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The Need for Story

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Abstract: Human beings live in a sea of stories, and yet there are those who claim that stories, particularly fictional ones, serve no other function than to entertain. In this paper, I show that stories serve a deeper and more useful function. They provide schemas for organizing the events of a life in particular ways. The more schemas in one's arsenal, the more ways by which the events of a life can be organized, and the easier it becomes to actually navigate through the world. Novels, in particular, serve this function. They are complex and show in detail how the disparate elements of a life can be weaved together into a meaningful whole. The reading of novels, and the conscious engagement with them in literature classes, develops a skill Aristotle called *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. It is this skill that is required for complex decision-making, particularly in the realm of morality. This skill is not developed through logical discourse or through scientific modes of reasoning. This being the case, it would be a mistake to devalue the humanities in general, and literature in particular. Science and technology can certainly tell us what sort of things the world contains, but it cannot show us how to act properly in that world and navigate through it successfully.

Key Words: Stories, human values, literature, humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings swim in a sea of stories. This is an undeniable fact. Every culture, at every time in the past, has found it necessary to tell stories and to engage deeply with them. From the time children are old enough to understand a language, or even before that, they are fed stories on a daily basis, most of which are fictional and highly imaginative, and which enthrall them to such an extent that they can't seem to get enough of it. Obviously, these stories, no matter how fictional and whimsical and fanciful they may be, serve a particular function. We might hypothesize that they serve simply to entertain or to provide a venue for escape from the harsh realities of life, or that they are forms of discourse that adults eventually outgrow. But could they serve a more practical and rational function? Is it possible that these stories, fictitious though they may be, have—from an evolutionary standpoint—a survival value? In short, isn't it possible to consider that without the ability to tell stories—fictional or otherwise—human beings, as we know them to be, would cease to exist?

2. MAIN CLAIM

This seems like a wild claim, but I shall try to point out in this paper that stories are necessary for human survival, and that fictional stories—particularly complex novels—allow us to make sense of the human world in such a way as to help us navigate through it effectively. What fiction does is to provide us with a set of narrative schemas for

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making sense of the world in a wide variety of ways. It allows us to identify with characters in all their complexity and move with them as they act as moral agents caught in specific situations that call for crucial decisions. Reading fiction, then, generates a certain type of skill or intelligence that cannot be replaced by other types of discourse. It is a skill associated with practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, a skill which cannot be taught by means of algorithms or rules or a set of injunctions. It is this skill which allows human beings to act as moral agents in the world, which allows them to regard particular events as meaningfully connected, and which allows them to view the complexities of any situation as unique and informative for a given purpose. To understand why this is so, we must recognize the fact that the world, as a whole, can be understood in two general ways. It can be understood as a large space consisting of things, or it can be understood as a field of activity or, as Peterson (1999) calls it, a forum of action.

3. ARGUMENTS

3.1 The World as a Field of Activity

The world can be construed—and understood—in two radically different ways. It can be construed as a place consisting of things and their properties, or it can be construed as a field of activity where certain actions take place. Consider, as an analogy, a room. It can be understood as a small area consisting of various pieces of furniture and objects, or it can be understood as a place where certain types of activities can be performed. In fact, the only reason why the furniture inside the room is arranged in a certain way is to make certain activities like sleeping, writing, and watching TV possible. To think of the world, like this room, as a place consisting of nothing but things requires, for our complete understanding of it, that we know what these things are, how they function, and how they relate to other things in the world. To think of the world as a field of activity requires something else. It requires a clear understanding of how to maneuver oneself around the objects within it, what these objects mean in relation to particular human concerns, and how to comport oneself within the space that one might call the world. It would also require an understanding of the significance not just of these objects, but of whole set of social concerns where these objects are found, since acting in particular ways would have no meaning whatsoever and would make no sense independently of those concerns. Moreover, the world also includes human beings—beings that cannot be properly categorized as objects—who interact dynamically with other humans in such a way as to give the contents of the world varied sets of meanings.

Heidegger (1962) was right when he claimed, in *Being and Time*, that the world cannot be regarded as a mere collection of things. This is because the world also contains tools and human beings, neither of which are mere entities. Entities can be understood solely in terms of their various properties. A particular mineral, for example, can be understood in terms of its weight, size, molecular structure, and so forth. But in order to understand a simple tool such as a hammer, more than a mere knowledge of properties is required. If one had absolutely no experience whatsoever with a hammer (one can, for the sake of a thought experiment, imagine a member of a tribe in a remote region of the earth cut off completely from civilization), one would not be able to understand it as a hammer simply by examining it. No amount of examination of the hammer's properties—its size, shape, physical dimensions, molecular composition, etc.—can aid us in understanding what a hammer is. To understand what a hammer is, one needs to understand the context in which hammers make sense as a tool, and this would require a familiarity with a whole plethora of activities and concerns. To understand what a hammer is, one needs to know that it is something that can be grasped with one's hand and used to drive wooden boards together with nails for the sake of building furniture or even a house. One needs to know, as well, that there are various tools connected with hammers, tools such as nails and rulers and planes, all of which may be used by a carpenter for the purpose of being-a-carpenter-in-the-world. To really understand what a hammer is, one needs to actually use it for a particular purpose,

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as it was intended, and engage in the activity of hammering. Hammers, then, like other tools, are complex. They cannot be understood through the mere enumeration of their properties.

Humans, unlike tools or entities, are even more complex. Heidegger points out that no individual human being can be fully understood through a set of properties. To understand a particular woman named Catherine, for example, it is not enough to know all her physical and mental properties. We could speak of her height, weight, and genetic constitution, or talk about her personality traits; but none of these, even collectively, would be enough. To understand Catherine, what is required is a keen understanding of her goals, intentions, and concerns, coupled with a set of interpretations she has about herself, the people around her, and the world in which she lives—all of which need to be put together and placed within a meaningful whole. This can only be done through a narrative. As Polkinghorne (1988) rightly puts it, "narrative presents to awareness a world in which timely human actions are linked together according to their effect on the attainment of human desires and goals" (p. 16). He says, furthermore, that "narrative ordering makes individual events comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute. The ordering process operates by linking diverse happenings along a temporal dimension and by identifying the effect one event has on another, and it serves to cohere human actions and events that effect human live into a temporal gestalt." (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18). In effect, "narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole" (Polkinghorne 1988, p.18). Narratives are required to understand human beings because they are not static entities. They live through time and organize their lives through events.

3.2 Temporality

Humans are temporal beings. They exist in time. They have a past, a present, and a future. This means that human life consists of events, not all of which are random. Some events lead to other events which cause still further events to occur. When human beings think about the plethora of events about them, they recognize patterns, and these patterns are fashioned in terms of plots that give these events some sort of significance. It is not simply the case that a woman fortuitously sees her fiancé in the arms of another woman, and also the case that she runs home to cry alone in her room, and also the case that she later trudges into a convenience store to buy a bottle of vodka. These events are related to one another and form a coherent story: Here is a woman who is madly in love with her fiancé, sees him in the arms of another woman, and *as a result*, feels crushed. She isolates herself in her room and cries her heart out, only to discover that this only aggravates her sorrow. And so she decides to drown her troubles in alcohol by walking to a nearby store where she buys a bottle of vodka, imagining herself as a tragic heroine like the main character of a novel she has just read. In between these events are a host of other details pertaining to her wishes and concerns and memories, all of which, if brought up, could be mined to construct a well-formed narrative that someone could use to understand her behavior. Without such a narrative, seeing the woman drown herself in vodka would have no meaning whatsoever. It would remain an isolated event unrelated to other isolated events in the world. If she meets a stranger as she staggers home from her drunk stupor, and this stranger offers to help her deal with her troubles, a new friendship could develop; and if this friendship develops further into something romantic, then the act of buying vodka from a convenience store would now have a completely different meaning, since it would be seen as an event that led to a chance encounter with someone who eventually turned out to be more valuable than the former fiancé. An event previously seen as tragic can now be viewed as an unforeseen opportunity to meet a future partner.

3.3 Plots as Organizing Schemas

The plots of stories are organizing schemas,

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but they organize elements of the world differently from the way logic does. Logical thinking puts together concepts that belong to particular categories and compare these with concepts from other categories. Logic also shows how certain statements follow from—or can be deduced from—other statements. Plots, on the other hand, put together varied events into a meaningful whole by means of a well-structured story. The story is able to show how the events are connected, how the actors within these events have made particular choices on the basis of particular concerns and intentions, and how particular events were the inevitable result of prior events or choices. Not any plot or story, however, can weave particular events into a meaningful story. Only certain plots will be adequate or appropriate. As Polkinghorne (1988) points out, "there are a limited number of narrative structures that produce coherent stories" (p. 18). This means that in order to make sense of a series of events that have occurred in one's life, one must be able to construct an appropriate narrative. The stories that one has read and has been exposed to—at least the basic plot structure of each—provide a skeleton over which the muscles of individual events can hang. The more narrative schemas in one's arsenal, the more options one can have to weave events into meaningful wholes. This means that the more stories we are exposed to, the more options we have for choosing just the right plot for a collection of events. If the story one gives for a series of events turns out to be inappropriate because one does not have a coherent plot for it, then the events of one's life—or perhaps even the whole of one's existence—may appear to be rather disconcerting. It would seem, for the one who has constructed such an inadequate story, that there is something that doesn't quite fit—that there is something wrong with the way things have turned out, or that there is something wrong with the way one has interpreted certain events. This may lead one to seek psychotherapy, a place where the events of one's life can be reorganized and reinterpreted through an alternative narrative. When a new narrative emerges, the meaning of certain events change, and this could result in the healing one hopes for in psychotherapy. "If a client has been fired from a job, for example, the significance of this event can vary depending on whether it is included in a narrative of opportunity or a narrative of tragedy" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 181). What heals in therapy, then, is not the articulation of certain arguments, which is the province of logic, but the production of alternative plots for the events of one's life. As Polkinghorne (1988) puts it, "therapists…serve to offer alternative narratives that more fully incorporate a client's life events in a more coherent and powerful narrative" (p. 182). Furthermore, "the constrictions of a personal narrative can be removed by helping the client to reorganize his or her experience and develop a new life plot" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 182). For the therapist to succeed in doing so, however, he or she must have a keen skill for constructing alternative narratives. This skill is best learned and developed by reading stories, particularly complex fictional narratives as presented in novels.

3.4 The Value of Novels

Novels, unlike other genres of stories, are complex. They contain a host of details that particularize characters and set them up against other characters who go through their own little stories. Novels, then, contain several plots and subplots and are able to portray the complexities of human life. Such complexities cannot be found in fairy tales, folk tales, and short stories. These complexities are important because they show how certain moral choices are contingent upon the particulars of one's situation. Two characters who seem to go through the same life story may be constrained to make different though equally reasonable choices because of the unique elements of their situation. What novels do, then, is to show the significant, unique details of a life—details that could never be identical to the details of another person's life. This attention to details and contexts develops the skill of discernment, of appreciating the minutiae of factors surrounding the meaning of certain situations, particularly situations that have

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moral significance. Novels also show how certain chance events, completely unexpected, can play a significant role in human life. This element of chance "can be of enormous importance to the ethical quality of [people's] lives; that, therefore good people are right to care deeply about such chance events" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 17). All these complex details in a novel, including random ones, tend to draw the reader deep into the story and are therefore likely to elicit certain emotions. These emotions serve as important cues for understanding particular events and their moral significance. Novels, then, apart from supplying readers with plots for organizing their own lives, also develop empathy through the arousal of emotions as the readers identify with the main character. These emotions seem to be crucial for making moral decisions since they provide useful information about the relative value of certain people, events, and situations. As Damasio (2005) has pointed out, emotions are crucial for making such decisions. Furthermore, novels, when taken up in literature courses, provide a venue for asking deeply philosophical and existential questions. These questions, since they arise from the reading of complex narratives, are embedded very deeply in particular, unique situations. They engage the mind in ways that an abstract, logical consideration of moral problems does not. Various situations, as presented in novels, force readers to practice flexibility in their interpretation of the moral significance of events. It is a flexibility that cannot be learned by engaging in logical, mathematical, or scientific discourse, all of which tend to rely on rules or algorithms for the decision-making process. Such a rule-governed way of dealing with events of moral significance will most likely result in wrong decisions, since the peculiar, unique elements of a situation bear upon the significance of a particular set of actions and events. This skill for attending closely to the unique and complex details of a situation is crucial, as we shall see, for *phronesis*.

3.5 Phronesis

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is the term used by Aristotle for the skill that is involved in practical decision-making, particularly in the realm of ethics. It is a skill that is informed by the particularities of contexts and cannot be developed my mere adherence to rules or algorithms, since these rules will always have exceptions and may not be applicable to new, unexpected situations. We often think that a moral sense can be developed by adopting—and relying on—a set of rules like "thou shall not kill" or "honor thy parents," but such injunctions always have exceptions. Killing may be justified for self-defense, and honoring abusive parents may lead to further abuse. Each situation is unique and must be approached afresh, with rules simply as guidelines or rules of thumb that may or may not apply in a particular case, even if this case resembles a past one. "Practical matters are mutable, or lack fixity. A system of rules set up in advance can encompass only what has been seen before" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 71). Nussbaum (1990) also points out that for Aristotle, phronesis "is concerned with ultimate particulars…and…these particulars cannot be subsumed under…a system of universal principles but must be grasped with insight through experience" (p. 68). Insights from experience can only be developed by attending closely to the various layers of experience and how they connect, like webs, with features related to it—and novels provide an excellent venue for this. Our own experiences are covered up by layers of distortions and self-deceptions, and so it would be difficult to examine them as acutely as the events in a novel. Complex fictional stories also provide experiences that we may never actually have, and so they increase our repertoire of hermeneutic understanding. This is especially true for ethical situations. As Nussbaum (1990, p. 69) points out, "the subtleties of a complex ethical situation must be seized in a confrontation with the situation itself, by a faculty that is suited to address it as a complex whole." She states furthermore that "prior general formulations lack both the concreteness and the flexibility that is required. They do not contain the particularizing details of the matter at hand, with which decisions must grapple; and they are not responsive to what is there, as good decision must

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be" (Nussbaum, 1990 p.69). Phronesis, then, is a skill that may be honed through the activity or reading complex narratives and through responding acutely to the details contained in them. When this skill is highly developed, one can use it to attend to the particulars of one's own situation in order to make wise decisions in response to them. The resulting decisions cease to become clichéd responses, which is what normally occurs when ethical situations are perceived in standardized ways.

3.6 Science vs. the Humanities

Science has successfully been able to understand the world as a place of things by developing particular methods of inquiry. This inquiry consists in examining objects, knowing their properties, knowing their underlying features, and understanding how they fit within a certain theoretical view of the world that enables us to explain how these objects came to be and how they interact with other objects. Physics, chemistry, and biology are excellent at doing this. What science cannot do, however, is to show how the world can be successfully navigated given certain human concerns—such as the need to survive or thrive, or to be a particular kind of person living in the world. This is because in order to speak about how we can successfully navigate the world, we cannot dispel with words like "ought" and "should." In short, in order to address the basic question regarding the manner in which the world can be successfully navigated, we are required to make constant reference to values—something which science is unable to do. One cannot, after all derive an "ought" from an "is." Stories, on the other hand are able to show what human beings value—what they prefer to pursue and avoid—in relation to particular concerns. Stories, in fact, connect events into a given whole and show what styles of life are worth living. Stories, however, do not belong to the domain of science. It is in the arts and humanities—particularly in the field of literature—that stories are read, retold, studied, and interpreted, honing the skill called *phronesis*. These stories—particularly great works of fiction—provide us with the key source for understanding what it is like to live in the world as human beings with certain concerns and with particular goals that are worthy of pursuit. Each story that has been read is like a map that provides a means for organizing the world in particular ways. The stories don't have to be real, because what counts is not the veracity of the events themselves, but how these events are strung together to form a meaningful whole. Stories, then, increase human freedom, since they provide alternative ways of organizing the events of a life. Without this concern for stories, human life would be chaotic, consisting of disparate, inchoate, and unconnected events, none of which would make any sense whatsoever.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can now see that stories serve an important function. They are constructed not just to entertain, but to provide useful maps or schemas for making sense of events that form a life. When things don't turn out the way they are supposed to, or when life itself seems overwhelming, it is the ability to construct alternative narratives that can save a life. Engagement with stories, particularly with complex novels, also encourages the development of *phronesis*, a skill that cannot be developed by logic or by science. It is this skill that allows humans to weave their way into the world and navigate successfully through it. Any attempt to devalue stories, or to eliminate their study by the eradication or diminution of the humanities programs in universities, would prove to be a grave mistake.

5. REFERENCES

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