

Eric Corona
Miss Larsen
TA Inklings
Online, Section I
Term Paper IV Final Draft
May 19, 2009
Word count: 1,763

Story Versus Essay: The Particular Feud of Universal Virtue

As Plato once cogitated, “If particulars are to have meaning, there must be universals.”

Universal is a term for a general idea under which other terms, or particulars, are ordered. In a Euler diagram, a universal is a large ring, or idea under which smaller particular ideas are classified. Without the aid of universal thought, particular thoughts are ambiguous in their correlation to each other and other more general ideas. However universals can only be clarified through an explicit definition of that universal or a connection of all particulars under that universal. One set of particulars as proposed by C. S. Lewis is that of, “Prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude . . . faith hope and charity” (*Mere Christianity* 76, 129). All of these ideas fit under the universal term ‘virtue.’ Though one knows the universal term virtue, how can he best understand this virtue? There exist two main forms of literary communication that one can use to express virtue – stories and essays. Although many Christians argue that one understands universal virtue best through the story form of literature, which implements particular virtues in a context, one understands virtue better in essay form because one can understand the logical reasoning and universal virtue put forth in an essay.

Narratives reference certain topics of choice to which the author alludes. These topics can have ethical implications. Moreover, the more conclusive implications a story has, the more the reader grasps the topic addressed by the author. However, unlike the essay, the story not only exclusively addresses particular topics the authors wishes to address, but also only

particular instances, or scenarios, of the addressed topic. Stories do not address universals, and without a universal knowledge of an idea, such as virtue, one cannot truly comprehend the particulars through just the particular examples set in a narrative. For example, a story can explain how not getting enough sleep can affect one's health by narrating a story depicting an irresponsible college student who fails all his classes due to the lack of study. Thus the author addresses one particular effect of not getting good grades in one particular instance in which one does not study. Stories exclusively illustrate particulars, not universals. Since one must connect particulars to form a universal idea, stories cannot form universal ideas because stories cannot draw connection to suggestion a universal idea. Stories can only explicate the particular ideas on which the author wishes to expound. So, if the audience knows nothing of universal virtue, the author must either define it, or connect particulars. Therefore, the author can only suggest particular qualities of a topic in an illustrative story.

A story can convey a principle through common experience. Experiences set forth in stories shared with both reader and author hold a story together as an understandable narrative. This knowledge gained by common experiences is the foundation of stories because stories demonstrate particular knowledge gained from past experience. Yet, the foundation of narrative literature handicaps it from displaying universal virtue as a thought, being unable to convey any understandable conclusive ideas without the primary assistance of particulars through common experiences. Since stories can only illustrate particulars, by common experience, they cannot exemplify universal ideas, such as virtue as a whole. So, stories prove unable to give meaning to the universal concept of virtue.

Conversely, essays are generally capable of confronting universal topics. Although the necessity of confronting exclusively particular ideas based on common knowledge handicaps

stories, essays do not primarily address particular subjects, but instead principally address ideas in an academically universal form. Nonetheless, essays only employ particular concepts as support of the universal ideas, like virtue, being the foundation. For example, in C. S. Lewis' argument in his essay "The Inner Ring" he mentions the names of Inner Rings; he observes, "It [an Inner Ring] has no fixed name. The only certain rule is that the insiders and outsiders call it by different names" (*The Weight of Glory* 145). This observation is an exceedingly universal idea that Lewis uses to give the reader a comprehensive grasp of the use of Inner Rings' names. Without giving any examples or particular proofs, Lewis just sets general, or universal, attributes of an Inner Ring. It demonstrates how authors use universal ideas, instead of merely particular ideas in essays. Universal thought does not limit essays though; they also use particular ideas to backup universal thought. Without the clarification of universals, particulars are more difficult to comprehend. In the same essay, Lewis gives particular examples of the names of Inner Rings: "From outside if you have despaired of getting into it, you call it 'that gang' or 'they' or 'so-and-so and his set' or 'the Caucus' or 'the Inner Ring'" (*Weight* 145). Just as in his use of the universal idea of the names of Inner Rings, Lewis backs his claim with particular ideas to which, just as in stories, the reader can easily relate. If the universal information Lewis gives in the first quotation is unknown, then the second quotation has no meaning. If the reader only knows that, as Lewis points out in the second quotation, those inside and outside of the Inner Ring call it by different names, he does not fully grasp the universal idea that an Inner Ring has no fixed name. Instead he only sees Inner Rings in the terms of the particulars that the author identifies. He does not grasp the explicit universal idea by solely grasping the particular ideas the author presents, because the reader will guess at the conclusion the author wishes him to draw when only the particulars are present. The universal idea, that Inner Rings have no fixed name, explicitly

identifies the author's conclusion and thus only needs particulars as support. In a context, universals can draw conclusions, while particulars can only allude to conclusions. Universals can expose ideas, such as universal virtue, with particular ideas as backup, while particulars can present particular instances of an idea giving implications to a conclusion.

Stories reveal ideas through past experience and are thus prone to fallacious interpretation. Any statement drawn from past experience is subject to the fallacy of a hasty generalization on the part of the reader or author. These hasty generalizations, also known as apriorism, demonstrate stereotypical universal ideas, since the mind instinctively interprets particulars as the universal if the universal is unknown. The universal is unknown in stories. For instance, in *That Hideous Strength* if one notices that all of the mentioned N.I.C.E. members are discontent, his mind will automatically stereotype every following N.I.C.E. member as discontent (68, 70, 77-78 86, 95, 100). Apriorism, as an interpretation, leads to faulty conclusions because when one perceives the stereotype, all N.I.C.E. members being discontent for example, as being correct, the conclusion also includes this fallacy. If the story's conclusion is that all the N.I.C.E. members die, the reader deduces that dissatisfied people die, which is not what the writer is attempting to point out. Due to this fallacy, one can interpret conclusions in stories quite elastically based off of the particulars, apriorism, and his own experiences. Essays do not encounter this problem because they can present and organize universal and particular distinctions along with any other misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Although one does not need to identify the author's original meaning in a story in order to find a wholesome virtue, due to the inevitably destructive nature of apriorism and the meager defense of story, the reader may find himself with a destructive conclusion based on a weak misinterpretation or space for a flimsy implication. Accordingly, apriorism, an inevitable fallacy in stories, creates elastic and

therefore many unintended or ambiguous conclusions in stories due to the vagueness or inconsistencies brought with apriorism.

On the other hand, essays provide complete logical thought and therefore a concrete conclusion. Consisting of universal arguments established on particular ideas, essays follow syllogistic thought in order to form a sound conclusion. A quality essay does not construct fallacious arguments. In the case of explicating universal virtue, one finds no fallacies, such as apriorism, in essays. Thus, conclusions are in no danger of flexible or implicit interpretation in essays, as it is in the flimsy foundation of narratives, but essays provide solid, foundational conclusions.

Although stories cannot establish universal conclusions, one can easily apply virtues in life through stories and thus understand virtues better than essays. Since stories are based on common experience, they influence common knowledge. For example, a story that is based on Farmer Bob's industriousness and thrift would give an account of Farmer Bob, who works hard on his farm and spends wisely, reaping an abundant crop and earning ample income. Consequently, through the fortunes of Farmer Bob, the reader would not just know a definition or conclusions drawn from industriousness or thrift, but the essence of these virtues and how they apply to everyday life, thus affecting one's common knowledge to view these virtues as admirable. In stories the reader can understand a virtue as the author demonstrates it, and therefore, how it is in reality. Therefore, stories do not just create concise definitions or foundational conclusions as essays do, but provide the reader with a genuine understanding of virtues.

Unlike stories, essays show how virtues connect and how they exist universally, not merely particularly. While stories provide the reader with a grasp of particular virtues, only

essays can provide a firm grasp of universal virtue. While stories give common experience examples of particular virtues and they can only give implied conclusions, essays supply an understanding of universal virtue. Essays, not stories, can give readers a solid grasp of universal virtue because only essays can explicitly address, define, and conclude using universal virtue. Because stories cannot do more than allude to universal virtue, they cannot refer to connections in the idea of universal virtue as essays can. Although stories can embody a particular virtue and show its application to reality, essays can draw those particulars and form a defined universal. Thus, only essays can connect, refer, and define universal virtue, not stories.

Therefore, although there are many people who believe that one can understand virtue best in story form, one can understand universal virtue best in essay form because one can easily identify the explicit logical thought and conclusion, generally free of fallacies and under no veil of implicit arguments, apriorism, or flimsy interpretations as in stories. Essays prove to be a better form of communication when conveying a universal idea. Thus, Plato's adage that without universals, particulars have no meaning proves that essays, not stories, can only give meaning to universal virtue.

Works Cited

Lewis, C. S. Mere Christianity. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1952.

—. That Hideous Strength. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945.

—. The Weight of Glory. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1949.