Telling Stories-Giving Reasons:
Narrative Ethics revisited

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Abstract

The paper attempts to give a systematic survey of different strands and intentions of "narrative ethics" both in philosophy and in theology and proposes how to develop narrative ethics in the future. This proposal features three different dimensions of the term "moral vision,", i.e. morally substantial ideas that are embedded in traditions (Moral Vision 1), the appropriation of these ideas by particular historical cultures or individuals (Moral Vision 2) and moral perception channeled by Moral Vision 2 (Moral Vision 3). Narrative ethics, the paper argues, can describe how (religious) traditions can inspire moral thinking and learning without falling prey to traditionalism. Theological ethics is about forming an ethical culture in which we remind each other of the stories that continue to inspire us and in which we tell each other of our moral world-view and commitments, our strong feelings about the good and the bad which are based in our individual and common lives and not derived from grammatical rules or ultimate principles.

Keywords

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1. Narrative, ethics, and normative ethical theory

Narrative ethics may have lost some of the appeal that it once used to have. In theology, narrative ethics is sometimes seen as a traditionalist (in the sense of resistant to change), positivistic, or fideistic project. I understand these reservations, but I still think that narrative ethics has something to offer us. Narrative ethics does not need to be traditionalist at all. Indeed, narrative ethics can, and has, been adopted by philosophers whose work is anything but traditionalist. So, what I want to do in my paper is firstly to ask, how these very different approaches to narrative ethics relate to one another, how they can be located on a broad scheme of what ethics *does*, and secondly, which directions for future research are promising? First, I want to understand how it can be that narrative and literature are addressed both by traditionalist people in ethics *and* by people who have nothing to do with traditionalism. Martha Nussbaum described very pointedly the divergence between different groups of scholars who work or comment on literature and ethics. Somewhat militantly, Nussbaum distinguishes between "allies" and "adversaries" in the field of narrative literature and ethics (Nussbaum, 2003). Some scholars, like Nussbaum herself, think narrative literature and ethics are allies, some think the two are adversaries. In the adversaries' camp, people argue that one must choose between traditional theoretical ethics on the one hand and turning to literature on the other hand. In the allies' camp, literature and ethics are seen as mutually enhancing. In my paper, I have slightly renamed these two categories, added a third category, and include theological approaches, which are not Nussbaum's concern. This brings forth the following map:[1]

	a) cooperation (→ moral vision 3)	b) anti-theory (→ moral vision 3)	c) traditionalism (→ moral vision 1/2)
1. Philosophy and Social Sciences	Martha Nussbaum Charles Taylor	Richard Rorty Cora Diamond	
	Nora Hämäläinen		
2. Theology	Alexander Lucie-Smith	Johannes Fischer Michael Roth	Stanley Hauerwas Dietrich Ritschl

I will briefly go through the cells of the chart and then discuss what this all I will briefly go through the cells of the chart and then discuss what this all

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1. For an alternative organization of narrative ethics, see Joisten, 2016.

means. Nussbaum situates herself on the allies' side (Nussbaum, 2003). She argues that literary education, or more particularly: the cultivation of perceptive capacities is a necessary element of any moral education (Nussbaum, 2003). Narrative is not merely a rhetorical device, not merely a way of presenting ethical ideas (by giving examples, etc.). Instead, narrative ethics incites ethical deliberation; it is itself an act of moral activity (Nussbaum, 2003; Barton 2003; 2004). At the same time, she thinks that narrative approaches to ethics and theoretical approaches to ethics are mutually dependent. Ethical education would lack something important if were not accompanied by literary education, and ethical education would also lack something very important if it did not foster the ability to argue and to use theoretical devices. In contrast, philosophers like Richard Rorty and Cora Diamond are implying that normative ethical theory and narrative literature are adversaries. Narrative is seen as a contestation of normativity. They argue that all we have are moral narratives and moral intuitions, we can summarise these, but we cannot give (independent) reasons for them (Rorty, 1999; Diamond, 1991). "Books" can help us to become sensitive to cruelty, to perceive what people do and say, but they do not offer any normative theoretical insights. Nora Hämäläinen, who has recently published a very thoughtful monograph on literature and moral theory, has very neatly pinned down what the challenge that "narrative," meaning the narrative configuration of our thinking and ethical reasoning, can pose to ethical theory (Hämäläinen, 2016; Schmidt, 2018).

She points to the "vertigo" that befalls the ethical subject who sees him- or herself torn between competing vistas that theory and narratives give rise to. Literary approaches to ethics and normative-philosophical approaches to ethics appear to each create their own evidential force, as it were, and to move back and forth between the two certainly causes a substantial vertigo (Hämäläinen, 2016, p. 194).

Nora Hämäläinen herself tries to bridge this very gap, though her attempt to do so is far removed from a strong normative-theoretical position. In her view, "moral theories are patterns of structured thought, based on moral beliefs and intuitions that people hold in real life. Different moral theories clarify different moral ideas or intuitions, give them a systematized form and put them in relation to each other, so that their role in the larger whole can be more clearly grasped" (Hämäläinen, 2016, p. 205). Accordingly, theories can help to clarify moral situations, but they can never provide authoritative guidance (Hämäläinen, 2016, p. 206), indeed Hämäläinen makes it clear that the task of moral philosophy is not at all to pin down evaluative, normative, or meta-ethical commitments (Hämäläinen, 2016, p. 211). It seems to me that the compromise she offers might be more compatible with the adversaries' position than with the allies' position, but still, it is a worthy

attempt to mediate between theory and anti-theory. Very broadly, Charles Taylor and Peter Winch could also be located at this in-between position that Hämäläinen inhabits.[1] I have not come across a traditionalist take on narrative ethics as seen from the field of philosophy. Moving on to theology, Alexander Lucie-Smith represents a theological position that sees narrative and theory as compatible. He emphasizes that narrative and rationality are not in a genuine tension but are mutually enhancing, as he argues that the particular and the universal can be mutually affirming (Lucie-Smith, 2007), which is precisely what particularist positions would contest. I would tend to allocate Johannes Fischer close to the anti-theoretical position. Fischer's main line of argument takes recourse to moral emotions, which he says are what morality is all about; morality is not about rational arguments, says Fischer, and here, he differs from Nussbaum, who aims to balance ethical deliberation and moral emotion. Fischer makes a strong point that morality is always embedded in perceptions of situations; narratives represent situations and alert us to their moral dimensions (Fischer, 2012).

Nussbaum would not disagree, but Fischer goes further than she does by claiming that the recognition of that which is moral is immediate (Fischer, 2012, p. 62; Prichard, 2002). At the same time, Fischer distances himself from Rorty, arguing that there are (narrative) *reasons* for acting (which he implies Rorty would deny), though these reasons are not to be reconstructed as arguments (Fischer, 2012, p. 38; Rorty, 1996; Fischer, 2012, p. 38). Those theologians who would fall into the last cell of my chart argue that narrative approaches to ethics are richer and more real, than theoretical or rationalistic approaches to ethics. Their approach to narrative can take a conservative turn drill, as one can see in Stanley Hauerwas and Dietrich Ritschl. It is worth noting nothing that both Hauerwas and Ritschl have distanced themselves from the very *term* narrative theology (Ritschl, 1976b; Hauerwas, 1995): Both claim that theology itself is not narrative, and Ritschl claims that theology is regulative (Ritschl, 1976b).[2]

I will look at Ritschl in more detail because I think his traditionalist attempt at narrative ethics is typical for the kind of narrative ethics that many people think they want to stay away from. Ritschl thinks that biblical writings contain implicit axioms (Ritschl, 1986). Ritschl claims that while implicit axioms cannot always be fully reformulated, they cannot resist

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1. Taylor would not dismiss theory, though he also emphasizes that moral theory is not enough, since "Codes don't make people moral" (Taylor 2007, p. 707); "... philosophy can no more show a man what he should attach importance to than geometry can show a man where he should stand," says Peter Winch (Winch, 1972, p. 191).
2. Now this is actually a misunderstanding, because the adjective "Narrative" in narrative ethics does need to qualify the why ethics is presented (Joisten, 2016, p. 108).

reformulation completely (Ritschl, 1984, p. 142; Ritschl, 1986). What ethics does, then, is to see ethical problems and positions of our present times in the light of the grammar/implicit axioms of the story of God/Israel/Jesus Christ (Hütter, 1993, p. 199; Mieth, 1983, p. 63; Hofheinz, 2008, p. 63f) and to make ethical judgements accordingly.[1]

Personally, I do not think that theological ethics unearths or isolates the grammar or implicit rules. We do not have any real access to the worldview of ancient Israel and we ultimately cannot distill or explicate the grammar of traditions that are so far removed from us. Traditions can inspire us and form our thinking, but we cannot distill implicit rules or axioms from the tradition. I should explain in more detail what I mean by this. Ritschl is saying that theology *first* develops implicit rules from tradition and its narratives and *then* compares these rules to (moral) ideas of the present times. Ritschl makes it clear that one cannot derive moral principles from the Christian story (Ritschl, 1976a, p. 63), but he is still quite enthusiastic about the possibility of isolating what he calls the grammar of the story/implicit axioms at least to a certain extent, and this allows him to assume that the "story" is the guideline/standard ("Vorgabe") for the life of the believer (Ritschl, 1986; Ritschl, 1984, p. 292). To develop implicit axioms from narrative tradition means that one must "tilt" from narrative to summary, and Ritschl points out that that this very "tilt" from narrative style to summary and definition is where theology evolves (Ritschl, 1976b, p. 25).

I think this is not how it works. When Marin Luther King proclaimed that segregation violated the sacred dignity of the human person, that sacred dignity was not an implicit axiom that he had distilled from the Christian tradition in a previous step. The sacredness of the human person is not an ethical *brutum factum*, no matter how much sanctity-of-life campaigns want us to believe it.

Therefore, when it comes to normativity or deriving rules from the grammar of traditions, I am skeptical. Narrative does not give univocal shape to everything (Fischer, 2016). Narrative ethics is about discovering connections between the tradition and contemporary situations, it is not about deriving present-day normative ethical judgments (albeit indirectly). Narrative ethics searches for the aesthetic force of biblical texts rather than for their implicit axioms (Berger, 1990, p. 232).

I will briefly repeat the arguments that we have considered. I see Rorty's point. There is no safe external ground from which we can access moral truths (except for very elementary things e.g. "torture is bad"). Still, I have reservations about some of Rorty's claims: Even if we do not act for rationally explicable reasons, we assume that reasons are valid in our

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1. The term *meta*-story in Ritschl is also related to this idea (Jones, 1985; Ritschl, 1976b).

everyday interactions (transcendental pragmatism).

In everyday life, we presuppose that it makes sense to account for one's action and to hold each other accountable. I think Hans Joas is right in emphasizing that we cannot make our ethical stance understandable without resorting to narrative, but that this does not mean we should rebuke theory (Joas, 2013, p. 19). If our everyday practice of holding each other accountable and asking for reasons were to rest on a misunderstanding, then a vast amount of human interaction would rest on a misunderstanding. To claim this would be counter-intuitive. We are not only narrating animals (Joisten, 2016, p. 113), we are also theorizing animals; Nussbaum is right about that. In this respect (and in opposition to Rorty), ethics is more than merely summarising the ideas of a culture. Johannes Fischer is right in making this claim, though his own account of the numinous experience of the 'atmospheric presence of the good' is problematic (Fischer 2012). This idea relies on the idea of a moral universe that begs the question. I appreciate Hämäläinen's attempt at reconciling the allies' camp and the adversaries' camp, but I think that theory is more than just a way of describing or modeling problems. Finally, and this will be the focus of my second section, I will argue that tradition is important for our moral lives, but traditionalism is to be avoided. I agree that tradition gives shape to our moral life, but I will describe the shape-giving labor of tradition in a different way.

2. Moral vision and narrative ethics

Secondly, I would like to briefly say what ethical work is about, and try to locate narrative ethics in my description of ethical work.

The work of theological ethics is to analyze, criticize, foster, and cultivate different aspects of moral culture and moral thinking. All these different aspects of moral culture and moral thinking are related to "moral vision". I will briefly develop what I mean by "moral vision" and then indicate how this relates to narrative ethics, allowing me to further explain my map. I propose a distinction between three different kinds of moral vision. *Moral Vision 1* refers to ideas, narratives, and convictions that carry moral meaning within a given tradition. Günter Thomas has pinned down precisely what I mean by Moral Vision 1: "The ethical dimension of religions does not merely pertain to commandments to act in a certain way. It also pertains to the visions of a good, intact life – visions that are sedimented in rituals and narratives – and the same applies to interpretations of damaged life." (Thomas, 2001, p. 375 [translation my own]; Smart 2000, pp. 114–129) "Moral vision" in this sense of the word can be found in book titles like *The

Vision of Islam or *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* among others.[1] Typical 'containers' of Moral Vision 1 are, again, religious rituals, liturgy, written traditions, etc. One could speak of the deep grammar of religions, though this does not imply that the term "grammar" is used the same way as Ritschl is using it.[2] Philosopher Terence Cuneo has offered a description for the moral potential of tradition which I find much more helpful than Ritschl's (Cuneo, 2015). Cuneo is looking at the function that the orthodox liturgy has in the formation of a character. The participant of the liturgy enters the space of a narration and allocates himself a position within this space, says Cuneo with reference to Nussbaum. Cuneo calls this process "liturgical immersion". By virtue of the imaginary self-identification with the literary characters of the liturgical script, the subject develops his or her moral character and capacity of moral perception in light of Moral Vision 1 (in my terms), that is, in light of the moral "semantic potential" (Jürgen Habermas) that the liturgy contains. In other words, by way of imagination, the liturgical subject inhabits the world contained in traditional narratives and thereby forms his or her character in the course of this liturgical immersion. *Moral Vision 2* refers to the appropriation of religious tradition by members of (religious) cultures; it refers to the religious style that (religious) cultures and individuals within these religious cultures develop. While Moral Vision 1 is an abstract ideal type or an ideal construct, referring to the semantic potential of religion, Moral Vision 2 refers to the concrete realization of this potential in religious subjects and how real people see life morally.

Moral Vision 2 can be a mixture of religious and non-religious moral and non-moral ideas and values. Present-day civil religion in the USA would be one example for Moral Vision 2. *Moral Vision 3* refers to any act of competent moral perception; indeed moral perception has been of central importance among many ethicists in the recent Anglo-Saxon and German debate, though of course the very idea that moral perception matters can be traced all the way to Aristotle. Perception does not come from nowhere: our ability to perceive emerges through education, including and especially

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1. Murata and Chittick, 2006; Hays, 1997; Lynch, 2014, p. 38; Moyaert, 2010, p. 442, Charles Taylor uses the term vision in a similar sense (Taylor, 2007).
2. Wittgenstein, 1972, c1958, p. 168e (PU 664). I would like to add that moral vision *can* sometimes relate to the future, but they do not need to do so. Eschatological visions are *examples* for moral vision 1 (Stackhouse, 2010, p. 561), and indeed Wittgenstein has demonstrated in his lectures on religious belief that eschatological visions can have a regulating function in human life (Wittgenstein, 1966; Schmidt, 2016b). But moral vision 1 contains much more than eschatological visions, indeed the very point of Wittgenstein's comments is that the contents of eschatological visions point to the future, but their aim is direct the here and now and a way that had nothing to do with the realization of the Kingdom of God (in the sense of Jürgen Moltmann).

through literary education,[1] and it is shaped by what our culture thinks one ought not to overlook, and that again is part of Moral Vision 1. So the three kinds of moral vision are connected:

> *Moral Vision 1*: morally substantial ideas, deep grammar, etc.
> *Moral Vision 2*: the appropriation of these ideas by particular historical cultures or individuals
> *Moral Vision 3*: moral perception channeled *by* Moral Vision 2

To perceive the morally relevant features of any given situation (Moral Vision 3) requires one to have some kind of framework for what counts as a morally relevant feature of a situation, and Moral Vision 2 provides this framework. To see a moral situation as a moral situation (Moral Vision 3) requires one to see the world morally in a certain kind of way (Winch, 1992, p. 229). To make this point the other way around: Concrete moral situations, which challenge our moral perception (Moral Vision 3), give shape and profile to what Moral Vision 2 actually implies and consists of, and if concrete moral situations make us ponder Moral Vision 2, then we might find ourselves going back to the stories that shape our culture (Moral Vision 1). I would argue this is what the parable of the Good Samaritan might be all about: the interrelatedness of moral perception (Moral Vision 3: seeing the need to help), the moral culture of a given period of time (Moral Vision 2: early Christianity) and the ideas that the moral culture of that time period are embedded in (Moral Vision 1: the moral vision of Judaism).

In short: Moral Vision 1 is what subjects who are informed by the moral potential of their tradition see before their inner eye. Moral Vision 3 is how the eyes are opened to perceive the morally relevant features of a given situation; eyes are made receptive for morally relevant features of a given situation by virtue of moral cultivation. Literature can enhance the moral capacity of the human being particularly by presenting other modes of being and by training the imagination to be empathetic to the needs of another person (indeed one could argue, as Fischer does, that we have no access to the situation of another person except through narrative, but here is not the place to pursue these functions of Moral Vision 3 in more detail). The ability to perceive is linked to features of the person who perceives, and these features are not incidental, they are cultivated in the culture one lives in (Blum, 1994, pp. 45-47).

3. Summary and outlook

In the scheme of three kinds of moral vision, tradition takes an important

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1. Düwell, 2000; Joisten, 2016, 106; referring to Mieth, 1983, p. 59; Schmidt, 2017a, 2016a. McNaughton, 1988, pp. 212-213, argues that to develop moral perception and to become aware of one's blinds spots is key to moral education.

role, but its role is not to offer rules that we could somehow distill from the tradition. Being inspired by Moral Vision 1 implies that there is something moral in this tradition that can give us a good orientation, but we will never be able to pin down exactly what this something means normatively, and indeed if we were, pinning down basic axioms might be of little help (Prichard, 2002). The task of theological ethics is to ponder traditions and sources, to share in hermeneutical exegesis, to bring the deep grammar of religious traditions into play (Moral Vision 1) (Hämäläinen, 2016, p. 111; Mieth, 2000, p. 79), to analyse, criticise, and cultivate the way in which people look at the world morally and are inspired by the traditions they feel attached to (Moral Vision 2), and finally, the task of theological ethics is to ask what it means to perceive a situation morally and how moral perception fails (Moral Vision 3).[1] Again, this works both ways: to encounter the failure of moral perception, as, for example in the infamous Samaritans experiment, may inspire one to go back to the tradition and see what it has to say about self-deception (Schmidt, 2014).

In short, the task of theological ethics is to clarify what our tradition can mean, what we mean when we refer to our tradition, what our tradition has done to our culture and what it could do for our moral culture. This clarification is always *in via*, never able to have the final word, in constant search of tradition's potential to provide orientation. Theological ethics is about forming an ethical culture in which we remind each other of the stories that continue to inspire us and in which we tell each other of our moral world-view and commitments, our strong feelings about the good and the bad which are based in our individual and common lives and not derived from grammatical rules or ultimate principles (McNaughton, 1988, [ch. 1.4]).

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1. Narrative ethics does not (merely) narrate, but in shares in narrations affirmatively and critically. Narrative ethics shares in narrations critically when narratives are abused in a manipulative kind of way, which is always possible (Düwell, 2000, p. 12) and when narrations are activated in a traditionalistic kind of way. Tradition is to be held distinct from traditionalism (Gorski, 2017; Stout, 2009). Traditionalism is the conviction that stories are somehow "canonical" (cf. Stout 2009, p. 118) and contain rules that are then to be applied. I would like to opt for an alternative description of how tradition is morally functional. Broadly speaking, narrative is "an interpretation of the past that generates a vision of the future."

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