**Story Morals Codebook**

What is the moral of a story?

This project aims to create a framework for the annotation of a story's "moral."

All stories have a higher ordering principle that governs a) the particular features used in the story (characters, setting, events) and b) the particular structure of the story, i.e. how it is told. These have variously been labeled as "genre," "schema," "archetype," "world-view," among many others. In this project we wish to recover the story "moral" as one possible higher ordering principle of storytelling.

We define the "moral of a story" as: *a general lesson that the narrator wishes to impart to the audience about the world*. ("Lesson" comes from the Middle French "Leçon" from the Latin "lectio," the act of reading a text aloud for the purpose of instruction. This activity emerges in the third century CE in relation to Biblical scripture.) While we might feel that not all stories have "morals," we would agree that all stories have central "lessons," that is, a higher-order message that the storyteller wishes to convey, consciously or unconsciously, to help the audience lead a better life, i.e. engage in pro-social behavior.

In this annotation exercise, we will be annotating story summaries for the following properties in addition to identifying the story's central lesson (i.e. the "moral"). We define these story properties first and then the definition of a story moral second.

NOTE: be very careful in entering your text. Pay careful attention to not entering extra spaces, keep an eye on your spelling and copy paste names from the stories.

**Story Properties**

1. **Who is the protagonist of this story**?
   1. A protagonist is defined as the "main character" of a story.
   2. Protagonists can be people, animals, robots, etc. In rare cases they can be abstractions (like "capitalism"), but they have to be highly personified (agent-like).
   3. *Always cut and paste the protagonist name as it appears in the text*.
   4. If the protagonist is the narrator, write "narrator."
   5. If there are two main characters who are equally central and opposed to each other then generally the good character should be the protag and the bad character the antag all things being equal. (But if the bad character is clearly the main character then it's ok to have them as the protagonist and the good character as the antagonist. Protagonists are always the most predominant character.)
2. **Is the protagonist a hero or a villain** (i.e. are they portrayed positively or negatively) or a **victim**? **You may choose more than one. If none, say none.**
   1. Heros do not have to be "heroic" just positively portrayed.
   2. Villains do not have to be demonic, just negatively portrayed.
   3. None = when the protagonist is just an agent who does some stuff but is not positively or negatively portrayed.
   4. Protagonists who are morally ambiguous or make mistakes rather than intentionally do bad things should also be "none."
   5. Victim = Someone to whom very bad things happen. They don't have to be good or bad, they can also just be neutral and suffer.
   6. Heroes or villains who die in the end should be: hero+victim or villain+victim.
3. **Who is the antagonist of this story**? **State your answer as a single name. If there is none, say none.**
   1. Like protagonists, antagonists can only be characters, i.e. they should not be abstractions unless they are highly personified.
   2. Antagonists don't have to be aggressively evil. They can just be an obstacle or an opposing force to the protagonist. Someone who stands in the way of the protagonist. But they do have to be an ***opposing*** force. They can't just be a second main character.
4. **What is the central topic or issue of this story?**
   1. Think of this as the highest level content of a story ("plane crash", "climate change", "election", "military sacrifice", "heartbreak").
   2. Topics cannot be people (which are covered in questions 1-3).
5. **Is this story more negative or positive?** **State your answer as a single number between 1 and 5 where 5 = very positive and 1 = very negative. 3 = neutral.**
   1. Don't shy away from extremes. A totally positive story is a 5. A totally negative story is a 1.
   2. Reserve 2,4 for stories that are more muted and/or contain ups and downs.
   3. If both positive and negative things happen in this story use a hierarchal approach: the ending takes precedent, thus a happy ending means a 4, even if bad things happened earlier.
   4. Reserve 3 for very neutral stories.

**Defining a Story Moral**

1. A moral is didactic. It aims to teach us something about the world (a "lesson").
2. A moral is not necessarily "ethical" in nature. The moral of a story may be unethical. What matters is that the author is conveying a "principle" that readers should / should not follow in their conduct.
3. A moral is generalizing in nature. It aims to teach us something about the world beyond the particular events or characters of the story. It does not include the specific characters or actions of the story but instead generalizes about those individuals and actions into more universal truths about the world ("a kindness is never wasted").
4. A moral aligns with the intentions of the storyteller. Identifying the moral of the story is similar to asking, "Why did this person tell this story?"
5. There may be multiple morals of a single story. There are good answers and potentially wrong answers when it comes to the moral of a story, but there is no single right answer.
6. Different people may identify different morals based on their personal experience.
7. A moral moves from what questions (what happened?) to why questions (why was this told?). The moral does not focus on what happened but on *why* it was told *in this way*. For example "a kindness is never wasted" is not a summary of the story's actions but the lesson to be learned from the actions.
8. A moral is not the same as a plot summary or a theme.
9. A moral is an act of abstraction. It conveys *values* which are less concrete than the elements of a story. Morals often contain more conceptually abstract language than stories.
10. A moral is an act of compression. A moral depends on a highly compressed version of a story (and thus relies on story summarization). It eschews details to focus on the big picture of a narrative. It is itself a compressed message. It can always be reduced down to a sentence, a phrase, or even a single keyword. As a higher ordering principle one of its functions is brevity and the ability to be easily memorized, understood, or communicated.
11. While all stories have morals (a goal as to why they were told) some will have clearer morals than others. Not all stories are equally translatable into morals.
12. A moral can be thought of as a particular way of filling in the blank: "The lesson of this story is [insert moral]." A moral is a particular way of answering "What is the **point** of this story?"

**Summary**

- A moral is the **higher-level lesson** that a story conveys.

- A moral is more **general and abstract** than the contents of the story.

- A moral is **not a summary**, but does rely on summarizing key elements.

- A moral focuses on **why questions** (why was this told?) **not what questions** (what happened?)

- A moral answers the question: "The **lesson** that this story wishes to convey is...." or "The **point** of this story is to convey..."

**Annotation Method**

Annotating morals can be challenging. There are a range of possible answers and everyone expresses themselves differently. In order to achieve as much consensus as possible we are going to use the following approaches:

1. **Single Sentence Method**
   1. What is the moral of this story? State your answer as a single sentence.
   2. Focus on high-level values in your moral, such as "A kindness is never wasted" or "Envy can lead to tragic outcomes." Sometimes you might want to put a qualifying statement such as "Compromise in politics is important" or "friendship can be valuable in times of trouble." See below for more examples.
2. **Single Phrase Method**
   1. What is the moral of this story? State your answer as a single word or phrase followed by "is a good behavior" / "is a bad behavior".
   2. Here we focus on a single value or action. Depending on the context, this keyword may be a single value / action or it may be contextualized through a predicate.
      1. Violence [is a bad behavior]
      2. Kindness [is a good behavior]
      3. Ignoring climate change [is a bad behavior]
   3. Sometimes the moral is universal (violence) and sometimes it applies to a particular object or predicate (climate change). "Ignore" is not by itself a bad behavior. The context is important to understand the behavior as behavior *towards* something. Generally you'll find that fictional stories tend to be more universal and news stories tend to be more specific to a particular object in their morals.
   4. Negative morals do not have to be intrinsically antonyms of positive morals. They may be, but they also may just be their negative message.

**Examples**

Here we provide examples of story summaries along with suitable responses to the above questions. In the actual annotation exercise you will (mostly) receive full stories, with a few exceptions.

**Example 1: Fairytale**

"The Magic Fiddle" is a tale about a woman who, unfairly treated by her sisters-in-law, becomes a victim of their jealousy and is ultimately transformed into a supernatural being. The story begins with seven brothers and their sister, whose primary role is to cook for the family. Resentful of her, the brothers' wives conspire with a spirit (Bonga) to delay her daily water-fetching, which leads to her accidental drowning and transformation into a Bonga. Later, she reappears as a bamboo, which a Jogi turns into a fiddle. This fiddle, possessing magical qualities, produces music that deeply moves anyone who hears it, including her brothers. The Jogi, unaware of the fiddle's true nature, loses it when tricked by a village chief. In an extraordinary turn of events, the Bonga girl emerges from the fiddle when alone, maintaining a semblance of her former life by cooking meals. Eventually, she reveals her identity to the chief's son, and they form a bond. The story concludes with her brothers, now impoverished, visiting the chief's house, where she confronts them about their past indifference to her suffering, marking her only act of retribution.

**Protagonist**: Woman ; Bonga

**Hero/Villain/Victim**: Hero

**Antagonist**: Sisters-in-law

**Central Topic**: Magic ; Supernatural Transformation

**Valence**: 2

**Moral Sentence**: Jealousy can lead to unintended consequences

**Moral +**: Compassion

**Moral -**: Jealousy

**Example 2 Reddit**

The story is about a woman who experienced a heartbreaking birthday due to her ex-boyfriend's actions. Initially, she didn't want her birthday to be celebrated, but her ex-boyfriend hyped it up, promising her a special day, which made her excited. They had a plan to spend the night together, and she was looking forward to just being with him, getting drunk, and smoking. However, due to the pandemic, they both had to travel to their parents' homes and stay longer for safety reasons, postponing their celebration. On her birthday, her ex-boyfriend seemed happy and called her, which was reassuring as they had a bumpy relationship but were doing well recently. Later that night, while talking on the phone, he abruptly expressed his unhappiness and immaturity, leading to a breakup. Despite his apologies and hints at possibly trying again in the future, she decided to block him and move on, feeling hurt and betrayed. She had been very invested in the relationship, to the extent of doing his homework, and is now struggling to cope with the breakup, wishing for the pain to pass quickly and hoping he feels regret for his actions.

**Protagonist**: Woman

**Hero/Villain/Victim**: Victim

**Antagonist**: ex-boyfriend

**Central Topic**: Breakup

**Valence**: 1

**Moral Sentence**: Move on from toxic relationships for your personal well-being ; You can survive heartbreak

**Moral +**: Self-care

**Moral -**: Relying on others too much

**Example 3: News**

The story revolves around a tragic incident involving members of the U.S. Navy's SEAL Team 3 during a mission off the coast of Somalia. The team was intercepting a ship carrying illicit Iranian-made weapons to Yemen. Navy Special Warfare Operator 2nd Class Nathan Gage Ingram slipped while climbing aboard the vessel and fell into the sea. His teammate, Navy Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Christopher J. Chambers, instinctively jumped in to save him. Unfortunately, both SEALs, burdened by their heavy gear, drowned in the Arabian Sea. This incident highlights the risks and sacrifices of military operations, and underscores the ongoing conflict in Yemen, where Houthi rebels are attacking commercial and Navy ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, further complicated by the involvement of Iranian weapon shipments. The U.S. Navy’s 5th Fleet is conducting an investigation into the incident, examining aspects such as equipment, training, and decision-making related to the mission.

**Protagonist**: Christopher J. Chambers

**Hero/Villain/Victim**: Hero

**Antagonist**: None

**Central Topic**: Military Sacrifice

**Valence**: 1

**Moral Sentence**: Acts of bravery and self-sacrifice, even in the face of grave danger, are the hallmarks of true heroism

**Moral +**: Self-sacrifice

**Moral -**: Selfishness

**Example 4: Literature**

"Clockwork" is a dark and profound story set in a dystopian near-future England, centering around Alex, a sociopathic teenager with a taste for "ultra-violence" and classical music, particularly Beethoven. Leading his gang in nightly escapades of random violence, Alex's life takes a dramatic turn after he's imprisoned for murder. In prison, he undergoes the Ludovico Technique, a controversial aversion therapy aimed at curing his violent tendencies. This treatment, which makes him physically ill at thoughts of violence and inadvertently ruins his love for classical music, is initially successful. However, after his release, Alex becomes a victim of society and his past actions. Beaten by former victims and abandoned by his family, he attempts suicide, only to be exploited by the government for political gain. In the end, Alex's conditioning is reversed, and he finds himself contemplating a more peaceful future, indicating a potential for personal change and questioning the nature of free will and the effectiveness of punitive justice.

**Protagonist**: Alex

**Hero/Villain/Victim**: Villain, Victim

**Antagonist**: Society

**Central Topic**: Free will vs. state control

**Valence**: 1

**Moral Sentence**: Forced suppression of free will for societal conformity can be as destructive and dehumanizing as the criminal behaviors it seeks to eradicate.

**Moral +**: Self-determination

**Moral -**: Violence ; Forced Reformation