Narrative and the Personal in Ethics

Christopher Cowley

Abstract

It is tempting to conceive of the philosophical counsellor as an empirical scientist; his job is to find out what happened, what are the present possibilities, and what rules – prudential or ethical – are relevant. The guiding assumption is of a singular reality, out there, waiting to be discovered by patient observation and thought; and that there is a relevant ethical rule that can be brought to bear on this perplexing situation. I challenge this assumption by exploring the insight that ethics is essentially about interpersonal relations, that the people in those relations are leading on-going lives, and that both these relations and lives are narratively structured. Such a narrative structure is much more complicated than it might seem.

Narrative and the Personal in Ethics

Many people, and many philosophers, think that ethics is mainly about general rules. Whenever I claim that doing X would be the right thing to do in this situation, I am implying that it would be the right thing for anybody to do in this situation, not just for me or for you. Perhaps some people won’t be able to do X in this situation, for whatever reason (e.g. maybe they don’t have the requisite knowledge or training), but there still remains a general class of people who are able to do X, and therefore ought to do X. The subject of ethics is then the enquiry into the general rules that bind us in this way.

I want to call this approach legalist, because it copies the way the law works. The law of the land, if it has been properly passed by the appropriate authority, is supposed to bind every citizen of the realm, be he prince or pauper. Laws and ethical rules are importantly different in that laws can be enforced; but those who break ethical rules may still be still liable to the force of blame, even if it is not effective.

Sometimes there will be mitigating circumstances that need to be taken into account when measuring out appropriate punishment or blame; ignorance of the rule, for example, may sometimes be a sound excuse, as when I unintentionally offend my host in a foreign country by not eating their food. Perhaps some people won’t be able to do X in this situation, for whatever reason (e.g. maybe they don’t have the requisite knowledge or training), but there still remains a general class of people who are able to do X, and therefore ought to do X. The subject of ethics is then the enquiry into the general rules that bind us in this way.

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The legalist conception of ethics is fine for many ethically-charged situations, especially those relating to the formulation of public policy. However, I want to argue that they are not the whole story when it comes to relations between individuals, because they fail to take into account the two sets of narratives within which the encounter will be experienced by the two individuals. This is of direct importance to philosophical counselling, the concern of this journal, since the philosopher and the client are always particular individuals. In order for them to communicate properly, in order for one to get through to the other, one will have to know something about the other’s narratives, something about who he is, where he stands, where he’s coming from and where he’s headed. These notions are common enough conversational phrases, but they harbour an important philosophical truth about the nature of ethics.

1. Elements of Narrative

To begin with, a narrative is to be distinguished from what it is a narrative of – a loose, often unconnected series of events that make up a chronicle. Thus we may describe a simple chronicle of discrete events as follows: ‘The queen died. The king died.’ One corresponding narrative might run: ‘the queen died, and then the king died of grief,’ and already the notion of grief has temporal resonances beyond the present tense. Many different narratives, equally coherent, can be woven around a single chronicle (or, to reverse the order and use Hayden White’s term, a single chronicle can be emplotted into different coherent narratives); one need only think of disagreements between historical winners and losers in interpreting a decisive battle, where each narrative might serve different purposes.

In hearing about the king and queen, not only do I come to know of a causal link implicit in the word ‘grief’, but it is more than that: the grief only makes sense as a result of the death, and understanding the nature of the grief means understanding something of the depth of the relationship that existed between the king and queen before her death; it also says something about the relationship that will continue after her death, for she remains alive in his thoughts. The concept of grief, ascribed to the king in the present, thus necessarily refers to the past and future. Indeed, it might be impossible to fully capture the relevant aspects of that relationship without reference to the fact that the king’s grief for his dead queen was sufficient to kill him; the grief reveals the essence of the relationship in a way that other descriptions – while she was alive – could not. Importantly, the grief may reveal the essence of the relationship to the king himself; indeed, he might be surprised just how much he grieves. In this sense he is not

1 I would like to thank Carolyn Wilde and Peter Goldie for discussion on this topic.

2 The original thought is Wittgenstein’s: ‘For a second he felt violent pain.’ – Why does it sound queer to say: ‘for a second he felt deep grief’? Only because it so seldom happens? But don’t you feel grief now? (‘But aren’t you playing chess now?’) The answer may be affirmative, but that does not make the concept of grief any more like the concept of a sensation. - The question was really, of course, a temporal and personal one, not the logical question which we wanted to raise. (Wittgenstein 1953 p. 148)
the full author of his own narrative. Importantly, narrative explanations can work in both temporal directions: another narrative of the above chronicle might see the queen as killing herself for the sake of her husband, either in self-sacrifice, or to punish him – in each case the putatively distinct situation will be very different.

A narrative may be told by someone else, but it need not; it could just refer to the structure without a narrator. Most films and plays lack narrators: they seem to start as a chronicle, but the spectators are gradually led to assemble the narrative as the relationships and the relevant past details are revealed. But one can also eavesdrop on a conversation in a train, without a writer’s manipulative efforts.

In watching a film or eavesdropping, I am trying to make sense of the character’s story. This will often be done by listening to the reasons that he gives to his interlocutor. What is the point of these reasons, exactly? Jonathan Dancy puts it well:

   To justify one’s choice is to give the reasons one sees for making it, and to give those reasons is just to lay out how one sees the situation. As such one is not arguing for but rather appealing to others to see it as one sees it. The persuasiveness here is the persuasiveness of narrative: an internal coherence which compels assent. Moral justification is therefore narrative rather than subsumptive.4

This final word ‘subsumptive’ refers to the legalist conception of ethics. According to the legalist, moral justification involves subsuming an action under a rule, and thereby revealing the action to be ethically prohibited: ‘this is theft’ – ‘theft is wrong’ – ‘this is wrong’. Dancy is arguing that moral justification, at least in certain interpersonal contexts, doesn’t work like that. In my very attempt to lay out my moral reasons for doing something, I am telling a story which I hope will be compelling; I am trying to bring you to see the situation as I do. In doing so I may of course reveal more than I intend to about who I am, where I stand, where I’m coming from, and where I’m headed. Whether or not a given reason finds purchase in another’s understanding (whether the other accepts the reason) depends not only on the reason itself, but on the narrative context in which it is couched and which gives it its full meaning: the listener will only accept the reason if he accepts enough of that narrative context.5

The legalist might complain at this point, that this narrative conception of meaning is too contingent. If a single factual chronicle can be emplotted in different ways, if there is no guarantee that A’s reasons will be understood in the proper narrative context by B, then it starts to seem that “anything goes,” and we are left with a corrosive form of relativism. In reality, the legalist will conclude, we surely do manage to communicate far more effectively than the above discussion would suggest.

Any discussion of narrative will involve a nuanced discussion of truth. Although the chronicle will often be open to different narrative interpretations, it is not wide open. The narrative’s dependence on the chronicle grounds and constrains the narrative sufficiently for it to aspire to some sort of truth. At the simplest level, the narrative has to be true to the facts: if the queen is demonstrably alive and well, then the story of her death is simply false, and has to be quite radically revised, for example by adding an explanation for the king’s ignorance of this fact; similarly, archival newspaper reports can corroborate or falsify present narratives about the past. There are also constraints of narrative coherence, based on a widely-shared understanding of human behaviour (e.g. the ubiquity of lust and greed), and based on a more narrowly-shared understanding of a particular human’s behaviour (‘Mandela would never compromise’). These objective limits provide a bulwark against the worst relativistic fears, and allow for some narratives to be more plausible than others.6

2. Maclntyre

One of the most famous discussions of narrative in contemporary philosophy is Alastair Maclntyre’s After Virtue. There (p. 206) he offers us an apparently banal example of a man digging in his garden, and asks us what

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3 Some chronicle details might resist plausible emplotment for a long time. At the limit, some of the narrative threads of my life will not make full sense until the end of it, as I lie on my deathbed watching the final Summing Up. Other narrative threads may never make sense, may never cohere sufficiently with my understanding of who I am to cease troubling me.

4 On the same page, Dancy goes on to provide the following example:

   The father who tells his child not to take the flowers from the next door garden because that would be stealing should not be seen as subsuming this action under the general principle ‘Stealing is wrong’ (or perhaps ‘Do not steal’), but rather as pointing to the most salient feature of the situation (that the flowers belong to somebody else), which in this case gives sufficient reason for the child not to do it. Even if the father were to add ‘and stealing is wrong’, this need not mean that there is any subsumption going on. Rather, [...] he is reminding the child of the sort of importance the fact that one’s action would be theft can have. (Dancy 1993 p. 113)

5 I am making an important assumption here, and that is that no external moral reasons exist. I refer to a debate between the reasons-internalist (such as Bernard Williams) and the reasons-externalist (such as Kant). Williams’s seminal article is ‘Internal and external reasons’ (1981b). The externalist believes that there may be reasons for a given agent to do whether or not he (i) knows about the reason or (ii) accepts the reason. Williams argues, persuasively in my opinion, that the only external reasons have to do with the agent’s inferential errors and ignorance of relevant facts. Otherwise there are no external reasons, for a reason can only function as a reason if it finds purchase – or could realistically find purchase – in the agent’s ‘subjective motivational set’.

6 Consider Paul Ricoeur, who discusses the absence of the logical necessity of the kind typical of theoretical explanation: To follow a story is to move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripetia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfilment in the ‘conclusion’ of the story. The conclusion is not logically implied by some previous premises. It gives the story an ‘end point’, which, in turn, furnishes the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole. To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story. (Ricoeur 1990 p. 66.)
Part of my understanding of my own past will be regret over both a single interpreting subject, makes his interpretations not only a sense of epistemic integrity – what makes him up with an expanding sense of the past. Up with the next to form a narrative route, and must join valuable in some way. And each such placement must join one possibility over another because he considers it and at an intelligible distance from, various more-or-less measured evaluatively (Moore 1997 p. 225). The gardener from; ‘where’ is partly geographic, but it is mainly in terms him, but most importantly a story of where he’s coming to explain the mysterious or unsavoury parts and to make it intelligible we need to fill in the background detail, which will include his intentions of various scope and at various hierarchical levels. At the base level of narrative, the man is digging, rather than putting a spade repeatedly in the earth; and the narrative end point will be a hole of sufficient depth. But beyond that his intention might not be to plant but to prepare the garden for winter, or to please his wife by preparing the garden for the winter. As an observer, I may only come to conceive the scene under one description, and it may not be the one running through the man’s head or the one which you (keeping me company on this police stake-out) relate to me. But beyond that again, his intentions would refer to his on-going gardening hobby or to the narrative history of this particular marriage. His marriage will itself be partly guided by interpersonal expectations of appropriate marital behaviour (i.e. the institution of marriage will have its own narrative history in that community). As MacIntyre continues, ‘we cannot, that is to say, characterise behaviour independently of intentions, and we cannot characterise intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to the agents themselves and to others’ (ibid.).

Maybe the man will have two intentions, operating on different levels, or two overlapping local intentions with room for some give-and-take under a third over-arching narrative, which, at the limit, will be the present phase of the story of his life; an observer would want to ask the man himself which intention was primary, without necessarily assuming that the man would be a full authority on his own intentions – after all, the man will also be a character in the story he tells himself about his past and future, and such a story will require some rationalisation to explain the mysterious or unsavoury parts and to preserve some measure of overall coherence in the light of the man’s determinate ideals of behaviour.

This will not only be a description of his present commitments and memberships and where they’re leading him, but most importantly a story of where he’s coming from; ‘where’ is partly geographic, but it is mainly in terms of what Adrian Moore calls the ‘space of possibilities, measured evaluatively’ (Moore 1997 p. 225). The gardener must understand his past choices in terms of placing himself at different times in a certain orientation toward, and at an intelligible distance from, various more-or-less specifiable values and disvalues. He will incline toward one possibility over another because he considers it valuable in some way. And each such placement must join up with the next to form a narrative route, and must join up with an expanding sense of the past. To do this requires not only a sense of epistemic integrity – what makes him both a single interpreting subject, makes his interpretations and self-interpretations of a piece, and makes him the same person then as the person he is now – but also of narrative integrity, so that he can see his reasons as his reasons for tracing just that route and no other.

3. Narrative and Points of View

So far we have been discussing the importance of narrative in the structure of one’s understanding of oneself, and of understanding others under discrete observation. However, it also structures the very relationships I have with others, and especially with ‘significant others’ (to use Mead’s fashionable term). The obvious cases of significant others are friends and family, but to a certain extent they will also include work colleagues and clients. I stress the difference between my detached appreciation of fictional characters or complete strangers, and my engaged appreciation of the partner in an on-going relationship (however close or distant), where one of the things that matters to me is how that person sees and what that person thinks of me. In his ‘Time and Narrative’ (2001), Peter Goldie discusses the role of imaginative points of view in this process of understanding. Unlike the legalist’s characteristic interest in the distinction between more objective and more subjective points of view (between multiple appearance and a singular reality), Goldie is interested in the distinction between my personal point of view and the point of view I imagine that the significant other to have. But as he explains, this basic idea opens up quite a complicated structure of experience.

Let us begin with Goldie’s example of James and Mary, which I want to develop further than he does (without suggesting that he would agree with such a development). At a certain moment, James is thinking \( p \), and this will be part of the content of his perspectival experience of the world. Mary watches James as he thinks \( p \), but she herself does not think \( p \); her point of view on the world includes James-thinking-\( p \), and as such it is ‘higher-order’. At this point there are a number of possibilities:

- Mary’s viewpoint might involve no more than the thought that James is thinking \( p \).
- But she might also think further, evaluatively, about James’s thinking \( p \). For example, \( p \) might be the thought that life is pointless: James could have that thought, Mary could observe him having that thought, and think that having such a thought is awful; she could come to understand why he thinks that – he has recently gone through a messy divorce. Here, however, she is still an observer, albeit with a more intimate view.
- If Mary knows the ex-wife, and remembers the happier times between her and James, she could also understand James’s thought that \( p \) in the light of her own memory of James in love, and of his wife as illuminated by his love; that illumination allows Mary

\[ http://www.practical-philosophy.org.uk \]

\[ ^7 \text{Part of my understanding of my own past will be regret over decisions I wish I had not taken; either because of some contemporaneous information that I now wish I’d (or now feel I should have) known then, or because of my present knowledge of what then-unpredictable consequences that decision generated. Another part will concern decisions I felt then – and feel now – that I had to do, that in an important sense I had no option, given who I remember being and what I remember mattered to me.} \]

\[ ^8 \text{He actually uses the term ‘perspective’, but I have replaced this in what follows by ‘point of view’, since I am using ‘perspective’ to denote an individual’s wider vision of the world and of himself in it. As such, a single individual can adopt different points of view within his determinate perspective, but cannot adopt other perspectives. (Although his perspective will probably change over time.)} \]
Imagine that James and his wife book a session with a marriage counsellor: each speaks to him separately, and then the three of them attempt to talk things over together. The counsellor has to compile a coherent narrative from the two descriptions, where each description may be twisted by rancour or self-pity, and probably wildly incompatible with the other; the counsellor has to recognise and compensate for the risks that even sincere autobiographical narratives run (such as the great scope for self-serving rationalisations to fill the gaps and uncertainties), and compensate for the distortion associated with not being able to see the wood for the trees. The counsellor may consult friends of the couple on certain matters, and their accounts may well corroborate or falsify one or other version of a controversial episode. However, the friends will often be just as implicated as the two spouses, and so their first-personal accounts of what happened might also be distorted in similar ways. These will be limits to any counselling process, including philosophical counselling. Indeed, insofar as the marriage counsellor has to make sense of other people’s lives and viewpoints before he can give any advice, he is being a philosophical counsellor in a wider sense. There is a striking conclusion here, that runs directly against the legalist epistemological paradigm: for the really important events, there is no such thing as privileged access to the singular truth of what happened.

Again, matters of fact can be verified (James did check into a certain hotel with a certain ‘Beverley Jones’ on a certain date); and indeed the fact of a specifically-worded utterance can also be verified (as with Nixon’s White House tapes). But such facts and utterances will require interpretation within the context of further stories, and these stories will derive plausibility from their place in the larger narratives of James’s life, his wife’s life, and the semi-autonomous life of the relationship (which will be more than the sum of the two constituent narratives). Throughout, there is a single, partly-hidden chronicle, to which all the competing narratives must remain true. But beyond such facts and utterances, there are only perspectival stories: there is no single correct narrative of what happened (although there will be areas of great overlap among the narratives). Concomitantly, for much of their married life, James and his wife were the only ones in the room: there is no further testimony and only limited evidence of what happened on so many fateful evenings.

Finally, this narrative understanding challenges the legalist assumption that an event has a fixed significance. Many events in a person’s life will have the significance they do partly in virtue of the particular narrative context of the later vantage point, in that same life, from which the first event is contemplated. As the vantage points change, so too does the significance of the past event. Let’s say James meets his wife at t₁ in Bognor Regis, at t₂ they marry and at t₃ they divorce, his view of the t₁ meeting will probably be very different at t₃ than at t₂; at the former he will bless that day in Bognor Regis, at the latter he will curse it. At t₄, ten years after the divorce, he may well have acquired a greater understanding of his own hamfistedness at the time, and come to see the t₁ meeting once again as blessed, although in a bittersweet sort of way. All the judgments at t₄, t₁ and t₃ will be answerable to certain facts and will have to fit, more or less, with other people’s testimonies; (and if such significance is wildly inconsistent with others’ testimonies, then a new narrative explanation will have to be developed for that inconsistency). But that still leaves great scope for a narratively coherent shift in the significance over time, and denies the possibility of a single fixed significance.

4. Autobiography

The marriage counsellor was asking the two clients not just to assemble their stories, but also to tell them to him. This is not a straightforward report. Instead, the story and the story-telling will be partly designed with a view to the specific context of the telling, a context shaped by the agent’s shorter and longer-term goals. In addition, the very telling of the story, and the reactions that the story provokes in the significant other, may well change the agent’s understanding. It is this two-way stream that I want to explore in this section, and which I will return to in the final section on dialogicality.

As we saw, to make narrative sense of my life, I have to have a sense of who I am, where I came from, and where I am going – in the sense of possibilities, measured evaluatively. Let me take another example, again from Goldie, of a mini-story recounted in the pub:

Last Saturday I went to the ground to watch the match, and stupidly bought a forged ticket from a ticket tout who seemed honest enough at the time. I ended up missing the game and trudging home fifty quid worse off, wet, angry, and thoroughly sorry for myself.

(Goldie 2001 p. 13)

At the very least, this is a narrative rather than a sequence of thoughts in that the later events make sense in terms of the earlier events (assuming the unproblematic recognition of those experiences as mine). However, it is richer than that because in telling the story I adopt a more objective retrospective viewpoint of greater ironic knowledge than that of the viewpoint of the hero of the story – the tout
So here I am telling the above mini-story to my friends down the pub. In telling the story I am watching the reactions of my audience to ensure that they are understanding what happened in the past; that they are making sense of my response then and of my response now and the ironic contrast between them; and that they come to share sufficiently my present viewpoint on what happened and to understand sufficiently both sets of emotional responses (i.e. that my anger seemed appropriate then but in fact, i.e. in retrospect, was not, and that my gullibility is now mildly amusing). However, I may not succeed in getting them to understand or in drawing these responses from them; I may have to think quickly to come up with additional detail from the narrated events, I may have to explain some key links between the viewpoints, and I may also have to explain why it is supposed to be amusing (which, notoriously, will rarely ensure that it becomes amusing). Sometimes I might deliberately embellish, and recall the modification as an embellishment. Sometimes the distinction between the embellishment and the embellished may be blurred at either the moment of telling the story or in the version that I later remember.

This is very important. My attempts to make sense of a certain episode in my own life often rely on telling stories about that episode to other people, especially those whom I want to help to understand me, and whose opinion of me I value. In this way I can ‘try on for size’ a tentative interpretation of the events in the same way that I can try on a political opinion, in the hope of clarifying it or otherwise improving it on the basis of the other person’s interpretation and response (my audience may also delight in pointing out the embellishments). More abstractly, as a teenager I can ‘try on’ whole personalities copied from films, and refine them on the basis of the response (and again, this need not be a fully conscious, fully chosen process); adults can do the same, of course, e.g. when it comes to exaggerating one’s indignation because one feels it is called for by the situation and by the personliness ideal to which one is striving. There will be pockets of one’s past that remain ‘narratively opaque’, in the sense that I cannot weave them into any plausible story; and too many such pockets can lead to alienation – I remember the events and my responses well enough, but I cannot emplot them into a sufficiently plausible and sufficiently explanatory narrative, given my present understanding of who I am now, who I was then, whom I want to become now, and whom I wanted to become then. Sometimes the past event may be so traumatic as to demand opacity, as in the case of military veterans. So when I spoke of logical and narrative coherence, I do not have a polar concept in mind, but one of degrees, where there has to be enough coherence for the person to hold his ‘total vision of life’ together.12

Some of these ideas can be illustrated by considering the role of perspective in literature. Realist literature, under which label I include most Victorian novels, usually has an omniscient narrator who allows the reader into the narrative world of the fictional characters without the commitments and risks associated with the determinant perspective of a direct participant in the action. Although the narrator might sometimes address the readers in personal tones, and might even speak in the first person as a former participant in the isolated past which he describes, he usually remains disembodied and indistinguishable from the narrative process itself. Partly for this reason, partly for lack of any alternative systematic viewpoints on what happened, he commands authority.

In contrast to the omniscience of the literary narrator, there is another kind of story told by a restricted first-personal

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11 Goldie’s is the archaeological metaphor, although this is not quite right, since archaeology also involves reconstruction of a household or lifestyle or even a civilisation from fragments. Indeed, seeing an object as a fragment is already a reconstruction, since a fragment must be a fragment of something, e.g. a bone or artefact.

12 This is Iris Murdoch’s phrase:

> When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solution to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. (Murdoch 1956, p. 39)

A ‘vision of life’ is something that has to show a certain amount of coherence and unity, as do the narratives that make up such a vision. It might be tempting to use the word ‘integrity’ to describe such a vision, but I have deliberately refrained from doing so because of the word’s misleading philosophical implications. First, integrity is sometimes no more than conscientiousness under adversity, but this comes too close to legalist conceptions of the self, and leaves out the elements of narrative and dialogicality that I have been discussing here. Second, integrity does not pay enough attention to the relation between the self and action. Third, a linguistic point: integrity implies wholeness or completion, whereas I prefer a scalar terms such as coherence, or an unquantifiable term such as Murdoch’s vision.

But integrity may also be an inadequate term because of its emphasis on achievement rather than on approach; sometimes a failure to achieve structural integrity can nevertheless yield an admirable total vision of life. Gabrielle Taylor (‘Integrity’ in: Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, vol. LV (1981)) attempted a formal analysis of the concept, stressing the notion of a self ‘in some sense whole,’ and ‘under due influence of his past.’ However, in his response (in the same volume) Raimond Gaita rightly pointed to the counter-example (p. 161) of an amnesic who has lost much of his past and with it his self-understanding, but who could nevertheless be described as possessing integrity because of his attempts to restore order to his life ‘in an uncompromising spirit of truthfulness.’
narrator, usually a participant in the story he describes, but who trades on the authority reliably commanded by providing the main systematic viewpoint with enough of a sense of even-handed impartiality. Interestingly, this authority can be gradually undermined, as an alternative explanation for the narrator’s viewpoint (and especially the selectivity and interpretation of its descriptions of events) emerges within the first-personal narrative. I have in mind two such examples, the first being Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where – against all the conventions of the detective genre – the first-personal narrator himself turns out to be the murderer, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist in the Floating World*, where the narrator’s confusion about the extent and blameworthiness of his direct involvement in producing propaganda for the militarist regime in 1930s Japan is revealed in his own contradictory and confused accounts of the things people tell him, especially his two grown-up daughters. There are important differences between the two stories, however: Christie’s narrator is revealed to have been deliberately deceiving the reader all along, and by the end receives the punishment he knew well he deserved. Ishiguro’s narrator deceives himself as much as his readers, and by the end it is not clear how much more informed he is, or can afford to be.  

5. Moral Dilemmas

Our understanding of narrative can also provide a way of discussing moral dilemmas. There is by now a fairly substantial literature on this, and the main question seems to be an ontological one: whether moral dilemmas exist, as opposed to merely apparent dilemmas; and if they do exist, how is one to square that with the legalist assumption of a singular realm of moral truth. One typical answer is to deny their existence, and suggest that there must always be some factor or reason that the agent has neglected, even when such a factor might only become apparent, if at all, after the decision is made and the consequences suffered. However, I reject the legalist assumption. To see why, let me consider an example of Raimond Gaita (Gaita 1989 p. 103). Two mountaineering friends are atop a treacherous and poorly accessible mountain. One of them badly injures himself and can no longer walk, while a violent storm down the mountain.

Now, the non-moral dilemma I can accept under the legalist construal: there is a best route which the mountaineer may or may not find, and about which he could consult authoritative advice (maps etc.). The moral dilemma, however, admits of no singular legalist solution for all who find themselves in the situation, because the precise meaning of the dilemma – and the meaning of what might count as a resolution to the dilemma, if there is one – will depend on the dilemma’s place in the perspective of the particular individual considering the dilemma. In other words, it depends how the dilemma fits into the on-going stories in which the individual finds himself.

For some individuals, there might not even be a dilemma: ‘I don’t know about you, but I would never abandon a friend’ (maybe they have a particular friend, Bloggs, in mind as they say this). At the same time, that same individual can appreciate that others might respond to the same story with ‘all this romantic poppycock about “greater love hath no man” – when it comes to the crunch, we all think of number one;’ a third individual might be genuinely perplexed, and suspend judgment until he is in actually that situation, perhaps arguing that particular situational factors will always tip the balance. A dilemmatic story, in other words, allows for individuals to imagine a legitimate diversity of respectable responses, whatever their own beliefs. Such a diversity will be constrained, however, by a shared understanding of things like the limitations and vulnerabilities of the human body, of things like the sort of behaviour and attitudes one friend can reasonably expect from another if their relationship is to be recognised as a friendship at all (i.e. beyond the mutual benefits accrued); of things like the sort of reason that could justify otherwise nasty behaviour to a friend. Throughout, even if my choice would be clear to me, I can still accept Smith’s perplexity, as well as Jones’s confidence in making the opposite choice. To enquire into the ontology of whether it is ‘in fact’ a moral dilemma, or whether the relevant moral reasons do in fact underdetermine the rationally best outcome, is a wild goose chase.

That is the first point I want to make about moral dilemmas, about the importance of narrative imagination in understanding them as dilemmas, and about the legitimate assumption made by the dilemma’s author that his audience will respond with such narrative imagination. The second point is to reiterate that the meaning of the dilemma will itself change as the individual’s perspective on the world develops over time, where such a perspective will include the individual’s changing understanding of (i) the dilemma, (ii) its attempted resolution, (iii) the ends that were supposed to be the basis for resolving the problem in that way (i.e. the ends may in time turn out not to have justified the means), and, perhaps most
importantly, (iv) the past individual (i.e. himself) who resolved the problem that way then.

Third, and it’s also a more general point about many examples in mainstream philosophy, concerns the absence of dialogue between (i) the characters in the dilemma, (ii) the observers or listeners of the dilemma and the character(s) in it, and (iii) the observer and the person with whom he imagines himself in a corresponding dilemma (i.e. I imagine what I would do with Bloggs if he were injured up a mountain with me). This absence, I suggest, greatly undermines the philosophical conclusions drawn from such examples; and it is the best reason, I think, for using examples from literature.

In Gaita’s example, not only are we not told anything about the particular nature of the two mountaineers’ friendship (and the two mountaineers’ own understandings of each other and of their friendship), but the mountaineers do not say anything to each other. If the injured mountaineer were unconscious, this would be inevitable; but what would the friends say to each other as the storm approached, with one lying crippled and immobile, but very much conscious and frightened. Certainly, the injured man’s words (be they ‘please don’t leave me’ or ‘get out of here, save yourself!’) might not make the dilemma any easier for the healthy man to resolve, since there will still be the question of whether to heed the friend’s demands, which will depend on the narrative gloss he chooses to place on them (‘does he mean it?’, ‘is he in a fit state of mind?’ etc.) and on how much he thinks through the implications (‘how would I explain this to my wife?’ ‘what if I abandon him and he miraculously survives – what would he think of me?’). However, the dilemma becomes infinitely richer and more particular, and the healthy man’s decision infinitely more personal, because of it. The particularity of what a person says in a moment of crisis has an enormous power to surprise and reveal. For the injured man’s words can only be properly understood by the healthy man in the context of his narrative understanding of their on-going relationship, and of his awareness that this relationship (at least in its present form) may well be about to end.

From the outside, every intimate relationship has its own internal narrative logic that can never be fully negotiated nor fully grasped; for if the outsider is close enough to at least one of the partners to understand some of the relationship, so that outsider’s perspective on that relationship will be informed by the only-partly-knowable internal logic of his own relationship with his friend. As such it could almost be said that the only real criterion of an intimate relationship’s success, when viewed from the outside, is its longevity.

We are now a long way from the legalist conception of a singular realm of moral truth, let alone from a singularly objective conception of the right or best thing to do. In the example above, what on earth could constitute acting for the best or doing the right thing? – the only coherent response for us as observers of the story is pity, the same response as appropriate to the great theatrical tragedies. The dilemma faced by the healthy mountaineer is tragically intelligible and tragically irresolvable, notwithstanding the misguided efforts of contemporary philosophers to offer, rather than find, resolutions. The narrative aspect of the perspective and of identity makes both even more personal.

6. Dialogicality

So narratives and stories make an essential reference to an audience, where an audience can range from a packed theatre to a single interlocutor in an ordinary conversation, to oneself. The story-teller has to anticipate the audience’s expectations and responses to some degree, and to fine-tune the telling accordingly. Each audience will merit a slightly different version of the same story, if only because the second telling will involve reflection on the success of the first telling. Note that the word ‘audience’ should not be thought of as a final, passive stage of the process of creation and delivery: rather, the audience is actively engaged as one side in a dialogue, and such engagement requires a sufficiently shared perspective and understanding. Even in the contrived environment of the theatre, where the audience usually has no lines in the play and sits in darkness, it still retains the capacity to surprise the actor, and there will always be room for improvisation by ‘feeding’ off the audience’s reactions.

In addition, the process of telling the story will very often influence the remembered content and meaning of the story. What should be guarded against is the thought that the story is there to be told, that the story will be unaffected by the telling, as a mountain is unaffected by being described or misdescribed. Charles Taylor defines his quasi-technical term ‘articulations’ as attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated. But this kind of formulation or reformulation does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what we desire or what we hold important in a certain way. (Taylor 1985 p. 36)

There are intelligibly obscure links between an individual’s self-understanding, his understanding of others as other members of the same cultural-linguistic community, and his involvement in intimate relationships with ‘significant others’. The key term is again Charles Taylor’s: human life is essentially dialogical in nature. When

15 Again, when saying this, I am assuming conceptual limits to the concepts of friendship and affection, in order to recognise it as a friendship in the first place, and not an instance of unhealthy domination or dependency.

16 Importantly, although improvisation can be wildly inventive and usually (from the audience’s point of view) unpredictable, the actor cannot do anything; he is constrained by the same sorts of limits of intelligibility that I have been describing throughout this article. But he will also discover further constraints of intelligibility (as well as constraints of taste, humour etc.), depending on the particular audience at today’s performance.

17 ‘Intelligible obscurity’ is Williams’s term (‘Internal reasons and the obscurity of blame’ in: Making Sense of Humanity, CUP 1995, p. 44), and is to be contrasted with unintelligible mystery and with intelligible clarity. The idea is that the exact nature of such links is unobservable because, like the paradigm of the popular understanding of quantum physics, the observation process itself disrupts the entities observed. But unlike quantum physics, the links in question are readily intelligible, even if obscure, as a primary part of folk-psychological explanations in everyday life and in fiction.
young, we learn a rich capacity for expression through language, gesture, art and love, mainly in dialogue with our parents and relatives, but then with teachers and priests and with fellow first-language-learners. So much of our self-conception – both in cool reflection and in moments of crisis – is therefore wrapped up in formative dialogical exchanges from the past. ‘Moreover,’ continues Taylor, this is not just a fact about *genesis*, which can be ignored later on. It’s not just that we learn the languages in dialogue and then can go on to use them for our purposes on our own. This describes our situation to some extent in our culture. We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognise in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. (Taylor 1991 p. 33, italics orig.)

Dialogicality therefore addresses the worry that my perspective might isolate me from reality and from others too much, leading to corrosive Cartesian doubt at worst, or to self-indulgent flights of fancy at best. This is a crucial response to a strong legalist objection. My perspective is rarely the end of the matter; I have to deal with others’ perspectives, and with what I imagine to be others’ perspectives, all the time, since I am engaged in on-going and essentially reciprocal relations and projects with them. I do not simply encounter the situation, respond to it with an evaluative description, judgment or action, and walk away. If the others are significant others, I have to take their judgments seriously; not only does the situation demand a response; *they* demand one. And if I care to remain as morally competent in their eyes (where I deliberately use the word ‘care’ rather than ‘decide’), I must at least address their concerns and provide satisfactory (for them) explanations of my actions. Everybody but the radical sociopath will have intimate relationships, and it is partly within the context of their on-going relationships (and in the context of their perspectival awareness of their on-going relationships) that individuals develop in *this* direction rather than *that* one. To put it another way, I am never alone. The web of relationships I am involved in accompanies me wherever I go, and partly informs my perspective and my experience within that perspective.¹⁹

The dialogicality of relationships makes it easier to understand why betrayal and abandonment by friends are peculiarly awful experiences, beyond the disutility or abrogation of duty that might primarily bother the legalist philosopher. In addition, there is another type of isolation that is relevant here – that felt at times by a person *inside* a relationship, especially an emerging or otherwise turbulent one. The isolation stems from not having a sufficient grasp of the changing internal logic, which needs to be partly re-discovered and partly re-negotiated; but it also stems from the awareness of the fact that (sufficiently) full comprehension of the relationship as a changing entity will not be available to anyone outside it, and only partly available to those within. A third party’s well-meaning advice, even with the best legalist credentials, is notoriously inadequate in such a situation.²⁰

**Conclusion**

Much of what I have said will not be news to a reader of novels. But the legalist paradigm remains dominant in mainstream morality. And while that paradigm has been decisively challenged in the philosophy of science (where there is no longer any such thing as an ‘innocent eye’), it continues to provide the framework within which many debates in ethics are carried out. There is still an obsession with discovering and describing what actions are ethically wrong, as if it involved no more than a different kind of observation of the world; there is rarely any mention of ethics being *essentially* about people and the relationships between people. As a result, the philosophical counsellor’s job cannot be formulated in terms of a truth to dig out, be it a truth about what happened or about what possibilities are available now. The counsellor has to be much more sensitive to the role of narrative in his client’s life and especially in his client’s view of his own life.

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¹⁸ Taylor footnotes this with a reference to the work of Michael Bakhtin, especially his Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics.

¹⁹ Consider the power of a symbol like a wedding ring. When I wear such a ring, I can never be alone in a room again. Perhaps to some this will sound like relentless persecution, to others like crass sentimentalism; for better or for worse, it is intelligible to say that my identity has become so intertwined with that of my wife that I am not sure any more where I end and she begins. My enjoyment of the good things and my suffering in the face of the bad things in life will be given a completely different texture insofar as they are shared.

²⁰ The best description I know of this sense of isolation is in Dickens’s David Copperfield, where David suddenly realises that he is married to the object of his infatuations, Dora. All looks blissful at first for the young couple, but doubts set in for the reader. It is not so much his ignorance of running a household, for we know that he has been resourceful in other areas and he will learn to manage even without Dora’s help. Rather, it is his ignorance of the business of marriage, and especially marriage to Dora. He has to find out what he expects, what he can ‘legitimately’ expect, what he wants, what he ‘really’ wants, etc., and they have to sort all this out in medias res, trying to make it ‘work’, where each will understand ‘working’ against the background of their respective grasps of the concept of marriage. There will have to be joint decisions about household expenditures, holidays, guests, sexual relations, visits to the in-laws, and perhaps most challenging of all, parenting (luckily Dickens kills Dora off before the last one becomes an issue). During all this, David has no one to turn to; his male friends are none the wiser, and his aunt Betsey Trotwood (as a surrogate parent), refuses to provide more than a minimum out of an admirable principle of non-interference. And however much more is available today than in Dickens’s time – frank relationship manuals, sexual counselling, public discussions – I maintain that this sense of isolation can exist at times in every relationship.
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Christopher Cowley
School of Medicine
University of East Anglia
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

e-mail: c.cowley@uea.ac.uk

Christopher Cowley
School of Medicine
University of East Anglia
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

e-mail: c.cowley@uea.ac.uk