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Perceiving a Moral Identity

When Storybook Illustrations Express a Moral Duality

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Perceiving a Moral Identity: When Storybook Illustrations Express a Moral Duality

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Abstract: Perceiving a moral identity in a visual image of a fictional character is a recurrent experience in childhood. “This man is evil” or “that woman is good” are common responses of children to certain physical characteristics represented in a specific range of color or with a specific facial expression. In this study, we aimed to determine whether children perceived a moral identity in a series of illustrations of characters in children’s literature. To do so, we created a sample of thirty pictures of different characters; twelve with “evil” profiles, twelve with “good” profiles, and six neutral. The sample was viewed by forty-six children (twenty-one girls and twenty-five boys) who expressed their perceptions of the characters’ ethical nature, basing their impressions on their physical appearance alone without any knowledge of a possible plot or narrative link. They expressed their opinions on a seven-level visual analog scale, on which 0 indicated maximum goodness and 7 maximum evil. The results indicated a notable consensus with regard to the perceived ethical profile of the characters; the figure’s appearance provided enough clear information to apponment a moral identity of evil or goodness. This leads us to think about the existence of certain visual codes that allow us to understand questions about the identity of a character and, in this case, his/her moral identity.

Keywords: Illustrations, Fiction, Moral Values, Value Judgment, Perception, Childhood

Introduction

Showing stories with illustrations to children is a gratifying activity and their responses to the illustrations are often surprising. Their comments suggest a predisposition to grasp meanings that reflects an understanding of what the illustration is depicting, without any need for identification through narrative links. We may be surprised at their ability to discern a certain moral category of a character without having any knowledge of his or her role in a plot: judgments such as “this man is bad” or “this woman is good” may be made without any textual information to back them up. For Nodelman (1988, 56), this suggests the existence of “an innate ability to recognize an image.” It seems reasonable to think that there is some type of visual code that makes subjects perceive information of a moral nature about what they are observing. In addition, in most cases, authors of stories do not usually describe the physical identity of their characters; it is a character’s deeds that determine whether he/she is good or bad, not his/her physical features. Therefore, in a picture story, it is the illustrator drawing the image who decides how it should express either good or bad. But there is a difference between what the artist visually creates in order to transmit an identity and how this decision is perceived by the reader. To explore this situation in more depth, we designed an exercise to identify children’s perceptions of the goodness or badness of characters presented to them and to explore the decisions they make, since the dichotomy of “goodness” and “badness.” This dichotomy is a basic, ancestral moral categorization that has characterized human thought in general and Christian thought in particular (Hourihan 1997).

Since time immemorial, images have presented both moral categories in multiple ways; evidently, the ways creatures (either good or bad) are represented have changed over the years. There is no doubt that evil and its roots remain a complex issue for moral philosophy (Bonete

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2017). Evil has clear links with literature (Carr 2014), is expressed visually in the arts, and has a strong psychological impact (Winner 2018). Obviously, visual resources help to express the duality of good and evil, and understanding facial expressions is an essential part of this process. The identification of emotion in a facial expression occurs from a very early age (Loeches et al. 2004), and the recognition of emotions and identities in visual expression accompanies human beings throughout the life span.

Before entering into considerations on the interpretation of the image, we will highlight certain questions about moral development, because in our study the decisions made by subjects are clearly linked to a process of moral categorization.

Studies of moral development and education have dealt with these themes from different perspectives and with different purposes in mind, and have focused on the cognitive dimension and the development of a critical understanding of moral judgment (Gilligan 1982; Kohlberg 1984; among many others). Kohlberg began his research in 1955 building on Piaget's earlier work on moral development (1932) and concluded that moral judgment depends on moral reasoning and passes through different stages of development. For her part, Gilligan (1982) stressed the differences between women and men in the development of moral judgment, attributing to women a clear tendency to consider the needs of others. Unlike Kohlberg or Gilligan, other points of view seem to consider moral judgment to be an automatic decision that has little or nothing to do with a rational process (Haidt 2001) and that moral judgment is closer to an "aesthetic judgment: we see an action or hear a story and we have an instant feeling of approval or disapproval" (Greene and Haidt 2002, 517). In other words, in a rationalist model, moral judgment is the result of a process of moral reasoning; but in a social intuitionist model, it is an immediate *a priori* response to the information perceived by the subject. This information is linked to values that configure a specific moral category, although they are not independent of the other features of the character in the story, in this case, their physical features. In fact, values are not independent (Fronzizi 1963). They are very difficult to define, but as they are considered to be universal, there should be evidence that they are discriminated across different human groups (Schwartz 1994).

In our study we aimed to verify the existence of moral decision-making based on the visualization of the physical appearance of a character in children's literature and focusing on the dichotomy between "good" and "evil." This focus obliges us consider various aspects related to the perception of physical appearance and its relation to a literary moral identity. In other words, are there visual appearances that transmit the ideas of good and bad through images? We aimed to answer this question by studying the reactions of a group of girls and boys between 6 and 7 years old to a series of illustrations.

The perception of images and their interpretation has been studied from different perspectives and disciplines over several decades. While some authors have focused on the elements that make up an image, others have aimed to explore the cognitive mechanisms that allow us to understand them (Arnheim 1954; Berger 1972; Goody 1997; Gombrich 1960; Dondis 1974; Eco 1976).

More recently, studies have been carried out of images for children in audiovisual format and the transmission of values and emotions (Aierbe-Barandiaran and Oregui-González 2016) and more specifically in the field of children's literature, in which the illustrations may be considered to be the predominant artistic styles or the anchors of the text (Doonan 1993; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001; Coats 2014). These studies identify the elements of the images that contribute to expressing a certain type of message as well as how these messages, sometimes apparently irrelevant, are grasped: "Our data contribute evidence of how children enter the book world and relish opportunities to seize on meaning from apparently insignificant details" (Baird et al. 2016, 15).

In the process of reading an image, we find a great variety of possible meanings, as well as a unified set of codes that can be considered as universal, whether they feature humans or humanized animals (Suvilehto 2019).

Referring to the work of illustrators of stories, Peggy Albers (2008, 179) said that “they develop memory images and reproduce representations or schematic codes in their own artworks that enable readers to recognize and build knowledge about the world.” The knowledge obtained from details of greater or lesser relevance is very broad, ranging from the description of a landscape to the specification of a game scene, of an object important to the story, the gender, age or social status of a character and, of course, their moral identity. All these decisions taken by the illustrator thus transmit a very diverse content, including identities that he/she expresses through multiple elements and which are recognizable to the reader (Tursunmurotovich, Eraliyevich, and Shuhratovich 2020); they can sometimes have a decisive effect on the character’s personality, placing him/her in a particular category as opposed to another one in relation to aspects of beauty, ugliness, goodness, or malevolence. It is clear that emotions play a key role in this process of categorization and discrimination. In 1872, Darwin discussed the idea of the expression of emotion through facial expression, a vast field of study in which people’s emotional expressions indicate a communicative process on which much of our social experience is based (Ekman 2003). This process develops at different evolutionary stages (Nummer-Winkler and Sodian 1988) and depends on the context in which it occurs (Aviezer, Ensenberg, and Hassin 2017).

In the specific case of expression through illustrations, there is no doubt that visual stimuli represent a key element in the understanding of a text (Nodelman 2012; Brookshire, Scharff, and Moses 2002; Pike, Barnes, and Barron 2009; Tursunmurotovich, Eraliyevich, and Shuhratovich 2020). Illustrations are not just accessories with the function of embellishing the literary work; they serve to evoke multiple thoughts, ideas, and forms of knowledge (Sciurba 2017). Depending on the type of book, they can become the driving force behind the narrative storyline. In short, “illustration is a powerful tool and the graphic artist is the first educator to educate children about the worldview” (Tursunmurotovich, Eraliyevich, and Shuhratovich, 2020, 3530).

In our study, we set out to analyze whether visual codes can allow a child reader to decode an ethical meaning of goodness or badness. Being good, or at least carrying out good actions, is not the same as appearing good, and vice versa; therefore, the decoding of what makes us think of one identity or another is clearly linked to a symbolic language expressed through the elements of the image that allow subjects to carry out the cognitive exercise quickly and decisively. These elements seem to materialize in certain physical appearances. For example, children or adults observing a certain character tend to associate goodness with beauty and evil with ugliness (Griffin and Langlois 2006, 2011). It also seems clear that, in the case of children, the degree of trustworthiness that a face can inspire is closely linked to its degree of attractiveness, an association that becomes more noticeable as children grow older (Ma, Xu, and Luo 2016). What is more, the eyes, eyebrows, and mouth of characters seem to be particularly decisive attributes that influence readers when making social judgments about them (Dotsch and Todorov 2012); an open mouth, pointed teeth, or convex eyes are features that lead children to classify animal characters as evil (Lee and Kang 2012).

In summary, the aim of the present article is to show that basic moral categories such as good or evil in fictional characters are perceived automatically at an early age in a process that does not require reflection.

Research Methods

Participants

Forty-six subjects between the ages of 6 and 7 were selected. At this stage of development, age was the main selection criterion; children were deemed able to understand the material used and the task to be performed, and able to ask questions and answers about it. The forty-six children, from two schools, were divided into two groups. Participation was voluntary and parents or guardians provided signed informed consent.

Experimental Design

All the illustrations used as visual stimuli represented characters that provided sufficient information to be classified morally according to Ekman's facial action coding system (2003) as either good or evil. Some pictures were chosen from a sample of illustrated storybooks, and others were drawn by the first author (4). The stimuli used were thirty drawings, twelve representing evil-looking characters with facial expressions of anger (for example, frowning, screwing up their eyes, and sticking their jaws out); and twelve representing kind-looking characters with facial expressions of happiness (for example, raised cheeks, muscles around the eyes tightening, and the contours of the lips ascending diagonally). Each group was balanced in terms of gender (six men and six women). Six more drawings representing characters considered neutral and also balanced in terms of gender. These six neutral characters were included in order to be able to determine more accurately that goodness and evil were perceived sufficiently clearly, or to be able to determine whether there is continuity between the two categorical expressions. The images were edited with the Adobe Photoshop program to remove any information that might indicate the moral nature other than their physical characteristics. For example, if a woman appeared wearing a pattern on her dress, or any other distinctive element (for instance, a skull, a witch's hat, or a fairy's wand), these were eliminated as well as any others that might locate the story in a well-known setting and might influence the responders' decisions. To give a couple of examples, in an image depicting Snow White's stepmother with an apple in her hand, the fruit was removed, and the blue beard of the iconic villain was edited in another color. Some characters drawn by the authors were added to complete the sample and thus avoid any links with stories that might be known by the subjects.

Characters that were well known to the participating subjects, such as those from Disney films, were avoided. In addition, in the images selected, none of the characters were performing any type of action, since this might have interfered with the decision. The age of characters ranged from youth to adulthood. Another question that we took into account in the creation of the sample of the characters was the perspective of the drawing, preferring a middle range (neither close-up nor distance). Finally, drawings by twenty-six illustrators were included to ensure that the artistic style did not exert any influence. Once the sample of characters was completed, we designed a method to allow subjects to determine a character's of goodness or badness and, after some tests, we chose the image of a thermometer with a range of seven degrees in which subjects could rate the character's "temperature" from good (minimum) to evil (maximum degree). This visual analog scale thus provided seven response levels that allowed a categorization of three levels of goodness (from 1 to 3), three of badness (from 5 to 7), and one neutral (4).

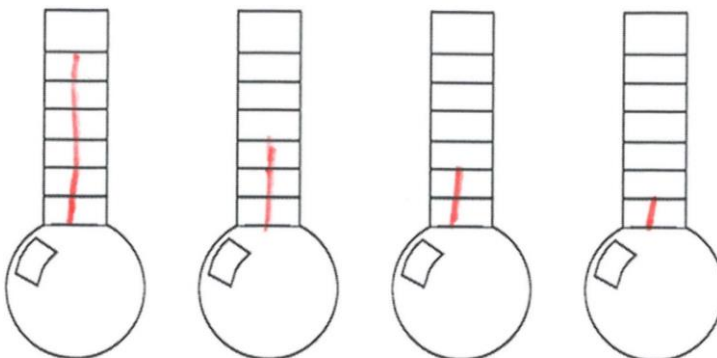


Figure 1: The Thermometer Used for Rating the Characters; Some Results
 Source: Obiols-Suari

The test was performed individually and lasted between 15 and 20 minutes per subject. First of all, subjects were told that they would be shown a series of characters that might appear to be good or bad and that we wanted to know their point of view. Once the character was categorized, subjects indicated the character's "good/bad temperature" on a seven-level thermometer. That is to say, the highest part of the thermometer indicated maximum evil; therefore, if subjects considered a character to be wholly evil, they painted the thermometer all the way up to the top. Conversely, if they thought the character was very good, they marked only the base of the thermometer. Before visualizing the characters, they were given various examples (always verbally, without any images) to ensure that the task was well understood. Subsequently, they were showed an image and asked whether the character seemed good or bad, and were asked to color in the thermometer accordingly: all the way to the top if they thought the character was very bad, staying at the bottom if they thought he/she was very good, or halfway up if he/she appeared neither good or bad.

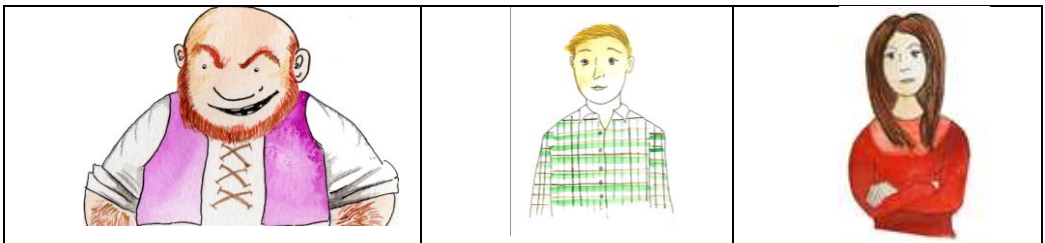


Figure 2: In Order, One Evil-looking Character, One Kind-looking Character, and One Neutral-looking Character
 Source: *Obiols-Suari*

All the subjects categorized the total sample of the thirty characters and the images were always assessed by the same rater, the author of this article. Therefore, any differences in responses between subjects were due to the features of the characters in question. Although originally the intention was to record the time taken by subjects to make their decisions, the response was so fast and clear (estimated between 1 and 3 seconds) that an assessment of the timing would not have added any relevant data. Between one group and another (from the first to the second school) the presentation of the stimuli was balanced so that the order of presentation of the characters would not influence the decision.

Results

The results obtained indicate that the subjects perceived characteristics in the images that identified them with a certain moral category and that; in addition, the opinions were shared by the majority of the respondents. However, this conclusion applies only to characters deemed good or bad; interestingly, neutral characters were mostly identified as good. In other words, "neutral" was interpreted as "good".

An analysis of the variance of two factors with several samples per group showed that the "Gender of the character (male, female)" illustrated was significant, $F(1,270) = 17,709, p = 0.000$. The "character Identity (good, neutral, bad)" variable was highly significant, $F(2,270) = 712,294, p = 0.000$. An analysis of the main components of the character Identity variable showed the three comparisons to be significant: good vs. neutral, $F(1,182) = 17,972, p = 0.000$; neutral vs. bad, $F(1,182) = 655,487, p = 0.000$; good vs bad, $F(1,182) = 1332.773, p = 0.000$. The interaction between these two variables, Gender and Identity, was also significant, $F(2,270) = 13,529, P = 0.000$. An analysis of the main components of the interaction of these two variables showed that the difference between male vs female was significant in the good of the character Identity variable, $F(1,90) = 6.547, p = 0.012$, as was the difference between male vs female in the neutral of the character Identity variable, $F(1,90) = 32,113, p = 0.000$.

The participants correctly categorized all bad characters. In the case of female characters, participants classified as good all the ones that were not in the bad category; that is, female characters in the neutral group were interpreted as kind-looking, but this was not the case in all males.

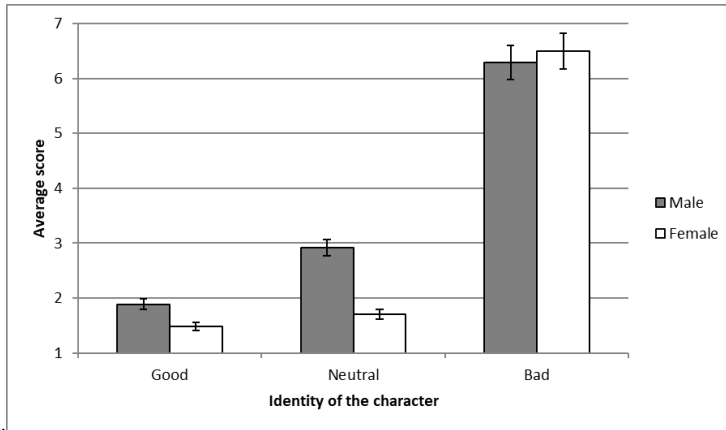


Figure 3: Mean Scores Given by the Participants for the Identity of the Characters According to Gender
 Source: Batista-Trobalon

Focusing on the significant difference in neutral characters, we see a clear willingness to assume that the characters are good. In other words, the aim of the research—expressed in the two opposite ethical poles of good and evil—was well understood by the subjects, but the results for neutral characters seem to show a clear preference for classifying them as “good” even though the thermometer allows the possibility of marking a midpoint. This was especially significant in the case of stimuli that illustrate female characters.

The data presented through direct scores were extremely consistent. However, to increase the validity of the results they should be confirmed with other data such as the number of participants selecting each of the categories on the thermometer scale. As Figure 4 shows, category 1 is the one chosen by our participants for kind characters, and category 7 is chosen for evil characters. The neutral characters are classified in a similar way to the kind characters.

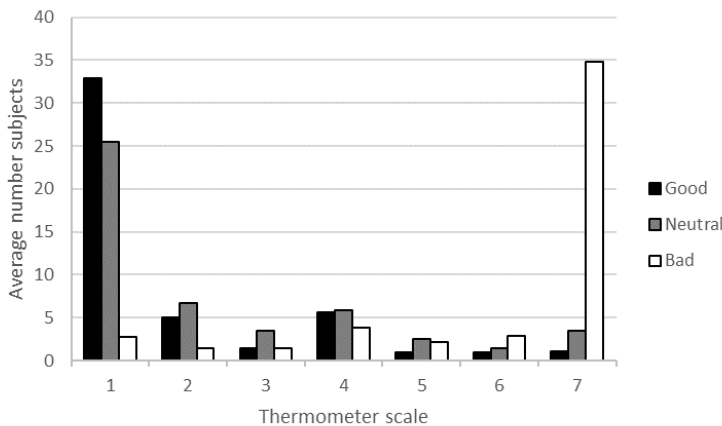


Figure 4: Average Number Subjects Who Response to Different Categories of the Thermometer
 Source: Batista-Trobalon

Figure 5 shows that the differences in the Gender variable are due to the different classifications of the neutral Moral Identity variable. As noted above, the children tended to regard neutral characters as kind, although more so in the case of women than in the case of men.

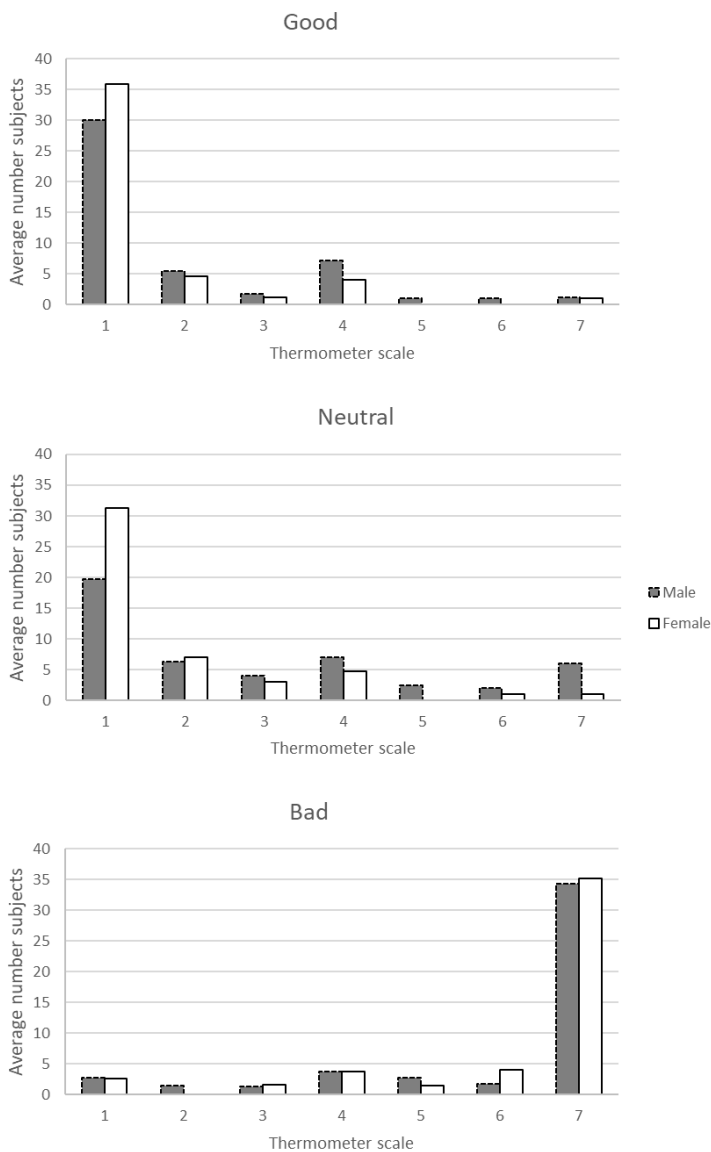


Figure 5: Average Number of Subjects Selecting the Different Categories on the Thermometer According to Gender of the Character
 Source: Batista-Trobalon

Discussion

Several years ago D.A. Dondis (1974) stated that what we see is a fundamental part of what we know. Perhaps this is what is happening in the decision-making process carried out by the

subjects in this study. Our research has highlighted the existence of the knowledge of a series of codes that allow the categorization of a narrative character's goodness or badness. As we have noted in this study, it should also be borne in mind that in children's narrative, or in audio-visual production in general aimed at this audience, this categorization between good and evil is very commonly used. Therefore, being shown a series of characters and being asked about their possible moral status is accepted as a comprehensible task; from an early age, subjects learn that what they see in a fictional story will often contain distinctive ethical features. Therefore, *what we see* implies a process of learning on the part of the subjects that can contribute to the construction of "a variety of strategies for making meaning" (Baird et al. 2016, 3). Ultimately, it is the continuous construction of bridges between what "is known by the reader and what is to be learned" (Albers 2008, 194). As we have seen, there was a broad consensus with regard to attributing a certain moral category to the characters deriving from the perception of their physical characteristics and their emotional expression (Tarnowski et al. 2017). It is clear, then, that the characters contain physical characteristics that reflected their moral identity through attributes which, as the well-known Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp (1992) said in his emblematic work *Morphology of the Folktale*, were decisive for their categorization: "By attributes we mean the totality of all the external qualities of the characters: their age, sex, status, external appearance, peculiarities of this appearance, and so forth. These attributes provide the tale with its brilliance, charm, and beauty" (Propp 1992, 101). As the results show, this charm can generate considerations about characters' ethical categorization with elements that make a major contribution to constructing the visual syntax of moral categories. In this connection, previous research has analyzed the social value of frowning (Tipples, Atkinson, and Young 2002), and mouths that show teeth or other elements interpreted as visual synonyms of evil (Lee and Kang 2012); issues related to the general identity of the character depicted and the changes in viewers' perceptions of the character once biographical knowledge is acquired (Rahman 2011); or certain social perceptions about photographs of people (Dotsch and Todorov 2012), as well as the degree of trustworthiness that a subject can inspire based on his/her physical attractiveness (Ma, Xu, and Luo 2016).

The results of the supposedly neutral characters are relevant, since the subjects showed a clear disposition to categorize them as "good" without bearing in mind that there may be an intermediate point. This categorization was more significant when the stimulus was a female character. So the interpretation of the supposed neutrality as "goodness" may be due to the subjects' cognitive inability to conceive of the existence of an ambiguous, unlabeled category that would seem to disrupt the typical binary structure of this categorical expression.

According to Albers (2008) this visual binary leads viewers to interpret what they see in terms of two opposing categories that make understanding possible. The finding that the response to the neutral image tended toward good rather than bad in our study is also because the code in the image is clearly not identifiable with evil: there are no frowns, no expressions of anger, no grotesque facial features, and no color ranges that might suggest a malign nature. Therefore, the respondents rule out the category of evil, even though it had been explained to them beforehand that they could indicate neutrality by marking the midpoint of the thermometer.

Finally, and by way of a conclusion, we have shown that the decoding of the representation of good and evil in characters in children's literature coincides with the moral intention of the illustrator. Thus, the visual aspect of the character gives sufficiently clear information to consider a specific moral identity in terms of the dichotomy of good and evil. An idea perceived in an image acquires the category of a meaning (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013), in this case, moral. Regarding the decision-making process, it is striking that all forty-six subjects took only one or two seconds to reach their decision in response to practically all the stimuli. Subjects seemed to perceive the question "Does this man look good or bad to you?" as an absolutely normal one: that is to say, as if making a decision about someone's moral identity was a cognitive exercise that is carried out so often that there was no need for any hesitation.

When reacting to illustrations, subjects' responses are much more emotional than intellectual (Stephens 1992) and there is no doubt that the character's facial expression is the key factor in the process (Ekman 2003; Tarnowski et al. 2017). These results show that our participants used the communicative features of the facial expression of anger (on Ekman's FACS scale) to morally categorize these characters as bad, and previous researchers (Tipples, Atkinson, and Young 2002; Lee and Kang 2012) confirm this idea.

In this study, we show how moral categorizations are the result of the perception of visual information linked to an emotional state. In other words, this is an emotional communicative process that results in a moral categorization. In one of our two groups of children, we were able to ask which elements of the image had prompted their decision. The answers implied that their responses were often improvised and that they were unable to give any precise reason. Given the ambiguity of these results they were not analyzed further, but they suggest that future research should use a methodological strategy that could determine exactly what elements the subjects evaluate in a particular character. What was clear is that most subjects made their decision without reflecting on a specific element of the image that could be explicitly mentioned, and so their response was more emotional than reasoned. They demonstrated a capacity to make decisions about the moral aspect of a character without the need for any narrative aspect that might have established some type of coherent link. All the participants understood the task quickly and took part willingly and answered rapidly; but when they had to justify their decisions, they found it very difficult to do so.

As we mentioned at the beginning, decision-making of a moral nature is considered in different ways by rationalist models based on a reasoned moral judgment (in line with the work of Kohlberg or Gilligan) or by intuitive models in which moral judgment is determined by an automatic decision (Haidt 2001). In any case, in our study, our subjects' decision-making was very close to being automatic, as if it were something that is done regularly without requiring contemplation or a great deal of time.

An issue that requires particular attention is the speed with which the subjects responded to a question that, a priori, would not lead to the elaboration of a moral judgment. Determining the good or bad nature of a character probably belongs to a code related to survival mechanisms; in order to be effective, it must be deployed fast. This idea may represent an important contribution in the field of psychology, and also of reading, as it is closely linked to the ancestral nature of human beings. That is to say, in all likelihood decisions of this kind are often motivated by survival, which would largely explain the automatic response to the stimulus. The association between the interpretation of visual stimuli and survival becomes evident when we must make a quick decision that clearly affects our social relations (Rotenberg, Boulton, and Fox 2005). Rudolf Arnheim (1954, 63) said that:

The discrepancy between complex meaning and simple form may produce something quite complicated. Suppose a painter represented Cain and Abel by two figures that looked exactly alike and faced each other symmetrically in the identical attitude. Here the meaning would involve the differences between good and evil, murderer and victim, acceptance and rejection, whereas the picture would convey the similarity of the two men. The effect of the pictorial statement would not be simple.

Our characters, far from Cain and Abel, present a moral codification that elicited a significant consensus and makes us think that goodness and evil can be expressed visually and, more importantly, decoded at an early age. The results of this and previous research suggest that "illustrations that are representative of the information important for integration facilitate the making of bridging inferences" (Pike, Barnes, and Barron 2009, 251). They draw attention to possible educational strategies, ranging from the analysis of image perception in childhood to the perception of visual codes that operate at a very young age. In any case, we think that the

identification of a moral identity through an image presents a suggestive field of study. Knowing and understanding the mechanisms underlying a decision based on an image is a new challenge for future research.

Our world is a world full of images. The power of images is indisputable. It is vital to establish how we understand different models and concepts. In our day-to-day lives, we observe, calibrate, consider, and sometimes make decisions about what we see. Our mind processes all the information and this directly affects how we interpret the emotional states of others (Ekman 2003). Artistic expressions have an undeniable psychological impact (Winner 2018) in which emotions participate. In this study, this impact has been reflected in the identification of a moral identity through the expression of an emotional state, an ability that is present in human beings from a very early age (Loeches et al. 2004). It thus opens up an extremely interesting field of study for identifying the links between the expression of emotion and moral dualism.

Going deeper into the analysis of these processes can broaden our understanding of how we establish moral categories based on visual information. It is popularly said that appearances are deceptive, but what emerges from our results is the idea that appearances seem to provide enough information to make a decision of a moral nature.

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