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Measuring virtue: Skeletal dilemmas or flesh and blood stories?

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The Second Annual Conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values
"Can Virtue-Be-Measured?"

Measuring virtue: Skeletal dilemmas or flesh and blood stories?

Conference subtheme: J

1. Measuring virtue

Suppose we could measure virtue like this: We present a person with problematic story, then invite them to respond with an account of what they would do in such circumstances. The respondent giving a virtuous response, however that is to be construed, is virtuous. If such an approach were effective then I propose that not any old story would do. My money would be on complex and convincing narratives; on flesh and blood stories, and not on traditional skeletal ethical dilemmas of the kind that predominate in moral philosophy (Dennett 1984) and more recently in moral psychology (Doris and Stitch 2012).

Thought experiments have traditionally been used to test the strengths and weaknesses of particular ethical theories (Brown and Fehige 2011). But they are increasingly used to test the strengths and weaknesses of particular individuals and populations. Ethical dilemmas – a subset of thought experiments – can be found in the moral education and assessment of children[1] the ethics training and testing of professionals[2], the selection and interview of prospective employees[3] and training and testing of existing employees[4] in the moral psychological testing of individuals and in experimentation on whole populations.[5]

The use of ethical dilemmas may at first seem attractive; they neatly capture competing moral considerations; divide respondents by intuition and opinion, and demand careful deliberation and clear reasoning. Such tests are simple, relatively risk-free and easily replicable on a large scale. But they won't do for many reasons, some of which I must sidestep in this paper. Here, I assume that it is *theoretically* possible to measure an individual's virtue by eliciting and evaluating their responses to hypothetical stories. I focus on defending the claim that stories in the form of paired down ethical dilemmas are not adequate for the job and I offer an account of the relationship between narrative and ethics that makes this seem plausible.

2. Ethical Dilemmas as measurements of virtue

2.1 What are ethical dilemmas?

Ethical dilemmas of the kind I criticise, are a subtype of thought experiment and thought experiments are a species of example – most at home in philosophical and scientific theorising – distinct from the examples we might use to explain an idea or illustrate a point. Rather than simply facilitating our comprehension of a particular claim, thought experiments involve making a judgement, they are intended to form part of our deliberative process. When we deploy a thought experiment in ethics we ask, or are asked, to determine the moral status of a particular state of affairs. To 'make a judgement about what would be the case if the particular state of affairs described in some imaginary scenario were actual.' (Gendler, 1998 p.398). Thought experiments can function in various ways to *clarify views*, focusing our attention on morally salient features of a problem, to *re-imagine issues* that have become stale through overfamiliarity or entrenched views by and to *provide counter examples* for general moral claims. Some thought experiments also function as *intuition pumps*, a means of eliciting intuitions that lead individuals to general moral conclusions though inductive reasoning (Walsh 2007).

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[1] See examples from US website for character education: http://www.goodcharacter.com/dilemma/dilemma3.html

[2] For example in the UK The University of Leeds hosts the Inter-disciplinary ethics applied (IDEA) Centre responsible for teaching applied ethics across the university as well as making and offer of training and consultancy to professionals, businesses and public bodies http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125160/inter-disciplinary_ethics_applied_centre
A similar offer is made at the University of Keele http://www.keele.ac.uk/ethics/ and elsewhere.

[3] For example, The Society for Human Resource Management offers advice on interview dilemmas here: http://www.shrm.org/TemplatesTools/Samples/InterviewQuestions/Pages/ExampleQuestion.aspx

[4] Here is an example from US company CRM learning, featuring hammy video clips of workplace ethical dilemmas. http://www.crmlearning.com/Moment-of-Truth-C8868-P54510.aspx

[5] For example the University of Alabama's Defining Issues Test at http://www.ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/ And Harvard Universities' Moral Sense Test http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu/

Ethical dilemmas are the subtype of thought experiment commonly found in contexts in which there are claims to measure virtue for example they are the basis the Defining Issues Test. Ethical dilemmas, understood this way, present scenarios in which moral considerations come into conflict. In an ethical dilemma an agent is required to do one of two (or more) actions; they can do each of the actions; but they cannot do both (or all) of the actions. Consequently, it seems that the agent is condemned to moral failure; no matter what she does, she will do something wrong (or fail to do something that she ought to do). (McConnell 2010). Discourse around moral dilemmas treats them as genuine, only if neither of the competing requirements overrides the other. One definition of a moral dilemma (Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, cited in Richardson 2013) as a situation in which the following are true of a single agent:

1. He ought to do *A*.
2. He ought to do *B*.
3. He cannot do both *A* and *B*.
4. (1) does not override (2) and (2) does not override (1).

However for the purposes of our discussion an 'ethical dilemma' is any ethical example that presents a stark moral choice for an agent or observer, even if deliberation reveals one choice to be more compelling as is often true of case studies. Case studies are real or imagined ethical situations that are often less polarising than dilemmas and tend to be free from the complex theoretical baggage of philosopher's thought experiments. They are commonly found in applied ethics training and testing, especially in medical ethics (Slomka 2008).

Despite their open-ended nature, dilemmas understood in this way, cannot be 'neutral', nor do they lack para-textual context. Like all stories, dilemmas are authored. In their constriction they framed in various ways that may prejudice the responses they illicit (Gold and List 2004, Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012). They are constructed by individual authors and contemplated by individual thinkers, both with their own set of circumstances and axes to grind. Furthermore they are deployed in particular and unique settings: the experiment, the job interview the school test. Such dilemmas - though they are thin on detail - do not lack textual context either: One may detect in Bernard William's 'Jim and the Indians' the residue of white-centric colonialism, while some may find that Judith Jarvis Thomson's 'Fat Man' trolley problem trades on a faint distaste for overweight people (Williams 1973, Thomson 1978). All of these factors have a bearing on how the dilemmas are construed and how they are construed. Given these concerns it is unsurprising that one might find ethical dilemmas imperfect. But in what follows I hope to establish more than this. I doubt any tool is perfectly suited to be used in the measurement of virtue, but I claim that ethical dilemmas are *particularly* ill-suited because of a fundamental lack of fit between their form and content and the form and content of our experience of the ethical issues that we encounter in everyday ethical life.

2.2 Where might ethical dilemmas be used to measure virtue?

Ethical dilemmas may be found in a number of contexts in which we may find claims that virtue is being measured. Dilemmas may be used in *educational settings* as an adjunct to other kinds of testing and benchmarking in schooling. We can see the use of moral dilemmas in education in the work of Lawrence

Kholberg the American psychologist in his experiments on the moral development of boys.[6] More recently dilemmas presenting issues that may be more familiar to children, can be found in some of the literature used by character educators, particularly in the United States.[7]

Likewise dilemmas may be found in *applied ethics teaching and training*, notably in the assessment of that training. Historically we find moral dilemmas in the form of philosophical thought experiments, case studies and vignettes in medical ethics (Slomka 2008). More recently professional ethics training has extended throughout healthcare, as well as in science, business, law, engineering, education media and sport where case fictional and non fictional studies are used in teaching and assessment.[8] We also find ethical training as continuing professional development or as part of registration with professional bodies – something that must be evidenced. (Drake et al. 2005).

Increasingly ethical dilemmas arise in *professional contexts* such as recruitment, interviews and in professional certification. Moral dilemmas may be presented to interviewees in order to assess the quality their responses or to detect evidence of dishonesty or other 'counterproductive' character traits or else, applicants may be asked to share an ethical dilemma they faced - along with a description of their actions as evidence of their good character.[9]

Finally, ethical dilemmas are most evident in *psychological experimentation* where they are deployed in online or paper multiple choice tests to test individuals and populations according to some prior notion of 'the ethical' or to collect data that might reveal trends in our current ethical thinking. One such example is the 'DIT2', the revised Defining Issues Test, devised by The Center for the Study of Ethical Development, it is tool that claims to be a 'measure of moral judgment development'[10]. The DIT uses a Likert-type scale to give quantitative ratings and rankings to issues surrounding five different moral dilemmas.[11]

2.3 How might ethical dilemmas be used to measure virtue?

In order to make progress, in what follows we must put aside some of the concerns we may have that the notions of virtue, character and virtue-education, training and testing. Concerns that such notions suffer from a lack of clarity, from redundancy, datedness and religiosity; concerns that they are paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative and situation-dependent. We must also put aside well-founded historical, methodological and practical misgivings (Kristjánsson 2013). Furthermore must also put aside concerns about the gap between what people say they will do in the face of hypothetical examples and what they actually do in real life situations. (Fieldman-Hall et al 2012).

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[6] Kohlberg assessed the children's responses according to his three stage, six step cognitive theory of moral development. According to the theory, individuals develop from pre-conventional moral thinking concerned with obedience and the avoidance of punishment (stage 1) or in terms of getting their desires satisfied (stage 2) to the conventional level where individuals find their standards in the approval of others (stage 3) or in the laws and conventions of society (stage 4). Finally, some individuals ascend to the post-conventional level of 'principled' morality: individuals judge right and wrong in terms of a supposed social contract (stage 5) or in terms of self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality and consistency (stage 6). (Kohlberg 1976).

[7] See examples from US website for character education: http://www.goodcharacter.com/dilemma/dilemma3.html

[8] See examples from bioethics, business, computing, engineering, journalism and education at The Vanderbilt University Center for Ethics: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/CenterforEthics/cases.html

[9] See examples of ethical dilemmas job applicants may face, according to the Society for Human Resource Management http://www.shrm.org/TemplatesTools/Samples/InterviewQuestions/Pages/ExampleQuestion.aspx

[10] See http://www.ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/the-dit-and-dit-2

[11] Specifically, respondents rate 12 issues in terms of their importance to the corresponding dilemma and then rank the four most important issues. Patterns of ratings and rankings reveal information about three Neo-Kohlbergian schemas of moral reasoning: the Personal Interests Schema, the Maintaining Norms Schema and the Postconventional Schema.[11] (Rest et al 2000; Navarez, 2002).

In order to get to the topic of this paper: the inadequacy of skeletal dilemmas and reasons we might favour flesh and blood stories, we must make the realist, naturalist supposition that moral properties such as honesty or wickedness really exist as parts of the natural world, furthermore we must suppose that these properties are measurable. Finally we must suppose that we can measure virtue – at the very least detect the presence of virtue(s) – by presenting an individual with hypothetical ethical examples and analysing their responses.

I accept that this is *an awful lot* to swallow. But I suggest that of the various examples I offer, many of these assumptions have been readily made. And so I hope that my critique of skeletal dilemmas does not amount to a straw man argument, but rather a caution against over-reliance on responses elicited by undernourished ethical stories.

2.4 A specific ethical dilemma at work

Perhaps one of the most famous uses of ethical dilemmas in the empirical assessment of character can be found in the work of the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg whose longitudinal Piaget-inspired research into moral development presented boys with scenarios depicting moral conflicts and recorded their strategies for resolving the dilemmas. Most well-known of his dilemmas is the Heinz case:

> A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay for it later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should the husband have done that?
>
> (Kohlberg 1963 p. 19)

In his analysis of the boys' responses, and his subsequent hierarchical classification of their moral development, Kohlberg was not concerned with their responses per say, but rather with the reasoning that produced their verdicts. While Kohlberg was not a virtue ethicist, on a more permissive view of virtue, we might understand his classification as a grading of participants along a continuum from lesser to greater virtue – from those with less cognitively sophisticated moral characters concerned with meeting their own needs and avoiding punishment, to more cognitively sophisticated characters concerned with self chosen, comprehensive, universal and consistent ethical principles.

While criticisms of Kohlberg's methodology are rife (Murphy 1980; Gilligan 1982) I ask that we focus on one question in particular: *Is the story of Heinz capable of stimulating genuinely virtuous or vicious responses*? I believe the answer is no.

Why? We notice after all, that the Heinz case is a narrative and in the next section I will speak at length about the value of narrative in the development of virtuous people. The dilemma *is* a narrative, albeit a very minimal one. It is temporal (spanning some critical period in his wife's illness to some unspecified time after the theft of the drug), it features existents in the form of people (a man, a woman, and a druggist) and place (presumably somewhere in America since they refer to the dollar). Events befall these people (cancer, failed negotiation with the druggist, the theft) and some of the causal relationships between the events are revealed. These features make it possible for the dilemma to be ethically stimulating at all. But the missing narrative features explain the inadequacy of the ethical dilemma as a tool in the measurement of virtue.

In order to explicate the shortcomings of skeletal dilemmas, we first need an account of flesh and blood narratives.

3. Flesh and blood narrative and the measurement of virtue

Both thin dilemmas and rich stories of the kind found in novels, films, documentaries and journalism, are narratives according to my account. However, dilemmas are often minimally narrative in form and content, and as a consequence lack features that are essential if we wish to stimulate a genuinely virtuous or vicious response to a hypothetical ethical scenario.

3.1 What is narrative?

When I speak of narrative I do so in the terms of an ever-growing community of interdisciplinary narrative scholars, among them philosophers, literary scholars, historians, psychologists, sociologists and neuroscientists (MacIntyre 1985); (White 1973); (Bruner, 1991); (Polkinghorne 1995) etc. Among these scholars narrative is widely acknowledged as more than a means of classifying texts – of separating recipes books from short stories, or telephone directories from film scripts.

Narrative is a ubiquitous, culturally privileged and multi-modal phenomena; a primary mechanism by which human beings experience, understand, and communicate sequences of events and their relations to particular people and places. Narrative organises complex, chaotic human experience into patterns that are intelligible and communicable – both to oneself and to others. These patterns revel the chronology, causality and significance of events, and bind them together as a structural whole – the story – that connotes 'a logic in it's own right' (Herman 2001 p. 130). Although these structures are complex, and their content infinitely rich, human beings from earliest childhood grasp their logic. In what follows I will say more to make sense of this rather complex account of something we ordinarily experience as immediate and straightforward.

Narrative is everywhere and takes many forms

An account of narrative naturally starts with attention to some narrative examples, and even a casual survey of such examples reveals something at once obvious and yet striking. 'The narratives of the world are numberless' the French Structuralist critic Roland Barthes famously noticed:

> 'Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting […] stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.

(Barthes 1977 p.79)

Narrative is a structure

Narrative content may be presented and translated into multiple modes. The basic story content of Romeo and Juliet for example – that two people fall in love and tragically die – may survive translation into dance, animation or painting. The possibility of transposing narrative from one medium to another is the strongest reason in favour of thinking of narrative as a structural whole.

Narrative is a structure comprising 'content' and 'expression'

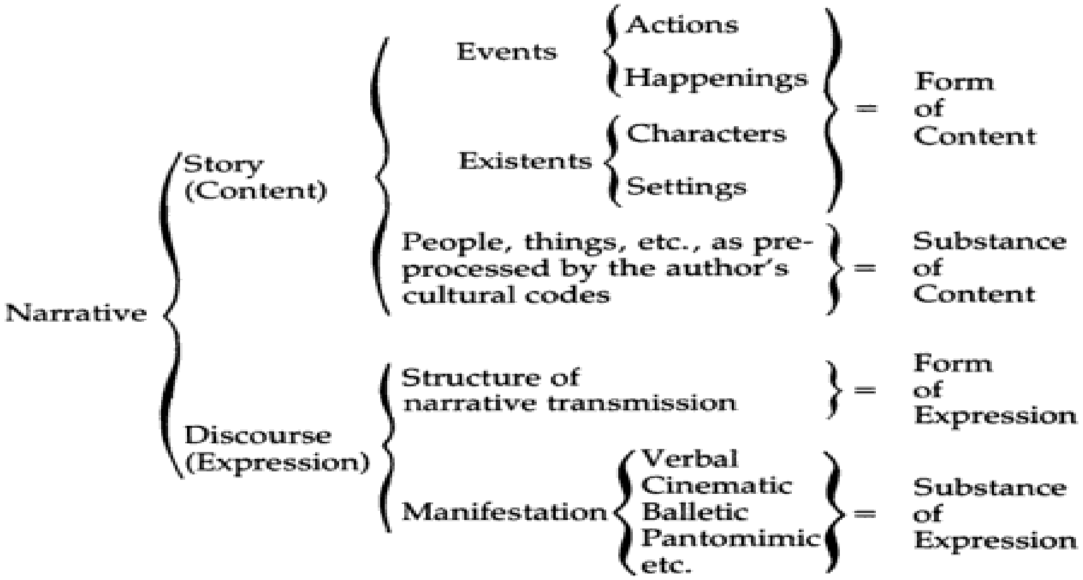
My understanding of the basis of narrative structure follows that of the American critic, Seymour Chatman, but has roots that can be traced back to Aristotle. On this view one must distinguish narrative *content* from narrative *expression*: 'the what' of the story or the basic facts it conveys and 'the how' of the story telling – the way those facts are selected, represented, arranged, and interpreted by the giver and the receiver of a narrative (Chatman 1978 p.19).

In Romeo and Juliet the basic facts and the logical relationships they stand in are preserved from the theatre production to the cartoon: the characters – Romeo and Juliet – exist, they exist in a time and place – fourteenth century Verona – and they are bound in relation to one another of love, and in in a wider context of familial discord. The events are *emploted* in the same basic way with the lover's meeting proceeding their falling in love and their deaths following their suicidal act. However the telling of the story as a comic strip is radically different; it employs an entirely new pictorial language to represent the story's events and existents. Beyond the change of medium; any retelling will embody many judgements on the part of the new storyteller, about what to include, what to omit, what to emphasise and what to down play; ultimately about what matters.

Narrative is a structural whole

I understand narrative as a structural whole because all of the elements within it – the events that take place and the people to whom they befall – are related to one another in an organised way. Unlike a collection of arbitrary people, places, actions and occurrences; the components within a true narrative tend to be 'mutually entailing' in a way that is recognisable even after transposition from one mode of expression such as cinema to another such as synopsis (Chatman 1978 p. 21). Any telling of a story has a basic chronology as its foundation. It takes place within a certain spatial and temporal setting. The events that happen are caused and have consequences. The characters within the story are agents possessing intentional states that are themselves, caused and causal. A story's characters stand in inter-subjective relations with one another and are bound by relational, all too often ethical, bonds. These basic features of stories constitute their logic and enable stories to represent ethically relevant features of everyday life

This primary division of story and discourse can be further subdivided to reveal some of the other conceptual objects common to a structuralist a theory of narrative.


Narrative
Story (Content)
Events
Actions
Happenings
Existents
Characters
Settings
= Form of Content
People, things, etc., as pre-processed by the author's cultural codes
= Substance of Content
Discourse (Expression)
Structure of narrative transmission
= Form of Expression
Manifestation
Verbal
Cinematic
Balletic
Pantomimic
etc.
= Substance of Expression

Narrative structures human experience

Despite the many complex manifestations narrative has taken in literature, cinema, theatre, oral history etc. Narrative is at its most basic, a perceptual activity that organises data into patterns that represent and explain experience (Branigan 1992 p. 3). These representations of experience are not the preserve of authors and playwrights though they might execute them with great skill; they are in production by almost everyone in daydreams, excuses and jokes. They are comprehensible and communicable by people across time and space, from cave paintings to computer games.

Narrative deals with experiences of change

Fundamentally, narrative activity produces patterns that represent an experience of change. 'In a narrative […] some person, object or situation undergoes a particular type of change and this change is measured by a sequence of attributions which apply to the thing at different times'. (Branigan 1992 p. 4) The American philosopher Arthur Danto describes this basic structure of narrative texts as follows: (Danto quoted in Altman 2008 p. 5)

> x is f at t_1
> g happens to x at t_2
> x is h at t_3

Narrative enables us to impose order on experiences that are in reality, complex and in a constant state of flux. A narrative frames events, designating some events as beginnings and other events as middles and endings.By way of an example, here is a very basic narrative popularised by the English novelist E M Forster in his 1929 *Aspects of the Novel*:

> The King died
> And then the Queen died

The narrative *content* – a simple account of change – maps on to Danto's structure as follows:

The Queen is alive at time 1	x is f at t_1
The Queen loses her husband at time 2	g happens to x at t_2
The Queen is dead at time 3	x is h at t_3

But this example can be used to illustrate what is possible in the *expression* of that content. While the basic facts stay the same, in this new telling of the story, a sequence of events are emploted. This, according to Forster is a plot:

The King died
And then the Queen died *of grief*

Of course most notable narratives represent far more nuanced and complex experiences of change; changes that befall characters with a history of change behind them and a future of change ahead. In stories that occupy more time and space, we are able to locate events within larger stories and make causal connections that supply events with meaning.

Narrative identifies the causes and consequences of change

Narrative is not merely a way of framing data within a chronology of beginnings, middles and endings. Narrative organisation arranges data into cause-effect chains of events within a given time frame (Branningan p. 3). In this particular example, the sequence of events in chronological order is transformed into a plot by the attribution of causes. The example, however scrawny, is instantly more recognisable as a story. The *events* – the Queen's death and the King's death – are bound up in causal relations to one another and to the narrative's *existents*: the King and the Queen themselves, their relationship, their love and their loss.

Narrative ascribes significance, meaning and value to experiences of change

In any natural narrative, the person who tells this story does not simply report a sequence of events; they express their understanding of the causes of those events and in doing so reveal a particular perspective on the significance, meaning and value of those events. An identification of a cause or consequence is often an expression of what matters in a particular story. When grief is identified as the cause of the Queen's death the significance of her death is revealed: it is not a coincidence but a tragedy borne out of what we assume is her love for husband and the acute sadness she experiences at his loss. Suddenly the basic story achieves a degree of meaning as a tragic love story. In a fleshed out narrative, this meaning is multiplied and is supplied by both storyteller and receiver.

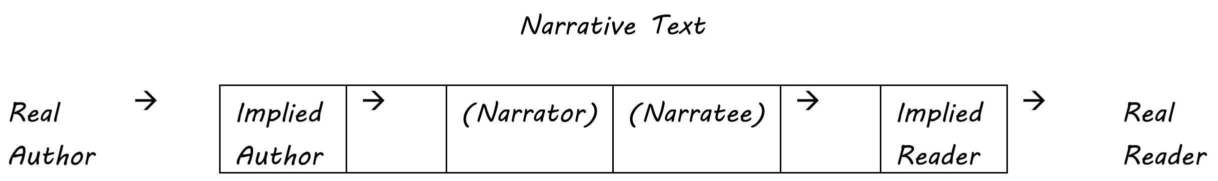
Narrative is co-constructed

One might assume that identification or attribution of causes and consequences, and the generation of significance, meaning and value in narrative organisation is the exclusive role of the storyteller, but scholarly discussion of E M Forster's example argues otherwise, and in doing so reveals something else fundamental about narrative. While Foster sees this acts of emplotment as the role of the author, later scholars consider the possibly that this activity is shared and that it happens both explicitly and implicitly, consciously and unconsciously. More often than not, we the receiver – the reader, listener or watcher – will infer causal relationships in stories. Even in the first example, we will notice the proximity of the Queen's death, to that of her husband and we will emplot the story ourselves, inferring that the Queen died of grief and thereby divining meaning out of its basic elements (Chatman 1978 p.45). We are so skilled in dealing in narratives that we often co-create them in communion with their authors, filling in the gaps with inference, empathy and speculation. This insight reveals my final claim about narrative.

Narrative is communication

It 'takes two to story' as the philosopher Richard Kearney puts it; in the majority of cases, narrative shares the common function of 'someone telling something to someone about something' (Kearney 2002 p.5) A narrative is a *communication* in which a storyteller - in an act of narrative expression - communicates to a listener, certain narrative content. A more nuanced understanding of this expressive act perceives further layers of interaction:

Narrative communication



(Chatman 1978 p. 151)

Understanding narrative as communication is borne out of a tradition of literary scholarship, the study of public narratives. But understanding narrative as a psychological phenomenon, as I do, requires an account of the private psychological acts of story telling that form part of the phenomenology of our daily experience. Our conscious experience is formed of many narratives – those of memories, examples, excuses, biography etc. – many of these narratives are never communicated publically. However by taking on narrative form, they become *communicable:* they have the potential to be communicated to others.

So the theoretical pieces of the puzzle are not simply narrative *content* and the *events* (actions and occurrences) and *existents* (characters and settings) which narrative contains. Our theory must also consider the *expression* of narrative, the various roles of narrative *giver* and *receiver* and the various techniques they employ such as genre, mode, voice, point-of-view, repetition, suspense, flashback and flash forward etc. that make the expression of narrative possible and potent. Narrative is the unconscious and conscious organisation and communication of experiential data in ways that are subjective and inter-subjective. The content and expression of narrative is invariably shaped by the knowledge and existence of another human being with whom the narrative giver or receiver is in communication. Every act of giving a narrative embodies a judgement about the nature of events themselves and often a narrative receiver is mindful of this (Braningan 1992 p. 3). For example, a writer may present crimes in such a way as to glorify them. Equally every act of receiving a narrative – of reading, listening or watching – requires judgements about the nature of events too: a story is interpreted by a particular reader as unfair or a watcher as gratuitously violent.

So in summary, narrative is a structure by virtue of which the events that befall certain existents are organised such that they are intelligible and communicable between giver and receiver (or receivers). The events and existents communicated in narratives may be either real or imagined or occasionally a combination of both. Narrative is both *conscious*, where it is communicated publically - in gossip, theatre and news reports - and *unconscious* where it gives form and content to private daydreams, personal identity and memory. Narrative communication, or the potential for communication, requires intellectual, emotional and imaginative activity in acts of interpretation, inference, guesswork, sympathy, empathy, speculation and wonder. The upshot of this perceptive activity, for givers and receivers, is knowledge and understanding of the world, including ethical knowledge and understanding.

3.2 What is the relationship between narrative and virtue?

Following the psychologist Jerome Bruner, my account of the epistemological relationship between narrative and ethics attempts to link the ways in which individuals *gain* and *use* knowledge, to the contexts in which they live. Narrative is everywhere in the contexts within which we live and the ubiquity of narrative as a form of human knowledge is both a *cause* and a *consequence* of its dual epistemological role.

The epistemological claim

I claim that – though we might not ordinarily acknowledge it – in the ethical domain, we live and learn by narratives: bible stories, court cases, fairy tales, novels, news reports, excuses, theatre, visual art, pornography, testimony, fables, parables, comic books, diaries, feature films, soap operas, gossip, folk songs, fine art histories, stained glass windows, photograph albums, memory, opera, ballet, mime, picture books and thought experiments. To a greater *and lesser extent*, these stories embody ethical perspectives and require an ethical perspective and ethical capacities in an audience in order to engage fully with them. But among them all, narratives co-produced by perceptive writers and perceptive readers are the most ethically illuminating.

Narrative is a *source*, a *method* of ethical knowledge and understanding. We achieve ethical insight not just when we encounter the ethical perspectives skilfully crafted in the books we read or the television we watch; we also gain ethical insight through the narratives we create ourselves in private thought and in public conversation as well as in those creative acts of the few of us who are writers and artists. Narrative is something that can be studied and something that can be practiced, and in these mutually complementary ways, we can gain ethical knowledge and understanding.

Narrative is particularly good at organising and representing human experience because it tracks fundamental logical structures of human experience; inter-dependent structures such as temporality, causality, contingency, necessity, particularity, singularity, generality, intentionality, emotionality, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. There is an ethical dimension to human experience that the logic of narrative necessarily represents by virtue of the structure of its content and the mechanisms of its expression. But narrative is more successful than other ways of ordering and representing the ethical dimension of human experience – such as those found in the sciences, mathematics and rhetoric – because, in order to achieve understanding, successful expression of narrative content engages the emotions and the imagination as well as the intellect. These are the faculties at work in everyday ethical life and this combination, rather than being imprecise and irrational, is actually superior in rationality and in the relevant sort of precision than intellectualist approaches alone (Nussbaum 1990).

Narratives as a source of ethical knowledge and understanding

Narratives function as a source of ethical knowledge and understanding by virtue of what they represent and how they represent it. Narratives represent worlds in which ethical issues are vivid, in narrative, we encounter ethical issues in their natural habitat – not as timeless abstract rules, principles and maxims – but as particular human experiences that are lived daily and felt keenly in the temporal, casual, contingent environment of everyday human experience. These representations are *sources* of ethical experience. In narrative we encounter events from the catastrophic to the miraculous and meet characters from the despicable to the inspirational. These events and existents challenge and enlarge enabling us to experience and perceive the ethical world fully. Furthermore, narrative is often able to amplify these familiar features of experience in ways that are particularly ethically advantageous. For example, narrative provides us with detailed insight into context, into the space and time in which events unfold. Narratives arrange events logically; helping us to appreciate the significance of ethical decisions and the ethically relevant causes and consequences of actions. But crucially, narrative is the primary means by which we access human psychology, illuminating individual’s motives and offering us multiple points of view. In these respects narrative can offer us superior ethical experiences with greater depth and sharper focus that those possible in the everyday lives of most of us.

Narratives are also artefacts of human creation and as such they cannot represent the world neutrally; each narrative word bears the fingerprints of the author and embodies the ethical perspective of an implied author; consequently it expresses a collection of values, commitments and faults. These values, commitments and faults leave their mark on those who engage with stories, sometimes because of their invisible influence – be it benign or malignant – but more fruitfully, when they are the subject of our critical and self-conscious ethical evaluation, when we actively employ narrative as a method by which we might learn.

Narrative as a method of ethical knowledge and understanding

Narrative functions as a method of ethical knowledge and understanding by virtue of the capacities at work their creation and communication. At the *unconscious* level, narrative is one of the fundamental mechanisms of mind that makes it possible for us to organise disparate and chaotic sensory and proprioceptive experiences. Organising fleeting impressions, sensations, images, feelings and thoughts into narrative requires the engagement of the imagination, the emotions and the intellect in our automatic and invisible acts of interpretation, inference, guesswork, sympathy, empathy, speculation and wonder. But narrative is more visible, malleable and effective as a method of ethical knowledge and understanding in our *conscious* acts of creation. Whether the conscious creator of a narrative is a novelist dealing in imagined worlds or a journalist dealing with the facts of the matter, In their acts of organisation, selection and attention they perceive the ethically salient features of the human condition; they practice and refine their abilities, and in doing so, they come to know and understand the ethical world more intimately. Telling stories becomes a mechanism by which all of us, in so far as we are storytellers, become more perceptive, and by which we learn what it means to be good.

Equally we cannot successfully engage with the stories others tell unless we engage with them emotionally and imaginatively as well as intellectually. We fill in the gaps that the narrator has omitted; we judge some characters and feel sympathy for others; we infer what was really meant in one conversation and imagine what might have provoked another; we put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Through these kinds of activities, we gain full access to the legitimate ethical experiences that promise to supplement the parochial ethical experiences of everyday life. The more we perceive, and the more carefully we attune our attention to what matters in stories and in everyday experience, and the more we learn about what it means to be good.

This fulsome account of narrative does not place all stories equally. Some of the stories we use to live and learn are minimally narrative in form and content; these kinds of stories do not offer the same learning experiences as the novels of Jane Austin or the films of Mike Leigh. Didactic, moralising parables, sensationalist and badly scripted soap operas and skeletal, logic-focussed ethical dilemmas provide partial, ethical examples but they fail to exhibit the full range of life-like properties that allow great *perceptive* narratives to enlarge our characters by exercising the intellect, emotion and imagination in new and authentic ethical worlds.

4. Why ethical dilemmas won't do

4.1 The Heinz Dilemma

If we look again at the Heinz dilemma we may begin to see some of its shortcomings more clearly. We notice first, that it is a very short story and like any story, even the briefest, lots of detail is missing and this is where our troubles begin.

The author has selected what he thinks matters and omitted what he thinks does not. The missing details include the time in which this story takes place, the setting and the people who face this terrible situation. Heinz has part of a name at least, but that's about it; his dying wife is nameless, ageless and faceless. Do the couple have children, an extended family, an employer or a religious leader? We simply don't know. The druggist - partially responsible for this dilemma and the suffering it has caused - is identified only by his gender and his profession. Perhaps he has spent his life savings developing this cancer treatment or perhaps he is already very wealthy yet seeks to be wealthier still? The dilemma gives nothing away, yet these details give the story texture that is not just aesthetically valuable, but ethically valuable too.

Readers naturally flesh out any story, and the more skinny a story; the more scope there is for this creative fattening up. As imagine the Heinz Dilemma is in the USA in the 1930s, around the time radium was used in cancer cases for the first time. Heinz is a German name, perhaps Jewish too, and so I imagine Heinz as the head of a family of German-Jewish immigrants to America. I see the druggist as a wealthy man, from outside their community – or else why wouldn't he compromise on his fee? Because of my reader's tendency to seek heroes and villains, I see him as someone who could do without such a large profit. Now even with this degree of embellishment, my responses to this case are relative to my quiet co-authored version of the story. Tacit assumptions lurk beneath my answers that impact upon my comprehension of the practicalities of scenario and my ethical assessment of it. I may assume, for example, that Heinz will get away with the robbery, or that the US courts will see his case sympathetically, meaning in practical terms the decision to steal is less risky. But, what if another reader imagines that the dilemma is set in Germany around the same period? Will they assume the Nazi authorities would treat a thieving Jew in the same way? Similarity, if I assume the druggist is wealthy I may make the reasonable ethical judgement that any harms to him will be minimal. However another reader who assumes that the druggist has spent his family's savings on this speculative inventions and is likely to be in debt, might reasonably judge otherwise. What is more, unless readers are forthcoming with this information, this creates problems for someone who hopes to measure the virtuousness of their responses, particularity where a reader fleshes out a story unconsciously as many seasoned readers may do.

While basic details of identity, time and place are conspicuous by their absence, the absence of psychological insight may be less evident. Although we have no access to Heinz inner life through his words or thoughts, we might lazily infer from his actions that Heinz fears his wife's death and will be very sad if she does not survive. This might be false, but more likely it will be true of almost *anyone*. We know nothing of the unique thoughts that characterise Heinz' experience of this dilemma. Nor do we have insight into the singular and irreplaceable features of his wife that distinguish her – for Heinz – from any other person. Does Heinz love his wife and does she love him? Do they have a loyal and supportive marriage or a strained and burdensome one? How does Heinz feel about her illness? Perhaps he is scared and desperate; perhaps he is angry and resentful. How are the children coping? With so little to pin our imaginings too, sympathy for the dilemmas' characters, even pity for their predicament is extraordinarily difficult. Heinz and his wife are stick men and any attempts to emotionally identify with them, to perceive the pain and loss at stake here, are futile.

Turning our attention from what is missing to what is included in the Heinz dilemma, we see a picture of what the author thinks matters morally. The legal background is strongly implied in the druggists' assertion of his rights and the implicit awareness that stealing the drug is illegal. The money at stake is clearly detailed, and we understand that the shortfall is significant. Finally, and most significantly, Kohlberg includes only enough detail to reveal the logical structure of a dilemma: the wife is certainly dying and the druggist is certainly refusing to budge. By setting up this story in such stark terms, denying the messy ambiguity, contingency and ignorance of everyday Kohlberg alerts the reader that their intellectual capacities are necessary, perhaps even sufficient, in order to respond adequately.

Yet in everyday life, we tend to respond to ethically challenging scenarios with a whole suite of capacities: cognitive, emotional and imaginative. Together these capacities constitute the epistemological virtue of perceptiveness 'seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way […] taking in what is there with imagination and feeling' (Nussbaum 1990 p 152). A flesh and blood story, displaying a host of narrative features, engages the same suite of capacities.

In Carol Gilligan's famous critique of Kohlberg's work we see some evidence of emotional and imaginative engagement with narrative and note that, despite its thoughtfulness and caring nature, it would achieve a low score on Kohlberg's scale. 'Asked whether Heinz should steal the drug [one child Amy] replied:

> *"Well, I don't think so. I think there might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money or make a loan or something, but he really shouldn't steal the drug – but his wife shouldn't die either."*

(Gilligan 1982 p. 28)

Asked why he should not steal the drug, she considers neither property nor law but rather the effect that theft could have on the relationship between Heinz and his wife:

> "If he stole the drug, he might save his wife then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, an d he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So, they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make the money."

(Gilligan 1982 p. 28)

Although Gilligan makes this observation to illuminate a different set of concerns about moral reasoning and gender, I notice something else in these comments. Amy strikes me a perceptive reader of stories and of ethical life, perhaps even more so than Jake a boy interviewed by Gilligan, whose responses a Kohlbergian assessment would have favoured.

'Jake, at eleven, is clear from the outset that Heinz should steal the drug. Constructing the dilemma, as Kohlberg did, as a conflict between the values of property and life, he discerns the logical priority of life and uses that logic to justify his choice:

> *"For one thing, a human life is worth more than money, and if the druggist only makes $1,000, he is still going to live, but if Heinz doesn't steal the drug, his wife is going to die."*

(Gilligan 1982 p. 25).

Jake unquestioningly accepts the rules of the game and is prepared to play by them, primed by the structure and presentation of the dilemma, he treats the scenario as a puzzle rather than a story.

Another thing we notice in the dilemma is the narrative point of view from which the story is told. The story assumes a third person, omniscient perspective from which the reader surveys the scene with god-like certainty. While this is common in many rich narratives, the stark presentation, brevity and lack of detail in the ethical dilemma obscures the fact that this story, like any narrative, implies an author, someone with a character or ethos of his own and a reason for presenting the story in the way that they do. 'Life is never simply presented by a text; it is always represented as something' (Nussbaum 1990 p.5) and although the implied author of this dilemma is almost invisible, our analysis of what he has omitted reveals a figure who values careful intellectual reasoning over the messy contextuality of flesh and blood narratives and everyday life. We might even think that the real author, Kohlberg, has devised a tool that necessitates the very cognitive responses that he has deemed important in the first place. At any rate, the stark, third person omniscient objectivity side-lines the other perceptive capacities of emotion and imagination.

A further inadequacy in the dilemma, insofar as it is a narrative, can be seen in the way it favours necessity over contingency. We know that Heinz' wife is certain to die, that the drug is certain to save her, that it is certain that the drug cannot be bought or traded and certain that the druggist will not yield to any further negotiation. Things are rarely so certain in flesh and blood narratives, nor are they so clear in everyday ethical life. It is likely a family would have had poor understanding of cancer and the limited options for treating it. Radium, around the time of its first medical use, was a notoriously blunt instrument causing harm as well as healing. Administration of the drug would be risky and potentially ineffectual, at any rate its administration would undoubtedly require expert assistance. Furthermore, no patient could undergo a radically new treatment with an assurance that it would save their life. A lengthy imprisonment for Heinz and the absence of income for the family would undoubtedly harm is wife and his family. A druggist monetising the treatment for the first time would likely need test subjects and positive publicity leaving the family further room for negotiation etc.

When presented with this dilemma, the keen reader or the noncompliant philosopher, much like Gilligan's girls, might resist the dilemma's inflexible terms and approach the problem laterally. Considering both horns of the dilemma problematic, they may attempt to look for a third way. Perhaps the druggist will accept publicity in lieu of payment? Perhaps the family doctor could intervene in the negotiations on their behalf? Perhaps Heinz could pay £1000 up front and work for the druggist until the outstanding debt is repaid? Perhaps Heinz could publically shame the druggist? Perhaps a rich member of their community could donate, rather than lend the money? Perhaps they could re-mortgage their house? etc. Unfortunately for those tested, these kinds of moves tend to be viewed dimly. They may be understood as attempts to wriggle out of the problem or simply a failure to understand the rules of the game. These kinds of answers answers fare even worse in an online or paper test, where there is no adequate way of recording such deviant responses – at worst respondent may tick one of two boxes, either Heinz was right to steal the drug, or he was not.[12] The problem is framed in such a way as to emphases its logical properties and to alert the reader that their cognitive capacities are necessary, perhaps even sufficient, in order to respond.

At any rate, I doubt many readers would give such a minimal story, so much readerly time and consideration when it offers so little in return. Unlike temporally extended, causally complex, psychologically rich narratives, ethical dilemmas offer little in return for emotional and imaginative effort. They reward the intellect – and there is much pleasure in that – but intellectual stimulation alone, amputated from our emotional and imaginative capacities and stimulated by an unconvincing story, is not sufficient to reveal virtue.

4.2 Sophie's Choice

It needn't be this way, consider an alternative dilemma narrative *Sophie's Choice* in which an ethical dilemma receives a distinctly different treatment. In the novel by American author William Styron, an aspiring writer, befriends an immigrant couple; Jewish-American Nathan and his beautiful lover Sophie, a Polish-Catholic survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. The stories is concerned with a tragic decision that Sophie is forced to make upon entering the camp, regarding the fate of her two children. In the story we begin to see narrative features add intellectual, emotional and imaginative flesh to the bones of the dilemma in such a way as to be ethically illuminating, for a reader, and perhaps for the educator, employer or empirical researcher who wishes to measure the reader's virtue.

The novel is temporally and spatially located: its action takes place in Germany and America spanning continents and several decades allowing sufficient time and space for the context and consequences of Sophie's decision to play out. The decision itself, to choose her son over her beloved daughter, is time-critical; and must be understood within these impossible confines. In emotional terms, we understand that the logical structure of a dilemma necessitates loss no matter what.

The novel's characters are psychologically three-dimensional existing in relationships with one another and in relation to their past and their future. This insight allows us to appreciate that characters are shaped by their damaging experiences; Sophie is depressed and dependent on alcohol and Nathan is seriously mentally ill and self-medicates on prescription drugs. The characters are both have agency and intentionality, assuming responsibility for their actions, yet our appreciation of the causes that have shaped their circumstances militates against their guilt and allows us to feel compassion.

The stories various particularities, details that might be omitted in a philosophers' dilemma, are crucial here:

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[12] In the *Defining Issues Test* there is an equivalent case about stealing food for a starving family. In the test, the respondent is presented with the question 'What should Mustaq Sing do? Do you favour the action of taking the food?' Three choices are available 1. Should take the food 2. Can't decide, 3. Shouldn't take the food. They then have a series of ethical considerations that they are invited to rank according to relevance, these considerations include 'Is Mustaq courageous enough to risk getting caught for stealing?' and 'Does the rich man deserve to be robbed for being so greedy?' While the insight into respondent's reasoning is interesting, the possibility of imaginative engagement with the stories is non-the-less precluded by the structure of the dilemma (as well as the form the test must take for practical purposes). See here for an online version of the test: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/LD65SNC

the anti-semitism of Sophie's father lurks in the shadows, and the small fact if her son's blue eyes and blond hair, are large enough to give her hope that he might survive if he was spared. There is non of the clarity of Heinz' dilemma; uncertainty and ambiguity abound in Sophie's Choice. Sophie must make her decision blind to the ultimate outcomes and neither the reader nor Sophie herself learns the fate of the son she tried to save.

Like the Heinz Dilemmas, Sophie's Choice functions as a serviceable ethical example insofar as it demands work from the reader. But unlike the skeletal dilemma that is primarily concerned with engaging the intellect, the flesh and blood novel required a reader's emotional and imaginative engagement too. If we can tell anything about a person's virtue by assessing their responses to an ethical dilemma, responses to Sophie's Choice are likely to reveal more of ethical worth, than Heinz Dilemma.

4.2 The Trolley Problem

To consolidate some of these ideas, consider another famous thought experiment now popular in online ethics tests. Among the many versions of the Trolley problem online, my favourite takes the form of an arcade game by the designer Pippin Barr[13]. The arcade game parodies primitive eighties gaming technology with heavily pixelated, monochrome graphics. On the first level, the gamer encounters a hilarious first-person perspective version of the original Philippa Foot trolley problem.

> Edward is the driver of a trolley whose brakes have just failed. On the track ahead of him are five people. The banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. The track has a spur leading off to the right and Edward can turn the trolley onto it. Unfortunately there is one person on the right-hand track. Edward can turn the trolley, killing the one. Or he can refrain from turning the trolley, killing the five. What should he do?
>
> (Foot 1997)

To the tinny sound of synthesised music the gamer contemplates whether to press the space bar, while five flickering stick men face a moving trolley. Over three more levels, the game presents versions of Judith Jarvis Thomson's Fat Man variant (Thomson 1976)[14] and - in a particularly outrageous twist - the final level allows the user to type in the name of someone they love so that one tiny pixelated stick man assumes the 'Mother', 'Husband' or 'Daughter' etc. Cue the music and the clock is ticking.

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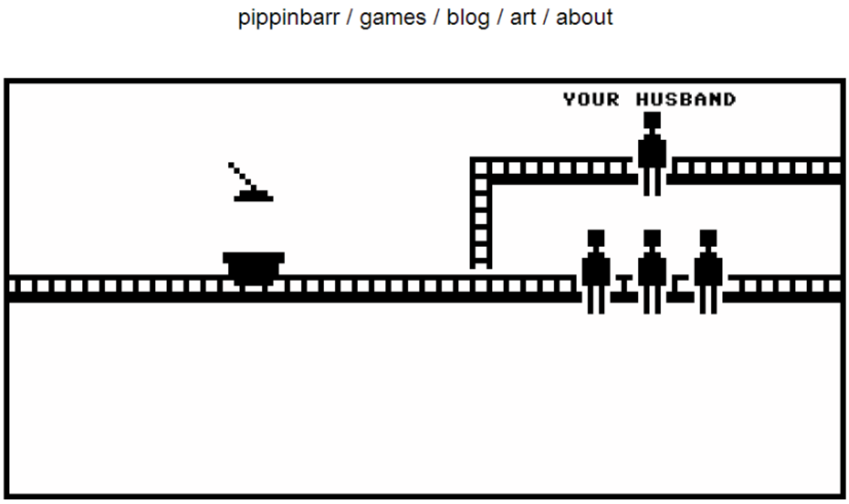
[13] Play the game here at http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/trolleyproblem/TrolleyProblem.html

[14] The 'Fat Man' variant takes this form:
George is on a footbridge over the trolley tracks. He knows trolleys and can see that the one approaching the bridge is out of control. On the track behind the bridge there are five people. The banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. George knows that the only way to stop an out-of-control trolley is to drop a very heavy weight into its path. But the only available, sufficiently heavy weight is a fat man, also watching the trolley from the footbridge. George can shove the fat man onto the track in the path of the trolley, killing the fat man. Or he can refrain from doing this, letting the five die. What should he do? (Thomson 1976)



This game is supposed to be tongue in cheek. But I find it articulates quite elegantly, the profound inadequacy of skeletal dilemmas as virtual reality simulators for virtue. While the game preserves the logic of the dilemma perfectly and requires the same intellectual capacities to play, any pretensions the dilemma has to stimulating authentic virtuous and vicious responses are undermined completely. The game is amusing, even absorbing, but even the most dedicated reader of stories must surely fail to see the flashing figures as real people with real lives worth living and real families who will mourn their deaths. Real ethical life simply doesn't feel like this.

Virtual reality has been used more seriously in a number of other contexts[15] producing dilemma-based material that looks more promising. Giving faces to the men on the track and introducing the pressure of time, transform the dilemma into something more serviceable in ethical assessment. But still the dilemma is amputated from any larger context that might provide the situation with ethical meaning. As an actor in the scene, you have no sense of where you came from, how you have become embroiled in his disaster, what relationship you stand in with regards to the men on the track, how the law will treat you for your action or inaction, how the families of the dead will treat you and how you will face your own loved ones afterwards. Even the most exemplary virtual reality simulation is lame if it insists on the basic constraints of the skeletal ethical dilemma.

Whatever responses we might observe by presenting a student, employee or research subject with this test, cannot tell us much of interest about real ethical character. Besides everything I have said about the temporal, causal, contingent, particular, intentional, subjective, inter-subjective and value-imbued nature of real ethical life, we must also acknowledge that acts of killing are incredibly rare in real ethical life, where they do exist they are more likely to be the result of extreme circumstances such as war, disaster and acute psychological distress. Those few who are faced with dilemmas that involve killing are often profoundly psychically wounded by their actions. Even the thought of killing – of *really* pulling a lever amidst the screeching of breaks and screaming of wounded people – unnerves the ethically alert person. Contemplating killing, is not an intellectual game; it is a profound act of the ethical imagination that requires both a clear head and a beating heart.

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[15] Find out more about virtual reality versions of thought experiments art the Navarrete Research Lab at Michigan State University here http://www.cdnresearch.net/vr.html and see a video of their Trolley problem simulation here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLpn71dxoFY

4.3 Crime and Punishment

Compare the giddy hand wavering over the spacebar in the trolley problem arcade game, to this prodigious example of narrative prose in which Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov contemplates the visceral and terrible reality, complexity and confusion of killing:

> 'He felt utterly broken; darkness and confusion were in his soul. He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned his head on his hands. "Good God!" he cried, "can it be, can it be, that I shall really take an axe, that I shall strike her on the head, split her skull open … that I shall tread in the sticky warm blood, break the lock, steal and tremble; hide, all spattered in the blood … with the axe … Good God, can it be?" He was shaking like a leaf as he said this.
>
> "But why am I going on like this?" he continued, sitting up again, as it were in profound amazement. "I knew that I could never bring myself to it, so what have I been torturing myself for till now? Yesterday, yesterday, when I went to make that … experiment, yesterday I realised completely that I could never bear to do it … Why am I going over it again, then? Why am I still hesitating? As I came down the stairs yesterday, I said myself that it was base, loathsome, vile, vile … the very thought of it made me feel sick and filled me with horror.
>
> "No, I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it! Granted, granted that there is no flaw in all that reasoning, that all that I have concluded this last month is clear as day, true as arithmetic…. My God! Anyway I couldn't bring myself to it! I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it! Why, why then am I still …?"
>
> - Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* , Ch. 5

Even to contemplate killing, Raskolnikov must harmonise his intellect, emotion and imagination. His imaginings are multi sensory, full of the images, sounds and textures of killing. He is highly alert to his emotional experiences; interpreting his trembling and disgust but also his hesitance. Equally, he is capable of cool intellectual thought, understanding both the simple mechanics required to gravely wound, and the profound existential implications of doing so.

Comparing an excerpt from a classic of nineteenth century literature with a spoof arcade game and a rudimentary virtual reality simulation is somewhat unfair, admittedly. But I do so to help illuminate my final claim: Flesh and blood narratives are superior to skeletal academic dilemmas, in fact, I suspect that rich narratives of this kind are the best kind of ethical reality simulator we have. They require the virtue of perception in order to comprehend and engage with them. If virtue can be measured, then they're our best bet.

Concluding remarks

My thesis is that we live and learn by narrative; bible stories, court cases, fairy-tales, novels, news, excuses, theatre, pornography, comics, diaries, films, soap operas, gossip, folk-songs, memories, ballet and thought experiments. To greater, *and lesser* extents all of these kinds of stories embody ethical perspectives and require an ethical perspective and ethical capacities in order to engage fully with them; capacities I understand as intellectual, emotional and imaginative. Together these capacities constitute the epistemological virtue of perceptiveness 'seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way […] taking in what is there with imagination and feeling' (Nussbaum 1990 p 152). Narrative is one of the dominant structures we use to experience, order and understand everyday life. The logic of narrative represents human experience as temporal, causal, contingent, particular, generic, intentional, subjective, inter-subjective and consequently, imbued with ethical value.

Some narratives such as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* exhibit this logic more fully, have been crafted more perceptively and demand greater perceptiveness from the audience. Other narratives – among them most ethical dilemmas – are lacking; they fail to fully engage the portfolio of capacities at work in real-life ethical perception. Ethical dilemmas in particular, fail to engage a range of ethically relevant narrative features. They are often minimally temporal: you're not in the world for long, save for the lengthy pause at moment of decision when the time-critical moment of truth is often misrepresented, existing as an eternal pause in which the second-person 'you', the implicated agent, or the third-person observer, may take all the time they need to deliberate: 'do I pull the lever?' (Foot 1967). In doing so they prioritise cool intellectual reasoning over the affective heat of the time-pressured moment.

Ethical dilemmas are deliberately inflexible and polarising, as a consequence, they fail to convincingly capture the causality and contingency of everyday life. Some deny a world in which many options are live, what remains is a stark bifurcation: do you pull the lever *or not*? In doing so the moral imagination is denied the possibility of finding a third way. Most ethical dilemmas purposefully lack detail; the people that populate them are often nameless, ageless, and faceless; the places they live and die are anonymous. In telling stories this way, the author prejudges – erroneously – those things that are ethically relevant. Ethical dilemmas as often casually restricted with little or no attention paid to happened before the present action or what will happen next. Skeletal thought experiments typically lack psychological insight, characters such as Thomson's 'Fat Man' rarely speak and so they cannot communicate their hopes and fears and as a consequence, such stories resist emotional engagement. (Thomson 1978). Finally, unlike real ethical life or the rich narratives that represent it, the ethical dilemma frames the issue too tightly, effectively screaming: *there is an ethical issue at stake here!*

5. What are the alternatives?

By discussing the shortcomings of one means of assessment, I must inevitably say, or imply, something about the kinds of conditions that *would* provide an adequate basis for the measurement of virtue; the conditions in respect of which I find skeletal dilemmas lacking. If flesh and blood narratives such as *Crime and Punishment* are potential means for measuring virtue, then how might they be used, what virtue or virtues might be measured and what would a virtuous response be? I can only sketch the briefest of suggestions, since a fuller answer is beyond the scope of this paper.

As Kohlberg did, we might ask a reader who has read the whole text: 'Should Raskolnikov have done that?' but here, such an approach does not look promising. It is hard to imagine any reader would reach the end of *Crime and Punishment* and conclude that Raskolnikov was right to kill, all things considered. In an educational, employment or research context this might look like a stupid question, or a trap.

But perhaps a narrative like this could be used in a different way. Imagine a conversation in which a student, employee or subject was asked: Why do you think Raskolnikov kills the pawnbroker? Do you think he redeems himself by the end of the novel? Were there any moments in the story when Raskolnikov could have acted to avoid his fate? Questions such as these – at home in a literature class, but rarely in the empirical study of character and virtue – have the potential to reveal perceptive readers; readers with an intellectual, emotional and imaginative grasp of the story presented to them. This provides evidence that such subjects actually possess intellectual, emotional and imaginative capacities of the kind required by a virtuous person, according to my account of narrative and ethics.

The person who self-reports their virtue – claiming in response to skeletal dilemmas that that they would never steal the medicine, pull the level or kill the pawnbroker – may say one thing but do another. But the perceptive reader *shows* rather than tells. Reading the ethically salient features off the pages of *Crime and Punishment* demonstrates the ability to read the ethically salient features off the narratives we construct and consume in every day ethical life. Perceptiveness is the virtue required by flesh and blood narratives. Perhaps it is a virtue that can be detected empirically.

Of course, readers may conclude that the optimal conditions I hint at in this paper are impractical for empirical testing, in which case my paper may be read as a negative response to the conference's central question. Certainly research on the scale of the Defining Issues Test will not work if every participant must first read a lengthy Russian novel and then engage in open-ended critical discussion! The truth is that I do not feel equipped to address the conference's main question head on. My modest claim is simply this: if it is possible to measure virtue, responses to skeletal ethical dilemmas cannot provide us with meaningful measures.

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