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# ‘Do what you wish or wish what you want?’ Michael Ende’s *Fantastica* and Rudolf Steiner’s Moral Imagination

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In Ende’s *The Neverending Story*, a boy named Bastian travels into the fantasy world of *Fantastica* which is being eaten up by ‘Nothing’ (Ende 1983, p.19). He saves this ailing world by giving a new name to its ruler, the Childlike Empress, and goes on to create a new *Fantastica* through stories and names of his own invention. By following the instruction to ‘do what you wish’ (p.189), Bastian must eventually find his way back into the real world through his wishes.

Ende read and commented on Rudolf Steiner’s philosophical writings, and *The Neverending Story* re-enacts Steiner’s search for free will. Bastian’s journey in *Fantastica* explores Steiner’s idea of free will as an underlying principle. Existing scholarly interpretations of *The Neverending Story* vary greatly, but most commonly Bastian’s journey is read as one of inner, psychological or spiritual development. But while psychological, didactic and religious readings can only give speculative interpretations of *The Neverending Story*, this article will source more definitively Ende’s active use of Steiner and his philosophical concept.

A reading from a psychological stance is Groneman’s (1985), who offers a walk-through of Bastian’s journey as a process of individuation: ‘In depth-psychology such a process as Bastian is undergoing [i.e. of accepting himself and gaining a positive outlook on the world] is called individuation, ... a synthetic process of integration of the unconscious and the conscious’ (p.9; this and all subsequent translations mine). Groneman goes on to show parallels between the text and his interpretation in a methodical way. Step by step images and events from *The Neverending Story* are explained as stages of individuation. A basic example of this is Groneman’s treatment of the character Atreyu as Bastian’s shadow self and *Fantastica* as Bastian’s psyche into which he must delve. Filmer (1991) similarly suggests that the Childlike Empress ‘symbolises, perhaps, the realm of the subconscious mind, where archetypal images and shapes are manifested and from which the Imagination springs’ (p.61). In both cases Ende’s book is presented as a purely internal exploration into the main character’s own psyche.

In another line of interpretation Huse (1988) sees the life/death situation of *Fantastica* and the Nothing as one which

Bastian must tackle in order to learn to ‘[control] the emptiness of the isolated self [after the loss of his mother] and [use] his last wish to learn to love’ (p.40). Bosmajian (1986) takes the contrary stance that Bastian’s journey is one of unsuccessfully working through grief at the loss of his mother, thereby confirming ‘our cultural patterns of the denial of death’ (p.120). The main emphasis of both Huse’s and Bosmajian’s reading is on the practical usefulness of Bastian’s journey for the real world — Bastian’s, and, particularly in Bosmajian’s case, the reader’s.

Similarly, the reading offered by von Prondczynsky (1983), who concentrates on the problem of Bastian following his wishes, is that of a life-lesson for the real world. Von Prondczynsky points out the need for Bastian to apply ‘Wunsch-Ökonomie’ (economy of wishes, p.44) and presents the potentially endless possibility of wishes as a ‘Strudel der Wünsche’, a whirlpool of wishes (p.44). Bastian needs to control this whirlpool and give his wishes a definite aim which can lead him home. In this way the story is a learning process for Bastian and the reader to adapt the tempting idea of infinite wishes to more goal-oriented aspirations: ‘goals can no more be reached without wishes, than there can be wishes without goals’ (p.45).

Finally, writing from a fundamentalist Christian point of view, Klaus Berger sees *The Neverending Story* as a journey toward Occultism and Satanism. In his reading the Childlike Empress stands for Lucifer, and the reader is manipulated into an occult system where ‘only in Evil one can infinitely do what one wills’ (Berger 1984, p.96). For him *The Neverending Story* becomes ‘the path into the realm of magic, from which the only escape is to actively reject it and accept God instead’ (p.98). In a letter response to a concerned reader who had apparently read Berger’s book, Ende dismisses Berger’s reading by stating that the idea of *The Neverending Story* as an Anti-bible for the Godless is almost comical (Hocke 2004, p.291). Nonetheless, Berger’s reading shows another, more external point of view. Here the central meaning of the book is neither the character’s own exploration of his inner self, nor the lesson to be learned by the character or reader, but it is rather a tale of warning against the pitfalls of magic and fantasy. Berger ultimately suggests that in fact Ende’s book should not be read at all.

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Steiner's concept of free will as played out by Ende covers all the various perspectives given above. First and foremost Bastian's journey in *Fantastica* is an inner one of self-exploration in search of his deepest internal impulse. Secondly the aim of the journey is for Bastian to learn a lesson he can apply in the real world after his return. Not only must free will be found internally, but it should be applied in everyday life outside the fantasy. And finally, couched into Bastian's adventure is Ende's stern warning to the reader and criticism of Steiner, that there is a fine line between an inner search for free will and getting lost irretrievably inside one's own imagination.

Readings of *The Neverending Story* as an inner journey are consistent with Ende's own notion of Bastian's adventure in *Fantastica*:

*For this is the story of a boy who loses his inner world, his mythical world, in a night of crisis, of life-crisis; it dissolves into Nothing and he must jump into this Nothing; we Europeans must do this, too. We have succeeded in dissolving all values, and now we must jump in, and only through the courage to jump in, into this Nothing, can we reawaken our very own, our most inner creative forces and build a new Fantastica, that is, a new world of values.*

(cited in Hocke & Kraft 1997, p.112)

Though usually refusing to offer any definitive interpretation of *The Neverending Story*, Ende here gives a rare insight into his own opinion of his most famous work. Not only has Ende himself tapped into his own innermost creative forces in order to create *Fantastica* for the reader, he also explains that the central character himself is enacting an inner journey towards creativity and a new world of values.

Ende's concern with fantasy as an exploration of values can be seen in the all-important coexistence of the two worlds in *The Neverending Story*. *Fantastica* needs the real world to provide the creative impulse, since creatures of *Fantastica* cannot invent or create new things. Equally the real world needs *Fantastica* as a creative outlet in which to explore the world of values. With the destruction of this fantasy playground by the Nothing, all invention would bounce back into the real world as its more base flipside:

lies, deception and delusion. This much is clarified by Gmork the werewolf in the first part of the book (p.132). What Gmork implies is that the lies and delusions in our world are creatures of a sick and neglected *Fantastica*. In exercising our imagination in a positive way we can heal *Fantastica* and reduce the exodus of lies, deception and delusion into our world through the Nothing. Or, as Mason Ellerby (1998) puts it, 'without *Fantastica*, we learn that human beings have no healthy way to employ their imaginations in the creation and recreation of make-believe. Instead, they become prey to "the Manipulators" who have learned that when it comes to controlling human beings, there is no better instrument than lies' (p.117).

However, in *The Neverending Story* the main character, Bastian, is not merely undertaking a journey into *Fantastica*, the world of values. He is also exploring the idea of free will. Ultimately his quest must lead to his deepest, truest wish, and the exploration of values along the way is merely the means to this end. Ende has stated in a letter that the 'Do what you wish' maxim gives Bastian absolute power in *Fantastica*, but that he must give it up freely in order to exit the fantasy realm (Hocke 2004, p.281). In the same letter he points out that the maxim refers to the search for one's true will (p.280). According to Kaminski (1983), 'Bastian does not follow his "true will", but rather the seductively arbitrary maxim of "do what you want to do." He is not permitted to lose himself in his fantasy and is summoned to reason!' (p.191). I suggest that for Bastian the journey through *Fantastica* is not arbitrary, but rather an exploration of moral imagination which will lead to free will. I take the term 'moral imagination' here from Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom* (1964), in which he explains the moral imagination as the path towards free will. Ende's *Fantastica* is a dramatisation of Steiner's idea of the moral imagination.

Rudolf Steiner's writings range from architecture to education and from philosophy to occultism. For the purpose of exploring the idea of free will Ende has drawn on Steiner's philosophical writings, and in particular his *Philosophy of Freedom*, which deals mainly with the idea of free will and how it is achieved. Wilson regards this book as 'a conscious attempt to lay the cornerstone for all [Steiner's] future work' and Heimleben is quoted as

saying that it ‘embodies, purely in the form of thought, essentially everything that was to be the content of the anthroposophy that Steiner developed later’ (Wilson 1985, p.78. For relevant selections from Steiner’s own work see Seddon 1988, in particular chapter 8, ‘Philosophical Foundations’, pp.127-138).

Various biographical sources point to Ende’s familiarity with Steiner’s philosophy. Ende’s father read Steiner’s books and liked to discuss them with his son, and for the last two years of school Ende attended a Steiner school (Hocke & Kraft 1997, p.19 and p.69). Furthermore, it is evident that Ende grappled with Steiner’s philosophy, in particular Steiner’s ‘great error’ about art. According to Ende, ‘[Steiner] thought that cognition can be constructed artistically. This was bound to fail and not only because he lacked the talent, but mainly because his understanding of what art can be and should be was wrong’ (Hocke & Kraft 1997, p.73). Ende does not go on to explain how Steiner’s understanding of art was wrong, but Ende’s criticism here is indicative of two things: that he had read and understood enough of Steiner’s philosophy to be very specifically critical of it; and that Ende himself was concerned with what art could or could not achieve.

For all his criticism, Ende’s knowledge of Steiner influenced his writing of *The Neverending Story*, and his invention of Fantastica is, in effect, an artistic representation of Steiner’s journey towards free will via the moral imagination. Steiner discusses the moral imagination within the context of free will in his *Philosophy of Freedom*:

*To be free means to be able of one’s own accord to determine by moral imagination those mental pictures (motives) which underlie the action. Freedom is impossible if anything other than [sic] myself (mechanical process or merely inferred extra-mundane God) determines my moral ideas. In other words, I am free only when I myself produce these mental pictures, not when I am merely able to carry out the motives which another being has implanted in me. A free being is one who can want what he himself considers right.*  
(Steiner 1964, chapter 12)

*He also explains that for free will, translation of the concept into a mental picture is always*

*necessary. Man produces concrete mental pictures from the sum of his ideas chiefly by means of the imagination. Therefore what the free spirit needs in order to realize his ideas, in order to be effective, is moral imagination.*

(Steiner 1964, chapter 12)

According to Steiner, then, we first have to be aware of the circumstances that influence our decisions. Only once we are able to identify these can we step back from them and choose not to let them influence us. Instead, we should act ‘according to [our] impulses, that is, according to intuitions selected from the totality of [our] world of ideas by thinking’ (Steiner 1964, chapter 12). For this Steiner presupposes an intuitive moral impulse inherent in all humans, which he calls moral intuition or ethical individualism. Equally Steiner assumes an ability for conceptual intuition or pure practical thinking. So free will means first freeing oneself from external circumstances, and then being able to make a decision entirely based on moral intuition and conceptual thinking. Since this is not possible in practice, we must exercise the moral imagination instead. Moral imagination as a technique is the ‘ability to transform the world of percepts without violating the natural laws by which these are connected’ (Steiner 1964, chapter 12). In other words, it is through moral imagination that we can think up or visualise hypothetically an ideal — free — decision, but within realistic parameters.

Several links can be established between Steiner’s idea of the moral imagination and Ende’s *The Neverending Story*. The fact that the term ‘moral imagination’ is ‘moralische Phantasie’ in Steiner’s original German, makes it clear that Steiner’s search for free will deals not with purely dry and theoretical concepts, but with perceptible mental representations (percepts). Ende’s fantasy realm is tellingly called ‘Phantásien’ in German. Ende’s comment that Bastian undergoes a journey towards a world of values closely echoes Steiner’s idea of exercising the moral imagination. This shows that *The Neverending Story* is not an escapist adventure, but an internal quest towards finding one’s own inner values, one’s moral intuition.

The most obvious link between Fantastica and free will is AURYN, the amulet Bastian carries throughout his journey.

This is engraved with the instruction 'DO WHAT YOU WISH', which is rendered in capitals every time it occurs in the book. The importance of this instruction cannot be ignored. It acts as a constant reminder to the reader that Bastian's journey is driven by the need to find his own true will. One of the first creatures that Bastian encounters in Fantastica is a lion by the name of Grograman. Bastian shows him the amulet and says: 'That must mean that I can do anything I feel like.' The lion is alarmed by this and says: 'No.[...] It means that you must do what you really and truly want. And nothing is more difficult' (p.213). In an alternative manuscript chapter that did not make it into *The Neverending Story*, Ende gives another character, Dame Eyola, the task of explaining true will. After listing various things people might wish for — freedom, riches, peace on earth etc. — Dame Eyola concludes that in most of these cases 'they are not using their *own true will*. They merely think that they want it or wish for it. But it is really an external will, one that does not come out of the depth of their own being, one which they believe for one reason or another they should have in order to be more successful, more important, or even a better person. But since it is not their own *true will*, they are only going at it half-heartedly' (Hocke 2004, p.19).

In *The Neverending Story* two heroes carry the amulet in turn. Bastian is the boy who is secretly reading a fantasy book in the attic of his school. Atreyu is the boy-hero of that fantasy novel, on a quest to save all of Fantastica, the realm in which this inner novel takes place. Half-way through *The Neverending Story* Bastian himself enters the fantasy world he is reading about and spends the second half of the book having his own adventure in Fantastica. Upon his arrival he receives the amulet AURYN, which makes all of his wishes come true, but at the cost of his memories of the real world. It becomes clear that when his memories run out, he will be stuck in Fantastica forever. He must find a way back into the real world before this happens. It becomes increasingly more difficult for him to even wish to go home, since he gradually loses all memory of the real world. The amulet with its capitalised inscription acts as a constant leitmotiv, a reminder that Bastian can only go home once he has found his true will.

In the first part of the book the amulet is given to Atreyu, the young boy of the fantasy world, about to go on his quest. It is given to him with the following words:

*Auryn will protect you and guide you, but whatever comes your way you must never interfere, because from this moment your own opinion ceases to count. [...] You must let what happens happen. Everything must be equal in your eyes, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, foolish and wise [...]. You may only search and inquire, never judge.*  
(p.38)

Being a Fantastican, a pure fantasy creation, Atreyu is the ideal person for these instructions. Only in a fantasy world could a young hero act entirely intuitively, un-judgingly, un-selfconsciously, with no ulterior motive whatsoever. Following his instructions Atreyu never has his own opinion or judgement on any matter he encounters. For him a free choice is one that is made by pure intuition and logical thinking; he does what he does because it is the thing to be done. Every choice he makes is therefore a free choice. And since Atreyu cannot read, even the inscription on the amulet itself, DO WHAT YOU WISH, cannot influence his actions. He is not conscious about what it is he wants. After Bastian enters Fantastica and becomes the bearer of the amulet, he reads the inscription to Atreyu and asks, 'If you had known [what it says], would it have changed anything for you?' Atreyu replies 'No....I did what I wanted to do' (p.238).

So Atreyu is the very epitome of free will, which can exist for Fantastics. As creatures who live purely in the world of ideas that have been translated into percepts, they already live in the moral imagination and have precisely been created to act each according to his or her very own impulse and intuition (moral or conceptual). The case is different, however, for visitors from the real world. Unlike Atreyu, who has no family, friends or personal history, Bastian comes with what we might call personal baggage. We are rarely told anything about Atreyu's life before his quest. In Bastian's narrative we are given constant flash-backs to events that happened at home or at school. While Atreyu seems to exist in a circumstance-free bubble, Bastian is burdened right from the start of the book with the weight of his personal experiences.

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It stands to reason, then, that Bastian enters Fantastica with little ability to exercise free will in Steiner's sense. For much of his journey, his wishes in Fantastica are based entirely on real-world insecurities, both physical and social. In the real world he is un-athletic, chubby and a bullied social outcast. His first few wishes in Fantastica therefore are to be strong, handsome and popular. Ende makes a very specific link between Bastian's wishes and his real-life experiences: memories. Every time a wish comes true we are explicitly told which real-life memory or circumstance it relates to or comes from. In this way Ende is very much making a point of how circumstances lead Bastian to make decisions, and are thus standing in the way of Bastian exercising free will. If Bastian is to find his deepest, truest wish, he must first put aside all the worldly influences that normally guide his wishes. This Ende does by stripping him of his memories. One by one the things that determine his motives of action are taken away. When Bastian wishes to be strong, handsome and popular, these wishes come true and at the same time Bastian loses all memory of ever having been un-athletic, chubby and bullied. In other words, through his un-free wishes and subsequent loss of memory, Bastian is gradually relieved of his personal baggage.

Ende is exploring what wish Bastian will eventually be left with. Once he has no real-world memories left, we can assume that any wish he makes truly comes from nothing more than conceptual thinking and intuition, like Atreyu's. Bastian never loses his capacity for conceptual thinking; he loses his memories, but not his ability to think rationally or logically. And this is no trivial point, since we find in Fantastica other real-world people who have not managed to find their true will and have lost their ability for conceptual thinking as a result. For Bastian it is a case of finding his internal impulse or moral intuition while he is still capable of conceptual thinking. Here, as in Steiner, both are needed to achieve free will.

Bastian's final wish towards the end of the book is to love his father. With this wish Bastian taps into his internal human and personal intuition. By now he has lost all his real-life memories, including those about his father. But as the wish to love grows within him, he knows that the object of his love is to be found in the real world, not

in Fantastica. When Bastian finds a picture of a dream he once had about his father in the real world, he has a strong emotional reaction to it, even though he can neither remember the dream nor does he recognise the man in it. The wish to find and love this man is what brings him to the end of his journey and back into the real world. According to Steiner, 'In dreaming the soul frees itself from the state of bondage to the body and lives according to its own nature' (Steiner 1985). So what guides Bastian to his true wish is not a memory — not a piece of personal baggage — but an image once created by his soul in its free state. Bastian finds out that 'All Fantastica rests on a foundation of forgotten dreams' (p.373). This confirms that Ende's Fantastica is, in effect, an internal landscape where one's inner ideals are stored and can therefore be explored and discovered. In this way Bastian is now finally making a wish that will be applicable in the real world, but has not been influenced by it. It has grown out of his very own moral intuition and conceptual thinking.

The fact that love is Bastian's true (and finally free) wish echoes Steiner's idea of free will. In explaining why free will is necessarily 'good', Steiner says:

*Only when I follow my love for my objective is it I myself who act. I act, at this level of morality, not because I acknowledge a lord over me, or an external authority, or a so-called inner voice; I acknowledge no external principle for my action, because I have found in myself the ground for my action, namely, my love of the action. I do not work out mentally whether my action is good or bad; I carry it out because I love it. My action will be 'good' if my intuition, steeped in love, finds its right place within the intuitively experienceable world continuum.*

(Steiner 1964, chapter 9)

Here the idea of free will is equated to the love of exercising free will. Since free will is achieved through our own moral intuition, a free choice will always be a choice that we love. In Bastian's case the wish to love is initially not linked specifically to his father. It is his wish to be able to love that drives him to find an appropriate object for this wish. When the dream-picture of his father is destroyed, Bastian thinks that he has lost his only way back to the

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real world, but all he has lost is the object of his love, not the wish to love in itself. Having arrived at his truest wish, he can still go home.

At this point Bastian crucially also takes off the amulet, showing that he has now found his true will and has therefore no further use for AURYN. He then finds himself instantly transported to a sanctuary which exists within the amulet itself. It is the gate back to the real world. The fact that he can now pass successfully through the very thing that had first told him to DO WHAT YOU WISH is further indication of the fact that Bastian has successfully completed his journey towards free will.

As soon as Bastian has left Fantastica, Ende seems to confirm Bastian's newfound ability to exercise free will. After returning to the real-world school attic where he had been reading the fantasy book, Bastian finds himself locked in. The only way out is via a scaffolding outside a first-floor window. Bastian is torn between his fear of heights and the embarrassment of having to scream for help and wait for a rescue. His decision is made by returning in his mind's eye to his time in Fantastica, when he had forgotten that he was afraid of heights and had climbed the highest tree in the forest. Based on this Bastian uses his reason and intuition to exercise his free will in Steiner's sense: 'Calmly and deliberately he found holds for his hands and feet and climbed down' (p.390). So by casting his mind back to his circumstance-free state and then using only conceptual thinking and intuition, he has exercised his moral imagination on a small scale.

Because Bastian has learned to free himself from external influences in Fantastica, and has come to his deepest truest wish based entirely on his conceptual thinking and internal moral impulse, this can now serve him as a model for further decision-making. His journey through Fantastica has been a physical dramatisation of Steiner's idea of the moral imagination, which he can from now on replicate internally.

But Ende does not merely play out Steiner's moral imagination to its desired conclusion of free will. He also gives the reader an alternative outcome. One issue that is problematic throughout Bastian's journey is his gradual loss of identity. As his memories are taken from him, he

becomes first 'Someone' (p.349) and finally 'the boy without a name' (p.378). He becomes a *tabula rasa* and is in danger of becoming a complete blank — a non-person without history, language, identity or even conceptual thinking. Bastian is lucky to find his true wish just in time to trade his last memory for it. Ende points out the potential danger of not succeeding on the quest for free will in his depiction of the City of the Old Emperors (pp.337-345). This is a city of real-world people who have used up all their memories and have subsequently lost their minds. They have lost, in Steiner's sense, their conceptual thinking before finding their moral impulse, and now they are stuck in Fantastica forever as pathetic imbeciles. Bastian comes to this place somewhat prematurely and is allowed to leave again, since he still has a few memories left to complete his quest.

The City of Old Emperors gives us a glimpse of Ende's critique of Steiner. The journey through the moral imagination, if taken to its logical conclusion, can go two ways. If successful, it can lead to free will. If unsuccessful, it can lead to a dangerous detachment from reality. If, Ende seems to suggest, free will can only come once all circumstances have been removed, then how can one retain one's own identity and not lose touch with reality altogether? It is a fate Bastian only narrowly escapes (with some timely help from Atreyu and Falkor).

Ende has given us an artistic representation of how free will is achieved in Steiner's moral imagination, and *The Neverending Story* also presents us with the more dangerous flipside of the coin. Ende shows how Steiner's free will can be achieved through exploring our imagination, but this journey is a precarious tightrope-walk fraught with potential disasters. Bastian's journey through Fantastica can be a successful one because his rich imagination has supplied him with 'fantastic' helpers and friends along the way. So in the end Bastian's free will is achieved entirely within the landscape of his moral imagination and its inhabitants, that is, by using Steiner's conceptual thinking and moral intuition.



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