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Children's film as an instrument of moral education

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This paper explores two philosophical treasures that we often neglect: the moral faculties of children and the pedagogic virtues of film. My thesis consists of three primary claims: (1) when properly educated, children are capable of thinking critically about ethical issues; (2) moral edification ought to have the dual aims of developing this capacity and educating the emotions; and (3) given these aims, the children's film genre is a surprisingly apposite tool for aiding the moral instruction of pre-adolescents. I advance arguments for positions (1), (2) and (3), while considering objections to each view. I conclude the paper by illustrating how one film, the 2007 Disney Production, *Bridge to Terabithia*, exemplifies the instructional virtues enumerated in (2).

The philosophical capacities of children

There is a tendency among adults to view children as inept, shallow beings who lack the capacity for moral deliberation. While most would agree that this view is mistaken, it is clear that many key figures in the history of moral education have subscribed to it in one form or other. It seems to our detriment, as well as theirs, that we continue to ignore children's natural role as participants in philosophical inquiry. In this section, I argue that a proper moral education seeks to identify and develop the inherent capacities of children and that underestimating puerile cognitive abilities encumbers this objective. I begin by briefly surveying several accounts of childhood development that have contributed to a current, rather pejorative view of children.

Aristotle was among the first philosophers to consider children's moral reasoning abilities. In the *Nicomachean ethics*, he argues that children are incapable of reasoning, since they 'live at the beck and call of appetite' (1925, p.77). He concludes that their moral education ought to consist primarily in habituating them to certain virtuous behaviours. Jean Jacques Rousseau, who also theorised about childhood cognitive development, held that children under 13 years lack the ability

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to understand reasoning. He similarly cautioned that pre-adolescents should not read, as reading only results in children ‘speaking on things of which they know nothing’ (Rousseau 1762, p. 184). Subsequent work by psychologists, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, would offer a far more comprehensive, though only slightly less troubling view of childhood cognitive and moral development.

Jean Piaget (1965) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) each closely studied the cognitive and moral maturation of children and reached similar conclusions in their work. Piaget held that a child’s moral reasoning is largely determined by his fear of punishment and respect for authority. Kohlberg suggested that Piaget mistook fear for respect. On Kohlberg’s account, while some pre-adolescents are motivated by a genuine respect for authority, this type of rationale is more typical of adults, most of whom never surpass the *conventional* stages of moral reasoning. Piaget submitted that the ethical deliberations of children are largely constrained by an egoism that precludes true morality. Kohlberg’s moral dilemma tests also advance this idea, as they would place pre-schoolers and some elementary students at a pre-moral level (Matthews, 2005). While modern theorists often criticise the notion that children are egoistic and pre-moral,¹ our current understanding of the moral and cognitive capacities of children still seem to be laden with condescension and disdain.

Even our language reflects and reinforces negative child stereotypes. Children are often referred to as incompetent and immature. *Per contra*, adults are developed, competent and mature—unless of course, they are ‘acting like kids’. Also, pre-adolescents are frequently excused for immoral behaviour on the grounds that they are ‘just children’. Doubtless, most of us use these idioms innocently enough and it is not clear that children, themselves, feel insulted by such expressions. However, traditional conventions could, and perhaps do, unjustly colour our judgements of children. While we ought not to hold pre-adolescents to the same moral and rational standards that we impose on adults, there is evidence that children are thoughtful, competent moral agents who are both interested in, and cognitively suited for, ethical deliberation.

Decades ago, psychologist Martin Hoffman concluded that even very young children are capable of empathetic responses and even (a sort of) inductive moral reasoning. Hoffman (1976) offers the following true account of an exchange between toddlers to illustrate his point:

Michael and Paul were struggling over a toy, resulting in Paul’s crying. Michael appeared concerned and let go of the toy so that Paul would have it, but Paul kept crying. Michael paused, then gave his teddy bear to Paul, but the crying continued. Michael paused again, then ran to the next room, returned with Paul’s security blanket, and offered it to Paul, who then stopped crying. (p. 129)

Of course it is not entirely clear that Michael’s actions were motivated by empathy or concern. One could argue that Paul’s crying frightened him and it was this fear, rather than regard for his playmate, that caused Michael’s *prima facie* empathetic response. The trouble with toddlers is that we cannot simply ask them what they are thinking. Older children, however, are quite able and willing to share their thoughts.

Philosopher, Gareth Matthews, reported several observations of philosophical thinking among children. For instance, he mentions the Cartesianesque inquiry of one six-year old: 'Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?' (1980, p. 1). Anecdotal exchanges between curious youngsters and their parents say fairly little about the philosophical capacities of children; however, Matthews (1984) also engaged small groups of elementary students in extended ethical discussions, in which the children explored various moral dilemmas and considered possible solutions (p. 92). It is important to note that many college-level philosophy courses largely proceed in this way.

Michael S. Pritchard (1996) argued that many of the aims and tactics used to educate university students in philosophy are also applicable to grade-school children (p. 15). Pritchard, along with Matthew Lipman,² observed first-hand the thoughtful insights of children regarding ethical questions. Pritchard (2002) reported instances of children constructing arguments for and against certain positions, detecting errors in the arguments of others and inventing their own interpretations and solutions for ethical dilemmas. His research led him to conclude that 'there has been ample documentation over the last couple decades that schoolchildren are quite capable of engaging in serious and sophisticated philosophical enquiry' (1996, p. 32).

Thus, given the body of recent research evidencing the philosophical capacities of children, one can scarcely deny that many early theories of childhood moral development are, at best, misguided. Empirical research reveals that children are indeed capable of empathetic responses and thoughtful, moral deliberation. Pre-adolescents are already exploring life's moral terrains; they require only that we properly guide and equip them for a successful journey. I now turn to the question of how moral educators might best utilise and serve children's natural proclivities for philosophical inquiry.

Two suggested aims for moral education

There are a number of ways that one might morally educate a child. One can exemplify various virtues and encourage the child to emulate his or her behaviour. One can issue a series of imperatives and punish failure to abide by them. Moreover, one might tell the child stories with didactic lessons in order to elicit favourable behaviour and to discourage unfavourable behaviour. Such stories often adhere to the ideal that children are empty vessels to be filled or inculcated with specific moral values. They are intended to 'prime the reader, purge him or her of original sin and foster passive obedience' (McGavock 2007, p. 130). I argue, however, that narratives can better serve other, more appropriate aims of moral education. In this section, I support an approach to moral instruction that favours developing the sense of empathy and encouraging moral reasoning over value indoctrination.

Some theorists have posited the view that emotions constitute the basis for morality. David Hume (1888), for example, argued that all morals are 'grounded in human sentiment' and he implied that empathy is a significant factor in ethical

judgements. Many present-day philosophers, such as Michael Slote (2004), have also incorporated the concept of empathy into their moral theories. Insofar as one's sense of empathy is a learned process that helps to facilitate moral reasoning, the development of this sense ought to be a primary objective of moral education.

I shall proceed on the assumption that at least one part of living morally involves respecting the feelings of others and taking their interests into account along with one's own. One way to instil this tendency in children is to elicit, via an appeal to their senses of empathy, the reasoned judgement that such values are important. For instance, suppose that John's mother wants him to understand that lying is wrong. She always tells the truth and verbally condemns dishonesty in front of John. Insofar as John wants to emulate or please his mother, it is logical to assume that he will try to tell the truth. She warns John that if he lies, she will take away his favourite toy. Insofar as John wants to avoid the pain of losing his toy, he will be likely to try to tell the truth. It seems, however, that in neither case has John's mother helped him to *understand* that lying is wrong. On the other hand, suppose that she asks John to imagine how one would feel if he lied to that person. Suppose further that John does this and then recalls how he feels when people lie to him. John suddenly senses that just as it seems wrong for someone to lie to him, it is also wrong for him to lie to another. It is conceivable that John's mother could employ any one of the aforementioned tactics to dissuade him from lying, but only this last method results in anything akin to genuine understanding.

Of course, one could argue that my notion of moral understanding is flawed. After all, if moral wrongness is synonymous with one's own pain, then the child who acts simply to avoid pain has a perfectly clear understanding of morality. However, we generally do not want children to base moral judgments on such egoistic foundations. We do not want John to think that lying is wrong only because he will be punished for doing so. We want him, in some sense, to *feel* that lying is wrong regardless of what comes to him as a result of the act.³ Empathy seems to be an appropriate vehicle for eliciting this type of response.

Educational psychologist, William Damon, noted the role of empathy in childhood sharing and subsequently concluded that children's natural empathetic responses are the most crucial factors in the development of morality (Pritchard 1996, p. 13). Also, Richard Upright (2002) refers to empathy as a learned process and noted that 'when strengthened and acted upon, empathy leads to kindness and a caring attitude' (p. 15). How does empathy become strengthened? It appears that narratives can be used to this end, as well as fulfilling the broader aim of developing moral reasoning abilities.

One aim, then, of moral education ought to be developing children's senses of empathy. Another suitable objective of moral instruction is enhancing moral reasoning abilities. The questions remain, however, as to how this might be possible and why moral reasoning should take precedence over value indoctrination. I answer the first question in the following section, but the latter issue must be addressed before we go any further.

Moral indoctrination refers to implanting values and codes of ethics within children. Pritchard (1996) argues that teaching moral reasoning is superior to value

indoctrination because children are 'active inquirers, ready and willing to offer their own rendering of the issue at hand' (p.52). Simply put, in Pritchard's view, indoctrination presupposes that children are unable to think for themselves and failing to respect the cognitive and moral capacities in children constitutes a gross error of judgement. There are those, however, who challenge this view.

Charles Sykes (2004), for instance, argued that moral indoctrination is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it may be a favoured alternative to morally confusing children, rendering them helpless in a 'wasteland of values'. *Pace* Sykes, I reply that the development of moral reasoning abilities does not render children helpless. On the contrary, such moral instruction only arms children against the array of dogmatic, often contradictory values that are hurled daily at their heads. A child who is skilled at moral reasoning can look on ethical principles with analytic eyes. S/he can examine arguments, detect fallacies and, frequently, offer alternate solutions to moral dilemmas.

Additionally, competent moral reasoners can apply their values more effectively. Imagine a child who is in a position to apply an ethical principle for the first time. The child may find this experience daunting. It is also important to note that sometimes, values conflict. In a situation where two values are incompatible, which should the child choose? Sharpened reasoning abilities ease the difficulty of these situations.

Numerous studies and observations suggest that moral indoctrination is inferior to instruction in moral reasoning. Pritchard (1996) cautions against indoctrinatory methods that underestimate the already considerable moral abilities that most school-aged children possess (p.16). Kohlberg makes the bolder claim that good teachers never indoctrinate, but rather, they assist their students as they travel from one moral reasoning stage to the next (Sommers, 2004, p.428). It has been supposed that one can prompt a child to ascend to the next highest reasoning level by presenting the student with a moral dilemma, thereby inducing a state of cognitive disequilibrium. Various forms of narrative can be used for this purpose.

Film and moral education

In Section 1, I established that pre-adolescents have philosophical capacities far beyond what theorists initially thought. In Section 2, I advanced the view that moral educators ought to nourish these natural capacities by (1) developing children's senses of empathy and (2) improving children's moral reasoning abilities. I also suggested that narratives can aid our pursuit of these instructional aims. Let us now turn our attention to this final claim. In this section, I argue that narratives and, more specifically, children's films, can help achieve the aforementioned suggested goals of moral education.

The view that narratives can be used to morally instruct children is highly controversial. Many object that narratives are inappropriate, ineffective vehicles for conveying moral messages. Can a story really teach a child that it is wrong to lie or steal? A story can certainly suggest that stealing is wrong, but so can a television

commercial or even a slogan on a billboard. There are many ways that we might *try* to communicate moral messages, but we have no guarantee that our efforts will be successful. Unless narratives can offer more than billboard slogans, we need not waste time debating their applications to moral development. Consider the words of philosopher Noel Carroll (1998):

So it seems that art neither teaches nor, for that matter, does it discover any moral truths on par with scientific propositions. And if an artwork pretends to such a role, such truths as it disseminates—understood as propositions—could questionably be acquired just as readily as other means, such as sermons, philosophical tracts, catechisms, parental advice, peer gossip and so on. Art, in other words, is an unlikely means of moral education, and even where art professes to have some interesting moral maxims to impart, it is hardly a uniquely indispensable vehicle for conveying moral messages. (p. 130)

The suggestion, then, is that narrative artworks are ill-suited for conveying moral messages. Others argue that while stories may be capable of sending moral messages, most children are not capable of receiving them. Some psychologists charge that modern children's stories confuse and demoralise children by blurring the line between fiction and reality (McGavock, 2007, p.138). Still others, like Darcia Narvaez, argue that we cannot rely on children to extract the intended moral messages of stories. In one study of 'moral text comprehension', Narvaez (2002) reported that, on average, third graders grasped the intended moral messages of stories only 10% of the time (p. 6). In another study, she noted that even teenagers often miscomprehend moral themes, citing a gangbanger who mistook an 'anti-gang violence' film as a glorification of his dangerous lifestyle (1999, p. 377). Narvaez suggests several reasons for this inconsistency. Students have prior knowledge and preferences that colour their interpretations of stories; also, children with low reading comprehension levels find it exceedingly difficult to identify moral themes (Narvaez *et al.*, 1999).

Taken together, the arguments of Narvaez and Carroll imply that when we seek to morally educate children through the use of narratives, we are simply barking up the wrong tree. I think we have the right *tree*, but we have been searching for the wrong fruit. Suppose that children learned to identify stories' moral messages with perfect accuracy. This would be of little consequence. Selecting '*Be kind to others*' from a list of five possible moral lessons does not indicate that a child will come to respect or obey this imperative. However, identifying with a fellow being, experiencing his pain and reasoning to the conclusion that causing such pain is wrong might very well result in genuine moral growth. The proper instructional role of narratives is not to inundate children with moral maxims, but rather, to advance the aims identified in the previous section: educating the sense of empathy and developing moral reasoning skills. Children's films can serve both of these ends.

A natural question is 'Why advocate film?' Many educators can appreciate the beauty and value of children's literature, but film is often seen as the enemy. We want our children to read, to exercise their brains, not to stare at a movie screen for two hours. Here, I must interject that movie watching need not always be a mindless affair. Some films can engage children, emotionally and cognitively, presenting them

with ethical problems that stimulate critical thinking and thoughtful reflection. To be clear, I do not think that a film on its own is of much value, but I feel similarly about novels and textbooks. Films are useful *tools* for moral educators. In order to gain the most from them, children should approach movies from an educational standpoint. Teachers and/or parents should prime children for issues that they will confront in the films and discussion should immediately follow them. Also, I am certainly not advocating movie-watching over reading. *Ceterus paribus*, reading a book is educationally superior to viewing a film. However, this does not change the fact that the children's film genre is an effective instrument of moral education and moreover, one that has several advantages over children's literature.

Many theorists who advocate moral instruction through children's literature have expressed doubts about film. Amanda Cain, for instance, who advocates reading as a means of developing certain virtues, warns that the moral effect of stories becomes encumbered as they are 'drawn out of the literary domain' (Cain 2005, p. 182). She attributes the problem to mass marketing forces that favour profit over moral education. She also suggests that films, unlike books, may not allow sufficient time for viewers to consciously connect their feelings to plot lines. Others, however, have attempted to show that not all films diminish the moral messages of their literary counterparts. Thomas Wartenberg, for example, argues that the film *Modern Times* not only illustrates elements of Karl Marx's theory of alienation, but it exists as a piece of philosophy in its own right. Wartenberg (2006) says that 'the film opens up a way of thinking about the human body as machine-like that Marx's claim on its own does not. In addition, the film's portrayal of assembly-line work as mentally decapitating strikes me as an innovative addition to Marx's claim' (p. 30). One might argue that Wartenberg, as a professional philosopher, can certainly extract philosophical significance from film; yet, for those who do not already possess a background in philosophy, gleaning ethical insights from movies is far more difficult and unlikely. One counter example to this view lies in the unorthodox teaching methods of Mary Litch. Litch (2002) reports successfully using contemporary film as a means of introducing philosophy to college students. She explains that film has the ability to address meaningful questions in a philosophically respectable and interesting way (p. 2). Indeed, the pedagogic virtues of narratives typically apply to film as well.

Narratives can help children develop and strengthen their senses of empathy (Upright, 2002, p.15). Young readers/viewers can frequently identify with protagonists in stories, imagine themselves in similar situations and, consequently, develop feelings of care and concern for the characters in question. While Plato deemed this feature of narratives harmful, Aristotle acknowledged that plays and stories were useful tools for educating emotions by clarifying them (Carroll, 1998, p. 131). Intuitively, when children learn to have regard for others, their capacities for moral understanding and their inclinations toward virtuous action become heightened. Like literary artworks, film can help facilitate this growth through vivid, realistic portrayals of the human condition. Moreover, while younger children with limited reading comprehension skills may not respond to literary figures, they may find cinematic characters more accessible and, therefore, more instructive.

Narratives can also educate by stimulating one's moral imagination. Carroll (2002) points out that professional philosophers use thought experiments, which are often narrative and fictional in nature, to enhance moral knowledge (p. 7). By analogy, one might surmise that standard literary and/or cinematic narratives can serve a similar purpose. In Section 2, I suggested that exercising children's moral reasoning skills is a worthy aim of moral education. I also suggested that exposure to certain moral dilemmas can stimulate critical reflection and propel a child to the next highest reasoning level. The ideas of Gregory Currie (1998) support this view, as he claims that an important part of the process of choosing and changing our values is imagining situations in which we pursue the values that are rivals for our attention (p. 163). Narratives can facilitate such imaginings and apply not only to adults, but to children as well.

Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl (2002) explain that moral dilemmas in children's stories can challenge students to think beyond their current levels of moral reasoning (p. 200). This ascension occurs when children are confronted with conflicting values and determine that their present modes of reasoning are incapable of satisfactorily resolving an issue at hand. Ideally, the children would then embrace new, more sophisticated patterns of thinking. Annalee Ward (1996) thinks that children's films such as Disney's *The Lion King* can aid one's moral development in this way. She also points out that such films enable children to learn lessons that are emotionally powerful, yet relatively harmless (p. 9). Thus, while the children's novel or storybook has a great deal to offer to young people, so too might primary school students benefit from the morally instructive powers of film. Consider the words of David Carr (2006):

Just as literature itself once replaced pre-literate (oral) means to the transmission and communication of human wisdom, it might be that 'post-literate' modes of communication are the way of the future for heirs to the technological advances of the last century and beyond. Indeed insofar as the twentieth century has already witnessed the growth of a new and much acclaimed technological art of cinema, it might be asked whether the modern 'movie' might provide the most effective post-literary mode of access to 'narrative' human wisdom and insight. (p. 321)

In our technologically advanced, fast-paced society, film is fulfilling many of the roles that literature once dominated. Fortunately, however, we can exploit the various advantages of film should we choose to acknowledge them. Parents who lack the time to help their children work through moral themes in a novel can typically spare a couple of hours to view and discuss the ethical implications of a movie. Also, implementing morally significant texts into an already overcrowded curriculum may be difficult for grade school teachers, but planning occasional class trips to the cinema may be a feasible alternative. Thus, parents and educators who want to use the pedagogic virtues of narrative to enrich critical thinking and foster moral development have an alternate, convenient option.

Still another advantage of film is that it incorporates technical effects, photography, graphic animation and music into its narrative presentation. In this way, the narrative is generally more emotionally engaging for children (Ward, 1996, p. 12). Likewise, these creative elements may also serve to enhance aesthetic appreciation for various forms of art (Carr, 2006, p. 328).

It is clear, then, that film, particularly children's films that are designed to engage the sensibilities and moral imaginations of young viewers, can be valuable tools for moral, not to mention aesthetic, education. I do not mean to imply, however, that all children's films are morally instructive. Nor do I suggest that among those that are, such films are equal in their abilities to educate the sense of empathy or to promote moral reasoning. On the contrary, there seem to be qualities that render certain films particularly suited for the aforementioned aims. For example, movies in which the main characters are pre-adolescents who face moral dilemmas that typify the lives of actual school-aged children are preferable to those which consist of non-human entities interacting in bizarre, chimerical environments. To be sure, the latter sort of films can certainly capture the imagination and emotions of an audience; however, I suggest that relatable characters functioning in realistic situations are more likely to elicit genuine empathetic responses and thoughtful reflection. This is not to say that we ought to deprive children of the wonderful world of cinematic fantasy. The best films are those that are creative and engaging, yet remain relevant to real-life, everyday morality.

Likewise, I suggest that good, morally instructive children's films are not afraid to subject their young audiences to weighty ethical issues. While directors and storytellers need not graphically depict violent or otherwise tragic events, they might tastefully and honestly portray issues like death, addiction or abuse in ways that respect the intellects of their viewers. For similar reasons, this view rejects the position that children's film and storybook characters should be either wholly good or wholly evil in order to avoid causing confusion. Most would agree that the real world consists of multilayered individuals whose traits and actions are of an ethically mixed variety. There seems no legitimate reason to patronise or miseducate children by suggesting otherwise.

Bridge to Terabithia

Based on Katherine Paterson's award-winning children's novel, the 2007 Disney production, *Bridge to Terabithia*, is a story of imagination, friendship and loss. Paterson (1977) intended the novel for young readers, reflecting on her own experiences and those of her son who lost a close friend when only a small child. While the novel received much critical acclaim, winning the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1978, it was not always well-received by parents and teachers. In fact, the American Library Association names *Bridge to Terabithia* as one of the most frequently challenged books of 1990–2000 (American Library Association, 2007). Challengers cite profane language, religious atheism/agnosticism and inappropriate topics for children, including child abuse and death, as reasons for banning the book.

The story takes place in rural Virginia and centres on two fifth graders, Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke, who are treated as outcasts in their elementary school. Jess, the middle child of a poor farming family, is a talented artist, but his father's disapproval causes him to hide this fact from most people. Jess also likes to run and has ambitions of becoming the fastest boy in the fifth grade. Here enters Leslie Burke, a

newcomer to the school whose well-off parents from Washington DC are too immersed in their writing endeavours to pay adequate attention to Leslie. Leslie also enjoys running, and soundly defeats the boys, including Jess and his chief rival, Scott Hoager, in their big race. Scott Hoager is a bully, as are Gary Fulcher and Janice Avery. Gary teams up with Scott, as the two continually harass Jess both verbally and physically. Janice is an eighth-grader who is beaten by her father and antagonises younger, smaller children at school. Despite their awkward first meeting, Jess and Leslie become fast friends. Plagued with school bullies, loneliness and limited outlets for artistic expression, Jess and Leslie venture into the woods and create a magical kingdom they call Terabithia. In this imagined world, the two embark on various adventures through which they can briefly escape their troubled home and school lives. Leslie names herself queen of Terabithia, while Jess is king; it is here that the two forge a deep connection and unparalleled friendship.

They enter the kingdom by swinging on a rope across a creek bed. At some point, hard rain fills the creek with water and Jess becomes apprehensive about crossing into Terabithia, but he still does so due to Leslie's urging. One day, Jess's music teacher invites him to spend a day in the city and, while he considers asking if Leslie could join them, he ultimately opts to spend the day alone with his teacher, who happens to be the object of his affections. Leslie tries to cross into Terabithia alone, but the rope breaks and she drowns in the creek. When Jess returns, he is forced to deal with her death. After several days of anger and grief, Jess goes back to Terabithia. He hears his little sister May Belle crying for help and realises that she has followed him. He rescues her from the creek and builds a wooden bridge so that the two can safely visit Terabithia together. He names little May Belle the new princess of the land.

The film itself does not have profane language and, while it does deal with the issues of death and child abuse, it does not graphically depict either event. The film respects child viewers as intelligent, moral agents who either have dealt or will deal with tragic issues at some point in their lives; yet, it spares them the undue emotional trauma of witnessing violence or death firsthand. This is not to say, however, that the film is not emotionally engaging. Beautiful imagery, intense musical scores and the realistic portrayal of common childhood problems poignantly capture the attention of young audiences allowing them to identify with the characters. When Leslie dies, it is difficult to imagine a young viewer who is not touched by Jess's feelings of guilt and sorrow. Unlike the majestic resurrections in other children's films, Leslie's death is final. We do not see her again, not even in Terabithia.

The characters are multilayered and realistic. While both are likeable characters, Leslie and Jess each have their faults. Not only does Jess have outbursts of meanness and jealousy but at times he appears to be timid and insecure. One example of Jess's prideful and jealous behaviour occurs directly after Leslie wins the big race. Jess falls down from exhaustion and when Leslie extends her hand to help him, he refuses to take it. Jess returns Leslie's kind gesture with a hateful glance and quickly walks away. While Jess's ill feelings toward Leslie soon disappear, he exhibits attitudes of resentment and jealousy toward his younger sister at several points throughout the

film. It is clear that little May Belle idolises her older brother, but Jess is jealous of May Belle's loving relationship with their father and he frequently lashes out against her. In one scene, he becomes unduly angry when he learns that May Belle has drawn in his sketch pad. While May Belle has done this, presumably, to be more like her big brother, Jess harshly scolds her and hurts her feelings. Also, when May Belle tries to spend time with Jess, he nearly always tells her to go away and, at one point, he even pushes her down and makes her cry. Jess, however, is not so aggressive when it comes to Scott Hoager, Gary Fulcher and Janice Avery. For the majority of the film, Jess ardently avoids contact with bullies. At one point, it is clear that his teacher needs help carrying in supplies and, though he considers helping her, he turns away when he sees Scott and Gary nearby. In a comparable situation, Janice steals May Belle's candy and, when she appeals to her brother for help, he refuses to get involved.

Unlike Jess, Leslie is spirited and courageous. While Jess hides his drawings, Leslie is happy to share her short story with the class, even though some students belittle her. She stands up to bullies and, at one point, antagonises Janice by waving mockingly at her. Jess warns Leslie, saying, 'You're really asking for it!' Leslie replies, 'Seems to me she gives it out whether you ask for it or not, so you might as well have some fun.' Leslie's courage, however, turns to recklessness as she insists on swinging on the old rope to cross the rain-filled creek bed into Terabithia. The decision to do this, and to do it alone, ultimately costs Leslie her life.

Not only do the protagonists in *Bridge to Terabithia* have flaws, but at least one of the bullies proves to have a benevolent disposition. After Leslie's death, Jess is withdrawn and devastated, but Gary Fulcher and Scott Hoager continue to harass the distraught fifth grader. At one point, Janice Avery sees one of the boys shove Jess and she stares disapprovingly at the aggressor. In the next scene, the boy is holding tissue over his bloody nose and it becomes clear that Janice has taken matters into her own hands. To Jess's surprise, she also sits with him on the bus ride home.

The film not only features strong, relatable characters, but it also depicts situations that resemble children's everyday problems. This fact is an important one, as research indicates that the best stories for encouraging empathy in school-aged children are those that capture their interest and feature obvious problems in which the main characters must choose between multiple justifiable solutions (Upright, 2002, p. 17). In *Bridge to Terabithia*, viewers witness Jess and Leslie working through a variety of difficult situations that typify the lives of many children. These include inattentive parents, religious confusion, crushes, poverty, schoolyard bullies and, of course, the seemingly ubiquitous childhood sentiments of being misunderstood. These emotionally rich, common childhood themes are likely to engage children, allowing them to identify with the characters and to reflect on the various feelings that arise, in both the characters and the viewers themselves, during the course of the film.

Educators can utilise discussion questions in order to encourage further reflection and growth. For example, Jess's poverty and his peers' reaction to his misfortune are fine topics for discussion. In the opening scene of *Bridge to Terabithia*, Jess is preparing for the big race and his shoes begin falling apart. Knowing that his family

cannot afford to buy him a new pair, he attempts to fix them with electrical tape, but his mother insists that he wear his sister's old shoes. Those shoes fit him well enough, but they are clearly meant for a girl, as they have pink stripes and laces. Jess tries to hide the pink parts by colouring over them with a black marker, but he is ultimately unsuccessful and his fellow students predictably taunt him. In another scene, the students are on the school bus and Janice throws a sandwich at Jess and shouts, 'Consider it a free lunch program, farm boy!' One might instruct a young viewer to reflect on these scenes, and to consider some of the following questions: How do you think it made Jess feel when the other kids laughed at him about his shoes? Why does it seem wrong to make fun of the fact that Jess is poor? How would you have reacted to the teasing, if you were in Jess's position? Have you ever been embarrassed because others laughed at you for something beyond your control? Have you ever made fun of another student and/or intentionally hurt his or her feelings? If so, how did you feel afterwards and how do you think the other person felt? Is it ever acceptable to have fun at someone else's expense? These are just some questions that could help to stimulate a child's sense of empathy. There are a multitude of other questions pertaining to this and other topics presented in the film that make *Bridge to Terabithia* particularly valuable for stirring a child's imagination and strengthening his or her sense of empathy.

Bridge to Terabithia also provides an excellent opportunity for young viewers to practise their critical thinking and moral reasoning skills. The characters approach ethical dilemmas with various reasoning strategies. According to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, for instance, Janice Avery appears to be stuck at the pre-conventional level of moral reasoning. Individuals at this level view the morally correct action as that which avoids punishment or gains reward, either because punishment and reward *define* the moral quality of an act (Stage 1) or because avoiding punishment and gaining reward are in one's best interest (Stage 2). These thinkers view morality as something external to themselves, as they have not yet come to identify with the values of their family or community (Crain, 1985, p. 121). Janice seems to fit this model, as she uses her size and strength to pilfer cash and treats from smaller children, because presumably she can reap the rewards without fear of retribution. When she finally does show regard for a smaller child, she predictably repays an injustice against him with physical violence.

One might argue that viewers witness Jess and Leslie working through the conventional level of moral reasoning, as each surges beyond the egoistic orientation of Stage 2 reasoning strategies. Leslie, for example, risks her own safety to champion the interests of smaller students, when she leads a playground rebellion against Janice and her cohorts who are charging children to use the restroom. At other points in the film, Leslie's behaviour indicates that she feels an obligation to alleviate the distress of others around her. When May Belle is saddened by her brother's refusal to play with her, Leslie kindly offers her old dolls to the little girl. Similarly, when Leslie hears Janice crying in the restroom, she feels compelled to try to help, even though it seems unlikely that the bully would have returned the favour. Jess appears to display similar reasoning strategies at several points in the film. Although

Jess fears his father, he defiantly frees a captured rodent who has been pillaging the crops when he learns of his father's intention to kill the animal. Jess also eventually feels remorse for mistreating his sister and he sets out to safely include her in his adventures in Terabithia. Thus, Jess and Leslie both appear to be at the third stage of moral development, as Stage 3 moral reasoners believe that good behaviour means demonstrating good motives and interpersonal feelings such as empathy and concern for others (Crain, 1985, p. 122).

One should note that my estimation of the characters' stages of moral development may not be exact, as the characters do not always make the reasoning behind their actions explicit. It is clear, however, that parents and teachers can use various dilemmas presented in *Bridge to Terabithia* to help children investigate potential reasons for behaving ethically. According to Kohlberg, children typically ascend to the next highest stage of moral development when their current reasoning methods are challenged. This occurs when children are encouraged to think about moral dilemmas and when they are given opportunities to consider the viewpoints of others (Crain, 1985, p. 127). Viewing and discussing *Bridge to Terabithia* facilitates both of these ends. Hence, the film serves as an excellent example of a morally instructive narrative.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to convey three main arguments. First, children possess a capacity for thoughtful and critical moral deliberation that is frequently overlooked or underestimated. Second, developing this natural capacity and educating the emotions are (or ought to be) primary aims of the moral education process. Third, given these objectives, it seems that the children's film genre is a surprisingly apposite tool for aiding the moral instruction of pre-adolescents. In conclusion, I suggest that we maintain open minds with regard to children's films as instruments for moral education. Many such films, along with their intended audiences, merit respect as authentic and valuable moral entities.

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Notes

1. Pritchard (1996) argues that children may be egocentric without being egoistic, in that the former indicates a failure to understand the perspectives of others while the latter refers to selfishly seeking one's own interests (p. 122). Also, McGavock (2007) argues that 'just because children may not conceive of or structure the world as we adults do, does not mean that they are pre-moral beings incapable of working through ontological dilemmas common to humanity as a whole' (p. 138).

2. Matthew Lipman's short novel *Harry Stottlemeier's discovery* (1974) has been used in primary school curricula around the world to introduce children to philosophy. Lipman also founded the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC).
3. Those who advocate an ethics of duty may reject this claim. Kant (1898), for instance, held that moral judgements that are based on emotions are 'impure'.

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