

Narrative Ethics and Coherentism

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In his essay, “Why is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics so Frustrating?” Alasdair MacIntyre argues that our culture is in an ethical crisis that pervades both our social lives and our philosophical theories. The most telling social symptom of this crisis is the nature of political debate in the mass media: two rival positions are presented which contain such disparate premises and conceptual inheritances that they are utterly incommensurable. “Abortion is murder” or “Every pregnant woman has the right to an abortion,” for example (MacIntyre 1979: 16). There is no public interest in the roots of these moral stances, nor any exploration of their political, social, and private contexts. Perhaps as an artifact of our pluralistic society, there is a lack of any shared rational criterion to frame moral debates. This absence leads to the seeming arbitrariness and incompatibility of moral claims. For MacIntyre, this reflects a deeply rooted cultural dilemma that similarly affects modern analytical philosophy. MacIntyre labels analytic philosophy a “ghost discipline” that only reiterates the failures of eighteenth century philosophers to arrive upon universal rules and truths through logic and reason (MacIntyre 1979: 17). He suggests that contemporary moral philosophy’s inability to produce universal and rational criteria indicates the need for a new kind of ethical theory, one focused on the narrative aspects of morality. This is a major claim. MacIntyre is here calling for a fundamental shift in moral epistemology that would drastically alter some of the foundational assumptions and concerns of contemporary ethical theory. Hence narrative ethics, as proposed by MacIntyre and others, deserves close evaluation and scrutiny. In what follows I will outline the objections

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Nussbaum, Stanley Hauerwas, and Alasdair MacIntyre, has developed over the last twenty-five years in the field of “narrative ethics.” Narrative ethicists generally hold that morality is constituted by the ethical stories that we tell and are shaped by, and that the moral properties of an action cannot be understood intelligibly once isolated from the action’s narrative context. In many ways, narrative ethics is a response to certain assumptions of contemporary analytical philosophy, and especially to the assumption that moral philosophy should be a search for a set of rational moral principles.

William Barbieri Jr. lists three major shortcomings of traditional ethical theories in his discussion of narrative ethics. First, he argues, “in their legalistic emphasis on rules and obligation, [they] fail adequately to take account of the personal, existential aspects of our moral experience” (Barbieri 363). For many critics of traditional moral epistemology, the abstract principles and deductions of analytic philosophy do not speak to the complexities of actual human affairs. In real life we make moral decisions based on our intuitions and contextual understandings; we don’t reach for a piece of paper and start writing premises. Implicit in this critique is the view that an ethical theory should be more than a limited and distant source of general ethical principles, but a source of insights into the nature of human morality.

Another critique of the traditional ethical view is its tendency to portray humans as detached, purely rational agents. Again, critics argue that this betrays the actual human experience in which moral decisions informed by our social context, our intersubjective influences, and a host of complex and organic processes (Barbieri 364). The traditional view has difficulty accounting for shared, communal meanings and perceptions due to its emphasis on the detached, rationalistic individual. In short, the problem of conceiving of agency as distinct from the body, and from our social and psychological attributes, is that it yields ethical principles that would pertain only to beings quite unlike ourselves.

A third charge against traditional ethical theory is that it is ahistorical. “The notion that the business of ethicists is to discern an unchanging set of moral stricture underlying all human society represents,” Barbieri summarizes, “a basic failure to recognize the

historical nature of ethics” (364). In other words, the search for abstract and rational universals in ethics fails to recognize that human morality is spatiotemporally conditioned. A critical flaw of traditional ethical theory, then, is that its ahistorical and universal presuppositions delimit and narrow its scope. The result is a body of theory that collectively ignores some significant dimensions of human morality, such as the historical context of ethics. Given these limitations of analytic moral epistemology, it seems that we are in need of a new form of ethics that addresses traditional ethical theory’s critical shortcomings. It is in this vein that narrative ethics calls for a new understanding of morality — as the stuff of story, rather than science (Barbieri 365).

For narrative ethicists, humans are always engaging in storytelling. As MacIntyre states in his book, *After Virtue*, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth” (MacIntyre 1984: 216). In other words, as humans we understand the world and ourselves by creating and revising coherent stories. Narratives are therefore not only an essential part of our being, but “the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions” (MacIntyre 1984: 208). To properly understand a single human action, we require a narrative to contextualize it. For narrative ethicists like MacIntyre, narratives are necessary to describe moral actions not only because human actions are always contextual, but also because we understand the world *through* narratives, and it would be incoherent to analyze moral actions as isolated entities.

For Barbieri, narrative ethicists share a specific constellation of views about agency, history, and the human context. Narrative ethics generally recognizes that humans constantly engage in storytelling, and that the stories that we create then partially inform our identities. Narrative ethicists often liken storytelling to an aesthetic practice. Since our storytelling partially informs our own moral, political, and social identities, it behooves us to cultivate our ability to construct our personal narratives (Barbieri 366). Narration is also considered to have both communal and individual aspects, since narratives are informed by cultural linguistic symbols and written from social contexts.

A major contention of narrative ethics is that “stories are prior to

rules in the moral life” (Barbieri 368). In this view, humans act according to their narratively formed character rather than according to general rules and obligations. This is not to say, however, that humans do not follow rules. Rather, we tend to interpret rules according to our narrative context. Moreover, narrative ethicists also hold that all principles, laws, rules, and obligations (even those broadly conceived and deduced through rationality) rely on narrative contexts in order to make sense (Barbieri 368). For example, I might turn right at an intersection where such turns are prohibited in a variety of conditions (e.g. there being no pedestrians on the street) and think it morally allowable. This reflects my tendency to engage with general rules based on current circumstances and my own narrative understandings (of whether or not, for example, I am “one who follows road signs no matter what”). Furthermore, the general rule, “Don’t turn right on red where prohibited,” is unintelligible without a narrative context that includes an explanation of automobiles, traffic systems, and the general conception that individual transgression of laws is wrong. Hence any moral rule or ethical principle, from “Don’t burn innocent cats for fun” to “Thou shall not kill,” requires some degree of narrative context for its both its theoretical explanation as individual application.

Narrative ethics is a stark response to the shortcomings of traditional ethical theory. Where traditional ethics seeks out of universal rules and principles, narrative ethics holds that all rules, no matter how broadly conceived, are necessarily parts of narrative cultural contexts. Where traditional ethical theory often conceives of individuals as rational agents, narrative ethics conceives of humans as storytellers whose identities are in turn informed by our own narratives. Where traditional ethical principles, if universal, should ostensibly be held by any agent, narrative ethicists hold that humans differentially endorse or reject moral principles based on their spatiotemporal, cultural, and social contexts. But though narrative ethics responds to some problematic features of traditional analytic moral epistemology, it has some critical shortcomings of its own.

In his *Narrative and Morality*, Paul Nelson argues that the narrativist view tends to adopt a problematic conception of human agency. In narrativist theory the power of stories to inform human identity is so emphasized that we seem bound by our narratives rather than in control

of them. Nelson worries that narrative ethics so overemphasize the power of narrative that it “becomes impossible to support any notion of moral responsibility” (Barbieri 370). In other words, without the presence of a critical agent that stands over and can work against the narrative, there is no paramount self to whom responsibility, choice, and agency can be attributed. For Barbieri, the narrative response is that we gain freedom not *from* our stories but *through* them (Barbieri 371). Our freedom is contextualized; we are neither radically free, detached minds with absolute agency, nor culturally rooted zombies who passively respond to the narratives that inform our being. According to Hauerwas, for example, “our agency consists in our ability to shape our character through metaphors and stories we inherit from our social setting” (Barbieri 373). There is surely a place for individual agency in the narrative view, but there is an important problem in the narrativist response that, as far as I can tell, has been thus far overlooked. The rejection in narrative ethics of any universal principles that can apply to all rational agents is highly dependent on the understanding that human agency and rationality are rooted in culturally specific narrative contexts. In the narrativist view, it is because of the fact that humans *are not* detached Cartesian egos that panhuman ethical principles cannot be derived. If the narrative ethicist concedes that humans are somewhat detached from our stories, and that we can think, behave, and reason over and above them, he or she opens up a space for autonomous rational agency. If such a space exists, and to defend human agency in the narrative picture it must exist, it will be increasingly difficult to reject all universal claims for betraying the human condition.

Another area of focus in the narrative critique concerns moral rules and principles and their relationship to stories. Narrativists agree that rules play an important role in our moral story telling, insofar as we must account for rules that we abide by or create, but they generally hold that all rules are dependent upon narratives, and enjoy no privileged ontological or epistemological status. Critics have responded that there exist foundational, narrative *independent* demands of morality. The difficulty of this objection, for Barbieri, is that “to reject the thesis of the primacy of the narrative is to be immediately faced with the unenviable task of showing that there can be any such thing as a

meaningful rule or principle that is essentially distinct from any human narrative context” (Barbieri 376). This is indeed a tall order, but a weak defense of the narrative view. The narrative position on narrative-independent moral truths is complex, and merits further analysis. For narrativists, any “universal” moral principle that a human can derive is contextual. Even if I work out a moral rule that everyone in the world agrees upon, the narrativist would respond that this reflects a broad human context with common values, dispositions, etc., that inform a very general rule. This is not to say, however, that a contextual rule cannot be identical to a universal one. Let us imagine, for a moment, that there are in fact some universal moral truths that exist fundamentally, and that one of them happens to be, when translated into English, “One ought not murder a defenseless sentient agent for absolutely no reason.” Let us also imagine that this moral principle can be arrived upon through analytical proof. For the narrativist ethicist, this might be, but the moral principle simply cannot be understood in *isolation*. To interpret this fundamental moral utterance still requires the application of human understandings and, in short, affirms the necessity of narrative context to frame ethical statements. Though such a position might still leave the traditional ethical theorist wanting, it allows the narrativist view to account for the possibility of universal moral principles, but respond critically to the notion that such principles, if they do exist, could be understood without any context.

Perhaps the most difficult objection for narrative ethics is the charge of relativism. Under the narrativist view, “there are no ethical criteria for judging narratives that are not grounded in a narrative tradition of their own, [and] it appears that we are consigned to some form of relativism” (Barbieri 377). In other words, since narrativists argue against any narrative-independent standards or principles, it is difficult to critically evaluate moral positions and, for instance, resolve moral disagreements. Barbieri outlines two strategies in the narrative position for dealing with ethical disagreements. The first tolerates value conflicts unless individual rights are at stake, while the second maintains that we should favor moral stories that are more inclusive, affirm personal autonomy, and promote conversation (Barbieri 377). These solutions, of course, commit a problematic trespass. They appeal to narrative-independent criteria for evaluating disparate narratives,

through they are themselves part of a particular narrative context, namely modern pluralistic liberalism. Hence these solutions are at best contradictory, and at worst hypocritical and conceptually incoherent.

As it stands, narrative ethics suffers from a number of flaws, chiefly the problem of relativism in evaluative judgments. One possible solution to the problem of relativism is to explore the analytic philosophical terrain for a theory that would both promote the critical evaluation of sets of beliefs and still welcome a narrativist interpretation. The moral epistemological position of coherentism, as outlined in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's *Moral Skepticisms*, is an attractive candidate.

In the last chapter of his book Sinnott-Armstrong defends the moral epistemological theory of coherentism as the best response to the challenge of the skeptical regress argument and moral nihilism. The crucial claim of moral coherentism, for Sinnott-Armstrong, is that one can be justified in holding some moral beliefs if they properly cohere with a coherent system of beliefs (Sinnott-Armstrong 221). This requires that individuals have systems of beliefs which are jointly consistent, connected and comprehensive. As we will see, the benefit of Sinnott-Armstrong's coherentism is that it invites one to construct a narrative of one's moral beliefs and evaluate it in terms of that narrative's consistency, connectedness, and comprehensiveness.

Beliefs are jointly consistent if they can be simultaneously believed without paradox or error. Sinnott-Armstrong provides the example of believing that one's pet is a cat, and simultaneously believing that one's pet is not a mammal, as indicative of the kind of inconsistency that should undermine justified belief within a coherent set of beliefs (Sinnott-Armstrong 222). Consistency is also important in terms of constructing a coherent narrative of one's moral beliefs. Even generally, consistency is crucial to a narrative that claims to be true. Hence, in constructing a narrative about one's moral beliefs, the discovery of inconsistencies (e.g. strict vegetarianism for ethical concerns and wearing fur) are reason for concern.

Connectedness requires that the beliefs are logically and semantically entailed to one another. This is important for justified belief because connected beliefs are necessary for one to make new

inferences in novel moral situations. One should be able to infer one belief from other beliefs, and this requires a relatively connected and coherent system of beliefs (Sinnott-Armstrong 224). This, too, is an important feature of narrative. If one's personal ethical narrative were that killing cows is wrong, eating pork is all right, one ought recycle, one should never laugh at another's expense, etc., without any connective beliefs, it would seem an odd narrative and an impoverished moral account. Hence connectedness, like consistency, is an important feature of both personal narrative and coherent, justified systems of belief.

Finally, a coherent set of beliefs should be relatively comprehensive. No system of beliefs can be totally comprehensive, Sinnott-Armstrong concedes, but systems of beliefs can be relatively comprehensive compared to others. As is the case of narratives, some cover more ground and address more subjects than others. In the case of a system of moral beliefs, comprehensiveness indicates that they system can address a wide range of issues and is not too narrowly conceived. Sinnott-Armstrong ends his chapter with the analogy of a crossword puzzle to describe coherentism:

When our answers fit the clues as well as the number of spaces throughout the entire puzzle, we seem justified in believing that our answers are correct. [They] still might be incorrect in some systematic way... [or we] might have been using the wrong clues for these puzzle spaces. Such chances of global error cannot be ruled out... However, we can still be justified in believing our answers given that we are not misled in any such global way. (224)

I consider this a compelling analogy for how we account for our systems of beliefs, and a perfect match for narrative ethics. According to the coherentist view, there do exist criteria for evaluating an entire system of beliefs, and for justifying individual beliefs based on that system. For the narrativist, these criteria will not be narrative-independent, but they do offer a different answer to the problem of relativism. The aforementioned narrative responses to relativism, such as the favoring of inclusiveness and pluralism, promote specific values

without disputing narratives as wholes. I think it more consistently “narrativist” to address disputes over certain moral principles by addressing the larger system of beliefs that informs them. In so doing, one can not only analyze the system as a whole through narrative means, but evaluate the place of a moral contention within it. To use the crossword puzzle analogy, we might find that the argument “Abortion is murder” fits nicely in the center of a coherent but limited set of beliefs, while “Women have the right to an abortion” fits into an equally coherent but more comprehensive system. To explore such a possibility, of course, requires storytelling, and to engage in fine-tuned storytelling in order to resolve a dispute is an important form of dialogue. The coherentist/narrativist view asks us as individuals to work on our systems of beliefs, through storytelling, and strive for consistency, comprehensiveness, and connectedness. It asks us as communities with moral disputes to engage in deep forms of dialogue, to thoroughly explore the narratives of others so that we can evaluate their moral utterances as part of larger systems of beliefs. Once combined with coherentism, narrativism is better equipped to address conflict resolution and the problem of narrative-independent criteria.

Works Cited

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