



THE
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Insight Series

**Cultivating Emotions Through Literature
and Historiography –
an Aristotelian View**

Dr. Jörg Schulte-Altendorneburg

Programme Manager

Porticus Düsseldorf, Germany

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Introduction

The purpose of this Insight Series paper is to explain to readers how and to which extent history, as well as poetry, can contribute to character education and the cultivation of emotions at school – from an Aristotelian viewpoint and contrary to many modern views.

For Plato, the life task of the individual - and connected with it, the supporting educational performance of the community surrounding the individual - is that of 'becoming a human', i.e. the individually specific self-development in each case. As Aristotle specifies in the '*Nicomachean Ethics*', a human person as a rational being develops his or her ability to think and act in an appropriate way by learning to make distinctions. That means to acquire criteria for discriminating acts of thought and to test and practise their situationally appropriate implementation in actions, in a mutually informing process.

For Aristotle, it is furthermore of decisive importance that the learning of thinking as discriminating also includes an appropriate handling of its affective side. And, according to him, this affective side is also inherent in every act of thinking and shapes the options for action. Correct, i.e. morally as well as situationally appropriate emotions and actions, are always directed towards the achievement of the good as the pleasurable or towards the avoidance of the bad as the painful. Therefore, one must learn from youth onwards to feel pleasure and pain appropriately. In other words, every emotion understood as an aspiration, and the subsequent action presuppose certain cognitions and their combination. This claim obviously carries significant educational implications, as explained presently.

In his '*Rhetoric*' Aristotle defines emotions, such as compassion, fear, love, shame, envy and others, as follows: He highlights for each affect the specific aspects of knowledge, each of which results in a striving associated with pleasure, as in the case of love, or displeasure, as in the case of fear, compassion, anger or envy. In anger it is the striving for retaliation, fear evokes the urge to flee from a danger, and compassion triggers the urge to mourn with someone for an undeserved suffering that could also happen to oneself.

In his thoughts on the necessity, nature and extent of ethical instruction, i.e. virtue education as a prerequisite for a happy life, in Book X of the '*Nicomachean Ethics*', Aristotle asks how situationally appropriate, ethically correct behaviour, comprising emotions as well as actions, can be taught and learned for the practice of life.

Knowing what is right and good is not enough, he emphasizes. Rather, one must make the right attitudes and their situational actualisation one's own also through practical exercise and learning from others' experiences. In doing so, it is indispensable to learn to distinguish clearly, i.e. to taste the truly good and the pleasure associated with it.

So it can be stated that the balanced combination of:

- the **predisposition** of character;
- the **habituation** in practice (through concrete acts of discerning);
- and the most varied and comprehensive **guidance or instruction** possible,

is decisive for Aristotle for the education to virtuous behaviour as well as to appropriate emotionality. It is important to stress this fact because in much of contemporary character education, even though most of it is promoted under the banner of Aristotelianism, the development of proper affect is often not prioritized in the same way as Aristotle did.

The affect-pedagogical role of poetry

How can 'appropriate emotionality' then be cultivated in young people? Aristotle foregrounds here the role of poetry. Poetry, in a sense as a 'condensation' of others' experiences, takes on an affective pedagogical role as a means in the cultivation of behaviour in general and emotions in particular, as Aristotle suggests in the '*Poetics*'.

In Chapter III he explains that the tragic, i.e. the failure of the 'tragic hero', is essentially caused by an attributable and avoidable wrong action of the protagonist. This mistaken action of the main character, who in epic and tragedy is characterized neither by outstanding prudence nor by wickedness, results from a momentary weakness of cognition: A hasty or incomplete perception and the subsequently situationally inappropriate conclusion result in a notional fixation. And this fixation is causing consequences which are devastating and at the same time avoidable. This is presented via the well-known characters from Greek literature and tragedy, as they were understood and portrayed by Homer and Sophocles, for instance. Thus Achilles of the Homeric '*Iliad*' rightly recognizes Agamemnon's behaviour towards him as unseemly disrespectful and gets into an understandable and, to some extent, appropriate anger. At the same time, however, he fails to meet the criteria of proper degree and duration that are important for appropriate anger, as Aristotle describes in the '*Rhetoric*' and in the '*Nicomachean Ethics*', as already mentioned. Fixated on grievance and reparation, Achilles causes the death of many Greeks, and especially that of his friend Patroclus, by deliberately staying away from the battle.

Antigone of the Sophoclean tragedy of the same title, out of love and the feeling of familial obligation, passionately and exclusively focuses on burying the body of her dead brother Polynices who is lying in front of Thebes - although religious and legal obligations forbid it at the same time, which she can no longer 'see' in her one-sided focus. Her uncle Creon, King of Thebes, is her adversary and is in no way inferior to her in the emotionally conditioned fixation: He insists on the observance of the law and the compliance with his orders without any consideration for Antigone's claims and motivation. The misguided actions resulting from the mutual misconduct ultimately cause the failure of both.

The list of examples could easily be extended by millions of characters from literature, from antiquity up to the present, presenting examples of human failure which results from an avoidable and fixation-induced wrong action. The better the character has been made visible in the plot through an elaborate presentation of the specific traits via corresponding actions, the easier it is for the reader or the spectator to recognise the failure of a fictional person as a manifest danger for him- or herself. Therefore, it is the unique and specific affect-pedagogical role and purpose of poetry to have an educational impact on the reader or the spectator through a thought-out and well-composed 'condensation' of others' experiences. This is not only entertaining and triggers emotions, but serves also as a school of cognition and emotion.

The affect-pedagogical role of history and historiography - some challenges

In addition to Aristotle's emphasis on poetry, I wish to introduce another strategy to cultivate virtuous emotions: namely, proper uses of history and historiography. I understand 'historiography' in this context as a systematic representation of events, circumstances and structures of the past in the form of a narrative.

In order to answer the question if and how history or historiography might also be taken on as a means in the cultivation of emotions and action, it is inevitable to have a brief look at the modern perspective on understanding, writing and teaching history.

If one thinks back to how one was taught history and its purpose at school, the answer will most probably be the following one: History is about past events which might have influenced the respective present more or less significantly, as well as about historic figures in key positions and their influence on systems, institutions, and political developments, in a specific, if not unique, context.

This widespread view on history and historiography was established in the 19th century's theory of Historicism: Mostly influenced by Prussian researchers, such as Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen, history has become a scientific discipline, having its own specific methodological toolkit and its specific hermeneutics. In methodological terms, it is about strict and critical assessment of facts and sources; in hermeneutical terms it is about an objective and impartial understanding and presentation of a chain of historic events.

Such a kind of thinking has two major implications which are important for the usefulness of history and historiography for one's own life and for the cultivation of character and emotions:

- In order to be able to understand a past event, which is perceived as something specific and rooted in a unique context, a basic connection between past and present is required. And this is not feasible without assuming a commonality between the researcher or observer and the historic event or figure. Currently, however, historical thinking is based on the opposite assumption, i.e. that the uniqueness and the otherness of an historic event, time or epoch, are emphatically stressed. And this postulate of Historicism is fundamentally questioning if it is possible at all to understand something completely different from the present perspective.
- The second implication is about the next step, i.e. on the writing about such a unique series of events. Beyond the problem of historical understanding, the aspect of using language to describe historic events is adding the problem of how to combine scientific research on history with narrativity – and this poses not only the hermeneutical question if a historiographer's vocabulary is appropriate to describe something unique or completely different. From the viewpoint of Historicism, there is also the challenge for a historiographer not to fall into the trap of applying literary methods to the sphere of research and of weakening the findings of a scientific approach.

From the perspective of Historicism then, learning history at school may have limited value for the emotional self-cultivation of students. For, if a historic event has to be understood as unique in itself and in its context, how can we, coming from a different and also unique context, understand this? And to which end, if it might have hardly anything to do with us and our own lives?

Historia Magistra Vitae: The Ancient Greek Perspective

In the light of this, it is helpful to go back behind the times and theories of Historicism, and that means behind this very influential shift of paradigm in the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century: Thinkers of the Renaissance, for example, were answering the questions raised in a different way, standing in the tradition of the Middle Ages and Antiquity. In 1569, Antonio Viperano (an Italian philosopher and historian), for instance, published a book on how to write history, and he defines the ultimate goal of historiography as follows: By learning from the experiences others have made before, one can acquire practical wisdom (i.e. *phronesis*), and this to a by far larger extent, than through one's own life. So history, in Viperano's words, is very useful and appropriate to be successful in one's own life and to educate one's own character in terms of virtues.

What Viperano defines here is exactly in line with how ancient Greek historiographers understood and wrote history, as a selection of programmatic statements proves:

- In the 2nd century BC, the historiographer Polybius praises history as the "truest school" for making politics and as the clearest and sole teacher on how to cope with life - and he expresses this implicitly as something natural for this discipline.
- In his books on "Roman Antiquities" (from the 1st century BC) the historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus describes the historiographer's task as presenting history in order to teach *phronesis* and knowledge by focusing particularly on human decision-making among other causes of historic events.
- Right from the beginning of his "Library of History", Diodorus of Sicily – in the 1st century BC too – underlines the specific purpose of history to understand how human action is going to be successful or to fail, and without forcing us to experience every painful failure ourselves.

This selection of merely three exemplary standpoints might prove that historiography – in Ancient Greece at least – is defined almost naturally as a school of life: the goal is to teach *phronesis* and knowledge by using past events and figures. This knowledge would include, in Aristotle's view, lessons about proper or improper affect.

This conclusion carries two fundamental implications:

1. For the historiographers quoted, it goes without saying that experiences historic figures made are transferable to the reader's or listener's own life. There is, apparently, a commonality which makes it possible to learn from how and why unique persons took decisions under unique circumstances. This shared fundament and pre-requisite of any understanding is a common 'human nature', as Thucydides, the famous historiographer from the 5th century BC, points out in his "*Histories*": This anthropological basis is entitling and enabling the historiographer to understand and to write history that has value for his or her contemporaries as a "school of life".
2. The second implication, closely connected to the first one, is about the historiographer's genuine task, or how a lesson can be taught which is applicable to the reader's life. It is about how to select appropriate historic events and figures, respectively how to handle the critically assessed facts around historic events in a way that human experience - that means choices and options in particular - become visible to the reader as a realistic challenge for his or her own life too.

The missing link is the attitude towards how to treat the specific historic characters accordingly, how to emphasize their genuine preferences, and that means the kind and extent of a character's *phronesis* as it becomes visible in concrete historic actions and their roots in emotions which are caused by specific attitudes and the ability to put them into practice – or to fail in doing so. Therefore, it is the historiographer's task first to collect and to assess, and then to select, structure, and present historical facts and deeds in the light of the role the historic character is playing in a historic event among other causes, in order for use to emulate or avoid these features in our own

lives. Polybius, Diodorus of Sicily and Dionysius of Halicarnassus - to name the already chosen ones only – agree that historiographers must focus on selecting and arranging facts and events around selected historic characters to teach *phronesis* – and this is quite similar to the poet’s method.

This is exactly what Aristotle is pointing to in his *“Poetics”* where he distinguishes poetry from historiography – not in essence, but to a degree. He states that the difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse or that one trades in facts and the other in fiction: “The real difference is this that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason, poetry is something more scientific and serious than history because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular truths.” The emphasis on the “particular truths” means that the historian must rely on and stick to the chain of events and their chronological order as given by the sources. But the poet is free to design a plot, i.e. a character’s actions, according to his educational goal. For Aristotle, a well-designed chain of actions makes a consistent and probable sum of specific preferences, attitudes, virtues and vices visible, and shows a specific character.

In their different but complementary ways, the poet and the historiographer both become our life coaches in the “school of life”.

Tragic history as a school of emotions and action – the example of Herodotus

But how does this theory relate to the historiographer’s practice? What does it mean for the educational purpose of history? How can a historiographer deal with being limited to “particular truths”?

One of the best examples of this sort of ‘historiographic mimesis’ are the “Histories” of Herodotus, whom Cicero calls the “Father of History”: In the nine books of his historical inquiries from the 5th century BC, Herodotus is presenting the Greco-Persian Wars from the 6th to the early 5th century BC - but not as a chronological series of confrontations of two nations, systems, armies or commanders-in-chief.

Herodotus is structuring his specific presentation of well-known historical events by focusing mainly on the specific characters of five kings in charge during the wars on the Persian side: The Lydian king Kroisos, and the Persian kings Cyrus, Kambyses, Dareios, and Xerxes are introduced and described as if they were the protagonists of Greek tragedies. Xerxes, for instance, who was defeated by the Greeks at Thermopylae and in the famous naval battle at Salamis in 480 BC, is not another incarnation of an imperialistic and greedy warlord coming to conquer Greece - on the contrary: By arranging the known facts, the “particular truths”, around elaborately composed conversations Xerxes had with advisors, important speeches, dreams, and examples of his day-to-day decision-making, Herodotus presents a full picture of a multifaceted character with specific preferences and traits whom the reader can even identify with concerning strengths and weaknesses. The purpose behind all of this is educational rather than a simple fact-finding mission.

In the light of this, Herodotus’ description of Xerxes’ decision-making process to fight the naval battle at Salamis (book VII), for instance, is a study of how a specific character fails due to his set of preferences, due to a momentary weakness to apply his *phronesis*, or almost literally: due to the inability to turn his head. While Xerxes’ advisors are pointing to the huge risk of being defeated – what should come true as every reader knew – the king is not sticking to his original decision not to fight, but, being tempted by some influencers and a threatening dream, is narrowing down his perspective in a fatal way: Relying on the obvious quantitative predominance of his armed forces and the promise of a historic victory, Xerxes is not able any longer to act cautiously and to properly assess any advice, given by relatives and external experts who are pointing to a very manifest danger

in terms of tactics and geographical conditions. As the reader knows, Xerxes failed, and Herodotus is presenting him as somebody who would have been able to avoid this failure if he had appropriately applied the practical wisdom he was shown to have beforehand.

In this tragedy-like manner, history can be understood and used as a cautionary tale, presenting specific character-related reasons for the failure of human action. While working with specific events and characters, the historiographer, no less than the poet, can thus illustrate:

- how emotions, emotion-triggered perceptions and actions of historic individual human beings can lead to failures or success;
- that historic failure caused by influential or powerful individuals and its devastating consequences for many would have been avoidable, in some cases at least;
- and that historic failures can be taught and understood as manifest dangers for the readers at all times, irrespective of changing environments and systems.

Three Conclusions

There are three practical conclusions to be drawn on how to educate characters through the use of history:

- 1) **Hermeneutics matter:** At the secondary-school level, it is possible to focus in the classroom how to learn from history, i.e. to help the student to realise that a shared fundamental understanding of the human predicament is needed to ensure the relevance of history for one's own life.

- 2) **Purpose matters:** Once students have understood this basic purpose of history, it is also important to ask what exactly we can learn from history, given that a shared fundament is understood as existing: This is referring to the manifold connections of human character and action to be found in history as reasons for failure and success. In the end, the purpose of teaching history is or should be, not only to be able to better understand the becoming and the being of one's own culture, but also to learn how to properly apply practical wisdom in one's own daily life through the experience of others.

- 3) **The selection of sources matters:** To use history as a school of *phronesis*, it is the teacher's specific and main task to select appropriate sources – beyond the classical history textbooks - which make it possible to focus on the role of human action among the complex sum of causes in history. As the example of Herodotus shows, anecdotes, historic plays, biographies, autobiographies, movies and novels can be excellent tools to help the student to realize the importance of character and its education for emotion and action.

In sum, I have argued in this paper that the teaching of poetry and history at school aims at highlighting the human factor within the complex causality of fictional or historical events. To understand the relevance of character and character education by cautionary tales, i.e. without forcing us to experience every painful failure ourselves, is one of the key components of acquiring virtues and cultivating emotions. However, there is no denying the fact that this way of using poetry and history will call for some radical changes to how poetry and history have traditionally been taught in Western school systems.

Jörg Schulte-Altendorneburg, Dr. phil., MA, born 1967, studied Classics and Classical Archaeology at the universities of Marburg and Mainz in Germany. He received his doctorate in 2000 in Marburg with a dissertation on the understanding of history by the ancient historiographer Herodotus. Currently he is serving as Programme Manager and Member of the Managing Board of an international philanthropic consultancy, located in Düsseldorf. He has recently spent some time as an academic visitor in the Jubilee Centre.



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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham | Edgbaston | Birmingham | B15 2TT

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk 0121 414 4875