darwin's impression of Malthus' economic model and the way that "Darwin explicitly used the

analogy in his writing” (Gardner 190). The teacher can use narrative to engage a story about an economist and a biologist, but then he or she can extend the analogy that Darwin made to easily identifiable modern changes; he uses examples of changing fashions and hairstyles, transformations in music through decades, character types in literature (Gardner 200). None of the examples, of course, can be perfectly explained by Darwinism, so the merits and shortcomings of each example can spark conversations.

While conversations and curiosity can be sparked for a number of reasons and through any one of his entry points to learning, the big ideas that Gardner introduces in the beginning (truth, goodness, and beauty) remain central. The ideal education, then, is one that uses the big ideas to explore and understand the world; they enrich and color our experiences by motivating questions. For him, there may not be an ultimate truth, goodness, or beauty, but our interaction with and exploration of them do lead to the questions—the curiosity—essential to motivated learning (Gardner 24).

Bruner

Psychologist Jerome Bruner also poses significant questions about the nature of education. One of the most striking and closely related to the theme in this essay is whether “selfhood become[s] richer by exposure to ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’” (Bruner 69). Immediately following this question, he discusses the idea of education as *Bildung*, “character building, not just subject matter” (Bruner 69). This is really my central concern—finding a way of seeing education that allows students to develop character and virtues, as well as to appreciate and find wonder in the human experience, all while still learning and understanding the more purely academic realms.

Clearly, finding a balance is necessary, but where that fulcrum lies is a point of contention.

As part of that balance, Bruner identifies and focuses upon the power that stories hold for us. “[Literature] explores human plights through the prism of imagination,” he writes. “At its best and most powerful, fiction, like the fateful apple in the Garden of Eden, is the end of innocence. Plato knew this all too well when he banned the poets from his republic. Tyrants knew this truth without Plato’s instruction, as have all revolutionaries, rebels, and reformers” (Bruner 9-10). Mirroring Rousseau’s Garden of Eden metaphor, Bruner recognizes the potential found in the combination of stories and the imagination; however, in it Bruner finds a force for growth and not the destructive, misleading potential that Rousseau sees.

Bruner questions the exact role of narrative in our lives, not unlike MacIntyre in proposing that it is a “part of our armamentarium for coping with surprise” (Bruner 27). Narrative addresses that element of surprise by shaping our expectations, he argues. Through exposure to literature, children “develop expectations about how the world should be,” and in their growth, they become like adults in being “highly attuned to the unexpected, even attracted to the odd” (Bruner 31). Stories teach us how to live by teaching us customs and expectations. Without them, it would seem that we would not know how to act, or would at least be very confused. Stories are, therefore, necessary to development.

The power and use of stories goes beyond hearing and engaging or even applying those lessons to life, though. We also seem to live our lives and define ourselves through

narrative. “Self-making is a narrative art,” Bruner writes (65). It involves internal elements such as “memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, [and] subjectivity,” as well as external factors that are “based on the apparent esteem of others and on the myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up from the culture in which we are immersed” (Bruner 65). Bruner goes on to write about the psychological concept of self as it relates to narrative:

[It] comes out to be little more than a standard protagonist in a standard story of a standard genre. She sets out on a quest, runs into obstacles and has second thoughts about her aims in life, remembers what’s needed as needed, has allies and people she cares about, yet grows without losing herself in the process. She lives in a recognizable world, speaks her mind when she needs to but is thrown when words fail her, and wonders whether her life makes sense. It can be tragic, comic, a bildungsroman, whatever.

(Bruner 72-73)

When even the studied psychological paradigm describing human life easily understood as a story, it is clear that narrative is more than an idle pastime or a teaching tool. The question of which mimics the other hardly matters here; they are intertwined, and the fact that they are so closely related is just another reason that narrative should be paid extra attention in education.

Bruner also examines the creation of stories on the individual level, outside of academia. In particular, he looks at the ways in which we tell stories to create our own identities:

A self-making narrative is something of a balancing act. It must, on the one hand, create a conviction of autonomy, that one has a will of one’s own, a certain freedom of choice, a degree of possibility. But it must also relate the self to a world of others—to friends and family, to institutions, to the past, to reference groups.

(Bruner 78)

We use narrative to understand and define the roles that we play and the roles that others play in our lives. The values that we assume and that motivate our actions are not merely chance ideas. They come into our lives through some part of our story, and we act based on the ways that those values speak to us and fit into our self-image as the protagonist in our story.

Bettelheim

Like Bruner, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim also pays particularly close attention to the use of narrative—both as the child hears them and as he or she creates them. The child can “achieve... understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams” (Bettelheim 7). The daydreams, he argues, are fed, consciously or not, by the content that the child takes away from the stories. Particularly fond of fairy tales, Bettelheim believes that “they offer new dimensions to the child’s imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own” and that their unique style “suggest[s] images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life” (Bettelheim 7).

The interaction of the child with the story and real life is particularly important to the child’s moral imagination. Good and evil characters are, Bettelheim argues, not harmful to the way children process information, as some may argue. Like Socrates in *The Republic*, Bettelheim sees an active relationship between the reader/ narrator and the

characters in the story; the narrator in Plato wants to imitate the heroic figure and avoid taking on the identity, even in just sharing a story, of the less-admirable characters (Plato 75; 396c-d). As opposed to Rousseau, who believes that fairy tales are improper to children because their minds work differently and are unable to apply the lessons, and in fact, often apply them “in a way opposite to the author’s intent” (Rousseau 115), Bettelheim sees fairy tales and fables as an essential element of childhood education. Fairy tales, Bettelheim argues, “offer new dimensions to the child’s imagination which it would be impossible for him to discover truly as his own.” It is through hearing stories that feed his or her own story creation that children are able to process events in their lives (Bettelheim 7). Rather than being consumed by the successful conveyance of the author’s intended moral of the story, Bettelheim focuses on the child’s use of narrative to process the world around him or her, good and bad alike.

Furthermore, because “evil is as omnipresent as virtue” in fairy tales, the child is neither misled about the nature of the world and is better able to ask him- or herself “not ‘Do I want to be good?’ but ‘Who do I want to be like?’” (Bettelheim 8-10). The child can cast certain people in his or her life into specific roles in a standard fairy tale (such as the mother and the step-mother) and then respond emotionally to those individuals in real life having processed the situation through the lens of the fairy tale (Bettelheim 69-70). The fairy tale’s lives on in the child’s mind and emotional processing. It is played out in imagined scenarios and in more real situations, and it lasts in memory to add to the child’s own life narrative. The child can “return to the same fairy tale when he is ready to enlarge on old meanings, or replace them with new ones” (Bettelheim 12).

Bettelheim argues that this interior reflection—both in the child’s completely fantasized stories and in the child’s merging of imagination and reality—is central to childhood development, going on to assert that trying to make children learn through experience alone, as adults do, is mistaken. The growth necessary to think like an adult, to gain a “mature understanding of ourselves and the world, and our ideas about the meaning of life” is a slow process, like that of physical growth from childhood to adulthood (Bettelheim 3). Because the child’s mind works in this way, the imagination and its use in the stories that the child creates are best supported by literature that does not exactly mirror the reality in which the child lives. Despite arguments, such as those that Rousseau might set forth, that allowing the imagination to run free with unreal and often symbolic ideas is dangerous, Bettelheim suggests that not only do children understand such unreality and symbolism, but that they are better able to separate the fictional narrative and their own reality when processing events in their lives (Bettelheim 62, 65).

Therefore, Bettelheim critiques modern children’s literature for its failure to arouse the child’s imagination and internal storytelling. The books used to teach reading, he claims, “are designed to teach the necessary skills, irrespective of meaning,” while others are simply “attempts to entertain or to inform, or both” that are “so shallow in substance that little of significance can be gained from them” (Bettelheim 4). The result, Bettelheim insists, is an overall devaluation of the skills such as reading since they contribute “nothing of importance to one’s life” (Bettelheim 4). Furthermore, the stories that mirror “true reality” (Bettelheim 65), are prone to “confuse the child as to what is

real and what is not” (64). Consequently, the child may eventually turn on him- or herself and his or her own imagination, concluding that the “inner reality is unacceptable” (Bettelheim 65). This, Bettelheim speculates, could contribute to a number of unfortunate effects such as continual lack of satisfaction with the world due to an “alienat[ion] from the unconscious processes” and the inability to “use them to enrich... life in reality” (Bettelheim 65). If Bettelheim is correct in his thesis, then not only is narrative as a whole important to childhood, but the role of complete fiction, far from “true reality”—magic, fairies, and unknown places far, far away—is not only healthy, but it is essential.

On the Use of Narrative

Clearly, the role of narrative cannot be ignored and must be paid special attention in the child’s education. It helps us to understand the world around us, it pushes our imagination beyond the everyday, and, as Bruner points out, it is central to “self-making,” that process of identity creation (65). Stories inform on one level, but they are embodied on another. Stories spark the imagination in the way that Greene discusses, help us to process the world around us as MacIntyre, Bruner, and Bettelheim suggest, raise critical questions as Wartenberg addresses with his curriculum, and construct identity both from the outside in and from the inside out as Bruner discusses. Stories are integral parts of our existence.

The transition from merely hearing stories to actually using and creating them is an essential moment. This is where narrative is most powerful and the exact reason why, I would argue, Rousseau and Plato are as concerned as they are about the stories children

hear and at what age. The power of the imagination to determine an individual's outlook on life, mental stability, decisions, and actions has been recognized for thousands of years. Stoic philosophers dating back to the first century B.C. were equally concerned with the power of the imagination and the creation of narratives. For example, in an attempt to stifle the emotions and maintain a stable mental condition, Cicero proposed a "pre-rehearsal of future evils" as a method of coping with surprise, particularly as a way to make an unfortunate event "easier to bear" (Cicero 3.29).

Although Bruner and Bettelheim are not suggesting that fairy tales and stories should be used to keep children from feeling emotions, they are suggesting something distantly related. Implicit in the suggestions that stories help children to better cope with their surroundings and their worries is the fact that the strong expression of emotions is being calmed due to additional mental processing. If stories provide a better understanding of circumstances and a clearer definition of expectations, then these can be used in the conscious and unconscious mental processes a child experiences. Instead of responding with tears and tantrums to situations that do not meet their expectations, they can respond in a calmer and more proactive manner because parts of the situations are already mentally digested—in all, not drastically different from the Stoic reasoning.

The use of stories, of course, goes well beyond priming children for responses, though. There is also the creation of self-identity as Bruner discusses. If the stories children hear cultivate or otherwise shape their values and ideas about life, then those same stories shape their subsequent actions, perhaps even for a lifetime. We fulfill (or attempt to do so) the identities that those values form.

CHAPTER 5: CREATING STORIES FOR IDENTITIES UNDER FORMATION

Clearly, the power of narrative and storytelling are essential to a child's development—moral and otherwise. I like much of what the authors above have suggested, especially Maxine Greene and Thomas Wartenberg, and I think some combination of what they have proposed could work. However, there are a few areas in theory and application that I would change.

While I agree with many of Maxine Greene's proposals about education and the power of the imagination, I do differ in the sense that I see both the importance of narrative as it helps us to understand and subsequently apply moral ideas, as well as the necessity of some attention to the big ideas (e.g., Truth, Goodness, and Beauty) in their abstract forms. Where do we draw the line between what is directly relevant to our lives and the "abstractions," after all? It seems to me that the abstractions can help us to better ground ourselves in reality. Narrative can assist in deepening our understanding of our values and relationships with others and with the world; however, the specifics lack the breadth that discussions in the abstract can lend, and that breadth allows the flexibility to apply those questions elsewhere. For example, in Greene's slavery story case, a reader or listener might consider ideas of justice and goodness—what it means to treat people properly, what value people have as individuals, and the like.

However, more overarching questions, such as, "What does it mean to be good?" could be easily overlooked, and it is questions like these that help define the values that shape our actions overall—beyond the way we treat and value people, alone, in this

example. “What does it mean to be good?” is an abstracted question about Goodness that could look more broadly at our thoughts, actions, relationships with other people, relationships with things, relationships with the earth, and even relationships with a higher spiritual being. Stories have the specifics that spark the imagination into a kind of experience that is more memorable and powerful than pure factual information, but part of the power of stories is arguably neglected when the specifics become the sole focus. The underlying big questions must also be brought into the conversation.

This is where I think Wartenberg is correct in his approach. He contends that childhood imagination and curiosity are not far from at least some approaches to philosophy. What sparks the imagination more than something that has no perfect answer—like Truth, Goodness, and Beauty? Children’s stories not have the depth and complexity in addressing those themes as one might encounter in Plato or Aristotle, for instance, but presenting certain questions and ideas to children can have a lasting impact on the way that they see and value the world, their lives, and others. What is more “wide-awake” than that? I can say that it worked for me, at least.

Looking back, my favorite childhood book, Debby Boone’s “Bedtime Hugs for Little Ones,” had a substantial impact on me—the way I imagine and think, the way I see myself and others, the way I approach nature and the world around me, the way I think about my future, and the way I think about and do art. Her calm and reflective tone was soothing to listen to as my parents read to me, and I occasionally found myself thinking and talking in that way. What is more, the questions she asked and the things that she imagined, while sometimes far-fetched, got me to wondering, too. I loved that each page

was about something different—a page about counting blessings instead of sheep (Boone 5), another about listening to rain on the roof (Boone 12), and another about pondering the possibilities for tomorrow and the rest of my life (Boone 17, 28).

I also loved that she wrote in a way that sparked my imagination with her own examples, but that she also invited me to engage my own experiences and ideas. In this book, I was not being told a story to passively listen to and imagine like a movie in my head—though that is certainly not a bad thing—but I was actively participating in giving meaning to what I was hearing and later reading.

While I cannot neglect the importance of the other books, ideas, and activities that I was exposed to in childhood, the fact that Boone’s was my favorite and most-read is significant. In fact, the reflection “When You Grow Up” was one that I still thought back to even years later when I was selecting a university:

When you grow up, what will you be?
You don’t have to decide now,
but it’s fun to think about.

Will you be—
A painter or a president?
An actor or an astronaut?
A doctor or a discoverer?

You don’t have to just pick one, either.
You can pick two
Or even three
If you want to.

When you grow up
You could think about different things all day
(they call that a philosopher)
or you could make speeches and quote other people
(they call that a politician)
or you could take care of a zoo

so you could see all your favorite animals every day.

And just because you wanted to be something yesterday
doesn't mean that you can't pick something different today.

I wonder what you'll be when you grow up? (Boone 28)

Reading it for the first time in many years, I was surprised by how much of myself I saw both in that poem and in the others. I knew that I often thought back to the illustrations—simple but imaginative—but I had forgotten that the way I thought about things like rainstorms, nighttime darkness, and picking a career started from those pages. This is why I set out to create something similar in my own children's book. As the author, I was not constrained by Wartenberg's method of working with existing stories, so I could embed the philosophical ideas intentionally into the text where I knew they would spark the imagination. I united ideas from nearly a dozen different philosophers and other writers into the book itself by finding similarities and simplifying the ideas to accessible vocabulary and placing them into relatable contexts, and I followed up with discussion questions and a reader's guide for adults.

Story time is fun, but it is also serious; theoretical proposals, empirical evidence, and science all agree. I think it is also clear that the imagination plays a vital role in moral and mental development—throughout childhood, of course, but notably through narrative, which is a comparatively controllable element. Parents and teachers can provide children with certain books and tell (or, in the case of movies and other media, allow them to be exposed to) certain stories—much like Plato called for only the best stories. So, let us tell stories that spark the imagination to see the world and knowledge

and people and *life* in a thoughtful and appreciative way, and let us not forget the importance of including the big questions in addition to the specific applications.

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