Summary

The overall concern of this thesis is to locate and explore -- via the resources and methods of past and present-day analytical philosophy -- the contribution of imaginative literature and other arts to the moral development and education of children and young people. More precisely, the thesis argues that insofar as one may regard education in general and moral education in particular as concerned with the cultivation of Aristotelian virtue as good character, and such virtue also entails the development of rationally ordered feeling and emotion, literature and other arts may be held to play a distinctive role in the education of the emotions: for example, as Aristotle himself seems to have held in his Poetics, we may be brought to feel in a morally appropriate way towards agents or events -- in real of fictional worlds by appreciation or contemplation of great tragedy.

Thus, after an introduction which traces the development of the author’s own philosophical interest in the educational value of the arts -- throughout a long professional career of publication on a wide range of interconnected or connectable issues in the philosophy of action, moral theory, professional ethics of teaching and aesthetics and art theory -- the first substantial chapter of this thesis is precisely concerned to explore the role that literature and various other arts might be held to play in the cultivation of something like Aristotelian virtue. Chapter one sets out to explore connections between a number of plausible claims concerning education in general and moral education in particular: (i) that education is a matter of broad cultural initiation rather than narrow academic or vocational training; (ii) that any education so conceived would have a key concern with the moral dimensions of personal formation; (iii) that emotional growth is an important part of such moral formation; and (iv) that literature and other arts have an important part to play in such emotional education. It is argued here that what is needed for a clear view of the moral educational relevance of literature and the arts is a conception of moral education that does justice to the interplay between the cognitive and the affective in moral life, and that a non-relativist Aristotelian ethics of virtue holds out the best prospect for such a moral education of reason and feeling. Crucially, this involves some analysis of the affective dimensions of human nature, not
least of the relationship -- or different views of the relationship -- between natural feelings and cognitively informed emotions.

The second chapter sets out to explore a range of issues concerning the epistemic value of the arts. Despite differences, it would seem that Plato and Aristotle agreed in according epistemic and educational significance to the arts. Whereas Plato regarded the arts as (largely) sources of sophistry and delusion and was prepared to exile the artist from his ideal state, Aristotle clearly considered poetry to be of value for the education of emotions and as hence contributory to the development of practical wisdom. However, it is no longer clear that the arts are widely regarded as sources of knowledge in general or moral wisdom in particular. For many, nowadays, natural (empirical) science is the only legitimate source of knowledge and recent (romantic and formalist) developments within the arts may also seem to question the epistemic value of artworks. This chapter revisits questions of the epistemic status of the arts with a view to clarifying and defending their educational potential as sources of knowledge in general and moral insight in particular. In particular, it is concerned to examine critically some of objections that have been made to any idea of the moral value of the arts, namely: (i) ‘autonomist’ claims that art has only ‘aesthetic’ value; (ii) ‘non-cognitive’ arguments to the effect that artworks can have no genuine epistemic content; and (iii) arguments from the apparent ‘immoral’ nature of many artworks to the conclusion that far from being morally educative art may often deprave or corrupt. Whilst seeking to defuse such claims, however, the chapter concludes on a note of some Platonic unease about the human significance of some of the realms of knowledge and understanding into which much modern and contemporary art has sought to lead us.

Be that as it may, the third chapter of the thesis sets out to show how great literary narratives -- here exemplified by the Arthurian and grail stories of Malory, Tennyson and others -- may provide rich material for Aristotelian study of the complexities of virtuous (as well as vicious) character. Recent moral and social theory—especially that of a more communitarian and/or virtue-ethical character—has greatly stressed the positive potential of great cultural narratives for moral and spiritual formation and education. On this view, there is much to be learned about human nature and character, and about the human struggle between good and evil, from the great myths and legends of cultural inheritance.
From this viewpoint, it is also significant that Aristotelian ethics, which has been a prime inspiration for such emphases on the moral significance of narrative, is also source of a much-neglected account of the psychological structure and dynamics of virtuous character. This chapter therefore attempts to show how an Aristotelian analysis of character might be employed for a greater appreciation of the moral and spiritual significance of one of the most powerful and compelling myths of western Christian culture.

However, the fourth chapter observes that while contemporary social theory has emphasised the key role that cultural and other narrative plays in any human understanding of moral self and agency, such access to narrative has traditionally been largely via the written word: those significantly educated in cultural heritage have been the primarily well read. But in an age in which communication is most commonly prosecuted through the electronic media of radio, cinema, television and computer, it may be asked whether or to what extent traditional literary access to cultural narrative has been overtaken by more modern technological events. Chapter four therefore sets out to explore the potential and prospects of the technological art of cinema for enhanced understanding of morally and spiritually significant narrative.

The concern of chapter five is to examine the potential of exposure to the arts for environmental education. There appear to be various respects in which the outdoor environment has been regarded as significant for education in general and moral education in particular. Whereas some educationalists have considered the environment to be an important site of character development, others have regarded attention to conservation and sustainable development as pressing moral educational concerns in a world of widespread human environmental abuse. This chapter, however, argues that approaches to environmental education that proceed by way of character education or environmental ethics may yet fall short of the central goal of promoting intrinsic appreciation of nature and the outdoors, and explores an alternative strategy focused on exposure to arts.

Chapter six looks at a time-honoured claim that music has moral and spiritual potential. Although it might be thought the least likely of all the arts to have moral educational significance, moral value has been ascribed to music by philosophers (from Plato to
Scruton) who have argued that it may have a key part to play in the ordering or disordering of the character and feelings of human agents. Still, it is clearly difficult to account for the moral significance of the arts in general and music in particular on those more rationalist (Kantian and utilitarian) ethical theories that have underpinned modern action-guiding accounts of morality. In this chapter, it is argued that this difficulty may be avoided on a more Aristotelian or virtue ethical perspective on moral education according to which music may be concerned, no less than other arts, with wider ethical explorations of virtue and vice as emotionally implicated states of character. The chapter concludes, however, by exploring some respects in which music that is not thematic or expressive in any such virtue ethical sense – what has been called ‘music alone’ – might also be regarded as having some moral value.

The conclusion of this thesis attempts to identify and explore some further issues and problems concerning the arts as potential vehicles of education in moral virtues. One theme of this work, that philosophers do not yet seem to have developed a clear or fully satisfactory account of the emotions – or at any rate, an agreed account of how affect is related to cognition in morally sound emotion or passion – is further developed here. However, the conclusion also explores a little more fully the respects in which educational neglect of the arts – not least the evident diminished faith in their epistemic value – may also have been reinforced by a more generally unsatisfactory view of the educational significance of knowledge as such.