

## Inculcating virtues (2): Literature

### I. Introduction:

- A. Last time we talked about the moral imagination: the store of possible actions that a person has in his mind/imagination along with the “classification” of those actions as morally good or bad (or indifferent).
- B. We talked about three ways that moral imagination is formed: 1) example, 2) literature, 3) direct explanations of the virtues. We focused on example as one of the major ways the moral imagination is formed. Children (and adults) see others doing good and bad acts and store them up as possibilities for their own actions (e.g., how you dress for various occasions).
- C. Today we will talk about *literature*.

### II. What we mean by literature

- A. By literature, we understand all the various stories, fables, histories, etc. in which people see moral actions portrayed. This is distinguished from example, in which people see actual actions done by real people in their presence. This is wider than the usual sense of English or Russian literature (basically written fiction).
- B. Literature is, as it were, a kind of surrogate example. People see actions portrayed that they do not see in their real life. These actions can be:
  - 1. Real (oral and written histories, biographies, historical plays and movies, etc.);
  - 2. Fictional (story-telling, poems, novels, plays, movies, etc.).
- C. In addition, those actions are usually portrayed as good or bad. Literature in this sense serves as a large and continuous source for the formation of the moral imagination.

### III. Power and importance of literature

- A. Literature fills in many of the “gaps” in a person’s experience; things that you have never experienced in real life like fighting in a war, being kidnapped, being a movie star, living in circumstance or places or times far removed from your own.
- B. Literature gives people a sense of what is normal: what is done “out there” outside my particular home or school, etc. This is especially true for kids who instinctively know that their world is not necessarily the same as the big wide world. It is important that the view of the larger world reinforces the values that are being imparted in the home.
- C. Because literature has an author (other than life itself), it tends to be presented in a way that captures our imagination.
  - 1. An author can frame his story and just focus on what he wants; leaves aside what is irrelevant (in real life everything is jumbled together).
  - 2. The author can tell the story or recount the history in an interesting or compelling way that draws us in and excites our interest. People will often

remember what they encounter in literature better than what they experience in real life.

3. The result is that literature can have a very strong influence on one's moral imagination.

D. An author can make the actions appear good or bad, often in a more vivid way than real life.

1. This is the real power of literature: it can make actions appear one way or the other.
2. It can make bad actions seem bad; it also can make bad actions seem good., E.g., modern movies where you are happy the guy gets the girl, although it means they are now going to live together out of wedlock. Or where someone lies and you are happy he does it and gets away with it. Or kids treat parents and adults disrespectfully and it is treated as a funny thing (as a sympathetic character).
3. Socrates was condemned for impiety because he was accused of teaching the young of Athens not to follow the Gods. But what Plato presents is that Socrates thought the stories about the Gods needed to be changed, since the stories presented the gods engaging in all kinds of immoral behavior and this was not a good model for the youth (also unfitting for a real god to be engaging in this sort of activity). At any rate, the ancients like Socrates and Plato were very aware of the power of literature for good or evil moral formation.

E. Literature provides a common stock of actions and characters by which any person can speak about these things (Dr. Spock, Harry Potter, George Washington, Job, Mr. Magoo, etc.).

#### IV. Need to ensure that children are getting good literature

- A. What is good literature? It is literature that presents good actions as good and bad actions as bad; (e.g., Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; Tolkien; Shakespeare; even the Hardy Boys). Good literature can contain bad actions and include bad characters (it not just about goody-goody characters), but it presents them as bad.
- B. Need to think about books, movies, videos, history etc. in terms of how they present actions as good and bad. Bad literature can deform the moral imagination. E.g., a movie in which a kid lies and gets away with something and it is presented as good or even just funny gives the impression that lying is OK. Or showing some gay person being persecuted so that you sympathize with the gay and come away saying that they should be understood and allowed to live their lives as gays.
- C. Control what comes into the home:
  1. If you do not control that, you are giving up the moral education of your children to someone else (TV programmers, makers of video games, authors of books or magazines).

2. Need to find the right literature: kids need literature and will find it one way or the other. You need to make sure it is good literature. There is plenty of good literature that they can both enjoy and profit from.
3. People sometimes say that you can't protect your children from what is "out there" so just let them see it and then deal with it. There is some truth to this, since you cannot (and should not) keep them from all that is "out there." But the fact that certain things are not allowed in the home has a powerful pedagogical value, even if they see things outside. What is communicated is that these things are bad, and we don't accept them here even if others may accept them.

#### D. Christian literature

1. As Christians, we need to have literature that reflects Christian teachings and values. This does not mean it has to be about explicitly Christian themes or that all the heroes have to be saints. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien would be an example of Christian literature, because the values that come through are essentially Christian.
2. The Bible: children should read (or be read) the Bible, including the Old Testament.
  - a. The stories of the Old Testament are given to us to help us understand man's relationship with God.
  - b. The basic point that comes through time and again: when you stick with God (obey him, worship him, not worship false gods), things go well for you. This is a very important lesson, especially for children.
  - c. Also they learn about the whole notion of divine providence: that God acts in our lives and that a good man relies on God, prays to God, thanks God.
  - d. There was a time where the Bible was one of the main staples of literature: read in the home from a young age; was integral to popular culture (people could refer to characters in the Bible and everyone knew who they were talking about). For Christians it remains the most basic literature. It was given to us by God himself precisely so that we would learn from it how we should act.
3. Lives of saints
  - a. Children need to see examples of people who lived their faith in a heroic way. They can be moved by them (The example of a nun who was inspired to follow her vocation because her mother who told her that every third book she read had to be the life of a saint. One was the autobiography of St. Therese. That book is what is what put the idea of becoming a nun into her head). Young girls need to see the example of St. Maria Gorretti to see how they

should protect their chastity. Boys need examples like St. Sebastian or St. Lawrence.

- b. Accounts of the martyrs: let the children see what their Christian faith may require and how they may have to respond in those circumstances.

V. Need to talk about the literature with sons

- A. Literature provides a very good occasion for fathers to talk to their children about good and bad actions. Parents should take advantage of literature to instruct their children.
- B. It is also important to point out the errors of bad literature when they are exposed to it.