Learning from Matthew Arnold’s Thought on Moral Education and Literature

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1. Introduction

This essay enquires into the subject of moral education and literature by examining the writings of Victorian poet, and school inspector, Matthew Arnold. From his influential position Arnold developed the idea of literature as fertile soil for moral development, which came to have a profound and lasting impression upon posterior western thought. His argument was essentially that literature is morally formative qua its power to convey the experiences of the human spirit to its reader. Arnold grounded his framework of moral education on a deeper understanding of the human being: encompassing her needs, capabilities, and motives. His praising of fine literature as an instrument for moral development was thus not a superficial idea, but rather the consequence of a serious contemplation on the human condition.

The essay explores the potentiality of Arnold’s ideas in our present doubt concerning the value, possibility, and purpose, of moral education and the role of literature within such education. Initially, it develops a framework of Arnold’s thinking in light of contemporary theorization of morality in order to present a comprehensible and elaborated understanding of Arnold’s reasoning and its potentialities. This framework is then applied to analyse and critic contemporary didactic instructions in Swedish moral education – which is presented in Olof Franck & Malin Löfstedt’s: *Etikdidaktik: Grundbok om Etikundervisning i teori och praktik*.

Franck & Löfstedt’s book analyses present policy documents in Swedish schools on moral education, and provides advice to teachers educating on morality. It is chosen as an object of analysis on account of its dynamic discussion on moral education, which offers not only pedagogical instruction, but that also contemplate on the subject of morality and its role in schools on a meta-level. Hence, it is a work that can be fruitfully tested against the thinking of Arnold.

The essay is, then, in its broadest sense, an investigation of how antecedent thought may develop, revitalize, and refine contemporary lines of reasoning. Taking Arnold’s writings as a point of departure, the discussion proceeds along a conscious – and a highly influential – train of thought on the subject matter. It is not a broad excavation of what has been said and written on moral education through literature in human history, but the exploration of a focused mind of another era, who has conceived literature’s effect of stimulating and developing the moral human being.
While Arnold’s work provides a qualitative reference point to scrutinize and criticize our contemporary thought on moral education, his ideas are not presented as static and isolated objects. The intention is rather to disclose and elaborate Arnold’s reasoning in light of John Wall’s contemporary theorization of morality; presented in his *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility*. By viewing Arnold’s ideas through theoretical perspectives that succeed the insights of the intellectual and political movements of the past century, the ambition is not only to present Arnold’s ideas, but also to reconsider their potentials for the future.

The following questions will guide the upcoming discussions and analysis: To Arnold’s mind, what are the conditions for human moral formation? And what mechanisms operate in the meeting between a reader and a literary composition to engender moral formation? And how can these ideas be elaborated? How do contemporary Swedish educational guidelines on moral education correspond to the criteria of Arnold’s thought on moral formation and education? And what role does literature play in these guidelines? Finally, how can Arnold’s framework improve our contemporary ideas on how moral education ought to be approached in Swedish schools?

The essay will argue that Arnold’s ideas – in combination with the ideas of Wall – reveal a deeper purpose to moral education than that which can be extracted from contemporary didactic reasoning in Sweden. For, while Franck and Löfstedt’s guidelines are limited by the ambition of forming functioning democratic citizens of a global world, Arnold’s, and Wall’s, thought elucidates that the telos of moral development resides in the creative human ability to think beyond the scope of one’s own society and prevalent ideology – which thus invites serious attention to literature of other eras. It is, then, argued that moral education in Swedish schools can, and ought, to benefit from a broadened and deepened view on morality, and that one step towards such a goal could be to make morality an explicit focus in a wider range of subjects, such as English and Philosophy.

Background and context

To understand Arnold’s innovative thought on morality, as well as his limitations, one benefits from acquiring a sense of his environment and background. For it is an elementary anthropological insight that human beings, and their conceptions on moral
questions, cannot be abstracted from the socio-cultural environment within which they live and develop. Recent works within the ‘anthropology of ethics’, such as *An Anthropology of Ethics* by James Faubion, and “For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom” by James Laidlaw, have convincingly theorised and illustrated how individuals inevitably draw upon the ideas, discourses, and social structures of their societies to establish themselves as ethical subjects – though not denying the inherent human capability to envision new horizons in her deliberation on how one ought to live.

Matthew Arnold, then, was born in Laleham, England in 1822, and was raised in a large family, with a father who was the Headmaster of Rugby (W. F. Connell vii). Arnold was known, both in his youthful days and later on, to take a provocative stance towards common ideas of his time (Connell 16). This personal trait was perhaps the outcome of influences from his more immediate social environment. Connell sheds light on the fact that Arnold’s godfather was at the forefront of controversial theological debates at the time. And this, Connell argues, allowed the young Matthew to develop an awareness that ‘old faiths and beliefs religious and political, were no longer accepted without question’ (19). Hence, while Arnold came to pursue a career within the given structures, he remained unconfined to the doxa of his time. In 1851 he rose to a position as the ‘Inspector of Schools’, from where his thinking had the opportunity to expand (Fred Clarke vii).

Clarke observes that Arnold lived in a time of ongoing decline of national insularity in England. There was, as Clarke argues, an emerging project of comparative studies, which saw Arnold as a pioneer. The poet’s capabilities, and position, allowed him to taste the fruits of novel intellectual horizons in several educational institutions overseas, which engendered analyses that illuminate how education must be studied and understood within its socio-cultural context (Clarke ix).

The accuracy of Arnold’s insight does, of course, also resonate in his own productions, as his own reasoning in certain instances establishes the ‘truths’ of his time and place. Clarke observes that ‘Some of the ideas were new and disturbing, others were old and not always obstructive. But some were endowed with a traditional authority to which they had no real claim’ (ix). Among other things, Clarke points out that Arnold regarded the poor as a fixed institution (ix). The poet’s limitations also come to the fore when he writes: ‘The education of each class in society has, or ought to have, its ideal, determined by the wants of that class, and by its destination. Society may be imagined so uniform that one education shall be suitable for all its members; we have not a
society of that kind, nor has any European country’ (Thoughts on Education 100). In conceiving classes as an inevitable part of society, Arnold’s words here indicate that his thoughts on education, to a certain extent, were bound to the order of his time.

It is important, however, to recognize that Arnold did conceive a possible erosion of societal structures, and particularly of class society as it had manifested itself. In the following quote he speaks of the function of a fading social order in the shadow of an emerging democratic society:

> Assuredly, churches and aristocracies often lacked the sanctity or the refinement ascribed to them; but their effect as distant ideals was still the same; they remained above the individual, a beacon to the imagination of thousands; they stood, vast and grand objects, ever present before the eyes of masses of men in whose daily avocations there was little which was vast, little which was grand; and they preserved these masses from any danger of overrating with vulgar self-satisfaction an inferior culture (Thoughts on Education 44).

With the erosion of these fixed ideals – embodied by the aristocracy and the church – Arnold observed that the masses stood before the enormous task of inventing and refining their own ideals. He thus foresaw a need for the common citizen to develop a refined aesthetic sensibility, which for him is the requirement for forming a good way of life – (and which is a point which we shall return to.) His conceived methods for developing such aesthetic sensibility among the masses – and thus their capability to form good ideals – was to saturate public schools with lines of well-written prose and verse. Arnold optimistically envisioned that a partaking of an accumulated human experience – conveyed through great literary compositions – could make the inner capability for refined humanity blossom in the common man. As Martha Crowley describes Arnold’s efforts: ‘his writing conveys patience and optimism for a spiritual renewal and a new epoch of progress in the future of humanity’ (12).

Against the backdrop of world wars, cultural relativism, and post structural ideas, Arnold’s optimistic ideas has, however, lost much of its grip on contemporary thought. As Nataša Pantić observes, the subject of moral education – as well as the role of literature within such education – is today a contested subject (407). More specifically, she remarks that ‘General suspicion towards the “oppressive” power of any belief-
system and its implication in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and cultural studies, led to a new view of literary “texts” as the products of various cultural forces’ (405).

In line with Pantić’s observation, the social theorist, John Wall, recognizes that postmodern thinking has largely done away with the potentiality for creative moral selfhood. He argues that it has been the fashion of our time to reductively explain the human being through her susceptibility to biological and psychological powers, as well as to the influence exercised upon her by her history, traditions and social structures (26); perspectives that undoubtedly obscure a positive outlook for a meaningful moral education.

Wall’s ambition is, however, in contrast to these currents, to revitalize our interest in the active human capability for moral formation within her embeddedness in the above-mentioned forces and contexts (26). He thus provides an optimistic trajectory that lends support to Arnold’s belief in the human potential to become a free-thinking creator of ideals and a refiner of her way of life – despite the inevitable influences on her of her time and place.

Theoretical perspective

Wall provides a deep-reaching exploration into morality, which addresses the creative dimensions of human moral life. His book covers different levels of morality, including individual, relational, societal, and historical, conditions facing the human being in her pursuit of a good existence in – and beyond – her world. For present purposes the use of Wall’s theory is limited to the individual level, and places a focus on the concept of self-narration, as well as his ideas on the effects of texts on moral formation – particularly that of Greek tragedy. Together, these parts of Wall’s work provide a complex model of human moral formation – including the effect of exposure to stories – which offers a theoretical perspective to illuminate and elaborate the potentialities of Arnold’s thinking. Wall’s theory will, more concretely, be used to explore the individual’s creative space in her moral formation and the role of texts within this process. For, while Arnold also seems to envision such a creative space, his ideas invite concretizations and further thought.
Wall’s concept of self-narration denotes the human capability to creatively process external stimuli to acquire a sense of her world and her place within it, and to infuse it with meaning (29-30). Literature and stories play a crucial part in this process to Wall:

Metaphors and narratives share with symbols the potentiality for the self’s creation of new meaning … Both the interrelation and the disproportion of human finitude and freedom are taken up into the plastic and inventive possibilities for meaning that arise out of the interpretation of symbols, metaphors, and stories. … This ability is only a particularly objectified form of a more fundamental human capability—shared by authors and readers of texts alike, as well as by speakers and listeners—for the creation of meaning in life (33).

Wall’s point here is that the meaning of texts is not confined to the time of its production, nor to the mind of its author, or its own inherent structure. Rather, its meaning may be extracted by an interpreter, who can creatively mould what she reads to fit with, expand, or even transform, her own constructed world of meaning and how she ought to act within it. In particular, he explicates how Greek tragedies, through their inherent depth and ambiguity could offer their audience glimpses of the human condition, and thus spark their emotions, moral reflection, and creativity. Hence, Wall concludes that: ‘tragedy plays a role not only in perceptiveness toward others but also in selves’ active constitution of their moral worlds’ (72). In acquiring meaning through the interpreter, the potential of stories and narratives to stimulate moral formation is of a timeless character; which Wall elucidates with the following words: ‘Traditional texts have their origins in the past, but they project before selves alternative worlds of meaning for the present, worlds that stand in some contrast to the worlds of meaning those selves already inhabit’ (39).

Coming back to Arnold, there are essential similarities between the ideas of the poet and those of the contemporary theorist Wall. Firstly, Arnold does, like Wall, conceive morality as grown out of human creativity. Secondly, the two thinkers both recognize that literature nourishes the human capacity for her creative moral formation, in that it allows her to partake of an ever larger world of accumulated human experience and thus discover new ways of transforming herself, her conception of herself in the world, and its meaning.
Outline of essay

Having introduced Matthew Arnold, and areas of interests, the remaining part of the essay is structured as follows. Initially it describes Arnold’s conception of morality through its conceived relation to aesthetic sensibility. It then explains Arnold’s theory of the human being, through his notion the ‘human spirit’. Together, these two aspects of his thought provide a basis for the subsequent explanation of literature’s role in contributing to moral formation. The ambition is to gradually develop an understanding of the logic of Arnold’s thinking on moral formation in connection to literature, and then to summarize and present a framework of his criteria for a sound moral education.

As has already been stated, Arnold’s framework will then be applied to analyse and critic contemporary didactic guidelines on how moral education ought to be conducted in Swedish schools.

2. Arnold’s thought on moral education

Arnold is explicit in his promotion of fine literature as an effective instrument to awaken, develop, and refine the moral awareness of students. Of England’s poorer pupils he writes: ‘I am sure that the study of portions of the best English authors and compositions, might with advantage be a part of their regular course of instruction to a much greater degree than it is at the present. Such a training would tend to elevate and humanise a number of young men’ (Thoughts on Education 6). The question to pursue is on what premises Arnold reasons to this conclusion.

It will be shown in this section that Arnold’s writings offer a preliminary theory of the human being and how she is morally formed by literature. The proceeding discussions will explain how the ‘human spirit’ responds, and relates, to the essential qualities recognized in great literature; which are beauty, clearness of idea, and flexibility of thought. Alongside Arnold’s ideas, Wall’s theoretical perspectives will be brought forward to elaborate upon, and elucidate the potential, of Arnold’s ideas. Initially, however, there is a need to account for how Arnold perceives aesthetics in relation to morality.
The primacy of aesthetic sensibility

One might, upon a hasty reading, mistakenly conceive Arnold’s thinking as lodged within a rigid hierarchy of morals, as when he advocates the implementations of state-run public schools that would provide the middle class with a more ‘noble spirit’:

the middle classes might, by the aid of the State, better their instruction … This in itself would be a gain; but this gain would be nothing in comparison with that of acquiring the sense of belonging to great and honourable seats of learning, and of breathing in their youth the air of the best culture of their nation. This sense would be an educational influence for them of the highest value; it would truly fuse them with the class above, and tend to bring about for them the equality which they desire (Thoughts on Education 20).

Arnold is, however, not promoting the aristocracy as the embodiment of the ‘best culture’, and of fixed ideals, towards which the middle classes ought to strive. What he advocates is rather that these classes – like the aristocratic class – cultivate the capacity to form and refine ideals. The innovation, and controversy, of Arnold’s thought resides in a free and flexible conception of ideals and values, in placing their inception in human creativity. For one ought to bear in mind that many thinkers of his time conceived morality as a God-given order. (His insinuation that the middle class of his time would have been incapable to form ideals, is, however, limited).

This limitation aside, Arnold optimistically regards the masses to possess the inherent capability of forming and refining their way of life. And, for him, the actualization of such capability depends upon a prior development of aesthetic sensibility. As Lionel Trilling recognizes when he considers Arnold’s conception of moral and aesthetic judgement: ‘not in the old way of making morality the criterion of the aesthetic: on the contrary, he made the aesthetic the criterion of the moral’ (xii). The following passage of Arnold’s illuminates this ordering of aesthetic and moral sensibility further: ‘Now, the ordinary self’s great defect being a defect in delicacy of perception, to cultivate in him this delicacy, to render it independent of external and mechanical rule, and a law to itself, is what seems to make most for his perfection, his true humanity’ (The complete prose works 92).
Hence, it is a refined aesthetic sensibility which grants people the freedom – and to Arnold, the legitimacy – to create and set ideals. One could, of course, form one’s conduct in lack of ‘delicacy of perception’, but such formation would in his view be ‘raw, blind, and dangerous’ (*Thoughts on Education* 21). The aim of Arnold’s educational argument is thus not the cultivation of a large class of learned people who can recite a certain number of great compositions, or live by fixed morals, but to liberate the spirits of the masses through an elevated sense of beauty, which allow them to freely form their own way of life in the best possible way (*Thoughts on Education* 105).

The Human Spirit

At the core of Arnold’s thinking on moral formation resides a conception of the human spirit – which is Janus-faced in two senses. Firstly, it possesses both an individual and collective character; secondly, it has both an emotive and cognitive side. This section begins by describing the relation between the collective and individual character of the human spirit. Subsequently, it describes how the emotive and cognitive feature of the spirit relates to the qualities of great literature.

Arnold declares that the principal aim of instruction is to enable human beings to know themselves and their worlds, which he stresses is ‘the only sure basis of action’ (*Thoughts on Education* 178), and further argues that this accomplishment is dependent upon knowing ‘the capabilities and performances of the human spirit’ (*Thoughts on Education* 178). To Arnold’s mind, the individual human spirit is, then, a force susceptible to, and formed by, exposure to the experiences of other human spirits. One could describe it as a ‘mechanism of inspiration’, in which the individual’s inherent capacity to develop certain qualities is stimulated by the exposure to such qualities in others. Furthermore, an individual is by her own experiences – and especially by her profound and beautiful experiences – also adding to the collective human spirit. Arnold writes: ‘But you, in your turn, with difficulties of your own, will then be mounting some new step in the arduous ladder whereby man climbs toward his perfection’ (*Thoughts on Education* 107). The individual spirit stands, thus, in a dynamic and progressive relationship to the cumulative experiences of the human spirit in its collective sense.

Given that Arnold seeks the refinement of spirits, there is a gradation of human experiences, awarding those that manifest beauty and profundness of ideas. The susceptible individual spirit is to be exposed to experiences of greatness in order to be
great, and so forth. When advocating a more serious education devoted to the pupils of the middle classes, he states: ‘Its greatest boon to the offspring of these classes would be its giving them great, honourable, public institutions for their nurture— institutions conveying to the spirit, at the time of life when the spirit is most penetrable, the salutary influences of greatness, honour, and nationality—influences which expand the soul, liberalise the mind, dignify the character.’ (Thoughts on Education 102). It is important, however, to stress again that Arnold does not propose a process of instilment of ideals into passive pupils. The emphasis lies rather on evoking their own activity of spirit and mind: ‘It is a vital and formative knowledge to know the most powerful manifestations of the human spirit’s activity, for the knowledge of them greatly feeds and quickens our own activity’ (Thoughts on Education 178). The question, then, is how pupils may most fruitfully come into contact with the ‘most powerful manifestation of the human spirit’. Arnold’s resolute answer is through great literature.

It is clear that Arnold perceives literature as a powerful means to convey to, and produce in, the human spirit the qualities of beauty, clarity and flexibility of mind. The mechanisms operating to engender such effect need, however, to be further explored. Primarily, one recognizes in Arnold’s thinking that literature stands in direct communication with the spirit. He says of his elusive concept of ‘grand style’ – (which is attributed to the very best literature): – ‘I may say that the presence or absence of the grand style can only be spiritually discerned’ (Thoughts on Education 68). Importantly, however, this direct communication must speak both to the emotive and cognitive side of the spirit to have the desired effect.

Regarding emotions, Arnold observes that letters, and the knowledge that they convey, have a long-standing history of deeply engaging our emotions. He even makes the bold claim that this effect of letters was the core motivation for raising universities during the medieval era (Thoughts on Education 264). Arnold is, however, conscious not to neglect the cognitive response that literature ought to stimulate in its reader. He states: ‘A succession of pieces not in general well-chosen, fragmentary, presented without any order or plan, and very ill-comprehended by the pupils, is what our schools for the people give as letters; and the effect wrought by letters in these schools may be said, therefore, to be absolutely null’ (Thoughts on Education 207). An emotional effect is thus not enough. Being moved by words of which one lacks understanding misses the point, as ‘the good of poetry is not really got unless the sense of the word is known’ (Thoughts on Education 233). Recognizing both the emotive and cognitive character of
the spirit, Arnold envisions that the best literature can accomplish a communication that
gives both emotional and cognitive stimuli, and which results in the desired flourishing
of humanity: ‘Good poetry does undoubtedly tend to form the soul and character; it
tends to beget a love of beauty and of truth in alliance together, it suggests, however
indirectly, high and noble principles of action, and it inspires the emotion so helpful in
making principles operative’ (Thoughts on Education 235). Arnold argues, thus, that
exposure to emotionally engaging aesthetic quality, fused with truth and principle, has
the power to awaken and rouse the spirit to moral action.

While Arnold seems to propose infinitely high demands on a literature, he does
recognize that great works of ancient times accomplish what he asks for. We shall,
further on, discuss the qualities of ancient Greek storytelling, and uncover Arnold’s
reasons to champion such texts in the pursuit of moral formation.

Creativity

The outline of Arnold’s framework begins to emerge. There is, at the core of his
thinking, an idea of a human spirit that responds to beauty, and which by exposure to
beauty develops its own aesthetic sensibility, which it then can use to freely, and
creatively, consider proper conduct of life. Yet there are gaps to fill in order to
understand the mechanisms engendering moral formation through the reading of great
texts.

It has been established that literature ought to be emotionally engaging, and
graspable by the mind, to be morally formative. But what are the mechanisms operating
in order for texts to be conducive to the reader’s own good way of life? On this point
Arnold is fairly vague, which he himself admits. When contemplating how education
could form pupils to become the spirits that he envisions he reasons: ‘As things now are,
the time is not ripe for laying down a theory of how this is to be thoroughly done and
following it’ (Thoughts on Education 202).

It is important, however, to recognize that Arnold does acknowledge a creative
potential in young individuals in relation to their moral formation. Because, to him, the
realization of a good moral education is a question of liberating and stimulating the
creative capacity in pupils: ‘The great fault of the instruction in our elementary schools
(of the secular part of it, at any rate), is, that it at most gives to a child the mechanical
possession of the instruments of knowledge, but does nothing to form him, to put him in
a way of making the best possible use of them’ (Thoughts on Education 202). Note his choice of words, to *form* a pupil, is to ‘put him in a way of *making* the best possible use’ (my emphasis). The ambition is not to instil pupils with a given conduct of life, but to develop their creative capacity to contemplate, and decide, on what is the good based on their acquired knowledge.

In order to gain an understanding of how literature can accomplish this desired effect, one can look to Wall’s theory of *self-narration*. According to Wall, the human being is constantly forming herself and her understanding of herself within the world. She is thus ever active in her meeting with ideas, characters, and narratives, which appear in her surroundings and through texts, and the potential meanings that these encounters produce are limited only to the creative capacity of herself. As Wall explains it: ‘each self has a certain innovative capability to form its given finite world in the direction (however endless) of its own narrative unity of life.’ (76). Wall unravels a complex and dynamic process in which individuals mediate their inevitable conditions of life, histories, new ideas and future prospects into a narrative understanding of their existence in the world. He says: ‘Selves must form the stories of which they are already a part in the direction of deliberately formed stories of their own, constituting a range of voluntarily chosen possibilities for realizing oneself in the world’ (78). Reading of texts containing human experiences emerges thus as a potential part of human storytelling of herself and her role within her world. Supporting himself on the ideas of philosopher Ricoeur, Wall concludes: ‘no received narrative component of moral life does not also, at the same time, demand to be narrated by a capable self. Narrative goods finally belong to “selves” as those beings in the world uniquely capable of having and forming narrative meaning’ (81).

Moral formation through literature is thus – alongside a consumption of stories and ideas – conceived as an active and creative storytelling belonging to the interpreting reader, who extracts ideas, characters, and plots, to forge them into something meaningful for her own good existence. It is inevitable that such a process is necessarily fuelled by both cognitive and emotional engagement in the texts. To Arnold, however, literature can do more than speak to the emotive and cognitive side of the spirit and provide stuff for her ongoing self-narration, it can also liberate the mind.
Flexibility of thought

Arnold offers an intriguing passage on the Greek word *eutrapelia*, which he defines as ‘Lucidity of thought, clearness and propriety of language, freedom from prejudice and freedom from stiffness, openness of mind, amiability of manners’ (*Thoughts on Education* 245). He demonstrates how the attitude towards the word has changed through the course of history, from having highly positive value in ancient times to acquire negative connotations later on, and subsequently concludes: ‘now see how this varying use gives us a clue to the order and sense, as we say, of all that Greek world, so nearly and wonderfully connected with us, so profoundly interesting for us, so full of precious lessons.’ (*Thoughts on Education* 249). Arnold argues that ancient great works convey a positive sense of eutrapelia, which reveals their broad horizons of thought: ‘in the first place, dignity and a high spirit is not all, or half all, that is to be got out of Alterthumswissenschaft. What else is to be got out of it–the love of the things of the mind, the flexibility, spiritual moderation–is for our present time and needs still more precious (*Thoughts on Education* 183). Arnold refers to a flexibility of thought lurking underneath simple and straightforward narratives, which marks ancient Greek works in contrast to more recent productions: ‘In the ballad-poets in general, as in men of a rude and early stage of the world, in whom their humanity is not yet variously and fully developed, the stock of these ideas is scanty, and the ideas themselves not very effective or profound. From them the narrative itself is the great matter, not the spirit and significance which underlies the narrative’ (*Thoughts on Education* 86). One notes also in other passages how Arnold values the aspects of literature that are not at the surface, but that convey qualities which invite the full range of sensibilities of the spirit: ‘the critical perception of poetic truth–is of all things the most volatile, elusive, and evanescent; by even pressing too impetuously after it, one runs the risk of losing it’ (*Thoughts on Education* 79)

What then does the quality of eutrapelia in literature contribute to the reader? Recall the ‘mechanism of inspiration’, for one can assume that it also operates in relation to eutrapelia. That is, like exposure to beauty gives rise to a sensibility for beauty, the exposure to flexible thinking give rise to an unchained mind. Granting this assumption, it would help to explain Arnold’s persistent advocacy of reading ancient works as a means to set the mind free. The assumption is also supported when he laments that the
quality of eutrapelia is lacking in the literature of Germanic nations, for it has thus ‘not educated us into flexibility’ (Thoughts on Education 246).

Once again, we may turn to Wall to elaborate Arnold’s ideas; in this case the idea of literature as a conveyer of flexibility of thought. Wall provides a deep-reaching exploration into the dynamic and complex character of ancient literature through Sophocles’ 441 b.c.e. play, the Antigone. The play tells the story of Antigone, who acts against the law of her kingdom by burying her traitorous brother. Condemned by the king, Creon, the young woman finally chose to end her life, which results in the suicide of Creon’s son, who loved Antigone, and which in its turn gives the suicide of Creon’s wife in sorrow over her son (Wall 72). Imbedded in this straightforward plot are profound notions of human life, bounded by contingencies and particulars. Wall concludes, based on Nussbaum’s analyses of the play, that: ‘What Creon finally learns (too late for him, but not necessarily too late for us, the play’s audience) is the danger of all “projects of harmonizing and synthesizing” and “the terrible power of unconstrained contingency”’ (72). The quality of this work is, thus, to not reduce the potentiality of human existence to a simplified, harmonious description of her place in the world, but expose to its audience the fleeting, fleeing, vulnerable, and essentially formable meaning of human life, which the audience can proceed from in their own deliberations. Wall further explicates how prominent thinkers have found profound inspiration for their differing ideas through the very same play; how Schopenhauer saw in Antigone the illustration of the ‘triumph of wickedness’, how Heidegger saw in it ‘an example of a new historical destiny’, and how Knox saw it as ‘a tale of humanity’s unavoidable erotic entanglement’ (Wall 74). And Wall argues that the play, in fact, actively invites the audience to reflect creatively on its content through the chorus: ‘The chorus’s conclusion, specifically, is to advise a certain activity of phronēsis that creates new meaning out of the conflict’ (74).

Recognizing then that the play offers strange and disharmonious lines that can fuel human creativity, Wall states: ‘If tragic poetry is a response to our own limitations of moral understanding, then human creativity may also—however ambiguously—be part of the answer. Such moral creativity is modeled, not on the narrowed inventiveness of the characters themselves, which remains inescapable, but, in contrast, on the broadening cathartic experience of the audience in witnessing the tragic poem itself” (73-74).
The deeper vision, which is shared by Wall and Arnold alike, is that the desired effect literature may offer its reader is not only inspiration to novel insights, but a way to reconsider her very own historicity and its meaning. Embracing the ideas of Ricoeur again, Wall states: ‘Traditional (and other) texts ultimately, for Ricoeur, have an emancipatory function. It is true that texts can be used to oppress, but unlike the mass of language into which each of us is unconsciously born, they can also reveal new worlds of meaning to a reader by which the reader may gain new perspectives on their own given historicity’ (43). The point being that, when presented with an alternative perspective, humans are able to both recognize and re-create the conditions of the world to produce for herself a new understanding of their meaning in relation to herself.

This profoundly creative capacity is, of course, not easily attained. It implies the development of students to become aware of their own historicity, to be able to apprehend its alternatives, and, ultimately, to have the capability of turning such insights into a creative and flexible force within the domain of how one can, and ought to, live. Yet, this seems to be the target of Arnold’s argument. As Crowely observes of the poet’s understanding of someone who possesses “Delicacy of perception”: ‘This larger view brings him to reorient his moral basis in the course of human history. Thus the spiritual practice Arnold has in mind requires seeing things differently, a refined perception that sees more.’ (17). Developing this perception, then, grants the power of forming one’s own ideals.

The logic of Arnold’s framework

We may now summarize and present the logic of Arnold’s framework of thought on moral formation, and its relation to literature, in the following points:

- A developed aesthetics sensibility actualizes the capacity to refine one’s own ideals and way of life – which is the telos of moral formation.
- Exposure to aesthetic quality through literature develops aesthetic sensibility, or ‘delicacy of perception’.
- To have the desired formative effect upon the spirit, a literary work must, however, not only radiate beauty, but also engage emotions, as well as convey profound and graspable ideas to the mind.
As the reader is to become creative in her moral deliberations, and she is formed by what she reads, the compositions ought also to convey a flexibility of thought, which stimulates flexibility of thought in the reader.

In conclusion, Arnold is highly conscious of the creative element of morality. His primary objective is the liberation, and expansion, of mind, and not the guiding of it in moral matters. Arnold’s vision of moral formation depends upon the human being’s inherent, and developable, love for beauty, and her ability to create a good way of life by its natural guidance. A moral education, in Arnold’s view, serves not the formation of citizens who think and act in alignment with certain prefixed ideals and values, but citizens who are capable of shaping their own ideals. This constitutes his optimistic and progressive vision for a moral education. As his famous words go: ‘The freethinking of one age is the common sense of the next.’

3. Analysis of contemporary Swedish moral education

*Etikdidaktik: Grundbok om etikundervisning i teori och praktik* was published in 2015, and is a guide for teachers invested in the task of moral education. The book analyses and criticizes present policy documents on moral education in Swedish schools and gives advice on how one ought to relate to these. Its aim is thus to provide teachers tools for how to execute and reflect upon moral education in Swedish primary school, upper school, and high school.

The following analysis of *Etikdidaktik: Grundbok om etikundervisning i teori och praktik*, will not place its emphasis on the policy documents which are discussed by Franck & Löfstedt – and which they claim is limited by a theoretical focus which emphasises knowledge of ethical models and concepts. Rather it is centred on the authors’ own discussion of the conditions, and purposes of moral education. Franck & Löfstedt claim that their book reflects the tension between formal demands on specific knowledge within the subject of morality and every human being’s personal liberty to ‘seek, think and act without ever being complete or fully learned’ (13). Hence, their work sets out to provide a more deep-reaching and dynamic discussion on how moral education can, and ought to be, conducted, which reaches beyond the limited scope of the policy documents, and thus serves as a suitable work to test Arnold’s elaborate framework.
The proceeding analysis will argue that Franck & Löfstedt’s explicit purpose of promoting the development of good democratic citizens do not reach the depths of Arnold’s vision. While the poet wants to cultivate ethical beings who may (re)create their own society and its ideals, Franck & Löfstedt envision a more specific formation; that of a functional citizen of a global democratic society. This is not to say that the right, and liberty, to pursue one’s own idea of a good existence and vision of society is not celebrated in various passages in their book. But the purpose, or incentive, to promote such a grand principle is obscured by a loyalty to the democratic vision, and is therefore shallow.

The creative dimension of moral education is, in Franck & Löfstedt’s discussions, largely reduced to cognitive ethical exercises, which are anchored within current conditions and the pressing needs of our time. And the importance of moral education emerges, again, as the ability to function in a multicultural and democratic society – (which is of course not necessarily an unfavourable objective).

An implication of the priorities of Franck & Löfstedt’s guidelines is a lack of focus on aesthetic sensibility, emotional engagement, and on literature as a timeless resource to expand and liberate the mind. This can, however, be explained by factors other than a dominating focus on cognitive competences and democratic education. As Franck & Löfstedt themselves point out, present limitations on moral education in Sweden resides in a narrow inclusion of morality in the curriculum. Moral education is, as they observe, limited to religious studies (9).

Acknowledging Franck & Löfstedt’s point, it will be argued that Swedish moral education could benefit from being included as an explicit focus also in other subjects, such as English, which could expand the intellectual horizons on morality in Swedish schools, and make use of literature as a powerful tool for moral development.

The inherent tension of the democratic project

Franck & Löfstedt point out that present policy documents identify Swedish moral education as growing out of a Christian value system and a western form of humanism (21-22), and that is has the purpose of instilling in students such virtues as tolerance, generosity, and responsibility (21). The two authors’ subsequently mark their distanced position in relation to the policy documents by advocating a universal perspective on values, rather than perceiving them as belonging to a Christian and western context
They observe further that moral education today denotes the development of a democratic perspective, rather than instilling traditional notions of right and wrong. They are thus loyal to the purpose of moral education as the upbringing of democratic citizens; even in adopting a broadened and analytical position. As they state: ‘The school is not – and should not – be free from valuation. There are certain democratic values that should be presented and conveyed’ (my translation).

There is a tension permeating Franck & Löfstedt’s discussions pertaining to the acknowledgement of individual liberty as an ideal and the political agenda which they support. This tension is straining when they, for example, discuss the potentiality that students might disagree with democratic principles. Claiming that it would be a problem if 20 out of 25 students would be against gender equality or solidarity with people in a vulnerable position, they support their position with following argument: ‘to object against or remain hesitant towards the values could create space for a perspective of the human being which is diffuse and which renders space for gaps and exceptions’ (my translation).

The point with exposing their uneasiness in relation to undemocratic attitudes is to disclose that Franck & Löfstedt are not promoting individual liberty and creativity at its primordial level, but rather as an expression of a democratic perspective of tolerance and openness. This premise sets their vision apart from that of Matthew Arnold’s. The latter praises the study of ancient literature – which express radically different values than that of our contemporary democratic doxa – as not necessarily negative counterexamples serving to enforce already embodied positions, but as potentially formative inspiration for the spirit and the mind. Such a vision is lacking in Franck & Löfstedt. While Arnold proceeds from an understanding of fundamental capacities and drives of the human being, the contemporary authors are guided by the demands on a functional human being within a democratic and global world. The two authors pose the rhetorical question of why schools ought to educate on moral and ethics, and answer that it is because: ‘Each and every one needs time for reflection and contemplation to not get stuck in their development and to see new dimensions in life, but also to continuously remind oneself of the responsibility to contribute to give others the same opportunities’ (my translation). As one observes, moral education is motivated by a praising of liberty to contemplate, but on the condition that one recognises the fundamental democratic principle that everyone ought to have the same opportunities. The goal with a moral education, they also claim, is the contribution to the development
of an ethical perspective which includes ‘wisdom, compassion, gentleness and empathy’ (8-9) (my translation). These are values that are conceived as self-evident truths within a democratic context, yet not necessarily so in another context – there have, for example, undoubtedly existed cultures in which gentleness has not been a celebrated virtue.

It is clear that Franck & Löfstedt’s principal aim is to form students to partake in a fruitful and harmonious coexistence with people of varying opinions and backgrounds, without them abandoning fundamental principles of the democratic ideational environment that they are brought up to inhabit. Such a vision is indeed commendable to anyone supporting the democratic principles – (and the objective here is certainly not to criticize such a vision, but to expose its limitations). A way, then, to cement a loyalty among students and teachers to certain values and ideals is to turn them into universals, which Franck and Löfstedt seem inclined to do. As already mentioned, they are hesitant to reduce values and ideals, advocated in Swedish schools, as belonging to a Christian and western humanistic context. They take the idea of universal values seriously in their discussions and present it is a viable alternative to perceiving values as bound to a specific cultural and historical context, which they identify as confusing and bearing problems (22). They also claim that perceiving certain values, such as compassion and solidarity, as bounded to a specific context, may damage an ethical fellowship (24).

The purpose of moral education, for the two authors, is thus to develop a respect and understanding for other peoples’ worldviews without attacking the fundamental pillars of one’s own perspective, which demands a certain distance towards the other. Recognizing that our present world is, at both the local and global level, the expression of a multitude of values and perspectives, Franck and Löfstedt state: ‘A critical competence is primary for much of what contemporary human beings are faced with’ (8) (my translation).

Further, there is in Franck and Löfstedt’s book no explicit focus on beauty, and little focus on other stimuli to profoundly, and creatively, change one’s outlook on the world and one’s place and meaning within it. Their emphasis on the cognitive capacity to comprehend other systems of thought in the contemporary world, and respect towards different perspectives, refers to another matter; it concerns a competence which allows one to function as a democratic citizen in a global world.

In our discussion on Arnold, his deep-reaching conception of creativity was elucidated. The term *creativity* is also brought up in Franck & Löfstedt’s discussions, but is left largely unexplored. At one passage they refer to creativity as providing space
for students’ to raise questions of acute relevance to themselves, and discuss them together with their teacher (13). They could, of course, in such a passage have elaborated and deepened the idea of this creative activity. As was demonstrated by Wall’s theory of self-narration, and the effect of stories, creativity can denote a capacity to profoundly change one’s outlook on the world and oneself – involving both emotions and mind. Yet, in Franck & Löfstedt’s guidelines, there is little attention paid to the idea of the human being’s creative capacities within the moral domain. The expression of emotional inclination towards certain positions are, as an example, brought up to be dismissed in favour of developing the capacity to form an argumentation for specific positions (51-52). Hence, it is established that formation of moral perspectives ought to be the outcome of a cognitive operation – which undoubtedly hinders moral creativity as envisioned by Arnold and Wall.

Pantić points out that our contemporary views on moral development have been influenced by a tradition, pioneered by Kant, that separate aesthetic and emotional experiences from moral development (210-211). She proceeds to declare: ‘In the same vein, the dominant ethical theories of our time, such as Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, see our morality primarily as a cognitive process, to which emotions involved with an appreciation of literature, could have little to contribute.’ (211). That Franck & Löfstedt’s reasoning also displays a dominating focus on cognition comes to the fore most clearly in the following passage, in which they touch upon the role of texts in moral education:

We have not seldom let pupils read both scientific and popular scientific presentations of ethical questions, largely with the purpose of allowing them see and test the mind against the relatively theoretical and complicated argument and reasoning which ethical questions provide in for example scientific but also popular scientific journals. Succeeding a read-through we have first stopped at words and sentences which have been experienced as difficult and incomprehensive, to thereafter chart exactly what arguments and positions that are being presented. As a third step there has then been a discussion initiated in which the goal has been to maintain a certain theoretical level while it has at the same time allowing for and encouraging pupils to reason around these arguments and positions in an colloquial manner, with assistance of a language that
are close to heart to the pupils. In that way it has been possible to strike a balance between theoretical presentation and everyday relevance, which is important to pursue in high school ethical education (51) (my translation)

The reading of texts does not have the purpose here of moving or forming the pupil, but merely to train her cognitive processing, and theoretical and vocabulary knowledge. While these capacities are important to develop – recall that Arnold also argued that the sense of the word in poetry has to be grasped in order for it to generate its formative effect – its primary position in Franck & Löfstedt’s discussion diminishes the aspects that are elucidated through Arnold’s line of reasoning; those are the aspects of beauty, creativity, and emotional engagement which underlies the actions of the moral being.

The need for a broader approach to moral education

As Franck & Löfstedt also recognize, there are reasons to argue for the inclusion of morality as an explicit part also of subjects other than religious studies. The authors present research showing that pupils tend to regard the subject of morality as appealing and important, while at the same time placing less interest in religious studies (61). Hence, they indicate a will among youths to expand and deepen the focus on ethics in Swedish schools – which is a position which Franck & Löfstedt seem to share by their critical stance toward the limitation of moral education to a single subject (26). There are, in other words, incentives to develop contemporary moral education to better encompass the deeper influences of morality in the life of a human being, and to recognize that its potentialities extend beyond religious matters and cognitive abilities. A fruitful way to do so is by addressing the topic outside of religious studies.

In alignment with Arnold’s reasoning, one would think that morality ought to have a primary place within the subject of English. Given the potentiality to explore moral dimensions through great works of literature, it would provide the possibility to stimulate the formative dimensions of moral education. One could, within English studies, expose the students to beautiful literary representations of human experience that they have not themselves known, to profound ideas that are vacant, or lie in the periphery, of the common discourse of their own society, as well as to the exercise of flexibility of thought. And one could pedagogically, assist students in grasping the content by ensuring that senses of words are known; by exposing the implications of the
presented ideas and their contrasting nature to given truths of our time; and by unearthing the complex and multifaceted thinking expressed in great literature; by engaging the students emotionally in the texts, and so forth.

4. Conclusions

Matthew Arnold presented through his works a theory of the spirit of the human being and her moral development. To his mind, the spirit exists both within the individual and as a cumulative phenomenon of human experiences. The individual spirit is inspired by the beauty and greatness of human experiences, and is particularly responsive to its representation in the form of literature. Great literary compositions, of beauty, profound ideas, and flexibility of thought, can, to Arnold’s mind evoke and develop these qualities in an inspired reader. The development of these qualities, then, liberates the mind and spirit, and sets the human free to create and reconsider ideals and values by which she lives.

Contemporary guidelines on moral education, presented by Franck & Löfstedt, display an ambiguity anchored in an unresolved tension between human liberty and a democratic agenda – and in addition they lack an underlying theory of human drives and capabilities. Its purpose is framed within a political, and functional, context which produces an uneasy relation to the acknowledgement of the human being as free and creative.

Within the political context, the question of whether values may be conceived as universal or context-dependent emerges, for example, as an important issue for Franck and Löfstedt. Such a discussion becomes less relevant when, like Arnold and Wall, one perceives the formation of ideals, values, and moral positions, as a process in which universal aspects and divergent experiences are but two possible conditions for an expanding creativity.

The tension between the democratic project and human liberty is resolved only by accepting that the prevailing ideological status quo is a passing phase in the long-standing history of human existence. Arnold’s, and Wall’s, deep-reaching thought discloses the limitations of present reasoning on moral education. Moral education ought, ultimately, be conceived as a human development, (which may, of course, support a democratic development). A step towards such an expanded perspective on the purpose of moral education in Swedish schools could, then, be to include morality as an explicit focus in other subjects than religion.
References:


