Free Will, Guilt, and the Illusion of Choice:

Intersections of Literature and Neuroscience

By

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Abstract:

Literature has historically played a crucial didactic role, particularly through the exploration of the moral dichotomy between good and evil, thus contributing to human moral development. These narratives often seek to depict the moral struggles and choices of individuals, indirectly shaping societal views on morality and responsibility. This paper examines the motivations underpinning acts of evil as depicted in literary works, aiming to grasp how such portrayals explain and influence perceptions of human behavior, responsibility, and the educational potential of literature. By integrating contributions from neuroscience, it explores the extent to which these depictions align with or challenge our understanding of free will and moral agency. Findings indicate that many portrayals of malevolence in literature can be traced to impairments in executive functions and decision-making processes, highlighting a potentially deterministic undercurrent in character actions. This perspective raises questions about traditional views on morality and free will, as it suggests that characters' choices may lack genuine autonomy. Consequently, this challenges the assumed educational function of literature by positing that such narratives may not reflect true moral agency but rather predetermined cognitive and psychological predispositions. These insights call for a re-evaluation of the role of literature in moral education, as neuroscience increasingly suggests that human agency may be more constrained than previously thought.

Keywords: didactic literature, neuroscience, decision making, free will, executive functioning

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Art and literature have historically played an essential didactic and educational role, serving as a cultural legacy passed down through generations since ancient times. The enduring theme of good versus evil, extensively explored in literary works, provides a framework that reflects a central human pursuit: cultivating moral judgment and developing an evaluative system grounded in the dualities of right and wrong, virtue and vice.

Building on this foundation, the primary aim of this contribution is to explore the educational function of literature considering recent neuroscience discoveries. The discussion opens with a brief overview of selected sources, key chronological developments, and definitions relevant to attest the role of didactic literature. This exploration highlights how didactic literature may aggregate the processes through which individuals cultivate skills, attitudes, and other behaviours of positive social value within their communities.

Following that, examples on the choice between good and evil are presented, based on characters described from literary giants of the calibre of Euripides, Virgil, Ovid, Apuleius, Dante, Manzoni, and Zweig. The reasons that led them to commit evil are investigated, namely revenge, *furor*, *invidia*, *curiositas* and gullibility, sloth, and weak will.

In continuation, an analysis of the causes leading to commit evil is provided by applying influential theories like Girard's mimetic theory and Cipolla's framework on the basic laws of human stupidity in connection with de Unamuno's less-known essay, *Inteligencia y bondad*: central to this discussion are themes of imitation and stupidity.

However, while these theories offer valuable perspectives, they do not fully account for the recurring patterns observed in the literary characters analysed, patterns that, by extension, mirror broader aspects of human nature. These patterns seem, in fact, intrinsically linked to attention,

impulse control, and decision-making processes—in essence, executive functions—which are central to acts of free will. This connection, therefore, prompts an investigation into the critical role of executive functions, enriched by recent findings from neuroscience.

Nevertheless, even this step in the investigation appears insufficient, as recent developments introduce a significant shift in the debate over free will and responsibility, particularly when considered alongside Libet's paradox. This paradox raises the notion that it is not only a malfunctioning neural system underlying executive functions that may impede genuine responsibility, but that the neural system itself could limit true accountability, thereby complicating concepts of guilt for wrongful acts. Increasingly, neuroscientific research proposes that the neural system may create only an illusion of autonomous free will and freedom, along with their associated responsibilities.

These insights not only carry significant legal implications, particularly in determining liability within the frameworks of wilful misconduct and culpability, but they also challenge the traditional role of education and the assumed educational function of literature. They suggest that such narratives may not accurately reflect true moral agency but instead reveal predetermined cognitive and psychological predispositions. Consequently, these findings call for a re-evaluation of literature's role in moral education, as neuroscience increasingly indicates that human agency may be more constrained than previously thought.

2. Prodesse et delectare

The relationship between art and its functions, as well as the definition of art itself, has never been straightforward. Consequently, the longstanding debate surrounding this issue will not be

explored here.[1] Given this premise, it is essential to recognise that, since ancient times, even before the advent of written language, art, particularly literature, has prominently served didactic and moral functions. It is therefore unsurprising that literary giants have utilized literature to educate readers about the moral dichotomy of good and evil. This inclination is encapsulated in Horace's formula *prodesse et delectare*[2], which illustrates the enduring influence of literature across various languages and genres. In *Ars Poetica* (Smart, 1836), Horace advises the aspiring poets of the wealthy Piso family in Rome, emphasising the moral function of literature. His influence has been substantial, often surpassing that of Plato and, at times, even Aristotle, who is traditionally thought to have inspired him.[3]

To expand upon this millennia-long debate, it should be noted that some critics argue that art cannot merely be reduced to a didactic tool.[4] Since the 19th century, the term "didactic" has

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[1] . For thorough understanding, we refer to Groden, Michael, Kreiswirth, Martin, & Szeman, Imre. (Eds.). (2005). *The Johns Hopkins guide to literary theory and criticism (2nd ed.*). Johns Hopkins University Press. This guide offers a comprehensive historical survey of key ideas and figures, ranging from Plato and Aristotle to twentieth-century scholars, providing accessible insights into a vast body of literary criticism that predates Plato. Notably, Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs*, presented at the Lenaia of 405 B.C.E., is considered a pivotal moment in the history of literary criticism, although there exists an antecedent tradition in the West concerning the performance and interpretation of the Homeric poems.

[2] . Ars poetica, 333-341: [...] Aut prodesse volunt, aut delectare poetae, aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae. Quicquid praecipies, esto brevis, ut cito dicta percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles. Omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat. Ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris, ne quodcumque velit poscat sibi fabula credi, neu pransae Lamiae vivum puerum extrahat alvo. Centuriae seniorum agitant expertia frugis [...].

[3] . For more information on Aristotelian influence on the proto-narratological precepts found in Horace's *Ars poetica*, see: Liveley, Genevieve. (2019). Ancient narrative theory after Aristotle-Horace. In G. Liveley, *Narratology* (pp. 63–74). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199687701.003.0004

[4] An influent one is the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce: Croce, Benedetto. (1950). *Letture di poeti e riflessioni sulla teoria e la critica della poesia*. Bari, Laterza.

acquired a negative connotation, often used to critique works perceived as overly instructional or moralizing. Edgar Allan Poe famously characterized didacticism as the worst of heresies in his essay *The Poetic Principle* (Poe, 1850), arguing that poetry should not solely aim to convey truth or moral instruction. As the epic tradition waned, didacticism emerged as a contentious notion, deemed too evidently false to sustain. In summary, the complex history of literary criticism reveals a persistent tension between advocates of literature's ethical dimension and those who emphasize its aesthetic qualities. These dimensions are not merely oppositional but intertwined, reflecting the enduring classical/romantic dialectic that highlights the close relationship between philosophy and literature.

Despite the presence of contrasting positions in the discourse surrounding literature and its criticism, didacticism remains a pervasive trait of literature, particularly in certain historical periods. For instance, during the Middle Ages, the didactic function was paramount in literary production and reception, as Huber (2001) notes, with the functional use of literature often overshadowing its aesthetic form, even in works addressing erotic themes (Cardelle de Hartmann, 2020). Didacticism aims primarily at education, expressed through moral lessons or knowledge of philosophy, religion, the arts, science, or practical skills.

While unified definitions of didactic literature are elusive, a solid working definition can be established: any text that prioritises education as a systematic and dominant principle of composition. According to the *Dictionary of Education*, education encompasses "the aggregate of all the processes by means of which a person develops abilities, attitudes, and other forms of behaviours of positive value in the society in which [s/]he lives" (Good & Merkel, 1973). A strict lexical, functional, and chronological description of didactic literature is provided by Bernhard Scholz in the entry on *Belehrung* (Braungart & Fricke, 2007). This characteristic of teachability

can manifest directly or indirectly, for example, through inauthentic representations such as allegory or symbolism, or via narrative techniques. Furthermore, it can be found in genres not exclusively classified as didactic literature, such as apophthegma, aphorism, epigram, riddle, and satire, often interpreted through specific analytical frameworks (e.g. allegoresis, *sensus litteralis/spiritualis*).

3. Fictional characters, real problems

The title of this paragraph is derived from a compelling collection of eighteen essays edited by Hagberg (2016), which examines literary production from Homer to the turn of the twentieth century. The essays aim to foster a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions of literature, recognising it as a complex and multifaceted representation of our humanity, with ethical content being one of its most prominent elements.

Hagberg opens his extensive introduction with a thought-provoking experiment: consider the implications if all literature were to vanish suddenly. He argues that we would lose far more than mere opportunities for entertainment; this void would highlight what he identifies as the ethical component of literature. This component encompasses several interrelated aspects: the development of character and its significance in moral discernment, the poetic vision in relation to ethical understanding, literature's unique role in shaping self-identity, the patterns of moral growth and transformation revealed through philosophical readings of literary texts, and the historical origins of contemporary concepts regarding literature's ethical dimension.

Numerous relevant and inspiring examples can illuminate the interconnectedness of fictional characters and real-world issues. This discussion will present seven notable characters: Medea,

as depicted in primary Greek sources; Dido from Virgil's *Aeneid*; Lucius from Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*; Pope Celestine V from Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*; Gertrude, the Nun of Monza, and the Unnamed from Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*; and the unnamed Kerkaporta guard in Stefan Zweig's *Sternstunden der Menschheit*. Through these fictional personas, we observe the manifestation of complex, morally compromised behaviors that address authentic human problems. The selection of these characters is justified by the authors' prominence in the international literary landscape, their familiarity to the author of this paper, and the vividness and representational strength of the characters themselves.

The ensuing analysis of these works and their authors will be minimal, as the critical approach will necessarily be somewhat reductive, potentially risking oversimplification. The focus will now shift exclusively to the evil actions perpetrated by the selected characters and the possible motivations behind these acts.

3.1 Medea: revenge

When limited to Greek sources and considering them chronologically, Medea's genealogy and marriage to Jason are briefly described in Hesiod's *Theogony* and the fragmentary *Catalogue of* Women (Hesiod, 2018). Herodotus' History references her twice: initially as a critical figure in the East-West confrontation and later as a person whose name gave rise to a nation. In Pindar's fourth *Pythian Ode*, which recounts the myth of the Argonauts, Medea plays a significant role, and she also appears in *Olympian Ode 13*, where, as the murderess of Pelias (τὰν Πελίαο φονόν), she is paradoxically respected for her prophetic powers (Pindar, 1937).

The theme of moral transgression emerges more explicitly through Medea's actions. In addition to king Pelias's murder, she is remembered for the brutal slaying of her brother Apsyrthus, an act detailed in Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica* (Apollonius Rhodius, 1912), where she drugs him, dismembers his body, and scatters the parts in the sea (πῶς γὰρ δὴ μετιόντα κακῷ ἐδάμασσεν ὀλέθρῳ Ἄψυρτον [5]).

However, what she is most widely remembered for, her revenge against Jason, features prominently in Euripides' tragedy *Medea* (Euripides, 1994): here, she ultimately kills her own children as an act of vengeance against Jason. Euripides' heroine grapples with her decision, portraying a complex psychological struggle rather than impulsive rage, driven by what she claims is a pressing necessity. By contrast, in Seneca's *Medea* (Seneca, 1921) the character embodies a more unrestrained fury, becoming a mother who murders her children in a violent, vengeful frenzy. The character of Medea thus invites an exploration of the complex interplay between emotion regulation and moral transgression, with her acts of revenge exemplifying how deficient emotion regulation, stemming from impaired executive functions, can drive morally reprehensible actions.[6] This topic will be explored in greater detail in the following discussion.

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[5] . "But how did she slay Absyrtus by an evil doom when he came to her?".

[6] . The direct and indirect associations between specific executive functions and emotion regulation strategies, like revenge as a possible cause of evil, are widely studied: Pronk, Tila M., Karremans, Johan C., Overbeek, Geertjan, Vermulst, Ad A., & Wigboldus, Daniel H. J. (2010). What it takes to forgive: When and why executive functioning facilitates forgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98*(1), 119–131. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017875

3.2 Dido: *furor*

The *infelix* Dido, queen of Carthage and *dux femina facti*, stands as a significant and widely studied figure in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Vergil, 2001). Her portrayal intertwines several key themes, notably politics, *fama*, *pudor*, and *furor*. The adjective *infelix* often describes her, not only reflecting her past misfortunes but also foreshadowing tragedy. Venus hints at Dido's fate when she says to Aeneas, *longa est iniuria, longae ambages* (1.341–2). Cupid is then sent by Venus to *furentem incendat reginam atque ossibus implicet ignem* (1.659–6), with the purpose of igniting a consuming love for Aeneas. This is where our interest in Dido's character becomes pertinent: gradually, Dido, *inscia* and unaware, falls for Aeneas, renouncing her responsibilities and becoming a *furens femina*, overwhelmed by a divine-instigated passion. Virgil emphasises the thematic lexicon of fire (*flammae, ignis*), wound (*volnus*), and madness (*demens*), illustrating love as *furor* in stark contrast to the virtue of *pietas*. Abandoned by the *pius* Aeneas, the *infelix fatis exterrita Dido* ultimately pleads for death (*mortem orat*, 4.450). As Covi (1964) explains, the Latin word order captures her spiralling mental state, as she moves from fear to despair, finding no recourse but in her own end. Dido is unable to decide anything but to commit suicide.

Thus, the key terms for our analysis are *furor* and decision-making, with the former hindering the latter and highlighting the critical role of effective executive functions in facilitating sound decision-making.

3.3 Aglauros: *invidia*

A powerful depiction of *invidia* (envy) occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (II, 708-832), centring on the human sisters Herse and Aglauros, along with the gods Minerva and Mercury, and the personification of envy, Invidia (Ovid, 1892–1919). Aglauros, the daughter of Cecrops, king of Athens, is aware of Mercury's presence in the room she shares with her sisters Erse and Pandrosa, where the god confidentially discloses his secret love meetings with Erse. By Minerva's will, Invidia, who resides in a cavern shrouded in thick black fog and sustains herself on snakes' flesh (II, 768-782)[7], unleashes her poisons upon Aglauros. Motivated by jealousy, Aglauros attempts to obstruct Mercury's entrance by barring her door, which ultimately leads to her transformation into stone by Mercury (II, 708-832).

For the purposes of our review, it is noteworthy how the ontology of envy aligns with elements of mimesis, as discussed by Milobenski (1964), and incorporates the concept of *inertia*, as explored by Dickie (1975). The adjectives *ignavus*, *iners*, and *piger*, all of which share similar meanings with *ignavus*, describe both Invidia and Aglauros post-infection. Invidia (II, 771) is

[7] . "Videt intus edentem vipereas carnes, vitiorum alimenta suorum, Invidiam, visaque oculos avertit. At illa surgit humo pigre semesarumque relinquit corpora serpentum passuque incedit inerti; utque deam vidit formaque armisque decoram, ingemuit vultumque ima ad suspiria duxit. Pallor in ore sedet, macies in corpore toto, nusquam recta acies, livent rubigine dentes, pectora felle virent, lingua est suffusa veneno. Risus abest, nisi quem visi movere dolores. Nec fruitur somno, vigilacibus excita curis sed videt ingratos intabescitque videndo successus hominum, carpitque et carpitur una, suppliciumque suum est". (Her face is pale, her body long and lean, her shifting eyes glance to the left and right, her snaggle teeth are covered with black rust, her hanging paps overflow with bitter gall, her slavered tongue drips venom to the ground; busy in schemes and watchful in dark snares sweet sleep is banished from her blood-shot eyes; her smiles are only seen when others weep; with sorrow she observes the fortunate, and pines away as she beholds their joy; her own existence is her punishment, and while tormenting she torments herself.)

depicted as raising *pigra* from the ground and advancing with a *passu inerti* (Met. 2, 772). After attempting to prevent Mercury from visiting her sister, Aglauros finds herself immobilised by an *ignava gravitas* (II, 821).

The key term in our analysis is *inertia*, which serves as a petrifying consequence of envy and inhibits effective decision-making, an expression of well-functioning executive functions. Alongside this dynamic, the interaction between *mimesis* and envy emerges, which will be further considered through Girardi's theory.

3.4 Lucius: *curiositas* and gullibility

The title of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (Apuleius, 1915) refers to Lucius's transformation into an ass, and much of the plot revolves around his attempts to regain human form. While Lucius is bright and articulate, he is occasionally overconfident, and his insatiable curiosity often leads him into perilous situations. For instance, when he witnesses the witch Pamphile transform into a bird by applying an ointment, he cannot resist the temptation to imitate her. This act of curiosity results in his own transformation into an ass. Lucius learns that he can cure himself by eating a rose; however, each time he approaches one, an obstacle arises—typically a consequence of his relentless curiosity, which he consistently blames for his misfortunes (3.27.2; 3.29.5; 4.2.8).

Lucius's quest for roses is closely tied to the cult of Isis. Desperate due to his transformation into an ass, he calls upon divine assistance and is ultimately answered by the goddess. After successfully consuming the roses offered to him as a crown by a priest of Isis (11.6.2; 11.13.2), Lucius undergoes initiation into the mysteries of the goddess, eventually becoming a priest who

serves both Isis and Osiris.

According to Schlam (1968), several scholars, beginning with Junghanns (1932), have explored the significance of the theme of *curiositas* in the Metamorphoses.[8] Mette (1956) renewed interest in this theme by analysing the negative portrayal of curiosity as a fatal flaw that perpetually leads Lucius into distress. Conversely, Libby (2011) contends that the central theme throughout the work is not Lucius's curiosity, but rather his gullibility; for instance, he mistakenly believes he is on trial for murder when he has merely slaughtered wineskins (2.32). Apuleius's narrative serves as a cautionary tale on how to evade Lucianic gullibility in the face of the real-life deceptions that await beyond the confines of the novel.

Both *curiositas* and gullibility reflect deficits in executive functions, particularly in areas related to decision-making and impulse control. The interplay between curiosity and gullibility suggests a complex relationship where heightened curiosity without adequate self-regulation can lead to gullibility and poor choices.

3.5 Pope Celestino V: sloth (*viltade*, *acedia*, *ignavia*)

According to Lyman (1989), sloth refers to a range of ideas dating back to antiquity, encompassing mental, physical, and spiritual states. The term is often translated from the Latin *acedia*, which is predominantly focused on religious contexts. Mentally, sloth manifests as a profound lack of feeling towards oneself and others, leading to

[8] . For a history of the word see: Labhardt, A. L. (1960). Curiositas: Notes sur l'histoire d'un mot et d'une notion. *Museum Helveticum, 17*(4), 206–224. Schwabe Verlagsgruppe AG.

experiences of boredom, rancour, and apathy, as well as a passive or sluggish state of mind. Physically, it signifies a cessation of motion and an indifference to work, commonly expressed through indolence. Spiritually, sloth was initially described as a disease afflicting women and religious individuals, resulting in a loss of sight regarding their duties and obligations. Additionally, sloth shares a notable connection with *inertia*, as previously discussed in relation to Aglauros (Dickie, 1975).

In Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio* (2021), the nature of sloth is explored as a capital vice. Within the fourth terrace, souls afflicted by sloth, known as *ignavi*, are depicted as lacking the capacity for love, as explained by Virgil. These souls, described as those who lived without infamy or praise (Purg. III, 36), do not engage in evil but are also absent from good actions; thus, divine mercy prevents their ascent to Paradise while justice excludes them from Hell. Among these souls, Dante encounters an unnamed character, often identified as Pope Celestine V, the hermit Pietro da Morrone (Bellomo, 2004) who is noted for his "great refusal" to uphold his papal duties (Purg. III, 59-61). Celestine's resignation, after a mere four months in office, is interpreted by Dante as an act of cowardice, illustrating the slothful failure to act with the necessary firmness of spirit.

This depiction further supports the notion that sloth inhibits effective decision-making and self-regulation, resonating with contemporary discussions on the implications of sloth within the framework of executive functions.

3.6 Gertrude and the unknown and: seduction and volition system

The following analysis examines two significant characters from Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (1957-1992): Gertrude, the Nun of Monza, and the unnamed figure.

Lucia, one of the two main characters in the novel, is placed in the care of the nun Gertrude, an unpredictable young noblewoman. Initially sheltering Lucia, Gertrude ultimately betrays her to abductors due to the influence of her relationship with Egidio. Born into a prominent family, Gertrude is sent to a convent by her father, not out of piety but to streamline his own affairs under the *maggiorasco* law, an institute of inheritance law born in Spain and widespread in the XVII century to ensure the integrity of a heritage. This leads her toward a predetermined fate shaped by external pressures and her own ambiguous aspirations for a different life. Manzoni carefully depicts the familial and clerical strategies that manipulate Gertrude, pushing her to a point of no return. Despite her awareness of being coerced by societal expectations, particularly the fear of scandal, she succumbs to her father's threats, entering the convent of Monza as *la Signora*. Here, seduced, she becomes entangled with Egidio, a man devoid of scruples, and their illicit affair culminates in the murder of another nun who discovers them. While one might interpret Manzoni's portrayal of Gertrude as reflecting an Augustinian view of predestination, it is equally essential to recognize the author's emphasis on individual choice. Each character retains the ability to navigate between good and evil; moral goodness is accessible to anyone who exercises their free will responsibly. Notably, Getto (1971) identifies a pathological pattern in Gertrude's behavior that reveals her

profound struggle to achieve stability and express genuine freedom of will. This pattern suggests that her choices are heavily influenced by external pressures and internal conflicts, ultimately leading to a series of destructive decisions that reflect a lack of agency.

In contrast, the unnamed character (the *innominato*) stands as a figure of moral complexity within the novel. A powerful and feared criminal from a high-ranking family, he grapples with the remnants of his violent past and a growing disgust for his life of crime. His character embodies the archetype of a mafia boss, entangled in local tyranny and systemic complicity. However, he experiences a pivotal transformation marked by a miraculous conversion, emerging from the depths of his soul. His strong will and courage, which previously fed his desire for power and control, ultimately lead him to embrace a path toward goodness. Importantly, despite his conversion, the unnamed figure retains his social status and influence; he does not sacrifice his criminal power but rather enhances his position, suggesting a nuanced view of redemption. His followers perceive that his will has changed, yet they see no sign of weakness in him.

In essence, Gertrude and the unnamed character epitomize two divergent paths of moral choice. Gertrude's rejection of grace—most poignantly exemplified by her betrayal of Lucia—serves as a symbol of the damnation of evil. Conversely, the unnamed figure's voluntary embrace of goodness signifies the possibility of redemption and salvation, illustrating the profound themes of choice and consequence that permeate Manzoni's narrative. Ultimately, the interplay between these characters may underscore the critical role of executive functions in moral decision-making, as both

their paths illustrate how choices, influenced by external pressures and internal conflicts, shape the contours of free will and moral agency.

3.7 The Kerkaporta guard: oversight and miscalculation

In *Sternstunden der Menschheit*, Stefan Zweig (1940) presents a collection of short stories that capture pivotal moments that dramatically altered the course of history. One such narrative focuses on “The Conquest of Constantinople”, set against the backdrop of May 29, 1453. For three months, a coalition of approximately eight thousand defenders—Byzantines, Venetians, and Genoese—heroically resisted an overwhelming force of 150,000 Ottoman Turks. The city’s formidable walls, constructed over centuries by emperors such as Constantine the Great, Theodosius, and Justinian, stood as a testament to human fortitude and architectural prowess.

However, the narrative illustrates how history can pivot on the smallest of details. Amidst the relentless bombardment from cannons capable of hurling granite boulders weighing half a ton, it is a tragic accident—a fateful moment that changes history and seals the fate of Byzantium. Something incredible happens: some Turks manage to pass through one of the breaches in the outermost walls. They wander between the first and second bastions when they realise that one of the smallest gates in the city walls, the Kerkaporta, has been left open due to an inconceivable act of negligence. In matters of negligence—whether through oversight or miscalculation, however seemingly small and trivial—the cost can be enormous. We may never know the identity of the person who forgot to re-lock the Kerkaporta Gate, a small postern on the northern edge of the city’s fortifications along the Golden Horn (a passage used by pedestrians when the large doors were closed during peacetime). Yet, upon this act lies the immense weight of

suffering and a decisive turning point in world history.

In the context of executive functions, the lapse in attention that left the Kerkaporta Gate open highlights the critical importance of vigilant control and judgment in high-stakes situations, underscoring that even small failures in executive processes can lead to irreversible consequences.

4. Other interpretative models of the concept of evil

The seven characters we have analyzed exemplify different types and motivations behind acts of evil, serving as fictional illustrations of malevolent behavior. Building on these examples, the following discussion will examine theoretical perspectives on evil, considering frameworks that help interpret these actions and the varied motivations behind them. The study of evil in literature is enriched by multiple analytical approaches. Given the inherent and pervasive nature of the good-versus-evil dichotomy in human evaluative systems, on the one hand Candel (2021) underscores the need for a systematic approach to understanding how literature engages with moral constructs. Such an approach not only enhances literary analysis but also illuminates broader ethical considerations. Furthermore, interpretive frameworks are essential for analysing the underlying causes of evil in literature, as they provide structured insights into literary characters and narratives. In this context, Calder's (2022) diachronic survey, presented in *The Concept of Evil* within the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, offers a valuable resource by tracing the evolution of evil across historical and cultural frameworks.

Yet, *The Concept of Evil* notably omits the perspectives of René Girard, Carlo Cipolla, and Miguel de Unamuno. Their original contributions, due to their intrinsic quality and unique focus,

will be explored below, bringing an essential depth to the ongoing discussion.

4.1. René Girard's Mimetic Theory

René Girard's interdisciplinary work, rooted in Philosophical Anthropology, draws extensively on fields such as Literary Criticism, Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, History, Biblical Hermeneutics, and Theology. Though he began and completed his career as a professor of French and Comparative Literature, his contributions extend far beyond these areas. His first major work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1984), examined literature by Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Proust, interpreting their works as caskets containing foundational truths about real problems of fictional characters: human desire, conflict, and self-deception.

Over time, René Girard developed Mimetic Theory, a framework for understanding human culture, centered on three key concepts: mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the revelatory power of biblical texts. Girard argues that human desires are not self-generated but rather shaped through imitation, or *mimesis*, as we adopt the desires of others rather than forming them independently. This imitative process lies at the heart of human conflict and, ultimately, evil.[9]

In Girard's view, rivalry emerges as people compete for the same objects of desire, with tensions escalating to the point of scapegoating innocent or vulnerable individuals. This tragedy is inherent to social dynamics; even without malice, our social nature predisposes us to rivalry, as

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[9] . For further information on the Mimetic Theory, see The International Association of Scholars of Mimetic Theory: https://violenceandreligion.com/bibliography/bibliography-l/

we mirror others' desires, unintentionally fuelling cycles of competition and blame.

Girard further distinguishes between external mediation—where a model of desire remains distant and unattainable, fostering positive imitation—and internal mediation, where a model is close at hand, creating rivalry. For instance, in literary terms, Aglauros envies her sister Erse, whom the god Mercury desires, evoking rivalry and resentment.

Girard's theory challenges the widespread belief in autonomous desire, proposing that individuals often mistakenly perceive their desires as self-determined. In reality, people unconsciously replicate others' desires, with the object itself becoming secondary or even irrelevant, as rivalry becomes the focus.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Girard's thought, particularly due to its notable convergences with the latest discoveries in neuroscience. One of the scientists who discovered mirror neurons, Gallese (2009, p. 39), writes:

> Girard's Mimetic Theory is illuminating, because it shows that mimesis when declined as mimetic desire has the intrinsic potentiality of driving humans to aggression and violence. Mimesis . . . is neither intrinsically good nor bad. It is a basic functional mechanism at the core of our diversified social competencies and activities. Nevertheless, mimesis has two sides. Any serious neuroscientific attempt to shed light on the truest and deepest nature of human condition cannot neglect either side. I posit that the empirical evidence here briefly summarized and future research stimulated and driven by the currently available evidence have the potentiality to shed further light on both sides of mimesis.

This perspective is supported by studies such as Lebreton's work on workplace bullying (Lebreton, Cristini, & Richard, 2019), where both René Girard's mimetic desire theory and Mirror Neuron Theory are applied to clarify the elements and unconscious components

associated with interpersonal connections that lead to aggression by the harasser against the victim in workspaces.

4.2. Cipolla: the basic laws oh human stupidity

Carlo Cipolla was a professor of Economic History at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Scuola Normale di Pisa. His essay, *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* (2011), published for the first time in 1976, explores the controversial subject of stupidity which he argues is responsible for much of the harm in the world. As he writes in the introduction, it is the result of a constructive effort to investigate, know, and therefore possibly neutralize one of the most powerful and obscure forces that impede the growth of human well-being and happiness. Stupid people are seen as a group, acting individually, more powerful by far than major organizations such as the mafia; they still manage to harm humanity with great effect and incredible coordination without regulations, leaders, or manifestos. In a humorous mood, the author exposes the five laws of stupidity[10], and a stupidity quadrant in terms of a semiquantitative model based on the gains and losses of the agents engaged in a process. The quadrant is divided into four subsectors. One of the two agents may gain something at the expense of the other, but it may also happen that both agents profit from the exchange. The worst-case scenario occurs when both agents lose something. The type of agent who causes

[10] . (1) Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation. (2) The probability that a certain person will be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person. (3) A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses. (4) Non stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals, and (5) a stupid person is the most dangerous type of person.

someone else's loss while also damaging themselves in the process is labelled by Cipolla as a "stupid person".

The model is undoubtedly interesting, as evidenced by its diffusion and the attention it has garnered in the last decade. Tettamanzi and Pereira (2014) conducted an agent-based simulation to test Cipolla's theory and explore under which conditions it aligns with a well-established theory like natural evolution. They concluded that there are parameter settings that allow for the emergence of stylized facts consistent with Cipolla's theory. Perissi and Bardi (2021) offer an interpretation of Cipolla's ideas within a biophysical framework, finding a correspondence between Cipolla's economics-based approach and biophysical economics. Based on their analysis, they propose a sixth law of stupidity, stating that humans are the stupidest species in the ecosystem.

Some criticism can also be found: in fact, Cipolla states that some are stupid, and others are not, and the difference is determined by nature and that stupid people are so because of genetic traits. This is a distressing assumption that, of course, must be placed and understood in the humorous context mentioned above, but which, on the other hand, can encourage complacency. We are led to believe that the author and his readers do not suffer from that genetic mishap, and consequently, the stupid person is always someone else. Instead, according to Welles (2018), people are all somehow stupid, and understanding oneself and recognizing one's own stupidity is the first step toward comprehending everyone else's and so learning how to avert, or at least mitigate, the terrible results of the power of stupidity. Welles also adds that human stupidity (like intelligence) is a predominantly cultural, not genetic, learning process: as a maladaptive dysfunction, stupidity can be understood and, to some extent, controlled.

If the attribution of evil to stupidity can, to some extent, be agreed upon, it may indeed be

applied to the characters presented here, although in a rather general sense. However, it is evident that, on one hand, the term "stupidity" is itself a vague and ill-defined concept, and on the other hand, there is a pressing need for a more detailed definition and analysis of this idea. As we will explore in the next paragraph, Miguel de Unamuno also addresses stupidity, though with different language and objectives.

4.3. De Unamuno: *Inteligencia y bondad*

And what if the problem were more complex? What if it were man's moral duty not only to be good but also to be wise, with a call to intelligence in Jesus' words that unites acting rightly with knowing and feeling rightly? From this perspective, in de Unamuno's essay *Inteligencia y bondad* (Boine & Unamuno, 2008), which has been overlooked in the editions of the author's complete works, begins a provocative re-reading of the passage from the Gospel of Matthew (5:22).[11] Unamuno reopens the problem of the connection between ethics and knowledge, demonstrating that goodness and intelligence form an inseparable pair that can modify human behavior, and arguing that being intelligent is a moral duty just as much as being good. The quoted passage warns that anyone who calls his brother ρακά will be brought before the Sanhedrin, and anyone who says μωρέ will be subject to the fire of Gehenna. Both these words fall within the semantic domain of stupidity, suggesting that insults that lower the intelligence of others are worthy of eternal fire.

Hence, the first assumption is that the primacy of intelligence over goodness is

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[11] . ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ·Ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνεδρίῳ·ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ Μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός.

unquestionable, since humans are endowed with reason. For de Unamuno, being intelligent and being good are inseparable requirements, and it is an obligation to combat the dualism that separates them. Thus, the means to combat stupidity are, without a doubt, to preach the moral obligation to be intelligent. According to this perspective, those who commit evil acts do so due to ignorance rather than malice, because he who understands everything forgives everything, and in a sense, the act of forgiving everything is itself an act of understanding everything. De Unamuno concludes that the goodness which makes us intelligent is not the apparent goodness of the indifferent person—one who forgives because they do not feel the offense—but the goodness of the one who, feeling the offense and knowing it at the same time, forgives as Jesus did on Mount Calvary: *"Pater, dimitte illis, non enim sciunt quid faciunt."*(Luke 23:34).

Similarly, Socrates, in Xenophon's *Mirabilia III, IX, 4* (Xenophon, 1921), states that no man deliberately chooses evil if he knows what is good, for those who err do so because of ignorance of what is good and those who follow the wrong path are neither wise (*σοφοὺς*) nor prudent (*σώφρονας*).[12]

5. The crucial role of executive functions in shaping behavior

The combined contributions of Cipolla, Girard, and de Unamuno reveal a profound link between intelligence and moral goodness. De Unamuno posits that moral failure arises from a lack of understanding, framing evil as the consequence of failing to comprehend and act upon what is morally right. This concept aligns with Girard's mimetic theory, which attributes cycles

[12] . […] πάντας γὰρ οἶμαι προαιρουμένους ἐκ τῶν ἐνδεχομένων ἃ οἴονται συμφορώτατα αὑτοῖς εἶναι, ταῦτα πράττειν: νομίζω οὖν τοὺς μὴ ὀρθῶς πράττοντας οὔτε σοφοὺς οὔτε σώφρονας εἶναι.

of rivalry and blame to misplaced desires. Characters like Medea and Gertrude embody this failure, often driven by mimetic desire and lacking a true awareness of the repercussions of their actions, thereby perpetuating tragic outcomes. Their moral shortcomings stem not only from their desires but also from deficiencies in intellectual clarity and impulse control.

Cipolla's perspective on stupidity further emphasises that individuals harm themselves and others due to a lack of insight. Similarly, the Gospel passage cited by Unamuno warns of the destructive power of ignorance, while condemning those who belittle the intelligence of others. Together, these views suggest that character flaws are not merely about misguided desires but also about limitations in cognitive capacities, contributing to the perpetuation of evil. As these philosophical perspectives suggest, the real challenge lies in the wisdom to regulate impulses and foresee consequences, not merely in choosing moral actions.

However, to deepen this discussion, we need a more refined framework than broad concepts like "stupidity" or "lack of intelligence", one that aligns these insights with specific flaws like the ones observed in our characters: revenge, *furor*, envy (connected with mimesis and inertia), *curiositas* and gullibility, sloth (*viltade*, *acedia*, *ignavia*), seduction, poor volition or misguided intentions, lack of attention, oversight, and miscalculation. These traits point toward assumptions concerning the effectiveness of executive functions (EFs) that play a pivotal role in regulating human cognition and action, guiding purposeful behaviours, ethical reasoning, and impulse control. In this context, the executive theory of responsibility, as proposed by Hirstein, Sifferd, and Fagan (2018), offers a compelling framework, suggesting that moral responsibility depends on the functioning of EFs.

EFs are a set of general-purpose top-down monitoring and controlling processes that take place in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which regulate the dynamics of human cognition and

action. They refer to learning, planning, reasoning, and problem-solving; in a few words, they are a core component of self-control or self-regulation ability in a purposeful, goal-directed manner (willpower) that have broad and significant implications for everyday lives.

They are essential to learning, planning, reasoning, problem-solving, goal-directed action, and self-motivation. There is general agreement that there are three core EFs: they encompass cognitive processes such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control (Miyake and Friedman, 2012; Diamond, 2013). They are more accurate predictors of academic readiness and life success than IQ or any other performance markers: so, there is an important need to offer affordable and effective solutions to today's educational challenges; there is an important need of cognitive training, mindfulness, and EFs skills curricula (Blair and Razza 2007; Morrison, Ponitz, & McClelland, 2010; Ahmed et alii, 2019).

Working memory involves the ability to hold attention on a concept or task long enough to complete an association or to generate a conclusion or new thought. The term describes a combination of cognitive processes for managing information, integrating new information with existing ones, and collating results into new information. For making sense of everything that happens over time and for reasoning, working memory is crucial. Additionally, it is crucial for many key academic tasks, including making mathematical calculations without the use of a calculator, considering alternative solutions to a problem, and making connections between seemingly unrelated things. Long-term memory is important since it is where basic concepts and strategies that are often involved in learning are stored. Functional memory is used to tackle it when something new is experienced.

Cognitive Flexibility is the ability to shift from one mind state or task to another, often responding to environmental stimuli, like a teacher's instruction, or to new social demands. It is

necessary for reorganizing priorities and thinking creatively about a problem. It is believed to build upon both working memory and inhibitory control and includes the skills of attention shifting and attention control. It is also essential for considering another person's perspective (Bailey et al. 2018).

Inhibitory control means being able to overcome a strong internal predisposition or external lure by regulating one's focus, actions, feelings, and/or emotions, and instead doing what is more acceptable or essential. Without it, one would depend on conditioned responses, impulses, and old habits of thought, pulling this way or that. Thus, inhibitory control gives the chance to change and to choose how to react and behave. It can also save us from making fools of ourselves. Inhibitory control of attention (interference control at the level of perception) selectively activates attention and focus on what has been chosen, suppressing distraction to other stimuli.

Since EFs are at the heart of cognitive functioning, are malleable throughout childhood and adolescence, and trainable, supporting their development is a social commitment and an investment in students' lifelong trajectory of achievement both in academics and in the complexities of social and emotional contexts (Durlak et al., 2011). Therefore, the traditional emphasis placed on the educational process, including through literary production, seems well-founded.

While the previous discussion highlights the critical role of executive functions (EFs) in regulating human cognition, impulse control, and moral decision-making, it also underscores their significance in supporting the exercise of free will. This has profound implications for how we perceive human agency, responsibility, and the potential for moral development. However, as we will explore further, the concept of free will becomes increasingly complex, particularly in

light of recent advancements in neuroscience. In the next section, we delve into the paradox of free will, with a specific focus on empirical findings like those of Benjamin Libet. We will examine how scientific insights into the brain's role in volitional acts challenge traditional views on responsibility, moral choice, and the potential for personal transformation.

This nuanced discussion invites a closer examination of how literature, particularly didactic works, can shape our understanding of morality, responsibility, and the very nature of human free will, as we consider whether and to what extent our actions are truly our own.

6. The mind's best trick: free will

The previous paragraph underscored the essential role of executive functions (EFs) in shaping human cognition and behaviour, particularly in their capacity to support decision-making, impulse control, and moral agency. By enabling individuals to make intentional choices, regulate impulses, and exercise responsibility, EFs form the cognitive backbone of free will. The inherent malleability of EFs has fostered optimism about their potential for development and refinement. Supporting the growth of these functions is thus more than a personal or educational objective; it represents a societal investment in nurturing a capacity for conscious, autonomous action and moral responsibility. In this regard, didactic literature has historically played a complementary, positively influential role, grounded in empirical experience rather than scientific analysis.

However, while EFs form the foundation of what we perceive as free will, recent neuroscientific research has introduced challenges to this conventional understanding. The debate began when Kornhuber and Deecke (1965) first reported their discovery of the *Bereitschaftspotential*, later translated to "cortical readiness potential", a slow build-up of scalp

electrical potential preceding the onset of subjectively spontaneous voluntary movements. It was interpreted as the electro-physiological sign of planning, preparation, and initiation of volitional acts, implicitly presumed to reflect the consequence of a decision process in the brain. This inspired the interest of many neuroscientists, and several experiments followed, the most famous of which was carried out by Benjamin Libet. Libet's seminal findings (Libet et al., 1983) reshaped discussions in the neuroscience of free will, giving rise to an extensive field of experimental research on volition (Frith & Haggard, 2018). These results have been repeatedly confirmed in the decades since, including studies at the single-neuron level (Fried et al., 2011). Although Libet's counterintuitive findings challenged traditional concepts, they have been consistently replicated and confirmed with newer technologies, such as fMRI.

Libet's experiment consisted of asking the subjects to bend a finger several times, or the wrist of the right hand, but at irregular intervals, spontaneously. At the same time, they were asked to look at a screen on which a digital clock appeared, to remember the moment when the impulse crossed their minds. During the process, the graph of the cerebral currents was taken, and the result was that the conscious spark occurred, on average, between 0.3 and 0.4 seconds after the appearance of the alert potential. He concluded that the brain determines our behaviour and that we are only made aware of this decision in retrospect.

As a consequence, Wegner (2003) went as far as to say that conscious will is the mind's best trick: the brain generates both thought and action, allowing the subject to infer that thought causes action: this is known as the theory of apparent mental causation. However, it should be noted that Wegner also declared that it cannot be affirmed that thought is not the cause of our actions, and that it cannot be excluded that further research may allow us to ascertain the existence of reliable connections between conscious thought and actions.

Nevertheless, considering that free will and consciousness are just illusions has inevitably caused criticism and the debate continues to be very heated. While there is no definitive resolution, Chiang (2005) sums up that there have always been arguments showing that free will is an illusion, some based on hard physics, others on pure logic. Despite the compelling nature of these arguments, most people continue to resist the conclusion. The subjective experience of possessing free will is simply too powerful for these theories to fully displace.

Given this perspective, if free will is, as findings suggest, an illusion—if our conscious decisions are merely the retrospective awareness of actions already initiated by neural processes—then the foundational principles of education come into question. The very purpose of education, as a means of shaping free and responsible individuals, is undermined. This shift in understanding forces us to reconsider not only the nature of human agency but also the role of educational tools and methods in fostering moral development. What once seemed like a straightforward path toward moral and intellectual growth now faces fundamental doubts about the very possibility of conscious choice. In this light, the long-standing role of didactic literature, while valuable in its tradition, must now contend with these emerging challenges to the nature of human will and responsibility.

7. Conclusions

This paper has explored the significant role of didactic literature in shaping moral development, particularly through its examination of the interplay between good and evil. Functional to this exploration were seven literary characters whose evil actions were driven by various human flaws, namely revenge, *furor*, seduction, *invidia* (connected with *mimesis* and

inertia), *curiositas* and gullibility, sloth (*viltade*, *acedia*, *ignavia*), lack of volition or ill directed volition, lack of attention (oversight and miscalculation). Drawing from the works of Girard, Cipolla, and de Unamuno, we identified common themes in the causes of evil, particularly mimesis and stupidity, which were found to be central in perpetuating harm.

Subsequently, to deepen the discussion and seek a more refined framework to explain the underlying factors behind broad concepts like the lack of understanding, we considered the role of executive functions (EFs) in human cognition and action. These cognitive processes—including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control, underlying decision-making, impulse control, attention regulation, and ethical reasoning—are pivotal in understanding the mechanisms behind both virtuous and immoral behaviour, providing a compelling framework for understanding moral responsibility.

While this finding paves the way for deeper discussions regarding free will, a turning point is introduced by Libet's famous paradigm. He concluded that the brain determines our behaviour and that we are only made aware of this decision in retrospect.

If neuroscientific evidence suggests that our conscious decisions are merely post hoc awareness of neural processes, it raises fundamental questions about the traditional goals of education—particularly the aim of fostering autonomous, responsible individuals. This shift challenges not only our understanding of human agency but also the very purpose of educational tools, including literature, which has historically aimed to promote moral development through the cultivation of conscious choice.

Thus, the growing tension between neuroscience findings and the conventional role of literature as an educational tool creates a paradox. While literature has long served as a moral

mirror, educating readers on human flaws, emerging evidence that decisions may not be entirely free calls into question the principles underpinning educational theory. As we continue to explore the complex relationship between cognitive functions and moral behavior, we must reconsider whether didactic literature can still effectively guide moral development in a world where true free will may not exist, or if it merely reflects a human experience constrained by neural limitations.

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