

Discussion without seeking solution: An approach to the teaching method of moral education through literary works

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Introduction

The recent decision of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to introduce moral education as a compulsory subject at elementary and junior high schools is said to have caused confusion and controversy among many school teachers.¹ The decision has also convinced many of the necessity to establish a strict standardization to deal with this new ‘subject’, because teachers are required to assess students for the final grades of moral education, while it is taken for granted that the most important thing for assessment is ‘fairness’ based on objectivity. To establish a reliable and transparent standardization for assessment, teachers usually need to set several benchmarks by which they can determine to what extent the students improved their abilities or grasped each subject. This helps teachers make sure that each student has understood the subject content or learned how to expand his or her knowledge by linking some factors to other subjects or by combining rules or facts with each other. This kind of process will be smoothly established if grades are determined by a visible and objective method such as paper tests.

However, we should recognize the fundamental differences between these subjects and moral education. First, the definition of ‘morality’ is itself fluctuating and based on perspectives that constantly change according to age, country, race, and various other factors. It is almost impossible to construct a common framework for the definition of ‘morality’. Second, if so, teachers have no other way but to rely on their own value or the way of thinking that they have learned or experienced in their own lives. This means teachers should not expect their students to give only one answer or solution when they offer some specific themes in class, because each student has an idea of what the appropriate answer is based on his or her own experiences. This situation might become confusing and embarrassing for teachers if they insist on a visible scale for standardization. However, we should notice that such a situation also enables both teachers and students to discuss new aspects of the given topics that they had not thought about before. The key in moral education is to give students many opportunities for a better understanding of diversity of human life,

including a receptiveness to completely opposite views, instead of inculcating uniform thinking.

This paper suggests effective ways of teaching moral education in classes by analysing some cases of adopting literary works as text. I focus on short stories of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), which I chose for undergraduate English majors in British Literature class this semester. In this class, we mixed an intensive reading of the text with the free discussion of topics that the students judged as appropriate to teach in moral education class at junior high schools. The students tried to find as many ways of thinking as possible and to broaden the perspectives of each topic. Finally they realized that leading students to one solution was not so important or even unnecessary.²

I will show the process of raising consecutive questions by associating one theme with another in each story. This method leads the students to further voluntary discussion and helps them understand other classmates' ideas and different perspectives. Wilde's short stories are full of superficially contradictory aspects that people face in their social relationships with others. I indicate specific examples of discussion so that teachers recognize that the key to teaching moral education is that teachers should create an awareness of differences among students and then give them the courage to accept those differences. In moral education class, if teachers succeed in motivating children to think about what morals or morality in their *own* society is, it should be regarded as successful.

The Meaning of Happiness in 'The Happy Prince'

'The Happy Prince' has been widely read in various versions all over the world, most of which are found in children's books. If we compare just a few versions of this story, we immediately realize that each version has been edited differently, and some parts of the original story are omitted, probably to adapt to the level of children's ability to understand the concepts.³ Sometimes detailed parts of the original are completely cut, and Japanese versions are no exception. This results in a variety of 'The Happy Prince' stories and also various messages of 'happiness' in this story, because each version reflects how editors or translators interpret this story.

The first step we should take is to compare these books with Wilde's original story and discuss the descriptions that are omitted or changed. This task inevitably generates questions just like: 'Which part of the story is truly related to the word 'happy'?', or 'Who is happy in this story and why?' We notice that many versions give the message that the Prince, the hero of this story, makes poor people happy by taking pity on them and offering parts of his own body made of jewellery. Some of the versions translated into Japanese add comments on how to read this story. Nishimoto explains that this story is 'a kind of cautionary lesson that we tend to forget to be generous or merciful towards other people though everyone wishes to live happily'. (203)⁴ His explanation gives a hint of a moral interpretation of this story: The prince notices the poverty of the people and helps them by having his jewellery ripped off his body. He is great because he makes poor people happy by doing something good voluntarily. From this explanation, we might even

imagine the value of self-sacrifice. In this case, we can regard this story as teaching readers the importance of caring for other people. Words like generosity, kindness, mercy and pity might be interpreted as synonymous with 'happiness'. However, this is just one way of teaching moral education and also just one interpretation of 'happiness'.

The discussion goes on, and the next question is: 'How should we interpret the situation of the swallow?' Nishimoto does not mention the role of the swallow in his comment, but the swallow is one of the main characters in this story. Some students point that the swallow is, in a sense, victimized by the prince's plea. He is too kind to refuse what the prince asks him and loses his life as a result. Conversely, some say that helping the prince is the swallow's own choice, so he is satisfied with his deed even if he knows he might die of cold. In this case, not only the prince but also the swallow seeks happiness, and this time the word 'happiness' is linked to self-satisfaction. Even 'desire' and 'self-love' can be keywords when related to happiness because, in the original story, the swallow first refuses to follow his friend to Egypt only because he is eager to woo a beautiful reed. When the swallow asks her to come with him, she 'shook her head.' (72) He becomes angry and leaves her, admonishing her, 'You have been trifling with me.' (72) This part is completely omitted in most versions, but it is important, because his self-righteousness and egotism are superficially contrasted with his later devotion to the prince and yet within the same category of the definition of happiness.

Comparing the swallow's attitude towards the reed with that towards the prince leads students to further and broader discussion: What is happiness for each student? Teachers should not seek 'correct' answers, even if some answers sound a bit unacceptable socially. In that case, the best way is to lead the students to further discussion, not to silence them.

'The Selfish Giant': Why Is He Selfish?

The pattern of the plot in 'The Selfish Giant' is stereotypical in that a 'selfish' giant — the word 'selfish' itself already has negative connotations — becomes generous and kind to children after he repents for his narrow-minded behaviour. The theme of generosity and kindness to other people is quite common when we talk about social morals. At the beginning of the story, a giant is upset to find that neighbourhood children have been playing in his fabulous garden without permission while he was away. He scares the children away, but the flowers start to die. One day he helps a strange child who is crying in his garden, and he realizes he was wrong. At the end of the story, the child is revealed to be Christ.

In the British Literature class, the students discussed why this giant is considered 'selfish'. There are several assumptions behind the pattern of this plot. The most foreseeable lesson in this context is something like this: The giant should permit the children to play in his garden because the bounty from nature should be shared with everyone, or adults should lavish their love and care on children or should be tolerant to them. We can trace the basis of this idea back to the end of the 18th and 19th century. The Romantic period

saw the flourishing of admiration for children, and poets like William Wordsworth (1770-1850) praised the innocence of children.⁵ From this perspective, teachers might teach students that the giant would be considered selfish or a bad person if he did not open his garden as a playground for children. Further, teachers are also likely to teach that the giant needs to repent. This implies that the giant might be punished if he does not change his attitude.

Here I suggested to the students in the British Literature class that they shift their perspective and imagine themselves in the giant's situation. I asked them if they could accept the idea of a group of children intruding on their garden and playing without any regard for the plants that they had been nurturing. They remarked that they would feel uncomfortable and behave just like the giant. This kind of contradiction arises from the preconceived idea that children are innocent and should be protected and accepted everywhere. However, the students notice that the giant also has the right to protect his own garden. In this case, how can teachers use this story to give their students opportunities for discussion? First, it is important to teach the historical background of ideas about children. Next, students should role-play several times by changing their situation and consider what they think about their own situations. They will be taught not to intrude on other people's property without permission. A student's opinion could completely change according to which position he or she is in. Consequently, teachers can continue further discussion.

'The Devoted Friend': Rhetoric and Reality

In this story, the Miller asks Hans to do various things by emphasising the importance of 'true friendship' again and again. His words sound reasonable and understandable, because his basic theory is quite moralistic: he says 'true friends should have everything in common' (90) and picks flowers in Hans's garden. Hans 'felt very proud of having a friend with such a noble ideas'. (90) In the winter, however, when poor Hans has difficulty finding food, the Miller stops calling on him, saying, 'when people are in trouble they should be left alone, and not be bothered by visitors'. (91) He completely ignores Hans's dire condition while Hans is in trouble. There are many other instances in which the Miller talks about true friendship, and he finally pressures Hans to risk his life by asking him to send a doctor to his sick son in the blizzard. Hans tries to do everything he can do for his 'true friend', because he believes the words of the Miller to be right. Neither of them even thinks that something is wrong. It takes on a grotesque atmosphere when the Miller declares that he should have the best seat in Hans's funeral, as he was Hans's true friend.

Here teachers can offer the first topic for discussion to the students: Where is the problem? What is the problem with the Miller's 'words' and his actual deeds? Here the sometimes troublesome nature of words might be discussed, because words do not always coincide with reality. Ear-pleasing words sometimes hurt people; alternately, the belief that a given word is good can give someone enormous pressure. The words of the Miller are logically impeccable, so students find it necessary to analyse each phrase of the Miller and how it influences both the Miller and Hans. It is ironic that logical sentences sometimes do

not have meanings when they are transferred to the deeds of a person. The words for moral teachings are effective only when they are not restricting other people or binding them unnaturally. Students notice that the coincidence of words and deeds does not necessarily bring good results, because the fact that words can be interpreted in multiple ways causes tragic misunderstandings. Thus, the first discussion should next be linked to the cause of Hans's death. If Hans had a feeling of 'doubt', he might have avoided risking his life. There are some cases in which doubting one's best friend has a negative connotation, but the students learn the necessity of doubt through this story. Hans's innocence can potentially drift into ignorance, something he never realizes. The discussion will lead to the topic of bullying or any troubles in school that teachers often choose as topics for moral education.

The last and the main theme of discussion would be the definition of 'true friendship': Why does Hans believe that the Miller is his best friend? This kind of topic leads students to think further about friendship itself. In that sense, this story could be appropriate for moral education, because the strange consistency of words and deeds is grotesquely described in superficially warm situations.

Conclusion: How Can Teachers Assess the Students?

In this paper, I indicated three cases of discussion through Wilde's short stories. As mentioned above, discussion itself creates another topic for discussion. Offering some topics from literary works is effective for that activity, particularly if those works have many contradictory aspects from a moral point of view. Students are given hints to view something from different perspectives which are alien to them, but there is no 'correct answer'. It is true that the assessment itself is difficult for teachers, but if the students give new topics or ask questions about some specific themes and find some contradictions in some of these literary works, it signals their ability to consider something on their own. Teachers do not need to end a given topic by giving their own ideas in every situation. The solutions for problems concerning morality could be varied, so every student has reason to consider their ideas perfect, and as such, the assessment should not be comparative. If children think something is incompatible with their ideas, their ideas should be respected as long as they can explain the reasons behind them, which are usually based on their own experiences or on their environment.

Notes

1. Concerning the concept of the moral education published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, see 'About Moral Education.'
<http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/078/siryo/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/08/05/1375323_4_1.pdf> , accessed September 11, 2017.
2. Hahakigi uses the phrase 'negative capability' to explain this method. The phrase was coined by John

Keats to describe poets' attitude towards the visible objects. He says, 'I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason — Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.' (Gittings, 43) Drabble also explains that 'he was ambivalent about his own attitude, and sometimes expressed admiration for the Miltonic approach'. (Drabble, 689. 'negative capability')

3. For this paper, I analysed the Japanese versions edited by Madokoro, Imoto, Hara and Nishimoto, all of which are based on Wilde's 'The Happy Prince'.
4. The English translation for Nishimoto's comment is mine.
5. In Wordsworth's famous poem 'My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold', composed on 14 March 1802, he sings, 'The Child is Father of the Man; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety'. (246) William Blake also sang of the innocence of children in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experiences* (1795).

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