Using explainer videos to do philosophy with children and young people

Lisa Bortolotti
University of Birmingham, UK
l.bortolotti@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

Aesop-style fables are narratives that serve as arguments from analogy. Because they are short and structurally simple, have no substantial plot development, and feature interactions between animal characters, fables are easy to read, listen to, and remember. Due to their having an explicitly stated message in the end and often offering practical advice, they are exactly the type of story that can promote personal reflection and can be used to introduce a philosophical concept or kickstart a philosophical discussion in a classroom with children and young people. In this paper, I suggest that in our digital age explainer videos are an effective and versatile means to share fables in the context of primary and secondary education. Content that is communicated visually is accessible and engaging for young people with varying reading abilities and can be easily consumed and shared online. I suggest that explainer videos can be used to do philosophy with children and young people by introducing philosophical issues of practical importance and illustrating different perspectives on such issues.

Keywords

Aesop, arguments from analogy, explainer videos, fables, folktales, philosophy in schools, philosophy with children, philosophy with young people

1. Introduction

Here is a version of the well-known fable by Aesop (1919), *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.

> One bright day in late autumn a family of Ants were bustling about in the warm sunshine, drying out the grain they had stored up during the summer, when a starving Grasshopper, his fiddle under his arm, came up and humbly begged for a bite to eat.
>
> 'What!' cried the Ants in surprise, 'haven't you stored anything away for the winter? What in the world were you doing all last summer?'

> 'I didn't have time to store up any food,' whined the Grasshopper; 'I was so busy making music that before I knew it the summer was gone.'
>
> The Ants shrugged their shoulders in disgust.
>
> 'Making music, were you?' they cried. 'Very well; now dance!' And they turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.
>
> *There's a time for work and a time for play.*

The Aesop-style fable as a genre exemplifies the complex relationship between literature and philosophy. As it is suggested in the passage below, a fable is typically a short story that is used to make a practical recommendation about the reader's life.

> [T]he Greek fable is a brief and simple fictitious story with a constant structure, generally with animal protagonists (but also humans, gods, and inanimate objects, e.g. trees), which gives an exemplary and popular message on practical ethics and which comments, usually in a cautionary way, on the course of action to be followed or avoided in a particular situation. (Zafiropolous 2001, p. 1)

We can find the typical features of the Aesop-style fable in *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. Two animal characters face the consequences of their previous choices. Ants spent the summer gathering food for the winter and as a result they have plenty to eat throughout the cold season. Grasshopper spent the summer making music and is starving because he hasn't got any food supplies. The final message, 'There is a time for work and a time for play', suggests that, just like the Ants, we should make sure that we do not spend all our time in idle pursuits (Clayton 2008; Kurke 2011; Skillen 1992).

However, the story can be interpreted differently. What if making music is important to Grasshopper, and is not just an excuse to avoid hard work? Was Grasshopper imprudent in failing to gather food for the winter, or was Grasshopper just living life to the full? A meaningful life can take a different shape depending on people's inclinations, talents, and values. Even if we concede that Grasshopper was imprudent, Aesop's message does not sit well with the thought that we should be generous. Isn't the response by the Ants—mocking Grasshopper and refusing to share food—too harsh? French fabulist La Fontaine's version of the story suggests that the Ants are being uncharitable, and in further retellings of the well-known fable through the

years, Grasshopper is often taken to symbolise artists whose work may not bring food to the table but should be appreciated and supported by the rest of society because it benefits everyone.

In this paper I will make three claims.

- Although narrative and philosophical argumentation have been traditionally kept distinct in form and purpose, Aesop-style fables are narratives that serve as arguments from analogy and for this reason they are an appropriate means to start and frame a philosophical debate (Section 2).

- Given their features (brevity, simplicity, animal characters, limited plot and character development, explicitly stated moral, practical import), Aesop-style fables are especially suited to the classroom context. Children and young people typically find it easy and enjoyable to engage with a short story where animal characters face a problem, and a solution is suggested in the end (Section 3).

- Explainer videos are short videos (usually animated) which are used to explain a concept or promote a product. They are an effective and versatile way for Aesop-style fables to be shared with both children and young people in schools. Explainer videos can be used to introduce a philosophical issue of practical importance and offer different perspectives on such an issue (Section 4).

2. The Aesop-style fable between literature and philosophy

We saw that Aesop-style fables are short fictional stories that serve a purpose; that is, they teach us something that can be of practical use in living our lives well or encourage us to behave in a way that promotes the fulfilment of our goals. In this section I will argue that the Aesop-style fable is especially suited to start and frame a philosophical debate on a topic of general interest. This is not a new idea, of course.

Based on Gareth Matthews's influential work (e.g. Matthews 1992), Gregory and Laverty (2022) argue that the fable can be an effective way to generate the type of philosophical perplexity that invites reflection, quite independently of the original intentions of the storyteller. Some Philosophy for Children practitioners, such as Tom Bigglestone (2022) and Jason Buckley, have reflected on the utility of Aesop-style fables and other short folk stories for prompting children to explore ethical concepts such as 'right' and 'wrong'. Research also suggests that the use of fables can be an

appropriate means to develop the critical thinking skills of adolescents, including those who have language disorders (Nippold & Marr 2022).

Both practitioners and philosophers of education recognise that the power of fables lies in their double nature, being literature and philosophy at once. The typical Aesop-style fable is not mere storytelling but serves as an argument in its own right:

> [N]arration in the Aesopian mode is never simply telling a story … He [Aesop] is not merely expressing his opinion, but in some way showing us the truth of it. This is the sort of thing that, in philosophy, is done through argument. (Hunt 2009)

On the surface, fables are just fictional stories, mostly based on a brief interaction between two or more animal characters. But fables are also arguments delivered in a narrative form, where the argument is generally an argument from analogy. What is an argument from analogy? Here is a concise explanation:

> In any argument from analogy one argues from the similarity of two or more entities in one or more respects to the similarity of those same entities in some further respect. The argument typically has two premises, the first of which states that entities P, Q and R have attributes or features w, x and y. The second premise states that one or more of these entities – let us say P and Q – also has attribute z. From these premises it is concluded that R must also have attribute z. (Cummings 2014, p. 93)

Let us consider this aspect of fables by going back to *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.

The storyteller wants to persuade someone who is frivolous to become more industrious (see Bex & Bench-Capon 2017, p. 41). We are told what Ant and Grasshopper did in the summer and we are shown that both insects have to face the consequences of their previous conduct. Due to being idle earlier on, Grasshopper is starving, whereas Ant—who was industrious—has plenty of food to eat. We should want to become reliable like Ant and stop being irresponsible like Grasshopper. The message is that, if we do not plan for the future, we will regret it—as we are left to infer that Grasshopper regrets making music instead of gathering food. The conclusion is that we should prioritise work over play, and duty over pleasure. The story also suggests that 'we reap what we sow': we cannot expect to be well fed over the winter if we failed to gather food supplies in the summer.

In order to function as an argument from analogy, the fable needs to persuade us to change our ways and this can be achieved if we (1) identify to some extent with Grasshopper; (2) recognise that at the end of the story Grasshopper's situation is undesirable; and (3) take steps to avoid being in the same situation as Grasshopper, for instance by behaving more like Ant (Bex & Bench-Capon 2017, p. 42).

Aesop-style fables are clearly aimed to show that a type of behaviour is appropriate, and we should pursue it, or inappropriate, and we should avoid it. More generally, fables and parables have the explicit aim of persuading people to think and act, or avoid thinking and acting, in a certain way.

Fables and parables are not the only literary forms that serve as arguments. Helen De Cruz (2022) aptly observes how aphorisms, autobiographies, thought experiments, and novels can be philosophical when they 'challenge us to see the world differently' and 'shake our preconceptions and help us think about weighty questions such as what a good life is or what a morally relevant action consists of' (p. vii). However, as De Cruz also acknowledges, academic philosophers tend to be very conservative about what they think is the best way to present arguments, this being the article or the monograph.

The idea that stories can serve as arguments has often been constrained or undermined; for instance, their role in campaigning and political debate has not been duly recognised (see Leslie 2015). This is probably due to a number of factors, starting from the perceived gap between writing that is aimed at getting us to reason in a certain way, such as the essay, and writing that is aimed at entertaining, stimulating our imagination, and arousing emotions, such as the short story or the novel. This reflects the gulf between the *narrative paradigm* and the *rational-world paradigm* described and theorised in Fisher's influential work (1984; 1987).

According to the narrative paradigm, humans are primarily storytellers, and judge explanations on the basis of their making sense as a whole (*coherence*) and their 'ringing true', given the stories they are familiar with in their lives (*fidelity*). According to the rational-world paradigm, humans are all primarily *rational beings*, and judge explanations on the basis of their reflecting relevant disciplinary knowledge and being logical and persuasive. If we tell a story to support our position in a debate, then we use a method for producing coherent stories that are faithful to our experiences instead of a method for producing accurate and logically rigorous arguments. There is a mismatch between our goals and our methods.

The concern with stories that are also arguments is that the goals of storytelling and those of rational argumentation do not always coincide. In stories that are meant to dazzle and inspire, the elements that would ensure argumentative rigour and clarity may be sacrificed for the sake of offering entertainment and engagement. At most, the critic might observe, stories can *accompany* arguments, serving as illustrations or elliptical versions of an argument, but they cannot *replace* arguments altogether.

This view is based on the assumption that *good* stories cannot be *good* arguments because, in order to be persuasive, arguments need to emancipate themselves from the constraints of coherence and fidelity and thus take a non-narrative form. Some challenge this assumption. For instance, Murphy-Hollies and Bortolotti (2021) argue that arguments can take the form of a personally significant story, even a social media post; Bortolotti and Jefferson (2019) observe how personally significant stories are used as arguments in debates on mental health, often successfully; and Stammers and Bortolotti examine arguments delivered as stories in political campaigns, such as the campaign prior to Brexit in the UK. Leslie (2015) defends the view that understanding and community building in humans work mostly narratively and successful argumentation cannot prescind from that. In particular, Leslie maintains that stories are suitable to explore reasons for action.

Due to their dialogical nature, where one character responds to another, fables offer different perspectives on the same problem. While we need to accept the differences between narrative and argument, we should also recognise what they have in common:

> Narrative does not stand in opposition to rhetorical argument. Rather, the two have a complementary relationship going back to the earliest days of rhetorical practice. Storytelling and oratory share a broad spectrum of aesthetics and rationality in which both are necessary: Both interact to form the basis of human understanding and political community. (Leslie 2015, p. 81)

In the rest of the paper, I will offer some further reasons to embrace the role of the Aesop-style fable in stimulating philosophical reflection and promoting philosophical discussion.

3. The distinctive features of fables

In this section, I will review the features of the Aesop-style fable (Lefkowitz 2018). Such features make fables especially suited to the classroom context, where the participants in the philosophical discussion or reflection are children or young people and the discussion or reflection is facilitated by a teacher or moderator. In particular, I will examine the advantages of six core features of the fable: brevity; simplicity of structure; animal characters; no articulated plot or character development; moral or explicitly stated message; practical import.

Brevity

Fables are very short. The version of *The Ant and the Grasshopper* at the start of this paper is just 139 words; shorter than the abstract of an article in a peer-reviewed journal. Thanks to their brevity, fables are well suited for presentation in a classroom environment—they can be read in a few minutes and then discussed in the class as a whole or in small groups, enabling children to consider the traits of the characters in the story and the best interpretation of the events. A longer narrative with a complex plot would be more demanding in terms of attention and concentration (especially for younger children) and contain details that could detract from the main message or moral of the story. Of course, the short nature of the story can be a limitation too, as it means that further resources will be needed to explore the various interpretations that the story can receive.

But one obvious advantage of the fable over longer or more articulate narratives is that students can be invited to add details themselves using their imagination (see Kasmirli 2020 on the important role of imagination in mediating between concrete and abstract thinking). Students can make inferences about what happened before the interaction reported in the fable or make informed guesses about what will happen next.

Simple structure and setting

Fables are often structured around a conversation between two or more characters in a simplified setting that is not described with abundant detail. For instance, in the version of *The Ant and the Grasshopper* we considered, Grasshopper and Ant have a very short exchange and all we are told about the setting is that it was a 'bright day in late autumn'. The simplified setting does not divert the attention from the

conversation, which remains the focus. As Clayton (2018) says, the simplicity of the fables 'makes them memorable and helps give them their power.'

Conversations among characters with different needs, interests or views are eminently suitable for the purpose of introducing philosophical concepts or ideas (as we know from the lasting influence of Plato's *Dialogues*) because they enable readers to appreciate a variety of points of view on a specific issue. Moreover, when reading a dialogue, students can make inferences about the mental lives and the virtues and vices of the characters without needing substantial background information about them.

Animal characters

The Ant and the Grasshopper features two garden animals. Although not all fables feature animal characters, it is typical for fables do so. The animals are not named or described in any wealth of detail. Often the common names of the animals become their proper names, and they are used in capitals to pick out a specific individual with certain characteristics as opposed to a whole species. Animal characters in fables are persons in a philosophical sense: they have desires, plans, and thoughts, which they can express linguistically, communicating with each other as if they shared a language.

Even more central to the moralising purpose of fables, animal characters have needs and behavioural patterns that can be approved of or criticised based on whether they fulfil or fail to fulfil those needs. In *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, both insects need food supplies for the winter. Ant was responsible and gathered such supplies—for that, Ant can be praised. Grasshopper was irresponsible and made music all summer—for that, Grasshopper is mocked and left to starve.

Even younger children relate to animal characters, and differences between animals in power or status can be represented in a way that does not necessarily render the conversation difficult or sensitive in the culturally or socially diverse environment of the classroom, although analogies between the animal world and the human world can be introduced and discussed when appropriate. Such differences in power or status are not obvious in *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, but in other very well-known fables, such as *The Lion and the Mouse* and *The Tortoise and the Hare*, we get a clear sense of the initial imbalance in status between the two main animal characters. Lion is powerful, feared and well-respected, whereas Mouse is inconsequential; Hare's speed is admired, whereas Tortoise's slow pace is an object of derision. Interestingly, in

many fables such power imbalances are subverted: Lion needs the assistance of Mouse and Tortoise wins a race against Hare. This makes fables thought provoking as they can challenge stereotypes and challenge what is perceived to be the *status quo*.

Lack of plot and character development

Due to the features of brevity and simplicity, there are no significant plot or character developments in the typical Aesop-style fable. Rather, the fable is centred around an interaction (at times, a confrontation or a disagreement) between the main characters. Although fictional stories with complex plot and character developments are deeply satisfying, there is clear sense that the literary and psychological requirements of such developments may shift the reader's attention from the practical focus (which can become the centre of the philosophical discussion) to something else.

Moreover, as previously anticipated, the lack of development can be seen as a valuable feature of the fable by offering the opportunity for further engagement in the classroom setting. The snapshot character of the story encourages students to 'fill the gaps', stimulating imagination, creativity and original thought. We can ask how Grasshopper feels about the idle way the summer was spent. Does Grasshopper regret making music instead of gathering food? We can also ask why Ant was so diligent. Did Ant realise the importance of gathering supplies? Or did Ant just do what all the other ants were doing without giving much thought to it?

Moral or explicitly stated message

In fables there is some acknowledgement from one of the animal characters or from a narrator who is external to the story that a lesson can be learnt. It is usually very explicit what the lesson is. Our contemporary sensibilities are scarcely tolerant of messages aimed at our moral edification, as we are aware that moral principles need to be contextualised to be meaningful, and are heavily shaped by values that can differ from person to person, and culture to culture. However, having a clearly stated message at the end of the fable has educational value as the students can be invited to consider whether they agree with the given message or wish to challenge it. Does the story only teach us the lesson that the narrator wants us to learn, or is there another, more important, message that has not been explicitly stated?

Further, students can be asked to work by themselves or in groups and write a different version of the fable, or a new fable altogether, embodying the opposite message. For instance, to contrast the message in *The Ant and the Grasshopper* that we

should plan ahead, they could be invited to write a fable illustrating the benefits of play or encouraging us to live in the moment.

Practical import

There are several senses in which fables are practical. In terms of *content*, the interaction between the animal characters seems to revolve around common situations and the messages offered are supposed to assist us in everyday contexts where an action or a decision is required. In the case of *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, the message can assist us when we are wondering whether, having a couple of hours to spare, we should go to the supermarket to buy groceries for our family dinner or go to the cinema with our friends to watch a movie. As enjoyable as the cinema outing sounds, grocery shopping should probably take priority. So, fables are practical because they are supposed to guide actual behaviour as opposed to making abstract points about moral agency.

In terms of *practical uses*, fables have always traditionally had a multiplicity of purposes, from entertaining and teaching rules of conduct to young people, to conveying political ideas in a covert way.

> Often the focus of Greek learning, especially regarding instruction for children in reading and writing, Aesop's Fables served a multitude of additional purposes. Politically, the fables emerged in a time period of Greek history when authoritarian rule often made free & open speech dangerous for the speaker. The fables served as a means by which criticisms against the government could be expressed without fear of punishment. In effect, the stories served as a code by which the weak and powerless could speak out against the strong and powerful. (Horgan 2014)

So, the Aesop-style fable was always supposed to be versatile. It was used to engage, entertain and educate diverse audiences. Moreover, as fables are typically arguments from analogy, this means that they can convey messages that could otherwise be interpreted as dangerous or subversive without raising suspicions or objections. In other words, fables are extremely easy to adapt to a variety of contexts.

One long-standing concern with the Aesop-style fable is that its use in bringing philosophy to children and young people risks reinforcing Eurocentric perspectives. This is a widely recognised issue that has been addressed in multiple ways. For

instance, some new versions of classic fables by Aesop (including *The Ant and the Grasshopper*) have been adapted to ensure that they centre Black cultural values (Yenika-Agbaw 2021).

However, the approach I am taking in this paper, where I support the use of Aesop-style fables in starting and framing philosophical discussion, does not depend on the content of ancient Greek fables which is often deemed Eurocentric. Rather, it depends on the structural features of the fable that can be found in many different cultures. Short, simple stories with animal characters and with explicit educational content are common in the Panchatantra (a collection of Indian folktales in Sanskrit), in the African tradition (for instance, in tales from South Africa, Nigeria and Tanzania), and in native American cultures (in the form of myths and tales).

As I will show in the next section, it is not the Aesop fable itself, but the Aesop-style fable that embodies those six characteristics we reviewed, that can be used to do philosophy with children and young people. My own suggestion is that we can create new Aesop-style fables tailored to address the specific issues that matter to our digital, multi-cultural society and share them by using the medium of explainer videos.

4. Explainer videos

In this last section, I suggested that explainer videos are a good vehicle for sharing Aesop-style fables and thus can serve to introduce concepts that are central to philosophical debates and show us different perspectives on a philosophical issue of practical importance. In other words, the explainer video can be instrumental to a revival of the Aesop-style fable as a genre exemplifying what literature can do for philosophy in the classroom. In addition to making the fable more contemporary by enabling it to reach audiences online, the explainer video can also increase its accessibility.

But what are explainer videos?

Explainer videos are short videos (typically lasting 90 seconds) whose aim is to explain how something works in a simple and engaging way. Explainer videos are popular marketing tools, as they can draw attention to a company's product or service. But they can also serve informational or educational purposes. For instance, explainer videos can be used to describe the societal impact of a research project and were widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 'The coronavirus explained to children', a three-minute explainer video aimed at children and produced by science

communication professionals, there is an account of what the virus did, how it was transmitted, and why it was necessary to close schools during lockdown.[1]

Most explainer videos use animation. The main advantage of using animation is that it provides room for creative freedom and video maker can choose whatever style they prefer to share their message. The style of the animation may depend on the nature of the message and the target audience for the video.

The explainer video format is extremely versatile. Here is a passage detailing the common structure of explainer videos.

> [A] good explainer video tells a story. It follows a simple narrative structure that draws the viewer in and takes them on a short and enjoyable journey. The structure that most videos follow is:
>
> **1. Present the problem.** This hooks a viewer in by identifying a relatable issue that you're going to solve.
>
> **2. Offer your solution.** You outline how your company's product or service tackles the issue outlined.
>
> **3. Show how it works.** You now show the mechanics of exactly how your solution solves the problem.
>
> **4. Provide a call-to-action.** This type of video marketing shows viewers how they can access this solution – purchase an item, sign up for a service etc. (Dowdall 2021)

The brevity and simplicity of the explainer video format matches the brevity and simplicity of the Aesop-style fable and guarantees very high retention rates; people who start watching an explainer video tend to stay until the end. The structural similarities between explainer videos and fables have not gone unnoticed.

In the modern world, as communications become shorter and more immediate (such as X, Facebook and other social media), we may see a renaissance of the fable genre, although of course the lessons it will communicate in today's world may be very different from those of ancient Greece (Clayton 2018).

---

[1] You can see the explainer video here: https://youtu.be/MVvVTDhGqaA?si=FiHWW-258h8zsXc0. The video has had almost 729,862 views since March 2020 when it was posted.

In a world where culture develops and is transmitted predominantly via images, explainer videos turn out to be a very apt medium for sharing fables (New Dictionary of the History of Ideas 2023). This applies especially to contexts where the audience is made of young people who use social media platforms and are skilled at communicating and learning visually. The popularity of platforms where users exchange images is a testimony to a cultural shift (Gimmel 2020). Visualisation is no longer just an accessory, added to the text merely to illustrate and divert; rather, it has become an autonomous way to develop new forms of understanding and to take a stance on important issues.

We can now revisit the typical structure of the explainer video in the light of the requirements of the Aesop-style fable. With an explainer video, the attention of the viewers is focused on the interaction between two (or more) animal characters, just like in fables that can be read from a book. Moreover, a short video can not only be watched and discussed in the classroom but also shared online, embedded in a site, and consumed on a smartphone, thereby reaching wider audiences and potentially having a greater impact.

Table 1: A philosophical use for explainer videos.

Goal	Means
1. Present a fictional problem.	Animal characters find themselves in a situation that is problematic and requires an action or choice.
2. Offer different perspectives on the fictional problem.	Two (or more) perspectives on the problem are offered, exemplified by two (or more) distinct animal characters reacting to the initial situation.
3. Show different perspectives on the fictional problem.	Via the interaction between the animal characters, viewers identify different reactions and appreciate their consequences for the action or choice.
4. Explain how the perspectives apply to a real-life problem that is analogous to the fictional problem.	The narrator or one of the characters suggests how the animal characters' reactions map onto perspectives that people can adopt on a real-life problem that has analogous characteristics to the fictional problem in the video. A recommendation is made to the viewers.

Consider the following example of an explainer video used to discuss how people explain unusual events (Bortolotti 2023a). The video introduces the issue of how conspiracy theories emerge and take hold, showing that the appeal of conspiracy theories becomes stronger at times of crisis, when people do not know how to explain a potentially distressing event. It also illustrates different reasoning styles and their effects.

The story in the video is named after, and loosely inspired by, the Aesop fable called *The Ant and the Grasshopper* we previously discussed.[2] The transcript follows:

> Narrator: How do conspiracy theories take hold?
>
> Grasshopper: Our supply of seeds is gone … it's a disaster! This trail of seeds leads to Beetle. He must have taken our seeds.
>
> Ant: Don't jump to conclusions! How can you be so sure that it was Beetle? We haven't gathered enough clues yet. Spider, what do you think?
>
> Spider: Grasshopper's theory makes sense. Yesterday Beetle was ogling your seeds. He must have decided to steal them in the night. Today your seeds are gone and now he's fast asleep.
>
> Ant: Grasshopper's theory makes sense, I give you that Spider. But looking at all these leaves off the branches and the nests fallen on the ground, isn't it more likely that the strong wind last night scattered our seeds around? Grasshopper, you are stuck [in Spider's web]! When you can't stand the uncertainty you may be tempted by an intriguing story, a story that is simple and coherent and points to someone else as the villain.
>
> *When we do not know how a new virus emerged, we may speculate that evil scientists created it in their lab, but we should wait and gather more evidence because once we commit to a theory it is difficult to give it up.*

Here we encounter two distinct reactions to a troublesome event, the supply of seeds going missing. Ant takes things slowly and tries to piece together the available

[2] The video is part of *The Philosophy Garden*, a virtual philosophy museum collecting resources for young people and educators. The video can also be found on YouTube at: https://youtu.be/_RfC_Zwf6oI?si=qn-lCJZ6vUbboblE

evidence whereas Grasshopper is in a rush to come up with an explanation and identify someone responsible.

Grasshopper's explanation, that Beetle ate the seeds, is plausible and coherent, and also captures the imagination; if the seeds are gone, there must a be thief somewhere who found a way to steal and gobble them up. But Ant points out that other explanations are possible, and one explanation in particular fits with some other clues that can be found in the garden. The leaves and nests fallen from the trees may be due to a strong wind and the strong wind may have scattered the seeds too.

The transcript is just 202 words and the video lasts 90 seconds. Yet, we can learn a lot about the philosophy and psychology of how people tend to explain unusual events if we reflect on the interactions between Ant and Grasshopper, and Ant and Spider, in the video. The end of the video points to a debate on the causes of a crisis (the COVID-19 pandemic) where some participants jumped to conclusions and sought villains to blame while other participants accepted that the crisis might have had natural causes and not have been the outcome of anybody's ill-intentioned actions.

At a more superficial level of analysis, as with primary school children, we may focus on the differences between the behaviour of Grasshopper and Ant, identifying and examining the traits that the animals exhibit in the video. We can call Grasshopper *impatient* for settling for one explanation after considering just one clue (the trail of seeds pointing to Beetle). We can describe Ant as *scrupulous* for considering other options. Spider can be seen as *cunning* for trapping Grasshopper in the web. We can reflect on the fact that surprising and potentially distressing events elicit a different reaction in different people; for instance, people who are more like Ant are likely to be cool-headed and discerning and thus avoid blaming others unnecessarily.

For a more in-depth analysis, as with secondary school students, we can introduce those biases and dispositions that psychologists and philosophers associate with people who either are more likely to believe conspiracy theories or who believe conspiracy theories with more conviction (Bortolotti 2023b; Douglas et al. 2017; Pierre 2020). We can also invite a reflection on the contextual factors that may lead people to endorse conspiracy theories. What do we learn from the story? People who come up with conspiracy theories or find them attractive behave like Grasshopper: they jump to conclusions, see causal connections everywhere, have low tolerance for uncertainty, and prefer explanations where some individual or organisation (possibly an individual or an organisation they already dislike or mistrust for independent reasons) is blamed for a negatively valued event.

The jumping to conclusion bias is often associated with the adoption of conspiracy theories, as the person focuses on one specific piece of evidence that is immediately available and comes up with an explanation that fits that piece of evidence without considering whether additional evidence would change the picture. A suspicious nature is associated with the pervasiveness and resilience of conspiracy theories where usually the responsibility for a negatively valued event is assigned to an individual or organisation that is disliked or mistrusted. Gathering more evidence or reflecting further on the nature of the event can lead to another explanation, as happens to Ant who is not impressed by Grasshopper's theory even though the theory is both plausible and intriguing.

The video prompts a reflection on the fact that, although conspiracy theories may lack robust evidential support and may not be the best available explanations we have, they are still *theories* in some powerful sense, and people are attracted to them because they are distressed by an event that they could not predict, or that they cannot fully comprehend. Like any other theories, conspiracy theories are attempts to understand the world around us. This helps us avoid stigmatising and pathologising attitudes towards people who come up with different explanations from ours. Although we may not agree with their conclusions, find their theories badly supported by evidence, or judge their methods of investigation lacking, we should not exclude them from public debate or dismiss their contributions without listening with empathy and respect to what they have to say.

Another discussion point is afforded by the interaction between Grasshopper and Spider. Once we commit to an explanation of a highly significant event, we rarely give that explanation up, even in the light of conflicting evidence. We are conservative with respect to the theories we commit to, as rejecting them at a later stage can be costly for us. We might have inferred other beliefs from the theory we initially favoured, or built an entire worldview on it, and we would have to admit that we were wrong if we accept that another, conflicting theory is the accurate one. In the video, this is represented by Grasshopper being so intrigued by Spider's careful reconstruction of the theory that Beetle stole the seeds, that he gets too close to the web Spider is spinning and remains stuck to it, without being able to get away. (This point is more evident when viewing the video than reading the transcript alone as the significance of the scene is mostly conveyed visually). Grasshopper getting stuck can give rise to a very interesting discussion about how we tend to identify with the views we hold dear, and this helps explain both the tendency of certain debates to become polarised and the need for us to be discerning when adopting a new explanation.

Lastly, while the list of learning points and ideas for further exploration and discussion can continue, it is important to drive home the message that one way of reasoning may be preferable in general, and beneficial in a given context, but it can be impractical or unsuitable in some other context. In any case, no reliable reasoning strategy can guarantee the truth of the conclusion it recommends. Let's briefly consider both points: context dependency and reliability.

Although being analytical and reflective before settling for an explanation is generally preferable, especially if by doing so we avoid blaming others, in some circumstances we may not have an abundance of evidence available to us. When the pandemic did strike, for instance, there were conflicting theories about how the virus was transmitted, and the evidence was not sufficient to reach a conclusion. We may not afford the extra time that is needed to consider all the clues because a decision needs to be made promptly. For instance, we may have to decide whether to take up the offer of a new vaccine before having evidence about its safety or efficacy. In those situations, where there is limited evidence available and a decision needs to be made in a tight timeframe, Grasshopper may have an advantage over Ant. Inviting children and young people to challenge the moral of the fable in the explainer video could lead to some interesting conversations. Is it always problematic to jump to conclusions? Could we think of a scenario where Grasshopper's low tolerance of uncertainty would make him better off than Ant?

The video does not tell us that Ant's explanation was correct, and Grasshopper's explanation was wrong. It just points to the advantage of considering all the available clues before settling on an explanation. Of course, it is still possible that Beetle gobbled up the seeds! Exploring this possibility is useful when examining the difference between justification and truth: a method can be the most reliable overall and yet on some occasion may not lead us to the truth. As even today people are discussing whether the COVID-19 virus was developed in a lab, this point is further strengthened by the real-life case mentioned in the video. More generally, the intentionality bias (assuming that if something bad has happened, someone's evil intention must be behind it) can be pernicious in our relatively safe contemporary societies but was probably adaptive in ancient societies where people were constantly competing with each other for limited resources. Being suspicious of the intentions of others and vigilant in that context would have increased people's chances of survival and reproduction. In the classroom, it may be useful to ask children and young people what would happen if Beetle confessed to stealing the seeds after waking up from his nap. Would they still value Ant's cautious and scrupulous attitude? If so, why?

It is surprising how much content can be conveyed or at least hinted at in such a short video. Each word in the script is carefully chosen and leads to some interesting findings about conspiracy theories that philosophers and psychologists have discussed in their peer-reviewed publications. We have shown the explainer video *The Ant and the Grasshopper* to children in primary schools (ages 7-11) and to adolescents attending secondary schools and sixth-form colleges (11-18). Our approach has been different depending on the interests of the participants.

When showing the video to younger children, we started by asking them how they react when they face an unexpected event, encouraging them to offer examples from their own experience. Then, we showed the video and asked them questions about the characters, inviting a comparison between how Ant and Grasshopper attempt to solve the mystery of the missing seeds. We ended by eliciting some general points on what makes an explanation a good explanation. There was no specific focus on conspiracy theories.

More advanced students can identify connections between the video and situations they have directly experienced, developing some understanding of the epistemic and psychological factors affecting explanations of unusual events at critical times. When showing the video to secondary school students, we explicitly introduced the topic of conspiracy theories, asking the group whether they were aware of any conspiracy theory and what they thought the main features of conspiracy theories were. We built on their own examples, identifying together the main biases and thinking styles contributing to conspiratorial ideation, including the jumping to conclusion bias, and the intentionality bias. Jargon was avoided and instead biases were introduced using icons, slogans and examples. Once the students had watched the video, they could recognise what they had learnt about the mechanisms responsible for conspiracy theories in aspects of Grasshopper's and Spider's behaviour. We ended by inviting participants to play a game where they had to use the biases we had discussed in class to arrive at new explanations of made-up events.

When learning more about the topic, guided by the teacher and inspired by the resources created to accompany the video, students can explore the contextual factors and individual traits that lead people to prefer explanations with certain characteristics. This contributes to a better informed and less pathologising view of conspiracy theories, as the young people learn that we are all vulnerable to biases such as the jumping to conclusion bias and the intentionality bias, especially when we are stressed and under pressure.

The additional resources to deepen the students' understanding can be tailored to their interests and level of engagement, and can include blog posts, magazine articles, podcasts, and videos on the philosophy and psychology of conspiracy theories, summarising the results of peer-reviewed research in accessible and engaging ways. There are also some interesting online educational games aimed at young people, such as Fake Plots, Bad News, and Go Viral. Some of these games have been shown to increase students' digital literacy and their capacity to recognise the strategies used to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories on social media (see e.g. Basol et al. 2020).

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I reviewed some of the benefits of using Aesop-style fable to introduce philosophical discussion and reflection on issues of practical significance. I argued that the traditional distinction between an argument that persuades us and a story that entertains us should be questioned, because stories can serve as arguments, and the typical fable is an argument from analogy.

In the classroom context, explainer videos can be an effective medium for sharing traditional fables in a more engaging way, and for introducing new fables that are engineered to draw the students' attention to philosophical problems that emerge from contemporary life. The advantages of the video format include the fact that it can appeal to students whose reading is still developing and that it can effectively convey a wealth of information by using visual cues such as the characters' facial expressions.

The use of fables in the classroom context has limitations, whether the fables are shared in written form or via explainer videos. However, I indicated some ways in which an explainer video embodying the characteristics of an Aesop-style fable helps promote reflection and discussion in children and young people, especially in situations where it is important to appreciate and examine different perspectives in relation to a problem and evaluate their implications for people's actions and choices.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Anna Ichino, Merten Reglitz and Kathleen Murphy-Hollies for numerous conversations on the topic of this paper. The author also wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback on a previous version of this paper.

Funding

The author acknowledges an AHRC Impact Acceleration Award which funded the production of the explainer video entitled *The Ant and the Grasshopper* and the other explainer videos available at *The Philosophy Garden*.

References

Aesop (1919) *The Aesop for children: with pictures by Milo Winter*. Rand, McNally & Co, Chicago, IL. https://read.gov/aesop/about.html

Basol, M, Roozenbeek, J & van der Linden, S (2020) Good news about bad news: Gamified inoculation boosts confidence and cognitive immunity against fake news. *Journal of Cognition*, 3(1), pp. 1–9.

Bex, F & Bench-Capon, T (2017) Arguing with stories. In P Olmos (ed) *Narration as argument*. Springer, Berlin, pp. 31–46.

Bigglestone, T (2022) P4C using family, fables and folktales. *The Philosophy Man*. https://www.thephilosophyman.com/blog/p4c-using-family-fables-and-folktales

Bortolotti, L (2023a) The Ant and the Grasshopper. *The Philosophy Garden*. https://sites.google.com/view/the-philosophy-garden/our-animated-videos/ant-and-grasshopper

Bortolotti, L (2023b) *Why delusions matter*. Bloomsbury, Camden, UK.

Bortolotti, L & Jefferson, A (2019) The power of stories: Responsibility for the use of autobiographical stories in mental health debates. *Diametros*, 60, pp. 18–33.

Clayton, E (2008). Aesop, Aristotle, and animals: The role of fables in human life. *Humanitas: Interdisciplinary Journal*, 21(2), pp. 179-200.

Clayton, E (2018) Aesop's fables. *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. https://iep.utm.edu/aesop/

Cummings, L (2014) *Reasoning and public health: New ways of coping with uncertainty*. Springer Nature, Berlin.

De Cruz, H (2022) *Philosophy illustrated*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Douglas, KM, Sutton, RM & Cichocka, A (2017) The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), pp. 538–542.

Dowdall, E (2021) *Explainer videos: What are they and why are they great?* https://kartoffelfilms.com/blog/explainer-videos-what-are-they-and-why-are-they/

Fisher, WR (1984) Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), pp. 1–22.

Fisher, WR (1987) *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC.

Gimmel, M (2020) *Art theory: Visual culture.* https://www.artshelp.com/art-theory-visual-culture/

Gregory, M & Laverty, M (2022) Frog and Toad at the academy: Gareth B Matthews on how children's literature goes philosophical. *Policy Futures in Education*, 20(3), pp. 297–315.

Horgan, J (2014) *Aesop's fables*. https://www.worldhistory.org/article/664/aesops-fables/

Hunt, L (2009) Literature as fable, fable as argument. *Philosophy and Literature*, 33, pp. 369–385.

Kasmirli, M (2020) The paradox of philosophy for children and how to resolve it. *Childhood & Philosophy*, 16(36), pp. 1–24.

Kurke, L (2011) *Aesopic conversations: Popular tradition, cultural dialogue, and the invention of Greek prose*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

La Fontaine, J (1841) The Grasshopper and the Ant. *Fables of La Fontaine* (E Wright, trans). Edward Moxon, Boston, MA.

Lefkowitz, J (2018, 3 July) *Listening to Aesop's animals*. IAI News. https://iai.tv/articles/listening-to-aesops-animals-philosophy-auid-1105

Leslie, A (2015) How stories argue: The deep roots of storytelling in political rhetoric. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 11(1), pp. 66–84.

Matthews, G (1992) *Dialogues with children*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Murphy-Hollies, K & Bortolotti, L (2021) Stories as evidence. *Memory, Mind & Media*, 1, E3.

New Dictionary of the History of Ideas (2023) *Visual culture*. https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/visual-culture

Nippold, M & Marr, E (2022) Philosophy for adolescents: Using fables to support critical thinking and advanced language skills. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 53(3), pp. 786–802.

Pierre, JM (2020) Mistrust and misinformation: A two-component, socioepistemic model of belief in conspiracy theories. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 8(2), pp. 617–641.

Skillen, A (1992) Aesop's lessons in literary realism. *Philosophy,* 67(260), pp. 169–181.

Stammers, S & Bortolotti, L (2020) When the personal becomes political: How do we fulfil our epistemic duties relative to the use of autobiographical stories in public debates? In S Stapleford & K McCain (eds) *Epistemic duties: New arguments, new angles*. Routledge, Abingdon, UK, pp. 254–267.

Yenika-Agbaw, V (2021) Picturebook adaptations of Aesop fables: An analysis of Morrison and Pinkney's adaptations of three classic tales. *Children's Literature Education*, 52, pp. 36–48.

Zafiropoulos, CA (2001) *Ethics in Aesop's fables: The Augustana Collection*. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands.