

The Stories we live by: Narrative in ethical enquiry with children

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1. Abstract

Many educators will be familiar with the power of stories to stimulate rich and meaningful philosophical enquiry on ethical issues with of children. In this paper, I present a view of the nature of narrative and ethics – and the relationship between the two – that attempts to explain why this is the case. It is not an accident that ethical matters are illuminated to children and adults alike in stories, nor is the explanation of this fitness for purpose, merely pragmatic, or a matter of convention. Narrative, I argue, is at the heart of ethical life and learning. We live and learn by virtue of the stories we tell and the stories that are told to us. This is possible not only because these stories present us with vivid ethical content, but also because successful engagement with and enjoyment of these narratives requires the exercise of capacities that also help us lead good lives.

Narrative is central to learning how to live a good life and living that life, in two respects: as both as *source* and a *method* of ethical knowledge and understanding. Crucially for educators narrative is a rich and abundant source and a method that can be easily grasped and then practiced and improved upon.

For those who find this account persuasive, I conclude with some suggestions about how best to practice narrative ethical enquiry in ways that acknowledge, actualise and maximise the power of narrative, whilst bringing it to bear fruitfully in everyday ethical life and learning. I propose 'Narrative Ethical Enquiry' a pedagogy that aims to develop three virtues: ethical awareness, narrative competence and critical, self-conscious enquiry.

I have found that the philosophy classroom is an ideal crucible for the combination of these three elements. However, elsewhere in my work I argue that that narrative ethical enquiry is not restricted to the philosophy classroom, or any classroom for that matter. It is equally at home in domestic, community, religious, professional or political contexts where people use stories to represent ethical experience, explore ethical issues and share what they have learnt. I am not advocating something radically new in this paper, but rather observing something that spontaneously exists in those places where human beings seek to order, comprehend and communicate ethical experience; and to learn how best to pursue a good life. Here I am merely proposing that this phenomenon – of ethical enlightenment through narrative – be recognised more widely, and capitalised upon by educators.

2. What is ethical enquiry?

We are involved in ethical enquiry a great deal of the time. Much of what I say later about the relationship between narrative and ethics rests on this.

2.1. Ethical enquiry in PWC

For those doing philosophy with children, the most recognisable kind of ethical enquiry may well be those moments in a community of philosophical enquiry when the dialogue addresses rightness and wrongness, values such as justice, virtues such as kindness and our conception of what it means to lead a good life. These are a particular kind of intentional, self aware and formalised ethical enquiries, but when I use the term, I use it with much wider scope. Ethical enquiry is what we *all* do to some extent, when we encounter, organise, evaluate, synthesise, critique, reject, revise and communicate ethical knowledge and

understanding. Typically this enquiry is stimulated by ethical experience; which may take the form of the events that we encounter as we live our everyday lives. However ethical enquiry may also be stimulated by the encounters we have with narratives.

2.2. What ethical enquiry is not

Notice that I do not use the term to describe the *totality* of ways in which we learn (or purport to learn) what goodness is, and how we might live good lives. Looking at key spheres of moral learning – the home, the classroom, the community, the place of worship and the workplace – ethical education takes a range of forms, among them: instruction, tradition, legislation, inducement, socialisation, persuasion, coercion, indoctrination, historical study, religious revelation, and philosophical reflection. We may learn about social expectations, religious teachings or historical precedents via such practices, but we are not necessarily engaged in *enquiry*, by which I mean a practice in which we are personally orientated towards discovering what is good. I understand this as a process that is active not passive, open-ended and not closed, inter-subjective not subjective, self-directed and not compelled.

2.3. Ethical enquiry broadly understood

Ethical enquiry, as opposed to ethical instruction, inducement or indoctrination, is a process of co-constructing knowledge and understanding about what is right and wrong, what is valuable and what constitutes a good life. This kind of learning stands apart from absolutist kinds of moral teaching where the pedagogy is one of propositional knowledge, communicated through authoritative axioms, principles and laws. However this is not a relativist position. Ethical knowledge and understanding that is co-constructed is always provisional as the grounds of its construction are open to debate. But it is negotiated between people, like you and me, who have significant ethical experience, and through this communication and negotiation it is ultimately shared. Ethics on this view is a *lesbian rule* rather than a rigid yardstick and this is strength of such a position rather than a weakness, as such an understanding of ethics allows it to bend and flex to accommodate the complexity of everyday life; the competing claims we face and the contingencies that befall us.

I use the term ethical enquiry to refer to a broad range of (often communal) activities that involve actively engaging *intellectually, emotionally, and imaginatively* with experiential stimuli in our everyday lives. I have in mind for example, the classroom in which students ask whether a text they are reading is racist, the home in which parents, hearing their child's excuse, discuss whether the child should be punished; the community in which neighbours discuss local antisocial behaviour, the prayer group in which the faithful explore a bible passage, and the workplace where parties in a dispute give their version of an incident, parliament, where MPs share anecdotes from their constituency in policy debates. The intellect, emotion and the imagination are the faculties that make it possible for us to engage in these kinds of everyday ethical enquiries. They help us make judgements, feel compassion and see things from another's point of view. These are the same faculties at work when we engage with narratives, from the story books of philosophy with children to the films, news stories, plays, gossip, novels and personal histories that occupy adult life.

2.4. Ethical enquiry and narrative

Narratives can feature at the heart of these kinds of enquires, and often they do. But the reasons for their fitness for purpose are not always clear to students or teachers. One of the consequences of this is that narratives often make an appearance in ways that do not reveal their full potential. Often we use narratives in ethical enquiry because stories are readily available to us, they successfully engage and enthuse children, and because using them is conventional in philosophy with children and in schooling in general. These reasons are adequate enough to get started, but this paper considers several more compelling reasons for placing narrative at the heart of ethical enquiry.

Occasionally we may use narratives to communicate glib, superficial or non-negotiable moral messages. This is an inadequate use for narrative in my view, as the reasons I share should make clear.

3. What is narrative?

When I speak of narrative I do so in the terms of an ever-growing community of interdisciplinary narrative scholars, among them philosophers, literary scholars, historians, psychologists, sociologists and neuroscientists (MacIntyre 1985); (White 1973); (Bruner, 1991); (Polkinghorne 1995) etc. Among these scholars narrative is widely acknowledged as more than a means of classifying texts – of separating recipes books from short stories, or telephone directories from film scripts.

Narrative is a ubiquitous, culturally privileged and multi-modal phenomena; a primary mechanism by which human beings experience, understand, and communicate sequences of events and their relations to particular people and places. Narrative organises complex, chaotic human experience into patterns that are intelligible and communicable – both to oneself and to others. These patterns reveal the chronology, causality and significance of events, and bind them together as a structural whole – the story – that connotes ‘a logic in its own right’ (Herman 2001 p. 130). Although these structures are complex, and their content infinitely rich, human beings from earliest childhood grasp their logic. In what follows I will say more to make sense of this rather complex account of something we ordinarily experience as immediate and straightforward.

3.1. Narrative is everywhere and takes many forms

An account of narrative naturally starts with attention to some narrative examples, and even a casual survey of such examples reveals something at once obvious and yet striking. ‘The narratives of the world are numberless’ the French Structuralist critic Roland Barthes famously noticed:

‘Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting [...] stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.

(Barthes 1977 p.79)

3.2. Narrative is a structure

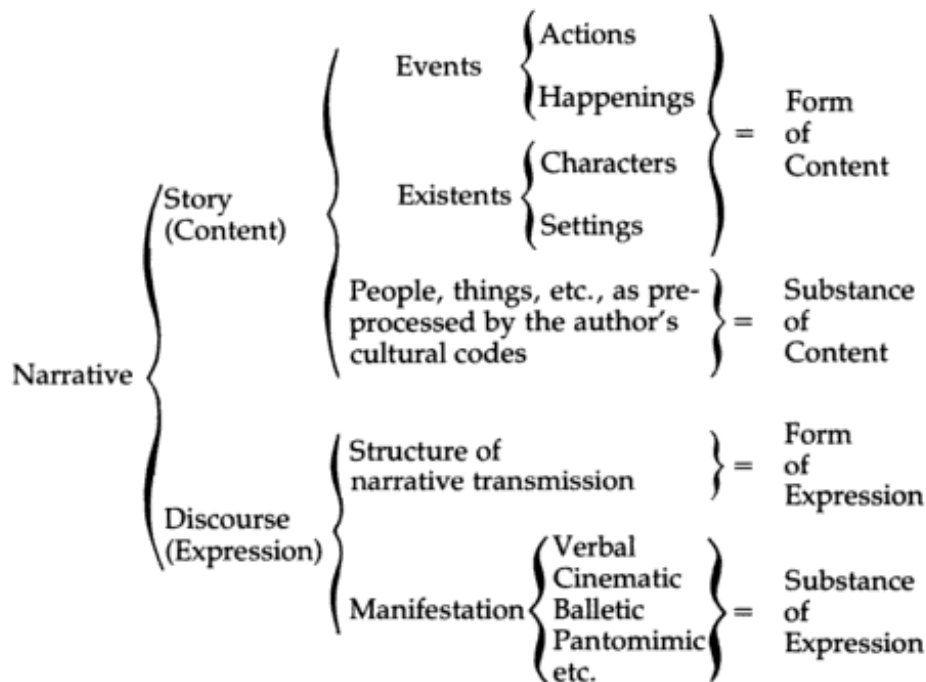
Narrative content may be presented and translated into multiple modes. The basic story content of Romeo and Juliet for example – that two people fall in love and tragically die – may survive translation into dance, animation or painting. The possibility of transposing narrative from one medium to another is the strongest reason in favour of thinking of narrative as a structural whole. What is preserved in a radical transposition of Romeo and Juliet from theatrical performance to cartoon if not some basic structure?

3.3. Narrative is a structure comprising ‘content’ and ‘expression’

My understanding of the basis of narrative structure follows that of the American critic, Seymour Chatman, but has roots that can be traced back to Aristotle. On this view one must distinguish narrative *content* from narrative *expression*: ‘the what’ of the story or the basic facts it conveys and ‘the how’ of the story telling – the way those facts are selected, represented, arranged, and interpreted by the giver and the receiver of a narrative (Chatman 1978 p.19).

In *Romeo and Juliet* the basic facts and the logical relationships they stand in are preserved from the theatre production to the cartoon: the characters – Romeo and Juliet – exist, they exist in a time and place – fourteenth century Verona – and they are bound in relation to one another of love, and in in a wider context of familial discord. The events are *emplotted* in the same basic way with the lover’s meeting proceeding their falling in love and their deaths following their suicidal act. However the telling of the story as a comic strip is radically different; it employs an entirely new pictorial language to represent the story’s events and existents. Beyond the change of medium; any retelling will embody many judgements on the part of the new storyteller, about what to include, what to omit, what to emphasise and what to down play; ultimately about what matters.

Narrative structure



This primary division of Content (Story) and Expression (Discourse) can be further subdivided to reveal some of the other conceptual objects of a theory of narrative.

(Chatman 1978 p. 21)

3.4. Narrative is a structural whole

I understand narrative as a structural whole because all of the elements within it – the events that take place and the people to whom they befall – are related to one another in an organised way. Unlike a collection of arbitrary people, places, actions and occurrences; the components within a true narrative tend to be ‘mutually entailing’ in a way that is recognisable even after transposition from one mode of expression such as cinema to another such as synopsis (Chatman 1978 p. 21). Any telling of a story has a basic chronology as its foundation. It takes place within a certain spatial and temporal setting. The events that happen are caused and have consequences. The characters within the story are agents possessing intentional states that are themselves, caused and causal. A story’s characters stand in inter-subjective relations with one another and are bound by relational, all too often ethical, bonds. These basic features of stories constitute their logic and enable stories to represent ethically relevant features of everyday life

3.5. Narrative structures human experience

Despite the many complex manifestations narrative has taken in literature, cinema, theatre, oral history etc. Narrative is at its most basic, a perceptual activity that organises data into patterns that represent and explain experience (Branigan 1992 p. 3). These representations of experience are not the preserve of authors and playwrights though they might execute them with great skill; they are in production by almost everyone in daydreams, excuses and jokes. They are comprehensible and communicable by people across time and space, from cave paintings to computer games.

3.6. Narrative deals with experiences of change

Fundamentally, narrative activity produces patterns that represent an experience of change. 'In a narrative [...] some person, object or situation undergoes a particular type of change and this change is measured by a sequence of attributions which apply to the thing at different times'. (Branigan 1992 p. 4) The American philosopher Arthur Danto describes this basic structure of narrative texts as follows: (Danto quoted in Altman 2008 p. 5)

x is f at t_1
g happens to x at t_2
x is h at t_3

Narrative enables us to impose order on experiences that are in reality, complex and in a constant state of flux. A narrative frames events, designating some events as beginnings and other events as middles and endings. By way of an example, here is a very basic narrative popularised by the English novelist E M Forster in his 1929 *Aspects of the Novel*:

The King died
And then the Queen died

The narrative *content* – a simple account of change – maps on to Danto's structure as follows:

The Queen is alive at time 1	x is f at t_1
The Queen loses her husband at time 2	g happens to x at t_2
The Queen is dead at time 3	x is h at t_3

But this example can be used to illustrate what is possible in the *expression* of that content. While the basic facts stay the same, in this new telling of the story, a sequence of events are emploted. This, according to Forster is a plot:

The King died
And then the Queen died *of grief*

3.7. Narrative identifies the causes and consequences of change

Narrative is not merely a way of framing data within a chronology of beginnings, middles and endings. Narrative organisation arranges data into cause-effect chains of events within a given time frame (Branningan p. 3). In this particular example, the sequence of events in chronological order is transformed into a plot by the attribution of causes. The example, however skeletal, is instantly more recognisable as a story. The *events* – the Queen's death and the King's death – are bound up in causal relations to one another and to the narrative's *existents*: the King and the Queen themselves, their relationship, their love and their loss.

3.8. Narrative ascribes significance, meaning and value to experiences of change

In any natural narrative, the person who tells this story does not simply report a sequence of events; they express their understanding of the causes of those events and in doing so reveal a particular perspective on the significance, meaning and value of those events. An identification of a cause or consequence is often an expression of what matters in a particular story. When grief is identified as the cause of the Queen's death the significance of her death is revealed: it is not a coincidence but a tragedy borne out of what we assume is her love for husband and the acute sadness she experiences at his loss. Suddenly the basic story achieves meaning as a tragic love story.

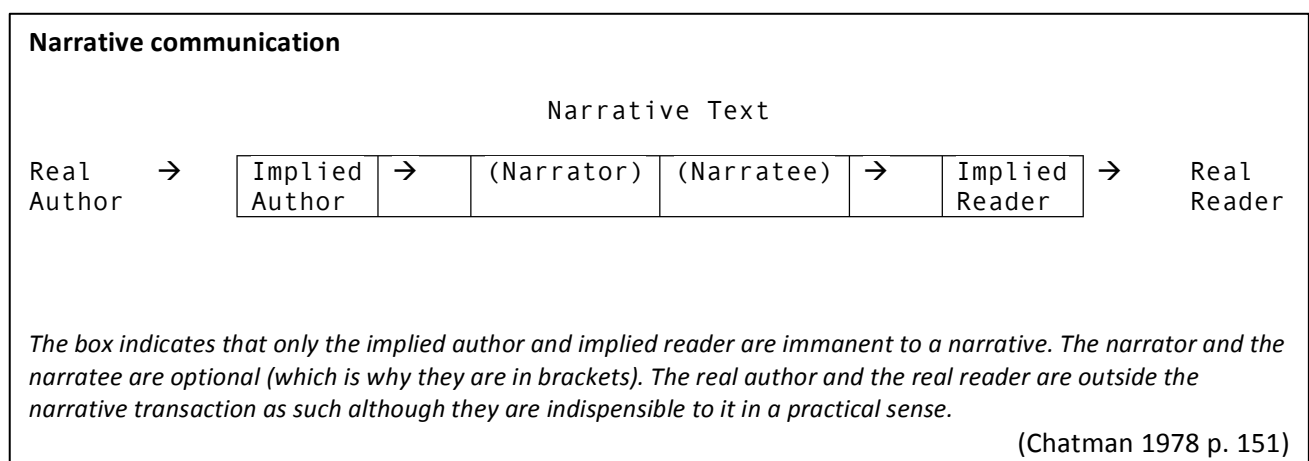
3.9. Narrative is co-constructed

One might assume that identification or attribution of causes and consequences, and the generation of significance, meaning and value in narrative organisation is the exclusive role of the storyteller, but scholarly discussion of E M Forster's example argues otherwise, and in doing so reveals something else fundamental about narrative. While Foster sees this acts of emplotment as the role of the author, later scholars consider the possibly that this activity is shared and that it happens both explicitly and implicitly, consciously and unconsciously. More often than not, we the receiver – the reader, listener or watcher – will infer causal relationships in stories. Even in the first example, we will notice the proximity of the Queen's death, to that of her husband and we will emplot the story ourselves, inferring that the Queen dies of grief and thereby divining meaning out of its basic elements (Chatman 1978 p.45). We are so skilled in dealing in narratives that we often co-create them in communion with their authors, filling in the gaps with inference, empathy and speculation. This insight reveals my final claim about narrative.

3.10. Narrative is communication

It 'takes two to story' as the philosopher Richard Kearney puts it; all narrative shares the common function of 'someone telling something to someone about something' (Kearney 2002 p.5) A narrative is a *communication* in which a storyteller - in an act of narrative expression - communicates to a listener, certain narrative content.

A more nuanced understanding of this expressive act perceives further layers of interaction:



For ease in the first part of this paper, I speak simply of a narrative giver and receiver with 'giver' capturing all roles to the left, and 'receiver' capturing all roles to the right.

So the theoretical pieces of the puzzle are not simply narrative *content* and the *events* (actions and occurrences) and *existents* (characters and settings) which narrative contains. Our theory must also consider the *expression* of narrative, the various roles of narrative *giver* and *receiver* and the various techniques they employ such as genre, repetition, suspense, flashback and flash forward etc. that they employ, that make the expression of narrative possible and potent. Narrative is the organisation and communication of experiential data in ways that are situated and inter-subjective. The content and expression of narrative is invariably shaped by the knowledge and existence of another human being with whom the narrative giver or receiver is in communication. Every act of giving a narrative embodies a judgement about the nature of events themselves and often a narrative receiver is mindful of this (Branigan 1992 p. 3). For example, a writer may present crimes in such a way as to glorify them. Equally every act of receiving a narrative – of reading, listening or watching – requires judgements about the nature of events too: a story is interpreted by a particular reader as unfair or a watcher as gratuitously violent.

I have said that narrative is a structure by virtue of which the events that befall certain existents are communicated between one giver and another receiver (or receivers). The events and existents communicated in narratives may be either real or imagined or occasionally a combination of both. The communication itself may require intellectual, emotional and imaginative acts of interpretation, inference, guesswork, sympathy, empathy, speculation, wonder and imagination *on both sides*. But so what? What does narrative have to do with ethics?

4. What is the relationship between narrative and ethical enquiry?

In my wider work I claim that narrative is at the heart of ethical enquiry. In support of this thesis I justify five claims about the relationship between narrative and ethics: the phenomenological, epistemological, metaphysical, normative and pedagogical claims. Here I discuss just one of these claims; the epistemological claim that narrative is at the heart of moral life and learning as a *source* and a *method* of ethical knowledge and understanding.

Following the psychologist Jerome Bruner, my account of the epistemological relationship between narrative and ethics attempts to link the ways in which individuals *gain* and *use* knowledge, to the contexts in which they live. Narrative is everywhere in the contexts within which we live and the ubiquity of narrative as a form of human knowledge is both a *cause* and a *consequence* of its dual epistemological role.

4.1. The epistemological claim

I claim that – though we might not ordinarily acknowledge it – in the ethical domain, we live and learn by narratives: bible stories, court cases, fairy tales, novels, news reports, excuses, theatre, visual art, pornography, testimony, fables, thought experiments, comic books, diaries, feature films, soap operas, gossip, folk songs, fine art histories, stained glass windows, photograph albums, memory, opera, ballet, mime, picture books. These stories embody ethical perspectives and require an ethical perspective and ethical capacities in an audience in order to engage fully with them.

Narrative is a *source*, a *method* of ethical knowledge and understanding. We achieve ethical insight not just when we encounter the ethical perspectives skilfully crafted in the books we read or the television we watch; we also gain ethical insight through the narratives we create ourselves in private thought and in public conversation as well as in those creative acts of the few of us who are writers and artists. Narrative is something that can be studied and something that can be practiced, and in these mutually complementary ways, we can gain ethical knowledge and understanding.

Narrative is particularly good at organising and representing human experience because it tracks fundamental logical structures of human experience; inter-dependent structures such as temporality,

causality, contingency, necessity, particularity, singularity, generality, intentionality, emotionality, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. There is an ethical dimension to all human experience that the logic of narrative necessarily represents by virtue of the structure of its content and the mechanisms of its expression. But narrative is more successful than other ways of ordering and representing the ethical dimension of human experience – such as those found in the sciences, mathematics and rhetoric – because, in order to achieve understanding, successful expression of narrative content engages the emotions and the imagination as well as the intellect. These are the faculties at work in everyday ethical life and this combination, rather than being imprecise and irrational, is actually superior in rationality and in the relevant sort of precision than intellectualist approaches alone (Nussbaum 1990).

4.2. Narratives as a source of ethical knowledge and understanding

Narratives function as a source of ethical knowledge and understanding by virtue of what they represent and how they represent it.

Narratives represent worlds in which ethical issues are vivid, in narrative, we encounter ethical issues in their natural habitat – not as timeless abstract rules, principles and maxims – but as particular human experiences that are lived daily and felt keenly in the temporal, casual, contingent environment of everyday human experience. These representations are *sources* of ethical experience. In narrative we encounter events from the catastrophic to the miraculous and meet characters from the despicable to the inspirational. These events and existents challenge and enlarge enabling us to experience and perceive the ethical world fully. Furthermore, narrative is often able to amplify these familiar features of experience in ways that are particularly ethically advantageous. For example, narrative provides us with detailed insight into context, into the space and time in which events unfold. Narratives arrange events logically; helping us to appreciate ethically relevant causes and consequences of actions. Narrative is the primary means by which we access human psychology, illuminating individual's motives and offering us multiple points of view. In these respects narrative can offer us superior ethical experiences with greater depth and sharper focus than those possible in the everyday lives of most of us.

Narratives are also artefacts of human creation and as such they cannot represent the world neutrally; each narrative word bears the fingerprints of the author and embodies the ethical perspective of an implied author; consequently it expresses a collection of values, commitments and faults. These values, commitments and faults leave their mark on those who engage with stories, sometimes because of their invisible influence – be it benign or malignant – but more fruitfully, when they are the subject of our critical and self-conscious ethical evaluation, when we actively employ narrative as a method by which we might learn.

4.3. Narrative as a method of ethical knowledge and understanding

Narratives function as a method of ethical knowledge and understanding by virtue of the capacities at work in their creation and communication.

Creating a narrative requires the engagement of the imagination, the emotions and the intellect, whether the creator is a novelist dealing in imagined worlds or journalists dealing with the facts of the matter. In their acts of organisation, selection and attention they perceive the ethically salient features of the human condition; they practice and refine their abilities, and in doing so, they come to know and understand the ethical world more intimately. Telling stories becomes a mechanism by which all of us, in so far as we are storytellers, become more perceptive, and by which we learn what it means to be good.

Equally we cannot successfully engage with the stories others tell unless we engage with them emotionally and imaginatively as well as intellectually. We fill in the gaps that the narrator has omitted; we judge some

characters and feel sympathy for others; we infer what was really meant in one conversation and imagine what might have provoked another; we put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Through these kinds of activities, we gain full access to the legitimate ethical experiences that promise to supplement the parochial ethical experiences of everyday life. The more we perceive, and the more carefully we attune our attention to what matters in stories and in everyday experience, and the more we learn about what it means to be good.

5. What are the pedagogical implications of the epistemological claim?

The epistemological relationship between narrative and ethical enquiry suggests a pedagogy that places stories centre stage, not just as sources of stimulus for ethical contemplation and discussion, but equally as a form of ethical enquiry in its own right. In a PwC context this proposal does not supersede community of philosophical enquiry; rather it enriches it. Narrative is not the only way of experiencing, understanding and communicating ethical knowledge and understanding; in fact it is rarely understood as such. 'Narrative is simply there like life itself' (Barthes 1977 p.79) and when we read, watch television or tell jokes we do so for pleasure, for information or without even knowing why. Rarely do we pick up a book with the intention of learning about goodness and the good life. We are swimming in stories, just as we are fully immersed in human values and perhaps this is why the phenomenological closeness of the two can be missed. 'Narrativised realities', suspects Jerome Bruner, 'are too ubiquitous, their construction too habitual or automatic to be accessible to easy inspection'. Like the fish, 'we might be the last to discover water' (Bruner 1996 p.147).

The familiarity and ubiquity of narrative can all too often render its power invisible. It is used so effortlessly and often with such little self-awareness that its potential may be obscured. Philosophy on the other hand attempts to be self aware by its very nature. Philosophical enquiry and narrative are allies, and in conjunction with one another the power of both is greatly increased.

5.1. Narrative Ethical Enquiry

I advocate a pedagogy of 'Narrative Ethical Enquiry' that aims at promoting ethical perceptiveness in learners and in doing so, borrows from narrative and philosophical ways of making sense of the world. It involves an exploration of the ethical issues alive in particular stories received by learners as well as the exploration of particular ethical issues through stories that learners give. Through 'Narrative Ethical Enquiry' it is possible to exercise the skills and capacities necessary both in the giving and receiving of stories and in living an ethical life.

Narrative is not just a stimulus for enquiry (i.e. narrative is not just a *source* of ethical knowledge and understanding). Story giving and receiving is a legitimate form of ethical learning in its own right. What we learn by giving and receiving stories is *ethical perceptiveness*. Perceptiveness is the ability to read the ethically salient features of a text or an everyday experience. It is a function of the use of our emotion and imagination in conjunction with the intellect (i.e. in this sense narrative is an *method* of ethical understanding too).

5.2. Narrative ethical enquiry in theory

Narrative ethical enquiry aims at three things that I take as constitutive of perceptiveness: ethical awareness, narrative competence and critical, self-conscious enquiry.

Ethical awareness

Narrative ethical enquiry promotes ethical awareness by actively seeking out the ethical content in stories. Through practice we become habituated to look at stories as sources of ethical illumination; as embodying ethical visions which we can accept or reject. Treating stories as sources of ethical content also reveals to us – through the stories that we tell – what our ethical commitments are.

Narrative competence

Narrative ethical enquiry promotes narrative by encouraging acts of story giving and receiving as an integral part of ethics education and not just as the basis for an exploration of issues in some other gear e.g. philosophical, legal, scientific, religious etc. Narrative ethical enquiry values skilful reading: the kind of reading that can identify voice and mood and can assess the authors' reliability. Narrative ethical enquiry also values the kind of writing and telling that can create believable characters, vivid settings and plausible plots.

Critical, self-conscious enquiry

It is possible that learners may pick up a story and read it whilst alert to its ethical dimension. It is equally possible that learners may explore a text in great depth through creative narrative activities of characterisation and rewriting and analogising. Both of these kinds of activities may be ethically illuminating, but neither fully realise *narrative ethical enquiry* in the sense I have in mind. It is only when these activities become critical and self-conscious that their full potential is maximised. Because narrative ethical enquiry is philosophical, it strives to be alert to its own aims and rationale. Learners and educators working in this way recognise and talk openly about the potential of narratives to offer ethical illumination. They also move fluidly from a story level discussion to meta-level philosophical discussion *and back again*. The reflective, critical and inter-subjective nature of their philosophical discussions helps them pin down what they have understood from a particular text, however provisional and context-dependent. This kind of critical, reflective discussion – familiar in a community of philosophical enquiry – is an ally of narrative ways of exploring ethics.

5.3. Narrative Ethical Enquiry in practice

In practice I am advocating that that narrative should occupy a central role in ethical enquiry; not just as a source of knowledge as a stimulus for contemplation and discussion, but also as a method of knowledge in narrative acts of telling, and retelling, of empathising and imagining as well as comprehending. These acts are necessary for full engagement in narrative meaning; they reveal the ethical perspectives embodied in a text. But ethical enquiry is not about the transmission of one perspective from a text into the minds of a reader. The power of a narrative is in the skills it demands of a reader the same intellectual, emotional and imaginative skills required by a good person living an ethical life. When I speak of narrative as a method of ethical enquiry, I am advocating a natural extension of the kinds of narrative-based pedagogies endorsed by philosophers such as Kieran Egan who argues 'learning to follow a narrative is a vital intellectual accomplishment, efficiently following a narrative means being able to allot significance, recognise what is important, fit parts together from textual clues, construct emotional meaning (Egan 1986). Ethical knowledge, on my view, 'is not simply an intellectual grasp of propositions, not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there with imagination and feeling' (Nussbaum 1990 p. 152). By engaging in stories as a source of insight and using stories to formulate and communicate our ethical perspective, a person does not grasp a series of propositions. Instead he or she becomes more perceptive: she learns to read stories more successfully, and in turn learns to read the world more successfully.

6. Narrative ethical enquiry in context: *The Devoted Friend*

Narrative ethical enquiry incorporates narrative as both a *source* and a *method* of ethical knowledge and understanding. In practical terms this involves selecting promising stories as a stimulus and context for ethical enquiry and using narrative methods as part of the activities that constitute that enquiry. In what follows I offer a narrative example. However the limitations of space mean that I can only make a few remarks when in fact, the story is enormously rich.

'The Devoted Friend' is a fairy story written by Oscar Wilde. I have chosen this example because it suits my purposes on two fronts: First it is a story for children with accessible ethical content. It's an example of a narrative we – as facilitators of an ethically focussed community of philosophical enquiry – might use in ethical enquiry with children. Secondly I read it as an allegory about the nature of ethics education.

The tale is a story within a story: a conversation between an old water rat and a green linnet gives way to the story of 'Big' Hugh the Miller and little Hans. In the story, told by the linnet with the intention of educating the water rat, little Hans lives in a tiny cottage surrounded by a beautiful garden; the result of much hard work and dedication. Hans counts among his many friends, the Miller: a rich man full of high-minded ideas about friendship. 'Real friends should have everything in common' says the Miller, taking fruit and flowers from Hans' garden whenever he pleases.

When winter comes, Hans suffers from hunger and the cold, but also from loneliness as the Miller never visits, nor does he invite Hans to spend the winter with his family, professing that he wishes to protect his friend from the feelings of envy that such a visit would produce. But when spring arrives, the Miller is back again. Discovering that Hans had been forced to sell some of his possessions to survive the winter, the Miller offers to give Hans his old wheelbarrow as it is no longer of use to him.

This modest offer creates a debt that it seems impossible for Hans to settle. Willingly Hans fulfils a long list of requests from the Miller: to give him wood, to mend his roof, to give him flowers, which he would otherwise have sold. Later Hans is asked to carry a heavy sack of produce to market, and later still, to take his sheep out to pasture. 'There is no work so delightful as the work one does for others' claims the Miller. At each new request Hans is motivated by what he sees as the Miller's 'act of pure generosity'.

In the climactic scene of the story, one dark and stormy night, the Miller asks Hans to go and fetch the doctor for his injured son. Willing as ever, Hans requests that he might borrow the Miller's lantern to keep him safe, a request the Miller denies. Despite this, Hans successfully alerts the doctor, but walking home as the storm worsens, he loses his way, wanders off on the moor and drowns.

At Little Hans' funeral the Miller proudly occupies the role of chief mourner however all he seems to mourn is his own suffering, suffering he attributes to his own generosity towards Hans. At the end of this story, we return again to the animals on the riverside and discover that though the water rat identified with the Miller, the 'moral' of the story has been quite lost on him.

This example powerfully illustrates several things that are central to my argument.

6.1. *The Devoted Friend as a source of ethical knowledge and understanding*

This story contains ethically illuminating information, but this is not a series of propositions about the good life that a reader must simply grasp. Although some educators may present this text to children in this way, readers who are orientated towards ethical *enquiry* (as opposed to instruction) are not looking for 'the moral of the story' in the sense in which the linnet does. In narrative ethical enquiry, ethical illumination is not measured by whether or not a reader identifies some maxim – such as '*there is no work so delightful as the work one does for others*' – as the story's definitive meaning and message. This story gives way to wisdom, only when treated in a particular way.

Like any narrative, *The Devoted Friend* constitutes an object worthy of ethical enquiry because it communicates an ethical point of view and assumes an ethical point of view in the reader. The narrative achieves this by creating a credible world in which ethical issues are vivid. This is possible by virtue of the logical structures of experience that the story represents. For example:

Temporality

In this story we encounter a sequence of events that transpire over time. Though we first meet Hans and the Miller at a particular moment, we infer that these men have a history together. The respect Hans has for the Miller's poetic words about friendship has accumulated over many incidents of pontificating. The self-righteousness required to take advantage of Hans has, we imagine, swollen over time too, and it has done so in proportion to the self-deceiving words he has said that assure him of his own moral integrity. During the story-time itself, seasons come and go. The Miller's neglect of Hans lasts the whole winter, and his demands in lieu of the wheelbarrow last most of the rest of the year. Time here is ethically relevant, it helps us quantify the extent of the Miller's exploitation of Hans and helps us appreciate the slow and subtle ways in which power becomes imbalanced.

Causality

Time is also linked closely with causality. A perceptive reader of this story will naturally read certain events as causes for later events. The Miller's unwillingness to give Hans his lantern is in part the cause of Hans' death; this reluctance in conjunction with his request that Hans go and fetch the doctor, compounds his guilt.

Contingency

Yet the reader also notices certain contingencies: the Miller didn't wilfully drown Hans, it was an accident. In an alternative set of circumstances Hans might have found the road again and survived. The weather and the terrain produce the tragic consequences. Our perception of causes, in conjunction with our awareness of what is contingent and not necessary, enable us to formulate ethical judgements about events.

Creating a credible world in this way can be achieved with greater or lesser skill resulting in varying degrees of verisimilitude. However in terms of its potential for ethical illumination the mere creation of a world is not remarkable, since almost all narratives, however parsimonious, embody an elementary ethical perspective simply by their value-driven selection of certain events and existents and omission of others. What this story does particularly well is communicate multiple perspectives – and not simply the perspectives of more than one character. There are multiple levels of communication, and each presents a seam that the reader can mine for information that they can then explore, freely and critically, in the spirit of ethical enquiry.

For example, there is a communication between the implied author of the text and the implied reader. Since we can never know the ethical perspective of the real Oscar Wilde, nor can Wilde, long since dead, know of the existence, never mind the ethical perspective of his many readers, we take implied author and implied reader to designate something particular. The implied author is Oscar Wilde as we feel we know him from reading this text and the implied reader is the kind of reader the text seems to anticipate; in this case intelligent children and adults capable of discerning that the stories' title is ambiguous. This communication provides a source of ethical illumination. The kind of reader the story presupposed is a person who realises that the title is ambiguous because it is not clear who it refers to: if the Miller is the friend in question then the title is ironic since the Miller is self interested, devoted only to himself. If little Hans is the devoted friend then the title is tragic and perhaps cautionary since this devotion is misplaced, and ultimately deadly. The ethical perspective communicated here is one that may seem dissonant, especially given the clear and

unambiguous message one might expect from a moral tale. From this ethical perspective, devotion in friendship can be a vice as well as a virtue.

There are more communicative seams to be mined. Since this is a story within a story, we are able to clearly observe the communication between the narrator, the linnet, and the naratee (or the person to whom the story is told) the water rat. Here the story cleverly embodies an instance of moral education using stories: the kind of account of the use of narrative in ethics education that I reject. The story is told by a well-meaning linnet to a pompous and ignorant water rat. The linnet considers herself in a position to educate the water rat, and presents the story of little Hans and the Miller as a lesson with an unambiguous moral lesson. However, the story ends on a note of cynicism from the water rat: the meaning intended by the linnet – that the Miller is no friend at all – is completely lost on the water rat. Furthermore, upon discovering that the story has been used in this way, to communicate a moral, the Water Rat is furious. The exercise has been a failure.

Finally at the level of character interaction we find further ethical perspectives embodied and communicated. The Miller, through the dissonance between his sanctimonious words and his hypocritical deeds demonstrates a lack of self-awareness. Because of his power and status, his words are internalised by Hans who finds them beautiful and aspirational, though he is blind to the Miller's hypocritical. 'At present you only have the practice of friendship but in time you will have the theory too' condescends the Miller suggesting that theory is superior to practice from this ethical vantage point. This is a view that may be dissonant for the reader who sees Hans as ethically more developed, as he appears to be embodiment of these ideals. In the story we also achieve an understanding of how this kind of naïve generosity might backfire: however it may appear to the reader, in the story Hans's generosity is read by the Miller as ingratitude.

6.2. The Devoted Friend as a method of ethical knowledge and understanding

The primary school teachers, artists and other creatives among us will routinely deal with a text like 'The Devoted Friend' in a variety of ways that do not immediately resemble philosophical enquiry. In their classroom we might imagine ourselves in Hans' garden and describe the colours, textures and smells as we explore it. We might enact the digging, weeding and watering that have, over many years, produced this harvest. We might imagine the Miller giving a fresh bunch of honey suckle plucked from Hans garden to his lovely wife, and the pleasure it gives her. We might write Hans' diary during the long winter he spent alone or recreate with our bodies, the fateful night that he lost his way, and ask ourselves whether, despite his almost saintly goodness, he resented the Miller in his final fearful moments. We might imagine what would have happened if the Miller's son had not been injured, or if Hans had refused the Miller his offer of the wheelbarrow and rewrite the story accordingly. We might tell our classmates, analogous stories from our own life experience.

These imaginative and emotionally literate modes of exploring text may take many forms; we find them in drama, creative writing, storyboard drawing, abstract painting, expressive dance and music for example. Far from distracting from a text's deeper ethical content, they constitute ways of accessing the story more fully. They emphasise the kinds of imaginative, emotional and intellectual engagement that becomes second nature to an attentive listener or careful reader. They also enable a children's story that, on the surface of things, appears to be a 'mere' representation of experience, to become a legitimate ethical experience in its own right.

There are many ethically aware and narratively competent readers who do not need such explicit activities in order to engage with a stories' ethical significance. Upon reading of a tragedy in the newspaper, many of us will imagine what would have happened if things had been different. Many of us will weep in the cinema at the fate of fictional people for whom we feel enormous sympathy. Many of us will endlessly reply an

argument in our memory, hoping to find by reason, whether we were in the wrong. Ethically aware and narratively competent activities are a natural response to the stimuli of everyday life. However as educators, our job is to create those contexts in which children can realise and recognise the faculties they need to discover what is good in life. We can create these contexts through activities that complement community of philosophical enquiry. The children with whom I have shared this story have explored it through their careful reading, their imaginative rewriting and their open-ended exploration of the story's world through letters, pictures, tableaux and inner monologue. This kind of activity builds their ethical awareness and their narrative competence – and it is this, in conjunction with community of philosophical enquiry – that constitutes narrative ethical enquiry.

7. What are the implications for philosophy with children (PwC)?

I have described form of engaging with texts that borrows from the practice of creative teachers and arts practitioners, in particular from those who teach drama and make theatre. However, these creative engagements with narrative do not fully realise narrative ethical enquiry. You will recall that narrative ethical enquiry, as I sketch it, aims at three things: ethical awareness, narrative competence and *critical, self-conscious enquiry*. It is this final feature that requires the kind of community of philosophical enquiry with which we are all familiar. However, before I endorse community of philosophical enquiry, I should first make some remarks about its shortcomings.

7.1. The shortcomings of community of philosophical enquiry

In my early days of ethically focused philosophical enquiry with children I might have used Wilde's text in a way that might be recognisable to some practitioners. First I would share the story with the children, briefly revising its content and assessing comprehension. I'd check for example that the children understood that the Miller was richer than Hans and that Hans' garden, besides a source of pleasure, was also his livelihood.

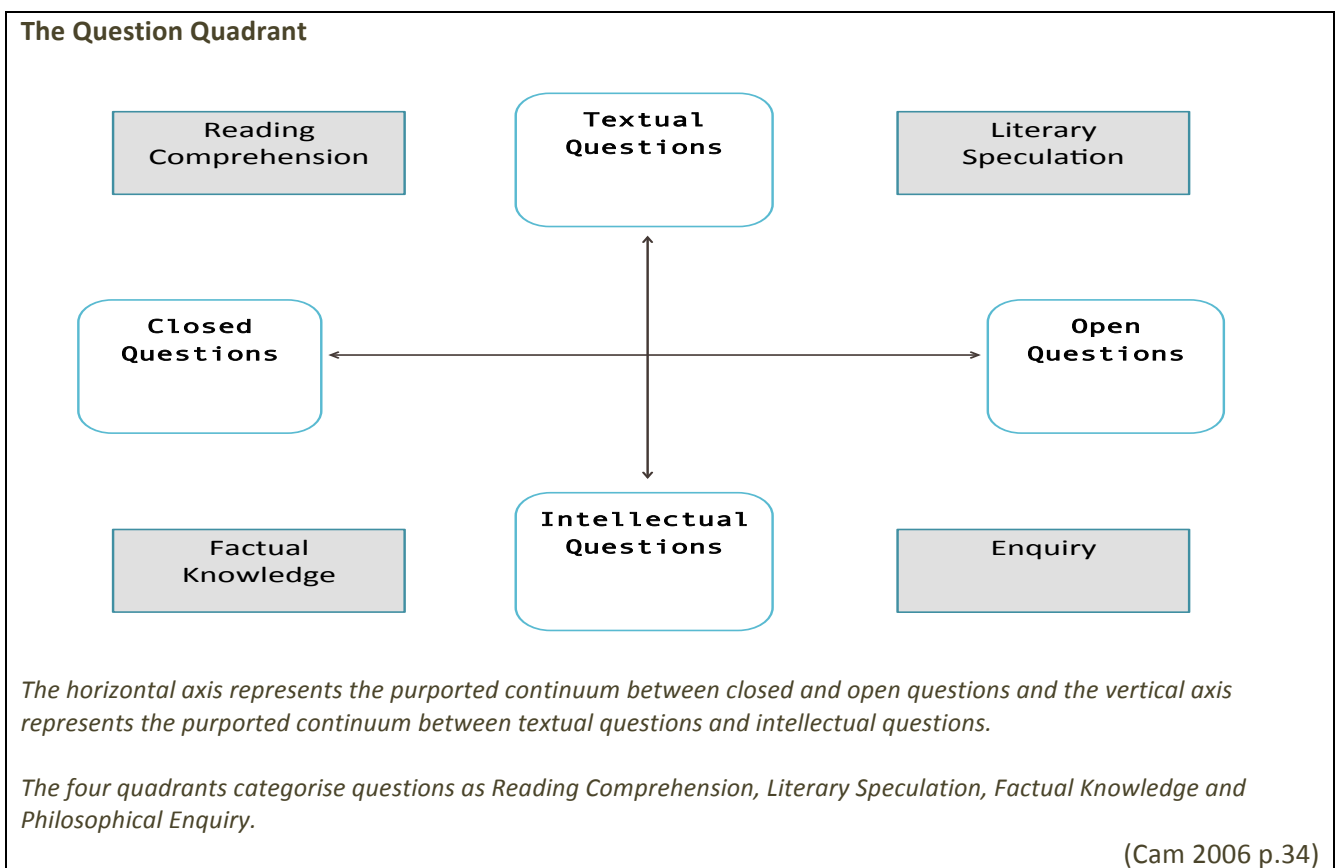
Beyond this initial textual discussion, I would have been keen to encourage the discussion to move – fairly swiftly – to a higher level of generality. The trajectory I'd anticipate would be one in which the group took a notion such as friendship, debt or hypocrisy and subjected it to conceptual analysis. In my facilitation, I'd push for examples and counter examples of meaningful usage of these concepts. Initially these examples and counterexamples would come from the text, but during the discussion I'd expect data from the children's experience and later from their imagination as they explored the logical limitations of the concepts. As the discussion progressed I'd encourage the formulation of *prima facie* principles or rules that might govern friend making, debt repaying or hypocrisy. These general maxims would give us further material to test and refine at a high level of generality, which I would take as constitutive of progress. As we drew the discussion to a close, we may be a return to the subject of the story stimulus but I wouldn't expect us to. Instead I'd hope that the children would reflect on the discussions' central conceptual content.

Throughout the dialogue, I would have dealt with personal anecdotes from the children according to my appreciation of their direct relevance to the concept under scrutiny, cutting short those anecdotes that seemed not to fit. My goal as a facilitator would be to keep things focussed, and philosophical.

Perhaps some will feel that I have set up a straw man here, and that their enquiries deal far more sensitively and fluidly with the concrete subject matter of stories than I have portrayed. Even if one does not recognise their personal practice in this sketch, what I aim to set up here is a vision of a certain kind of logical-scientific philosophical method that is certainly historically dominant in moral philosophy among adults and has as a consequence, influenced my early work and that of the many practitioners I have mentored. This is the approach that favours reason above the emotion and imagination and gives rise to Kantian deontology and Utilitarian consequentialism, which were until the late 20th century, the dominant voices in the philosophical ethical enquiry of our time. This mode of thinking in ethics seeks to 'to simplify and render tractable, the

bewildering problem of choice among heterogeneous alternatives' (Newton 1995 p.12). But in doing so it obscures the complexity, plurality and texture of moral life; neglects the emotions and the imagination; is insensitive to the uniqueness of moral situations, and fails to acknowledge 'the binding claims exercised upon the self by a concrete and singular other' (Nussbaum 1990 p. 56).

In community of philosophical enquiry we see the legacy of this kind of intellectualistic treatment of ethical stories in the widely used Question Quadrant, originally devised by Philip Cam. The Question Quadrant is a tool used to assist children in developing, categorising and discussing questions for philosophical dialogue. The tool embodies a particular perspective on the nature of philosophical enquiry that I have found quite useful in when dealing with certain metaphysical topics but have found limiting ethical enquiry stimulated by narrative.



The tool is typically used in such a way as to encourage children to understand philosophical questions as both open ended, admitting many possible answers and 'intellectual' concerned with issues at a higher level of generality. As a child-friendly introduction to the subject matter and methodology of contemporary western philosophy one could do worse than to start with Cam's tool. Seemingly the question quadrant elevates children from their common preoccupation with the myopic detail of the story, to a broader view of the philosophical issues raised by a text achieving a vantage point that enables learning that has application beyond the story and into everyday life.

However, when dealing with ethical issues, there is a problem with his move on my view. In light of what I have said previously about the mimetic, realistic, dialogic, inter-subjective possibilities of texts, one begins to

see how this logical-scientific philosophical approach entices learners away from the messy, subjective, textual world – which is precisely the place that offers them valuable ethical educational experiences. Many young children will have limited experience of exploitative friendships, hypocritical or sanctimonious individuals, tragic circumstances, or death. This story presents these incidents in a temporal, causal, intentional, inter-subjective context that offers children valuable and illuminating new ethical experiences.

7.2. How PwC functions in narrative ethical enquiry

Although ethical enquiry in PwC often begins with a story, this does not mean that narrative has been optimised in that educational encounter. Often in a PwC class that begins with a story, there is a hasty move made from an exploration of the detailed content of the story to the identification of one or two ethical concepts followed by the pursuit of understanding through conceptual analysis, the construction of prima facie axioms, principles and other theoretical constructs. All of which operate at a relatively high level of generality and abstraction.

This is what philosophy does well, but in doing so in ethical enquiry, it overlooks narrative features of a stimulus that can offer ethical illumination. Features such as the time and place in which the story takes place; the intentional and emotional states of certain characters; the contingency of certain events and the necessity of others; the uniqueness of the story as a singular whole including its particular details and simultaneously, the generic patterns it assumes such as tragedy or parody. Equally an intellectualistic philosophical engagement with a story will typically neglect the faculties of emotion and imagination that enable us to fully access the ethical dimension of a story and in turn allow us to navigate the ethical dimension of every day life.

I propose an approach to ethical enquiry that draws on the critical, self-conscious and systematic clarity of philosophy and the richness, complexity and immediacy of narrative. When we are self conscious about our encounters with narrative we are able to ask ourselves: ‘Why are we doing this?’ ‘What have we learned?’ and ‘How does this fit with the way others see things?’. When we are critical in our engagements with narratives, we are able to analyse our intellectual, emotional and imaginative responses to texts and uncover what they say about our notion of goodness and what it means to live a good life.

Philosophical and narrative modes of understanding can, and often do, complement one another in philosophical enquiry with children. In proposing ‘Narrative Ethical Enquiry’ I simply advocate that – through thoughtful choices of narrative stimuli and the employment of creative narrative activities – this is acknowledged, understood and capitalised upon.

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