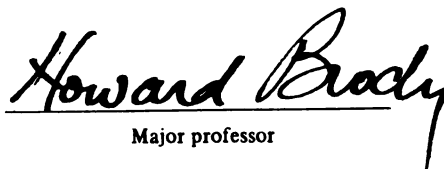This is to certify that the

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Gregg K. VandeKieft

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STORIES ON MY MIND: NARRATIVE ETHICS,
COGNITIVE SCIENCE, AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION

By

Gregg K. VandeKieft

A THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

STORIES ON MY MIND: NARRATIVE ETHICS, COGNITIVE SCIENCE, AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION

By

Gregg K. VandeKieft

"Narrative ethics" is a recent manifestation of the ancient debate over the roles of moral principles versus the narrative context of one's life in ethical deliberation. Most discussion examines the relative merits of principles versus stories in ethical analysis or in moral education – there has been less inquiry into the epistemological character of narrative. Some commentators propose that our fundamental modes of reasoning have inherently narrative features. Until recently, there has been little empirical support for this proposal. However, research in cognitive science has redefined traditional conceptions of brain function, particularly regarding the rational processes that underlie personality, socialization, and the basic decision making that comprises a life plan. This paper explores the implications of cognitive science for philosophical ethics. Based on this exploration, I propose that the purported dichotomy between principles and narrative is a fallacy and that they are, in fact, mutually interdependent components of moral reasoning.

Dedicated to:

Lynette VandeKieft
Who made it all possible

Emily, Luke, and Joel VandeKieft
Who give it all context

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction and Overview

Philosophy and religious doctrines are means by which humankind has historically attempted to achieve a more meaningful understanding of relationships among individuals and the world in which they live. These disciplines generally rely upon systematized rules or principles to govern their application to one's daily life. In recent years, substantial attention is being focused on the less formally structured and more context-dependent ways that "narrative" guides the application of one's most basic values in daily life. Numerous proposals regarding the role of narrative in ethics have emerged under the rubric of "Narrative Ethics." As an evolving field of scholarly inquiry, however, narrative ethics has not yet established an agreed-upon conceptual foundation.

Many commentators argue that narrative has always done the real work of ethical deliberation, but we lost sight of this by mistakenly accepting the positivist claims of traditional analytical philosophy. Principlist ethical deliberation, the argument goes, is really accomplished via narrative but principlists have inappropriately denied narrative's role. In this view, narrative ethics as a formal discipline has simply not matured sufficiently to have fully clarified its unique methodology. As the field undergoes a more rigorous scholarly debate and its defining theories are more clearly articulated it will either supplant principlism or, in less ambitious proposals, will at least acquire equal stature.

Critics of narrative ethics suggest that the lack of a clear identity for the field stems from a more fundamental deficiency: namely, that narrative ethics is a chimera, an attractive notion but ultimately lacking substance. In this view, narrative frames the context in which a given ethical dilemma is formulated and communicated, but when all

is said and done normative ethical theories still provide an adequate account of ethical reasoning.

A third position holds that both strong narrativist and strong principlist positions are not only reductionistic but are, in fact, a false dichotomy. In this view, principles and narratives are *both* necessary components of ethical deliberation and cannot function in isolation from the other.

In this thesis, I will argue from the third position. My exploration opens with a review of recent findings from cognitive science that reframe our understanding of the neurological processes mediating the basic reasoning involved in ethical deliberation. I will first explicate recent discoveries from neurological research that redefine traditional conceptions of "the neurobiology of rationality" (Damasio 51). The following section correlates these findings with theories from research in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence. Taken together, these areas of study comprise contemporary cognitive science. I will argue that current understandings in cognitive science support a theory of rationality, including moral reasoning, that is inherently narrative.

In the following sections I will argue that this model of rationality accounts for the ability of individuals and societies to adapt to a continuously changing environment. When confronted by new information or concepts that conflict with one's deeply held understandings, some means of reconciling the conflict is necessary to maintain a coherent worldview. This is accomplished primarily by the moral imagination. The moral imagination is the process within ethical deliberation where conceptions from cognitive science are most readily demonstrated. I will propose that the moral

imagination is a narrative form of imagining, supporting my argument with the preceding discussion of "the neurobiology of rationality."

This explication of the moral imagination will be followed by an overview of current conceptions of the role of narratives in ethics, framed by the earlier discussion of the moral imagination. I will then bring these considerations to bear on key questions that continue to vex narrative ethicists and their critics: If narrative is truly a necessary, constitutive component of ethics, what is its epistemic function in ethical perception and reasoning? How is narrative distinct from, or similar to, the application of ethical principles? Finally, what is the relationship between narrative and ethical norms?

In the concluding section, I will propose that narrative serves a *necessary*, rather than a merely complementary, epistemic role in ethics. However, I will not make claims for an exclusive or superior role for narrative over traditional normative moral reasoning. Rather, I will argue that narrative and ethical principles are deeply integrated and interdependent and that each is necessary for ethical inquiry, but not sufficient by itself— they are, in essence, different facets of a common rational process. Narrative ethics, in this view, cultivates the moral imagination to consider ethical norms and the contextual particularities relevant to specific cases as a form of dialectic. A rich store of basic moral principles, derived from moral education as summary representations of more expansive moral narratives, work in concert with a well-developed moral imagination to provide a highly malleable and adaptive model of morality.

Chapter 1: "What's Cog Sci Got to do With It?"

Moral reasoning is one of the most complex and difficult forms of reasoning, and any robust theory of reasoning is going to have to confront it eventually. It is one thing to show how a mind can calculate sums, but quite a different matter to show how a mind forms a judgment in a moral dilemma.

Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark
In *Mind and Morals*

My proposal for narrative ethics will rely on specific conceptions of how human reasoning occurs. I will, accordingly, begin by exploring research into the basic neurological processes that underlie rational deliberation. This exploration opens with a post-mortem of sorts—I will revisit a 150-year-old case of brain injury that, strangely enough, played a pivotal role in a series of studies on modern patients with comparable brain injuries. These studies, by renowned neurologists Antonio and Hanna Damasio and their colleagues, lay the foundation for a narrative conception of rationality.

In this chapter, I will correlate the Damasios' studies with work in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, paying special attention to the moral prototype theory. These concepts support the contention that cognitive science does more than "show how a mind can calculate sums"—it also offers a robust theory on "how a mind forms a judgment in a moral dilemma." My review of cognitive science will also support the claim that narrative serves an epistemologically necessary role in ethical deliberation—a key assertion for my proposal for narrative ethics.

The Curious Case of Phineas Gage (or, a blast from the past)[1]

In the summer of 1848, Phineas P. Gage was a successful and highly valued construction foreman for the Rutland and Burlington (Vermont) Railroad. In addition to supervising a work gang, Gage's duties involved setting the explosives needed to blast the railroad's path across the mountainous terrain. By all reports, he was a man of upstanding moral character and was liked and respected by his employers and his peers.

The course of Phineas Gage's life was irrevocably altered by a freak accident one September afternoon. As he set a routine charge, a premature explosion drove a four-foot long iron rod through his left cheek; it exited through the top of his skull with sufficient velocity that it landed over one hundred feet away. Gage never lost consciousness, and was rushed to the nearest town for the limited medical care available in the mid-19th century. After surviving an initial infection, Gage's physical recovery exceeded even the most optimistic expectations. In less than two months, his only significant remaining physical deficit was blindness in his left eye. However, in less tangible ways, Gage's recovery was not—and would never be—complete.

Despite a history of exemplary work habits and upstanding moral character, Gage became listless, profane, and generally a social misfit. He never again sustained long-term employment and repeatedly made disastrous decisions regarding his financial interests and general welfare. His problems did not seem to arise from the changes in intellectual capacity one might expect following a brain injury—indeed, most reports

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[1] The case of Phineas Gage is presented in extensive detail in Antonio Damasio's book, *Descartes' Error*. The opening chapters of the book review Gage's case and provide a framework for Damasio's consideration of how contemporary neuroscientific research informs cognitive theory. My description provides only a cursory review of Damasio's detailed and elegant case presentation.

suggest that Gage's basic intellectual functions were, like his physical capacity, well preserved. Rather, his problems stemmed from a dramatic change in personality. In the words of his physician, John Harlow, "the 'equilibrium or balance, so to speak, between his intellectual faculty and animal propensities' had been destroyed" (Damasio 8).[2] He had, in essence, lost his capacity for moral judgment.

Antonio Damasio observes: "Gage's story hinted at an amazing fact: Somehow, there were systems in the human brain dedicated more to reasoning than to anything else, and in particular to the personal and social dimensions of reasoning. The observance of previously acquired social convention and ethical rules could be lost as a result of brain damage, even when neither basic intellect nor language seemed compromised" (10).

Five years after his death Gage's body was exhumed and his skull, along with the infamous iron bar, were placed on display at Harvard University's Warren Medical Museum—only to come under medical scrutiny one hundred and twenty years later. Hanna Damasio and her colleagues studied Gage's skull, the iron bar, and the medical descriptions of Gage's injuries. They used modern forensic and neuroimaging techniques to generate three-dimensional computerized reconstructions of the range of possible injuries to Gage's brain. These models demonstrated that Gage's injuries were localized to specific areas of the frontal lobes of the brain. Despite the limitations of such a retrospective analysis, "Hanna Damasio and her colleagues could say with some foundation that it was selective damage in the prefrontal cortices of Phineas Gage's brain that compromised his ability to plan for the future, to conduct himself according to the

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[2] Much of Damasio's account derives from notes and published reports from Dr. Harlow and Dr. Edward Williams.

social rules he previously had learned, and to decide on the course of action that ultimately would be most advantageous to his survival" (33).

The story of Gage makes for an interesting read, but by itself is hardly sufficient to make substantive claims about the nature of human cognition—let alone moral philosophy. This sad tale, however, serves as an important starting point for contemporary studies that have elucidated the changes in Gage. These studies shed new light on the basic neural mechanisms underlying the decision making and planning necessary for a "lived life," including moral judgment.

Gage's Modern Counter-parts

Antonio Damasio noted striking similarities between the behavioral changes in Phineas Gage and patients he studied with injuries to the prefrontal cortex. His attempt to understand these cases led him to explore what he terms "the neurobiology of rationality" (51). Damasio and his colleagues performed an exhaustive array of tests of intellectual and psychological function on "modern Phineas Gages" and found a remarkably similar profile. He summarizes as follows: "[I]n none have we failed to encounter a combination of decision-making defect and flat emotion and feeling. The powers of reason and the experience of emotion decline together,[3] and their impairment stands out in a neuropsychological profile within which basic attention, memory, intelligence and language appear so intact that they could never be invoked to explain the patients'

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[3] Damasio's observation that "reason and...emotion decline together" contrasts with the classical notion that they exist in a reciprocal relationship (i.e., as one becomes more emotional reason declines, and vice versa). Damasio notes limitations in the correlation between reason and emotion, thus a powerful emotional experience might indeed inhibit rational decision-making, or an overly analytical approach might overrule ones correct emotional impulses.

failures in judgment" (54).

Damasio and his colleagues determined that individuals whose basic neural mechanisms for processing emotions are compromised show a corresponding decline in their ability to rationally formulate a life plan. "In short, there appears to be a collection of systems in the human brain consistently dedicated to the goal-oriented thinking process we call reasoning, and to the responsive selection we call decision making, with a special emphasis on the personal and social domain." (70). Reasoning in the personal and social domain, Damasio postulates, is directed by the particularities that make up the story of one's life, providing the topographical landmarks that guide basic decisions for formulating a life plan. Merely having the relevant facts at hand is not sufficient— additional factors, derived from the details of one's experiences, goals, emotional state, and intuitions guide the integration of the relevant facts into a coherent life plan. Phineas Gage and his modern-day counterparts lacked the ability to integrate relevant facts with the contextual landmarks necessary to make decisions. One could say the landscape of their moral reasoning was flat, depriving them of the contours of a lived life that are essential guides for mapping out one's future or discerning appropriate social behaviors.

The moral implications of these findings are intimated when Damasio theorizes about the underlying defects in Phineas Gage and Damasio's patients: "One way of describing their predicament is by saying that they never construct an appropriate theory about their persons, or about their person's (sic) social role in the perspective of the past and the future. And what they cannot construct for themselves they also cannot generate for others. They are bereft of a theory of their own mind and of the mind of those with whom they interact" (58). After losing the capacity to conceptualize a fundamental moral

framework, these individuals' behavior also contradicted the social and moral standards to which they previously adhered.

But are Damasio's findings really relevant to ethics? I will now turn to proposals from cognitive science that link Damasio's neurological findings to moral theory.

The Moral Prototype Theory

Cognitive scientists have explored how new understandings of basic brain functions affect traditional concepts of moral reasoning. May, Friedman, and Clark note that *the prototype theory of concepts*, which derives from research in cognitive psychology, stands out in cognitive science's development as a discipline. The "prototype-based model of knowledge of concepts and categories casts doubt on classical models of the structure of concepts." In the classical model of cognition, "grasping a concept...was depicted as involving knowing (perhaps unconsciously) a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for its application." Cognitive psychology, however, fails to support the classical model and instead proposes that "we organize our knowledge not around quasi-linguistic definitions but around stored knowledge of prototypical instances" (5).

But what do cognitive scientists mean by *prototype*? Mark Johnson explicates the prototype theory of concepts as follows:

> Psychologists, linguists, and anthropologists have discovered that most categories used by people are not actually definable by a list of features. Instead, people tend to define categories (e.g., *bird*) by identifying certain prototypical members of the category (e.g., robin) and they recognize other nonprototypical members (e.g., chicken, ostrich, penguin) that differ in various ways from the prototypical ones. There is seldom any set of necessary and sufficient features possessed by all members of the

category. In this way our ordinary concepts are not uniformly or homogeneously structured (Moral Imagination 8-9).

Johnson further observes, "Not every member is equally central to our understanding of a given category.... In most cases there will not be a single defining set of features possessed by each member of the category. Different members will be related by what Wittgenstein called 'family resemblances,' rather than by their sharing of a set of essential properties" (Moral Imagination 78-79).

Prototypical members of a category are developed experientially via *exemplars*, "the concrete instances we encounter during training or learning." With experience, one identifies "which features are most common to the exemplars of some class.... The idea of prototype is thus the idea of a body of features united as the most...common characteristics of the exemplars to which [one] has been exposed. And there is no bound on the kinds of thing, process, or event for which we may command a prototype" (May, Friedman, and Clark 5-6).

Initial proposals regarding category structure simply addressed the basic ways in which categories are cognitively conceived. Johnson and others expanded this work into the realm of moral philosophy. Conceptions of morality, including broad categories of moral understanding (e.g., lying is wrong), are not defined by meeting a simple list of necessary and sufficient conditions, but have a basic internal structure around which variations of the concept are built—i.e., *moral prototypes*. Since moral deliberation commonly involves dilemmas that cannot be reconciled with one's established beliefs, a robust theory of morality must account for an individual's ability to adapt to the situation at hand without undermining the integrity of his basic value system. Johnson argues that the classical theory of category structure is inadequate in this regard because it requires

that "concepts defined by necessary and sufficient conditions directly fit states of affairs

that exist objectively in the world." Moral prototypes, he counters, are more flexible and

allow for such adaptability. "[T]he prototype structure of our fundamental concepts

allows us to expand them to fit new cases, while still retaining a certain part of the

conceptual structure as relatively stable and unchanged. This would be impossible on the

classical view" (Moral Imagination 9).

As an example of the moral prototype theory in action, Owen Flanagan examines

the process by which a child learns to tell the truth. He cites the process of distinguishing

a joke or fairy tale from a lie, situations that calls for tact or "kind falsehoods/white lies"

to protect others' feelings, and situations that call for overt lying to protect one's own

safety or the well-being of another.

> How exactly a child or adult responds to a novel moral situation 'will be a
> function of which of her many prototypes that situation activates, and this
> will be a matter of the relative similarity of the new situation to the various
> prototypes on which she was trained.' Situations will occasionally be
> ambiguous and there will be disagreements about what is occurring....
> Moral ambiguity creates moral cramps of various sorts that lead to
> reflection, discussion, and argument, as does disagreement among persons
> about how to describe a certain act or situation. These, in turn, lead to
> prototype adjustment (28-29).

Damasio describes a parallel neurological process in human cognition by the

formation of *perceptual images*—visual, auditory, or conceptual images. The formation

of perceptual images is more than simply recalling a facsimile from a repository of stored

images. Studies of cognitive processing consistently demonstrate that perceptual images

are interpretive, momentary constructions—replications of previously experienced

patterns, or imagined projections based on previously experienced patterns. Perceptual

images are directed by *dispositional representations*. "Dispositional representations exist

as potential patterns of neuron activity in small ensembles of neurons I call 'convergence zones'.... What dispositional representations hold in store in their little commune of synapses is not a picture per se, but a means to reconstitute 'a picture'.... The acquisition of new knowledge is achieved by continuous modification of such dispositional representations" (96-108).

The brain works by reconstructing prototypes, stored as perceptual images. Variations on a prototype are controlled by dispositional representations—someone with a broader range of dispositional representations will correspondingly comprehend a wider array of variations on a prototype. Using Johnson's earlier example of the prototype "bird," most people will have a stronger baseline dispositional representation for a robin than for a blue-footed booby. Prototypes are recalled as perceptual images under the direction of dispositional representations, which are context-dependent. Thus, a reference to "bird" during a discussion of fauna native to the Galapagos Islands might indeed bring a blue-footed booby to mind before a robin.

Learned prototypes are not stored as fixed images in some specified locus in the brain. Instead, trained-up networks of neurons—Damasio's convergence zones—recreate prototypes when activated by a relevant input. However, this process is not localized to one specific brain center—when properly orchestrated, numerous loci within the brain act in concert to produce a seemingly unified whole: "[B]ecause of the brain's design, the requisite broad-based knowledge depends on numerous systems located in relatively separate brain regions rather than one region. A large part of such knowledge is recalled in the form of images at many brain sites rather than at a single site. Although we have the illusion that everything comes together in a single anatomical theater, recent evidence

suggests it does not. Probably the relative simultaneity of activity at different sites *binds* the separate parts of the mind together" (84).

However, specific neurological structures are essential for coordinating and communicating neural activity among the various participating brain centers. Furthermore, certain neurological structures—such as the prefrontal cortex—are essential to processing emotions as well as the type of reasoning involved in moral judgment. So damage to discrete regions of the brain can disrupt not only cognitive processing generally, but can also trigger specific social and moral deficits.

Thus Phineas Gage's injury to the prefrontal cortex, and the similar injuries in Damasio's patients, left basic intellectual and language functions intact but severed crucial communication networks among the convergence zones involved in "the personal and social dimensions of reasoning." This, in turn, disabled these individuals' ability to formulate a life plan or to frame their social interactions within the larger scope of their life.

Cognitive Science's Contribution to Moral Theory

The experience of Phineas Gage offers a cogent case study demonstrating the devastating moral consequences of losing the ability to create a coherent life narrative. My reframing of Gage's experience demonstrates the relevance of cognitive science to moral reasoning. However, thus far I have only highlighted the need to update classical moral theories. The preceding examples and arguments do not, by themselves, provide a more contemporary theoretical framework. In consideration of this question, May, Friedman, and Clark observe:

> Cognitive science brings to the ethical arena a developed interest in the kinds of internal states and resources that subserve thought and action. Our general understanding of the nature of these inner states and resources has undergone a rather dramatic shift in recent years.... The interest of this alternative vision for ethics and moral philosophy lies in its implications for an empirically well-grounded conception of moral reasoning. Such implications...concern a variety of specific issues, such as the nature of moral knowledge, argument, and expertise...the role of summary rules and maxims...and the evolution and growth of moral understanding (4-5).

This passage articulates precisely the sensibility that underlies this thesis. My interest is to advance "an empirically well-grounded conception of moral reasoning" concerning principlist versus narrativist models of ethics. The prototype theory of concepts plays a crucial role in this exploration, as it provides an alternative to classical models of category and concept structure and corollary rule-based theories of ethics.

Churchland proposes one way in which the prototype theory of concepts advances our understanding of moral reasoning:

> [T]he alternative to a rule-based account of our moral capacity...is a hierarchy of learned prototypes, for both moral perception and moral behavior, prototypes embodied in the well-tuned configuration of a neural network's synaptic weights. We may here find a more fruitful path to understanding the nature of *moral learning, moral insight, moral disagreements, moral failings, moral pathologies,* and *moral growth* at the level of entire societies (101).

Johnson asserts that "rule-based account[s] of our moral capacity" derive from moral law theory, which claims that solutions to moral dilemmas result from deducing the most correct rule to apply to a given situation. Johnson proposes that moral law theories are inadequate because they work only for "prototypical, nonproblematic cases. What we regard as 'moral laws' should be construed as useful rules of thumb that summarize the collective experience and wisdom of a moral tradition concerning prototypical situations..." (Moral Imagination 187-188). Johnson endorses the moral

prototype theory as an alternative to moral law theory, integrating cognitive science and moral philosophy at both the theoretical and practical level.

If learned prototypes derive from well-recognized patterns, how does one deal with "new, previously unconsidered, or problematic situations" (Benjamin and Curtis 41)? Andy Clark addresses this problem while discussing a connectionist concept that Churchland terms "conceptual redeployment":

> Imagine someone trying to solve a problem. To solve it…is to activate an appropriate explanatory prototype. Sometimes, however, our attempts to access a satisfying (explanatory) prototype fail. One diagnosis may be that we do not command any appropriate prototype, in which case there is no alternative to slow, experience-based learning. But an alternative possibility is that we do command just such a prototype but have failed so far to call it up. This is where a good piece of context fixing can help. The idea is that a bare input that previously led to the activation of no fully explanatory prototype may suddenly, in the context of additional information, give rise to the activation of a developed and satisfying prototype by being led to exploit resources originally developed for other purposes (117).

Conceptual redeployment allows one to integrate new knowledge or concepts within our existing conceptual prototypes by applying contextual clues—"context fixing"—to activate existing prototypes that satisfactorily accommodate the new material. In the next chapter, I will explore the role of the moral imagination in creating new moral prototypes, or substantially modifying existing moral prototypes, when conceptual redeployment fails to activate "a developed and satisfying prototype" during moral deliberation. I will also argue that "context fixing" is a narrative process.

In summary, Phineas Gage and his modern-day counterparts demonstrate the existence of neurological structures, such as the prefrontal cortex, that are crucial for mediating moral judgment. Cognitive psychology redefines how we conceive of category and concept structure, laying the groundwork for the moral prototype theory.

Taken together, these findings from neurology and cognitive science provide a highly contextual and adaptive model, amenable to subtle discrimination, growth and flexibility. They also offer compelling evidence that traditional rule-based accounts for moral reasoning are inadequate. I will now turn to alternative models for moral reasoning.

Chapter 2: Moral Imagining

[T]he central purpose of moral theory should be the enrichment and cultivation of moral understanding and...moral psychology is essential to the development of our moral understanding.... This means that that we cannot do good moral theory without knowing a tremendous amount about human motivation, the nature of the self, the nature of human concepts, how our reason works, how we are socially constituted, and a host of other facts about who we are and how the mind operates.

Mark Johnson, "How Moral Psychology Changes Moral Theory"
In *Mind and Morals*

In the preceding chapter, I explored new understandings of cognitive theory. But does cognitive science really have anything to offer ethics? Virginia Held argues that, as far as ethics is concerned, cognitive science is interesting—but not really relevant (69-87). Mark Johnson, however, challenges "the moral philosophy versus moral psychology split." He defines moral psychology as "the psychology of human moral understanding, which includes empirical inquiry into the conceptual systems that underlie moral reasoning" ("Moral Psychology" 45-46). My position concurs with Johnson: moral philosophy cannot be reduced to cognitive psychology, but we need to take into account how new findings in cognitive theory alter our view of the basic mechanisms of rationality, and how those new understandings transform the assumptions underlying our traditional views of moral reasoning.

Having outlined findings from cognitive science that reframe our basic understandings of both non-moral and moral perception and reasoning, I will now look at how these findings manifest themselves practically in moral judgment. Specifically, I will propose that moral judgment is dependent on the moral imagination. The moral imagination is, in turn, profoundly informed by the prototype theory of concepts. A

consideration of the ways in which the moral imagination is inherently narrative will follow.

Moral Judgment[4]

The goal of ethical deliberation is, ultimately, to make a moral judgment: i.e., to choose a morally correct course of action in a given situation, all things considered. In a community of shared values, moral judgment may be unproblematic. Since the participants in ethical deliberation share relatively similar worldviews and ethical frameworks, they can evaluate the situation at hand within their shared framework and reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion with relative ease. However, in a moral dilemma—when individuals with different ethical frameworks encounter moral disagreement or one simply encounters a situation far removed from her previous experience or moral education—one needs a means to "compare and evaluate ethical frameworks" (Benjamin and Curtis 39). Ethical deliberation frequently requires grappling with ethical frameworks that are new or that conflict with one's own ethical framework.[5]

How do individuals resolve conflicts when they encounter "new, previously unconsidered, or problematic situations" (Benjamin and Curtis 41) that cannot be reconciled within their existing ethical framework? One classical approach to resolving

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[4] I was aided in this section by Matthew S. Ebert's "Moral Judgment: Action Beyond the Limits of Deduction," a masters thesis for the Department of Philosophy at Michigan State University, spring 1997.
[5] John Kekes devotes an entire book to the question of moral pluralism (1993). Although I will not elaborate on the topic of moral pluralism, an underlying assumption for this discussion is that we live in a morally pluralistic society and no single moral viewpoint (or ethical framework) holds trump over others. This position is not an endorsement of indiscriminate moral relativism—Kekes argues that there are both "primary" moral values which are, "under normal circumstances, universally human," and "secondary" values which "vary with persons, societies, traditions, and historical periods" (18-19).

ethical conflicts derives from John Rawls's notion of wide reflective equilibrium (WRE). Martin Benjamin and Joy Curtis describe WRE as a model of ethical deliberation comprised of three main components: "Ethical frameworks are evaluated by comparing the extent to which the ordered set of principles that constitute them give consistent and comprehensive guidance while cohering with two other sets of beliefs: the pretheoretical moral judgments in which we have the greatest confidence (e.g., torturing children is wrong) and well-grounded background beliefs and theories about the world" (39-40).[6]

Utilizing this model of deliberation, when one encounters a conflict between two or more ethical frameworks she simply evaluates the competing ethical frameworks as outlined above. The ethical framework whose ordered set of principles resonates most fully with her pretheoretical moral judgments and her background beliefs and theories is said to maintain "equilibrium." As an example, consider the issue of physician-assisted suicide (PAS). Some patients experience severe suffering, physical as well as psychological or spiritual, that cannot be completely alleviated with even intensive therapy. On occasion, a patient will ask his physician to prescribe or administer medication to intentionally hasten the patient's death. The resulting dilemma: the physician either allows a patient to suffer against his wishes, or she prescribes or administers a lethal dose of medication to relieve the suffering but, in doing so, causes the patient's death.

Proponents of PAS argue that death is an acceptable means of relieving suffering if other means have failed—causing the patient's death is tolerated if the *intent* is to

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[6] I am presenting an abbreviated description of WRE, based on Benjamin and Curtis's account. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Benjamin and Curtis, 39-43.

relieve preventable suffering. The physician essentially prioritizes her principles so that relief of suffering takes precedence over the preservation of life. Many physicians are unwilling to cross that threshold, based on the belief that the sanctity of life is paramount—even if the patient experiences preventable suffering.[7] In either case, the moral deliberation does not occur in a vacuum. It is directed by the physician's pretheoretical moral judgments and background beliefs (e.g., suffering should be prevented, life is sacred) and the physician's moral principles (e.g., physicians have a moral obligation to relieve their patients' suffering, physicians have a moral obligation to preserve life).

If WRE provides an adequate basis for moral judgment, is the whole question of narrative's role irrelevant? Narrative, it could be argued, merely provides the context for determining the most appropriate ethical principle(s) to apply to the situation at hand. If WRE is simply working through one's ordered set of principles, narrative might supplement the process but does not really *do* the work.

The above account, however, does not explain how one resolves a situation in which equilibrium cannot be maintained by one's *own* established ethical frameworks. Benjamin and Curtis observe, "Once we apply our principles to new, previously unconsidered, or problematic situations, we must trace the implications for our fairly secure pretheoretical moral judgments and our background beliefs and theories. If these are all fairly compatible, the equilibrium is maintained. But if there is tension or

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[7] For the sake of illustration, this dilemma is presented in its most basic iteration. More complex permutations range from autonomy-based arguments that patients should be granted the right to PAS even if suffering is negligible, to the notion that *all* suffering can be controlled without resorting to PAS—even if it takes placing the patient under "terminal anesthesia." Within this range of considerations, I have attempted to distill PAS to its most fundamental dilemma.

inconsistency, we must try to restore the equilibrium. This may involve *modifying* any of the three central components or *withdrawing the applications of the principles* in this instance" (41, emphasis added).

But how does one modify any of the three central components—by what means, and on what basis? And if resolution requires modifying our most basic ethical tenets or "withdrawing the applications of the principles," then WRE involves more than simply figuring out which ordered set of principles to choose. A more dynamic and adaptive form of moral deliberation is called for. In the next section, I will explicate what I consider to be the fundamental tool for moral deliberation: the moral imagination.

The Moral Imagination[8]

Moral judgment takes place in the context of lived lives. Thomas Nagel states that judgment is "essentially the faculty Aristotle described as practical wisdom, which reveals itself over time in individual decisions rather than in the enunciation of general principles" (180). But before one acts, or makes the judgment upon which action is based, she must consider the myriad possible consequences of her decision. Thus some form of "thinking before acting" (Turner 4) is required: the moral imagination.

John Kekes describes the moral imagination as "a psychological process involved in the mental exploration of our possibilities" (99). Paul Churchland describes how the moral imagination manifests itself in moral judgment:

> People with unusually penetrating moral insight will be those who can see
> a problematic moral situation in more than one way, and who can evaluate

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[8] I was aided in this section, and the previous section, by Mike Pardales's "The Moral Imagination and Moral Judgment: Critical Connections," a term paper for *Philosophy 870: Seminar in Value Theory* (taught by Martin Benjamin, Ph.D.) at Michigan State University, spring 1997.

the relative accuracy and relevance of those competing interpretations. Such people will be those with unusual moral *imagination*, and a critical capacity to match. The former virtue will require a rich library of moral prototypes from which to draw, and special skills in the recurrent manipulation of one's moral perception (103).

As a person confronts an ethical dilemma and works through the process outlined in WRE, she does not merely work through some calculus of variably weighted moral rules. Rather, she considers how various possible actions cohere with her existing ethical framework and how her actions will operationalize the ordered principles within that framework. In short, she *imagines* the most likely outcome of her action, considering the array of possible action options from which she can choose. Furthermore, her options may not all be readily evident—by the process of imaginatively considering desired outcomes, she may be able to work back to previously unconsidered options which she can then enact to hopefully achieve these outcomes, perhaps by conceptual redeployment as described by Churchland in the previous chapter.

In the epigraph for this chapter, Mark Johnson asserts moral theory's reliance on narrative. He proposes that a sound moral theory requires knowledge about "human motivation, the nature of the self, the nature of human concepts, how our reason works, how we are socially constituted, and a host of other facts about who we are and how the mind operates" ("Moral Psychology" 46). I would argue that an understanding of human motivation, the nature of the self, or how we are socially constituted is *narrative* in nature. And not merely narrative in the service of concepts or principles—my discussion in the previous chapter and earlier sections of this chapter maintains the inadequacy of such a reductionistic understanding of basic concepts and categories, let alone human morality. Rather, moral prototypes and moral reasoning rely on a mode of reasoning

coordinated by the narratives that unify our basic understandings of who we are and how we should act—i.e., the moral imagination is a *narrative* form of imagining.

How might the physician in my earlier example work through the dilemma of either hastening her patient's death or allowing him to experience preventable suffering? In a classically principlist matrix, she simply weighs the facts of the case against her ordered set of principles, determines which principle should be honored (preserving life or preventing suffering), and acts accordingly. The process of weighing the facts of the case, however, involves a number of narrative features: the patient's values and desires, the clinical history of the patients illness, the relationship of the physician with the patient and his family, the culture of the patient and the institution, biases from the physician's training and specialty choice, just to name a few. These considerations could all be seen as nothing more than framing devices for the real work of weighing ethical principles—in which case narrative is merely in the service of principles. But the very process of weighing these considerations cannot be extricated from their particularities—in both form and content, the principles cannot function independent from their contextualizing narratives.

Furthermore, the physician will imaginatively undertake "a mental exploration of [her] possibilities." She will, accordingly, envision the suffering that might ensue if she cannot relieve her patient with standard therapies, the legal consequences if she agrees to PAS, how the family will respond to either course of action, and how her actions will affect her own personal and professional development. This exercise in the moral imagination will invoke her ordered set of principles, but is not necessarily beholden to them. She may well modify her principles, or even her pretheoretical moral judgments or

her background beliefs and theories, in response to lived experience of grappling with the dilemma. For example, virtually every physician that I have heard argue in support of legalizing physician-assisted suicide cited a specific, emotionally wrenching case that was pivotal in his moral deliberation. In any case, narrative imagining will be at the center of her deliberation.

The question then arises: are principles and narrative simply "separate but equal," or are they related in some deeper way? Few current proposals for narrative ethics have engaged the more radical claim for the moral imagination. In the following chapter, I will examine contemporary proposals for narrative ethics and propose that a more comprehensive conception of narrative ethics is still needed.

Chapter 3: How is Narrative Ethics Currently Conceived?

. . . there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry . . .

Plato, <u>Republic</u> (Book X)

The philosopher therefore and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example. But both, not having both, do both halt. For the philosopher, setting down with thorny argument the bare rule, is so hard of utterance, and so misty to be conceived, that one that hath no other guide but him shall wade in him till he be old before he shall find sufficient cause to be honest. For his knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general, that happy is the man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand. On the other side, the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine. Now doth the peerless poet perform both: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done; so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example.

Sir Philip Sidney, <u>An Apology for Poetry</u>

In the first chapter, I reviewed how cognitive science alters traditional conceptions of rationality, including the contribution of the prototype theory of concepts and connectionism to moral theory. In the second chapter, I explored moral judgment, including the proposal that the moral imagination is a fundamentally narrative process. In this chapter, I will look at current conceptions of narrative ethics and how they are informed by the proposals from the first two chapters. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of current conceptions of narrative ethics—starting with a brief review of different conceptions for the term "narrative."

What is Narrative's Role in Ethics?

The lack of a unified conceptual foundation for narrative ethics stems, in part, from the wide variety of meanings implied by the term *narrative*. Some cognitive theorists, such as Mark Johnson, intentionally use the term to encompass the most basic cognitive processes by which humans order the experiences and direction of their lives. Narrative ethicists more typically use the term to formally denote some type of *story*—a literary story, a case history, or the biographical background and circumstantial details that provide the context for an individual's unique life story.

Wallace Martin separates modern narrative theories into three groups, "depending on whether they treat narrative as a sequence of events, a discourse produced by a narrator, or a verbal artifact that is organized and endowed with meaning by its readers"[9] (82). My use of the term narrative derives primarily from the first of Martin's three groups of theories: those that treat narrative as "a sequence of events."[10] However, Martin's third group of theories also contains an integral concept for my understanding of narrative—the process by which "a verbal artifact is organized and endowed with meaning." This hybrid use of the term encompasses more than the literary realm, allowing for the notion that the sequence of events that comprise one's life can be considered a "lived narrative."

But what is narrative's role *in* ethics? Tom Tomlinson explores different proposals for narrative ethics and finds himself "perplexed." His primary interest is in

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[9] In recognition of oral narrative traditions, I would include "listeners" in this third group.

[10] Certain features are implicit in this understanding of narrative: at least one central actor or agent, a point of view (which, in "stories," may distinctly differ for the author, the narrator, and the central character or characters), a setting, some sequence of events occurring over time (i.e., with a beginning, middle, and end), and conflict or action which generally brings about some change in the central character(s).

the claim that "narrative serv[es] a central epistemic function in the discovery, justification or application of ethical knowledge—a role that fill the gaps inherent in any analytical, rule-based method" (124). His emphasis on the "central epistemic function" of narrative delves deeper than the usual considerations of narrative as an adjunct to principles in teaching ethics or enhancing moral understanding. Tomlinson's challenge elicits more fundamental questions: Does narrative underlie moral perception and reasoning in some inextricable and, at present, poorly understood way? What makes narrative a *necessary*, rather than complementary, component of ethical deliberation?

An overview of current conceptions of narrative ethics, framed by the earlier discussion of cognitive science's contribution to moral theory and the moral imagination, will offer an initial attempt to answer some of these questions.

Current Conceptions of Narrative Ethics

A primary difficulty in investigating the role of narrative *in* ethics stems from nascent stage of narrative ethics as a field of scholarly study. Narrative ethicists have not articulated an agreed-upon conceptual foundation. John Arras offers a typology for differing approaches to narrative ethics. Like Tomlinson, Arras wants narrative ethicists to clarify the epistemic function of narratives in ethics: "[T]he connection between narrative and moral justification remains maddeningly obscure. What, one wants to ask, is the relationship between narrative and the achievement of moral justification, between the telling of a story and the establishment of a warrant for believing in the moral adequacy or excellence of a particular action, policy, or character" (67)?

Arras prefaces his typology by observing that principlist models of moral justification "involved an effort to connect with a normative essence, idea, or norm beyond the vagaries of actual human behavior" (67). This effort's intent was to transcend the infinite array of personal, social, or historical contingencies that confound ethic deliberation and develop a moral methodology by which to judge one's actions or precepts independent of time or context. Modern ethical theories evolved from an effort to provide constancy amidst the relativism of individual life narratives.

Narrative ethicists criticize modernist ethics for taking a general descriptive methodology and inappropriately generalizing it to situations, peoples and cultures for which it has little relevance. Narrativist proposals in response to this criticism vary substantially in both character and in scope. In general, however, most have not distinguished themselves methodologically or conceptually as more than a fine-tuning of classical principlist ethics.

One of the more widely touted narrativist proposals, Rita Charon's notion of "narrative competence," asserts that a heightened literary consciousness augments moral reasoning skills.[11] Charon, however, makes clear that her narrativist proposal is not intended to usurp the dominant position of principlist bioethics:

> Although not an independent method that promises to replace all existing efforts in the field of medical ethics, a narrative approach can make existing methods work more accurately and effectively. The principlist methods of ethical inquiry remain as the structure for clarifying and adjudicating conflicts among patients, health providers, and family members at the juncture of the quandary. The principles upon which bioethics decisions have been based—patient autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice—continue to guide ethical action within health care. Narrative competencies, however, have the power to

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[11] Charon, a physician and literary scholar, works primarily in the medical humanities. Accordingly, Charon's descriptions use terminology specific to bioethics.

particularize such decisions, to increase involvement of both patients and providers in clarifying ethical choices, and to take timely longitudinal steps toward ethical recognition that will obviate quandary ethics (277).

Arras notes that in narrative competence and comparable proposals, "Principles retain their normative force; narrative sensitivity makes them work better. 'Narrative ethics' on this gloss is thus not a newer, better kind of ethics; it simply allows us to apply principles with greater sensitivity and precision" (70). Although narrative competence offers an optimized model of principlism, it does not promote a more ambitious role for narrative in ethics. Efforts to fine-tune principlism are laudable, but the claim that narrative sensitivity enhances the process of principlist deliberation borders on self-evident.[12] Such a subsidiary role for narrative adds little to my thesis, so will not be explicated in any further depth.

Martha Nussbaum makes a stronger claim for narrative as a form of moral methodology in its own right. Her proposal is based, in part, on certain assumptions about the relationship between the form and content of philosophical writing. According to Nussbaum, the evolution of philosophical discourse itself has impeded the development of a unique expression of narrative ethics:

> [T]he conventional style of Anglo-American philosophical prose...[became] correct, abstract, hygienically pallid, a style that seemed to be regarded as a kind of all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all could be efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged. That there might be other ways of being precise, other conceptions of lucidity and completeness that might be held to be even more appropriate for ethical thought...was, on the whole, neither asserted nor even denied... (Love's Knowledge 19).

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[12] In fairness to Charon, her proposal's sense of "narrative" differs from my more general use of the term. She bases narrative competence on the use of *literary* narratives for moral education, and explores approaching ethical deliberation via the methodology of literary criticism, making her proposal a more ambitious contribution to classical principlist ethics than my limited discussion suggests. She does not, however, portray narrative competence as a moral methodology independent of (or that radically departs from) classical principlism.

Nussbaum emphasizes that modes of philosophical expression emanate from one's moral methodology and, conversely, that an unreflective reliance on established modes of discourse implies acceptance of established views and methodology. Nussbaum further suggests that the dominance of "Anglo-American philosophical prose" was not a considered acquiescence to a superior form of ethical inquiry but a byproduct of Western philosophy's increasing deference to the natural sciences.

> The situation resulted in part from the long predominance of ethical views that really did underwrite the conventional style—so that it had by then become second nature, as though it was *the* style for ethics. It owed much, as well…to the long-standing fascination of Western philosophers with the methods and the style of natural science, which have at many times in history seemed to embody the only sort of rigor and precision worth cultivating, the only norm of rationality worth emulating, even in the ethical sphere…. But there is a mistake made, or at least a carelessness, when one takes a method and style that have proven fruitful for the investigation and description of certain truths—say the natural sciences—and applies them without further reflection or argument to a very different sphere of human life that may have a different geography and demand a different sort of precision, a different norm of rationality (Love's Knowledge 19-20).

Nussbaum's proposal, like Charon's, does not intend for narrative to replace principlist ethics. Nussbaum does, however, propose a more distinctive epistemological role for narrative. Specifically, she proposes that fictional literary narratives are a form of moral methodology in their own right. Reading literary fiction, she proposes, engages the reader's sensibilities in a unique way that principlist ethics cannot. In a more general way (i.e., in the broader sense of narrative outlined at the beginning of this chapter), one can utilize the narrative of her lived experience or the narratives of other persons' viewpoints and experiences to activate and modify moral prototypes relevant to the situation at hand.

Nussbaum notes that "Aristotelian arguments against *generality* (against general rules as *sufficient* for correct choice) point to the need for fine-tuned *concreteness* in ethical attention and judgment" (Love's Knowledge 38). Elsewhere, Nussbaum builds on practical reason to make a case for the moral imagination within the political realm—to cultivate what she terms "poets as judges." She traces a common thread from Aristotle, "who developed a normative conception of equitable judgment to take the place of an excessively simple or reductive reliance on abstract general principles," to Walt Whitman's poet-judge, "the equable man" (Poetic Justice 80). She makes the strong claim that "all of human life is a going beyond the facts...a projection of our own sentiments and inner activities onto forms we perceive about us (and a reception from this interaction of images of ourselves, our own inner world). We are all us, insofar as we interact morally and politically, fanciful projectors, makers of and believers in fictions and metaphors" (38). Like Johnson, she construes all we do as being, in some elemental way, *imaginative*. And, like Johnson, she sees the moral imagination as a necessary component of moral reasoning: "[T]his flexible context-specific judging is not a concession to the irrational, but the most complete expression of the...rational...." (Love's Knowledge 80).

Although Nussbaum proposes a more ambitious role for narrative than Charon, she still views narrative and principles as separate, albeit more equal, forms of rationality. Others argue for a more exclusively narrativist approach to ethics. Arras describes these proposals as "a frontal assault on the so-called Enlightenment project of establishing a rational basis for ethics beyond the constraints of tradition and culture" (73). In these proposals, ethical theories are anchored within a given historical/cultural tradition. Other

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communities or cultures may develop parallel moral traditions, but a radically different

morality may evolve just as readily. Echoing concerns that such approaches become

hopelessly relativistic, Arras notes that "reason and rationality will take on as many forms

as there are basic historical traditions; there is no one model of rationality that might be

used as a critical vantage point from which to pass judgment on the vast panoply of what

Wittgenstein called 'forms of life.' The Enlightenment project of making ethics

'scientific,' objective, and rational by stripping it of all subjective elements borne by

narrative is…a philosophical dead end" (73-74). Instead, a historical "meta-narrative"

would emerge, in which ethics would be based on traditions and "foundational stories."

Ethical justification then becomes "a matter of squaring one's actions with a social

role…that is, in turn, justified by a fundamental narrative" (74).

This approach has been heralded as a means by which one can "bridge the gap"

between the abstractness of moral principles and the particularities unique to a specific

ethical dilemma. Arras cites Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas as principal

proponents of this approach. MacIntyre notes: "I can only answer the question 'What

am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a

part'" (216)? Brody also argues that one must consider salient moral principles within

the context of an individual's life story, including consideration of the shared values of

the moral community in which the individual resides (e.g., what are the implications of

how and why one's actions adhere to, or deviate from, the values of one's moral

community in this situation). Tomlinson identifies these proposals as "narrative

rationality" (129). Narrative rationality asserts that human lives, like narratives,

> have meaning because of their place within a time sequence, a chronology,
> and to alter the sequence is to alter the meaning.… As soon as the

narrative is told, one can construct a non-narrative exposition of the content of the narrative.... That suggests in turn that if one simply had 'all the facts,' one would have been able to predict whatever was important, using the most suitable principles and theories, without the narrative. But that is not the lived experience.... [I]t makes a great deal of difference, conceptually, whether one comes at a narrative from before or after it was told (Brody 6-7).

Tomlinson finds this perspective lacking: "The fundamental fallacy in these views is the inference from the claim that my life is best *described* by a narrative to the normative claim that my life choices are best judged by their coherence within my life narrative.... Unless we assume that our stories are being written by someone else (God or the Fates), we don't live out a narrative, we create one by living a life" (130).

I agree that "we don't live out a narrative, we create one by living a life," but I want to argue that this *supports* rather than refutes narrative rationality as a credible proposal for the central epistemic function of narrative. Tomlinson separates the role of principles from that of narrative, with narrative in a subsidiary role: narrative may contextualize the formulation of an ethical dilemma, but the actual work of ethical decision making ultimately relies on balancing the principles most relevant to that context. But, as Brody points out, this reductionistic approach assumes people articulate their life's narratives and then engage in some form of philosophical ethics.

In lived lives, however, ethics is more likely to reflect the Aristotelian notion of ethics as *action*. Kathryn Montgomery Hunter elaborates on the Aristotle's "practical reason:"

> Aristotle distinguishes practical reasoning or *phronesis* from scientific knowing or *epistime*.... The distinction is essential to his account of ethics as a rational endeavor and especially to its difference from science: the knowledge of stable physical phenomena that can be generalized as necessary and invariant laws. *Phronesis*, by contrast, is a means of operating in the world, a matter of understanding how best to act in

particular circumstances that are not (and cannot be) thoroughly expressed in general rules.... There is, as Aristotle declares, no science of individuals.... Thus, in realms where knowledge is necessarily particular and rules arise from individual instances of practice (rather than being deduced from a general law)...a different kind of knowing is called for. It is not that abstractions...are irrelevant to practical reason, but that they cannot go the whole way alone. (304-305)

Ultimately, however, we must confront the "question of what makes any story [foundational or otherwise] morally compelling and worthy of our allegiance" (Arras 76). One solution would be to set out criteria for the evaluation of stories. "Narrative ethics must on this account have recourse to an independent set of abstract criteria bearing either on the rightness of actions or on the kinds of characters that our stories ought to foster. But the problem with this approach is obviously that it forfeits the supremacy of narrative over abstract principle, thereby returning us to the more benign conception of ethics as a supplement to (or dialectically incorporated ingredient of) principles and theory" (77).

A more satisfactory approach is to claim that some stories have historically done a better job than others in solving comparable problems. This approach is "more consonant with the whole idea of a robust narrative ethics" (77). In an "epistemological crisis"— when a narrative tradition's resources no longer prove adequate to the task at hand—one first looks to other narratives for guidance. In this approach, the corrective for an inadequate story is not recourse to abstract principles, but the formulation of a better story. Of course, this assumes that the adaptation of an outside story, or the generation of a new story, represents epistemological and moral progress—not merely the abandonment of one story and accompanying social roles for another story and set of

social roles. In the following chapter, I will examine ways by which one might construct "a better story," including Wayne Booth's notion of *coduction*.

In summary, most proposals for narrative ethics are either proposals for narrative as means to fine-tune classical principlist ethics or for narrative and principles as "separate but equal" cohabitants in the ethical arena. In the final chapter, I will argue for a deeper relationship between narrative and principles—namely, that they are not separate but are in fact components of a common mode of moral reasoning.

Chapter 4: Moral Intelligence

However, my topic is not 'narrative ethics,' at least not in its broadest sense: It is rather 'narrative (and norms) in ethics.' I put matters this way to emphasize that I do not conceive ethics to be exclusively norm-based or even norm-driven. Instead, I will focus on the relations between norms and narratives in ethics. Both, properly understood, are essential and indispensable to ethics—the difficult questions concern their relations.

James Childress, "Narrative(s) versus Norm(s): A Misplaced Debate in Bioethics"
In: *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Ethics*

A theory of morality should be a theory of moral understanding. Its goal should be moral insight and the guidance and direction that come from a deep and rich understanding of oneself, other people, and the complexities of human existence.... [Moral reasoning] involves an expansive form of imaginative reason that is flexible enough to manage our changing experience and to meet new contingencies intelligently. The key to moral intelligence is to grasp imaginatively the possibilities for action in a given situation and to discern which one is most likely to enhance meaning and well-being. The idea of moral theory as providing governance through rules and principles is fundamentally mistaken. In fact, it is counterproductive to the extent that it overlooks the changing character of experience and does not allow us to see creatively new possibilities for action and response.

Mark Johnson, "How Moral Psychology Changes Moral Theory"
In: *Mind and Morals: Essays on Ethics and Cognitive Science*

My proposal is that the persistent dichotomy between the narrative and the more traditional rule-governed aspects of ethics is a false one. These two methodologies are, in fact, not an either/or proposition but are merely different facets of the cognitive processes upon which moral reasoning is predicated. Furthermore, this assertion is supported by new understandings of brain function from research in cognitive science, namely the moral prototype theory. These concepts, in turn, correlate to human cognition's perceptual images and dispositional representations.

Mark Johnson's proposes that moral prototypes are important in moral deliberation in the following ways:

> 1) They represent experientially basic types of situations.... 2) [B]asic prototypes carry with them the affective dimensions of the concrete situations in which they arise.... 3) Prototypes are malleable and flexible.... 4) The meaning, point, and force of a particular prototype will also depend in part on the various narrative contexts in which it is embedded.... 5) Prototypes will be the basis for whatever moral principles we have.... 6) A central part of our moral development will be the imaginative use of particular prototypes in constructing our lives (Moral Imagination 190-192).

This description presupposes that the moral prototype theory is a fundamentally narrative mode of understanding. Moral prototypes are founded on exemplars that are learned by narratives—either in the form of moral education or from lived experience. Moral prototypes subsequently give rise to, and are enacted in, the narrative features of one's life. Specifically, a moral prototype may be perceived or enacted differently based on the contingencies associated with the situational narrative that invokes or is generated by the prototype. One might envision the likely outcomes of her possible actions, imaginatively project how these outcomes cohere with relevant ethical framework, then work to maintain integrity between her ethical framework, her actions, and the likely consequences of her actions. Prototypes are not necessarily narratives, *per se*. Moral concepts such as person, will, and duty are all understood as prototypes. But the acquisition of each concept, and the apprehension their manifold variations, are narrative processes.

Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner proposes two complementary but epistemologically distinct modes of cognitive reasoning: the paradigmatic (or logico-scientific) mode and the narrative mode. "Both can be used as means for convincing

another. Yet what they convince *of* is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical truth. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude" (11).

I am proposing that these two modes of thought, while distinct, are in fact reciprocal elements of the way the human mind reasons—i.e., different facets of a common rationality. The notion that narrative and principles are part of a common process is not new. Aristotle's concept of practical reason was predicated on such a symbiotic relationship between narrative and principles—Bruner's two modes of thought roughly correspond to Hunter's description of *episisteme* and *phronesis*.

Narrative Imagining

What makes the moral imagination inherently narrative? Johnson argues that "*our lives ultimately have a narrative structure. It is in sustained narratives...that we come closest to observing and participating in the reality of life as it is actually experienced and lived. We learn from, and are changed by, such narratives to the extent that we become imaginatively engaged in making fine discriminations of character and in determining what is morally salient in particular situations*" (Moral Imagination 196, emphasis added).

Damasio's work offers support for this contention in the form of cognitive theory. "My view then is that having a mind means that an organism forms neural representations which can become images, be manipulated in a process called thought, and eventually influence behavior by helping predict the future, plan accordingly, and choose the next

action" (90). Damasio uses the term *images* to include perceived or imagined "shapes, colors, movements, tones, or spoken or unspoken words." *Perceptual images*, which are images occurring at the time that they are perceived, include *recalled images*, which are images reconstructed from one's memory (96-97). Recalled images include not only memories of actual events, but also *imagined* images that were

> formed when you planned something that has not happened but that you intend to have happen.... As the planning process unfolded, you were forming images of objects and movements, and consolidating a memory of that fiction in your mind. Images of something that has not yet happened and that may in fact never come to pass are no different in nature from the images you hold of something that has already happened. *They constitute the memory of a possible future rather than of a past that was* (97, emphasis added).

It is distinctly possible that the brain injuries of Phineas Gage, and Damasio's Gage-like patients, deprived them of the ability to coherently unify these images into a life narrative. Devoid of the ability to imaginatively correlate the images of their past, present, and possible futures, the "sustained narratives" of their lives were disrupted. As a result, they could no longer "manage [their] changing experience and...meet new contingencies intelligently" or "grasp imaginatively the possibilities for action in a given situation and...discern which one is most likely to enhance meaning and well-being" (Johnson, "Moral Psychology" 66-67). The injury to brain structures essential to communicating and coordinating perceptual images from the diverse regions of the brain created substantial social and moral deficits. Absent the capacity for narrative imagining, their moral reasoning was disabled.

Johnson proposes that any meaningful moral theory must allow for the narrative conceptualization of a lived life:

> Tracing out over an extended period the consequences of various moral deliberations is therefore crucial to our moral knowledge, and it is essential for moral education. It is through sustained life narrative—through the narratives we live out and construct, and through the fictional narratives we *imaginatively* inhabit—that we can perform these essential reflections and moral inquiries.... The power of fictional narrative to develop our moral sensitivity, our ability to make subtle discriminations, and our empathy for others, is thus the result of the narrative structure of our lives (Moral Imagination 197, emphasis added).

He refers to this as the "experientialist" or "non-objectivist" view of the self. The experientialist view of the self sees moral actions—including deliberation via moral norms—as inextricable from the story of a life. For Johnson, this makes all of life imaginative. It is the moral imagination that allows for discernment in moral judgment and allows us to be "self-transforming beings" (160-161). Note that this conception of narrative assumes that one is actively creating that narrative, and intimates the development of moral character.

Johnson's prioritization of experience over principlist deliberation will likely trigger one of the most common criticisms of narrative ethics, namely that it attempts to *replace* analytical, rule-based philosophy. And were he making that claim, the criticism could be warranted. However, Johnson argues for the integration of these putatively competing moral paradigms. Quoting John Dewey, he notes that "what moral principles we have are not technical rules but rather 'empirical generalizations from the ways in which previous judgments of conduct have practically worked out.' They are summaries of strategies that have proved more or less useful for the kinds of situations previously encountered. But they must never be allowed to solidify into absolute rules, for then the opportunity for moral growth and progress is undermined" ("Moral Psychology" 67).

But how does one integrate basic moral prototypes, ordered sets of principles, and narrative experience during ethical deliberation and create a lived narrative? Merely recalling facts, including summary principles, is insufficient for a meaningful moral life. Ethical deliberation may indeed involve an appeal to one's ordered set of principles, but my proposal argues that narrative does more than aid the "real work" of weighing and choosing the most correct principle. Rather, the perception, reflective consideration, and expression of real or fictional narratives performs a central epistemic function in ethical deliberation. The moral imagination requires more than a refined ordered set of principles. The moral imagination requires "skills in the recurrent manipulation of one's moral perception" (Churchland 103). It requires the ability to "construct an appropriate theory about...their own mind and of the mind of those with whom they interact" (Damasio 58).

In anticipation of charges that this proposal lends itself to rampant subjectivism, I would counter that moral education and experience cultivates an array of moral prototypes that cohere with one's personal values—which have an intrinsic social dimension. Wayne Booth's notion of *coduction* offers a means of balancing the inherent subjectivity of narrative with established ethical norms. He develops the concept as an ethics for literary criticism, but the underlying premise extrapolates readily to narrative approaches to ethics.

> I suggest that we arrive at our sense of values in narratives in precisely the same way we arrive at our sense of values in persons: by *experiencing* them in an immeasurably rich context of others that are both like and unlike them. Even in my first intuition of 'this new one,' whether a story or a person, I see it against a backdrop of my long personal history of other stories and persons.... Thus the logic we depend on as we arrive at our particular appraisals is neither deduction from clear premises, even of the most complex kind, nor induction from a series of precisely defined

and isolated instances. Rather it is always the result of a direct sense that something now before us has yielded an experience that we find *comparatively* desirable, lovable or, on the other hand, comparatively repugnant, contemptible, or hateful (71).

Coduction, as articulated by Booth, anticipates charges of relativism by appealing to socially acquired norms of morality—not as "absolute rules" but as "summaries of strategies that have proved more or less useful for the kinds of situations previously encountered" (Johnson, "Moral Psychology" 67). Ethical deliberation involves a dialectical process of evaluating the situation in terms of the particularities at hand *and* normative guidelines derived from one's moral education and experience. Norms are contextually dependent—the particular features of the situation will determine which ethical guidelines apply, how they apply, and possibly how they need to be modified given the unique features of the situation. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, ethical norms are learned, understood, and applied via cognitive processes that are fundamentally narrative. In this process, narrative is not merely functioning as a handmaiden to principles; it provides a central epistemic function to moral reasoning in and of itself. But by appealing to the meta-narratives distilled from societal experience (i.e., ethical principles), narrative can effectively "connect with a normative essence, idea, or norm beyond the vagaries of actual human behavior" (Arras 67).

This approach coheres with the cognitive science proposals outlined earlier in this thesis. One develops moral prototypes through experience and moral education. These prototypes provide a basis for comparison—moral guides, or principles, that are the summary representations of one's own or one's socially acquired precedents for comparable situations. Thus, when one encounters a problematic situation, the solution is not necessarily a simple appeal to principles. Rather, one correlates the particular

features and imagined possible outcomes of the situation at hand with her established moral prototypes—such as the child in Flanagan's example learning to distinguish a joke from a white lie from a morally justified lie to protect another individual. This is, as outlined before, a context dependent process—i.e., a process reliant on narrative imagining to frame the situation with one's established prototypes. If no amount of "context fixing" identifies a satisfactory prototype, one can modify an established prototype or develop a new prototype that satisfactorily integrates the situation in question with one's ordered set of principles, pretheoretical moral judgments, and background beliefs and theories about the world.

Mark Johnson offers a perspective that broadens not only the role of narrative in human rationality, but also the range of activities that one might classify as "moral." Johnson proposes that essentially all of our deliberate actions involve narrative imagining. He describes the narrative nature of seemingly mundane everyday activities:

> Most of the myriad acts we perform every day, from picking up coffee cups to reading the newspaper to playing games with our children, are done for some purpose or other. Most of the time, we pursue these purposes with little or no conscious reflection or awareness, for the acts we perform are mostly routine. Nonetheless, the purposive element is almost always present, because we are constantly directing our energies toward realizing goals that are means to our more comprehensive goals... (Moral Imagination 164).

Johnson is sensitive to the charge that he is over-reaching, yet he wishes to clearly assert that narrative serves a fundamental role in judgment beyond its communicative or reflective component. "It most definitely does not follow from this use of 'narrative' that every experience is a 'text' in the sense of a linguistic entity.... However, my sense of narrative does indeed entail that we are fundamentally interpretive animals in everything that we do" (153).

A credible criticism of this argument would be that *everything* we do is narrative in the sense that it involves "a sequence of events" and that this is an unenlightening way to cast events as "narratives." Johnson does not claim that every prosaic action itself is necessarily narrative. Instead, he claims that the underlying motivations, goals, and understandings in which such events are embedded constitute an intrinsically narrative way of perceiving and understanding the world and other people. That is, narrative serves *a central epistemic function* even in basic, non-moral activities. That function is more apparent and essential in "the discovery, justification or application of ethical knowledge."

This coheres well with Damasio's sense of how perceptual images are modified and directed by dispositional representations—and, conversely, can modify and direct relevant dispositional representations to adaptively respond to perceptions or imaginative projections. From here, action ensues. Our actions are a part of the sustained narratives of our life—as Tomlinson suggests, we creating our narratives by living a life.

It is the ability to envision our actions as a part of our sustained life narrative, to imagine the moral other, to project how an ethical decision may play itself out in the foreseeable future, that makes ethical decision making imaginative. And this imaginative projection does not simply serve a subsidiary role in the weighting of competing ethical principles. Principles derive from context-specific historical origins, and in an ethical dilemma are considered within a context that can only be understood by grasping the particularities embedded within the situation. These principles are then imaginatively manipulated in a dialectical manner via the moral imagination. Ethics does not merely

need narrative to make it work better—narrative imagining *is* an integral part of ethical deliberation.

After his injury, Phineas Gage continued to live out his life, but he was no longer the author of a sustained, coherent life narrative. Instead, his narrative was limited to a disjointed series of experiences without a unifying theory of himself or those around him. He lost his capacity for moral imagination. Dr. Harlow observed that his "animal propensities" had taken over. Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to say that one needs narrative to be fully human.

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