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## Disclosing Virtue

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# Disclosing Virtue



Honors Thesis

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Department: Philosophy

Advisor: Diane Dunham, M.Hum.

April 2019

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## **Abstract**

This project is about the shape of our moral understanding and discourse. Herein, I describe the moral discourse and understanding afforded through narrative. I understand narrative as both a medium of discourse (i.e. storytelling) and a mode of understanding (i.e. a way to understand oneself, others, and the world(s) in which we find ourselves). In order to describe the ethical understanding and discourse constructed through narrative, I use the meta-ethical framework of Aristotelian virtue theory. The language of virtue theory constitutes the framework upon which I construct my argument regarding the irreplaceable and efficacious nature of narrative. The preface tells the story of this project, situating the essay alongside the uncertainties and hesitations I still have.



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## **Preface**

I presented this project at the Honors Student Symposium in late March, 2019. I opened my presentation stating that this project is a work in progress. It remains a work in progress. I have not yet written a version of this essay which precisely states the intuition from which I have drawn inspiration throughout this project. I have written multiple versions attempting to describe what I now understand to be the central issue from multiple angles. There is one version which I consider complete. This version is my submission for the final undergraduate honors thesis.

As stated, I have not been able to construct a discourse which entirely captures the intuition at the heart of this project. Since unresolved tension between ideas is interesting, I have decided to include this preface. This preface explains why I am not satisfied with the complete version which I am submitting as my undergraduate honors thesis. This preface, by telling the story of this project and contextualizing the current final version of this essay, serves to highlight and make clear the set of issues at the heart of this project. I hope this situates the thesis of the final version within some more nuanced, interesting, and difficult overarching discourse.

In my Honors Symposium presentation, after stating that this project is a work in progress, I explained the content of the project by explaining some discourses and issues which I have continuously considered over the past few years. This method – telling the story of the development of this project – communicates the true nature of the project more effectively than any abstract, propositional lines of reason that I have been able to construct. I do feel some vague sense of satisfaction and acceptance that the project, as it

currently stands, is described most effectively as a story; for the intuition at the heart of the project is an intuition about narrative. More specifically, the intuition at the heart of this project is a belief that narrative is an indispensable and irreplaceable component of meaningful moral understanding and discourse. This intuition has implications that extend beyond the realm of moral discourse, though. Narrative seems to be a method of discourse and a mode of understanding that supports understandings of self and other that extend beyond questions of morality. The extension of this discourse beyond moral epistemology is something I hope to pursue in the future, but this is not an extension I have yet made. For now, this project remains close to questions about moral understanding.

One of my first exposures to academic ethical discourse was in a class on Existentialism, taught by Diane Dunham. In this class, I sensed a serious tension that I have yet to resolve – the tension, I believe, that lies at the heart of this Honors Thesis project. This is the tension between the following: (1) the impossibility of articulating some absolutely true ethical or meta-ethical principle and (2) the ostensibly common intuition (which I certainly share in feeling) that one must act in a manner which is morally justifiable. I realize the impossibility of articulating any perfectly true ethic and I realize the impossibility of rationally proving the existence of an absolute ethic, and yet I feel I must believe in and behave in accordance with some ethic(s). This tension cannot be resolved with some form of moral relativism. I feel intuitively compelled to act ethically, and I do not mean that I feel compelled to act in a way that is justifiable within a particular society or practice. An ethic, if it is true in any meaningful way, extends

beyond the person and the context in which the person exists. This does not, I have come to believe, mean that an ethic needs to be simple or reducible to some series of prescriptions, rules, or propositions. It does, though, need to present itself forcefully to the agent who acts in accordance with it. In the absence of any epistemically forceful ethic(s), I sense that life would be defined by confusion and despair. One must feel some sense of orientation, and one must feel that the direction of this orientation is not arbitrary.

As my Honors Thesis adviser, Professor Dunham encouraged me to explore the tension that I felt (and still feel), regarding this ethical dilemma. I remember her encouraging me to “scratch the itch” that I felt. I found that, as I explored, the itch grew, as did the quality of work that I was able to create, as did the areas of study that I felt compelled to explore. A significant experience, early in this Honors Thesis project, was my exploration of Russian literature, and in particular, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, suggested to me by Professor Dunham. I spent months carefully reading this book, and I was completely enraptured by it. I was entirely convinced by what I would call the main claim(s) of this work. I empathized with Raskolnikov, and I felt that his moral failures and successes were believable and representative of real moral dilemmas. If the book is to be understood as moral literature, it can be understood to make moral claims. These claims, though, can not be stated rationally without significantly oversimplifying what is contained therein. *Crime and Punishment* must be experienced to be understood, it presents a meaningful ethical perspective, and it is morally correct in some seriously meaningful way. The perspective I am describing is at the heart of the

conclusion of this Honors Thesis project. It is not that the thesis is about *Crime and Punishment*, it is rather about the fact that these claims about *Crime and Punishment* are coherent and possible in the first place. It is an attempt to articulate why and how moral literature, and storytelling more generally, can provide orientation and seriously substantive moral discourse and development. *Crime and Punishment* inspired me to reflect upon the moral reality in which I find myself in a more serious and productive way than is typical when I read rational meta-ethical discourses. Similarly, it made me realize the epistemic force of a series of non-propositional yet substantive ethical claims. This book disclosed to me things about the ethical reality in which I find myself.

My attempts to articulate this intuition – of the resolution of the ethical tension I felt through a turn towards storytelling – have taken various forms, as I mentioned prior. Dr Michael Cox, in the class Philosophy of Religion after I expressed an interest in the capabilities of narrative, pointed me toward the authors Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. In the works of these authors, I found something like attempts to articulate something like the experiences I had with great moral literature. In the case of MacIntyre, narrative serves as one of four parts in his modern return to Aristotelian virtue ethics. It is reasonable to say that narrative plays a central role in MacIntyre's account of how we ought think about virtue ethics in modernity. In the case of Charles Taylor, and in particular his work *The Language Animal*, there is a turn toward understanding and language 'in the realm of action' (which is opposed to understanding or language 'in the realm of description'). Taylor, in a seminar given in Australia concerning this book, emphasized the fact that to learn the teachings of Socrates, Jesus, or the Buddha, we share



stories about these moral exemplars. This is understanding and language ‘in the realm of action’, for it is the actions of these exemplars that constitute our discourse and understanding about their teachings. Taylor asserts that there is an ‘antiphonal relation’ between these realms (i.e. the realm of action and realm description) – that we move back and forth between them. I assert with reasonable confidence that to move into the realm of description and try to explain these teachings using abstract principles is to necessarily lose something of their epistemic meaning and force. This is why I can not quite explain the impact and importance of *Crime and Punishment* – what the book discloses can not be reduced and explained. The teaching is tied up with the story itself.

Following the discourses charted out, for the most part, by MacIntyre, I became interested in virtue ethics. I enrolled in classes with Dr Myrna Gabbe and Dr John Inglis. Therein, I was allowed to explore the virtue ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas. These professors helped me establish an understanding of the foundations of the tradition of virtue in western philosophy. The linguistic and conceptual frameworks provided in these classes ended up constituting the meta-ethical framework of the final version of this essay. I worked closely with Dr Gabbe to construct a coherent meta-ethical framework in this version of the essay. The final version of this essay is this project at the intersection of virtue theory and my intuitions about narrative. I was able to find concepts through which to describe my intuitions about narrative in the language of virtue ethics. The problem I have with this final version is that the intuition did not arise from the conceptual framework of virtue theory, as the essay seems to suggest. Virtue theory

provides a useful framework through which to discuss the intuition, but it is not a necessary component of the final position.

My intention in writing this preface is to introduce nuance and context that would otherwise not exist when reading the final version of this honors thesis. The essay can be read as a standalone defense of the coherence of virtue theory and the importance of narrative in our conceptualization and teaching of virtue. Still, the unresolved tension and the yet-to-be-articulated intuition described in this preface are live issues. The final version of this essay skates past these unresolved issues and exists in a more propositional, coherent, and defensible space. I hope this preface, in situating the final essay within a more nuanced and difficult context, introduces something interesting and worthwhile.

## **Introduction and Summary of Claims**

In this essay, I use Aristotelian virtue theory to describe capabilities made available through narrative. I aim to describe the moral understanding and discourse afforded by narrative, and I assert that virtue theory supplies a framework through which to accomplish this task. I first develop a coherent meta-ethical account of Aristotelian virtue theory, then I apply the notions which constitute virtue theory to describe the moral understanding and discourse made possible through narrative.

I defend the following claims: (I) a coherent account of virtue theory requires commitments to unified, essence-having conceptions of persons and teleological conceptions of persons; (II) narrative allows conceptualization of persons as unified moral agents directed towards a *telos*, thereby allowing us to understand ourselves and others as agents within the framework of virtue theory; and (III) storytelling is a medium of discourse that allows us to disclose and defend substantive accounts of virtue (i.e. of what is virtuous and the *telos* towards which that virtue directs). Each of these claims is defended in the section of the essay which corresponds with the claim number.

In Part I, I discuss Aristotle's virtue theory and how it is informed by his philosophy of human nature, thereby establishing a coherent meta-ethical account of his virtue theory. I focus on Aristotle's methods and abstract commitments. I do not aim to defend his ethics, but rather to defend and use his meta-ethical framework. I place particular emphases upon the role of habit as well as the role of *telos*. This account of Aristotelian virtue theory ultimately plays a critical role in my assertions regarding narrative. Virtue theory provides the language and conceptual framework through which I

describe and make sense of the ethical understandings and discourses afforded by narrative.

In Part I, after defending the coherence of virtue theory, I consider the difficulties of understanding virtue. The virtues (i.e. what is and is not virtuous) do not and cannot reduce to fully comprehensible, rational principles or prescriptions. Acting virtuously is not a matter of learning ethical prescriptions and principles, virtue is expressed spontaneously by persons with developed virtuous disposition and habits. Accordingly, one cannot comprehend, discuss, or disclose a substantive understanding of virtue and the *telos* towards which virtue directs by establishing first principles and constructing logical, atemporal, or reductive arguments. To understand or discuss ourselves as moral agents within the framework of virtue theory, we must consider ourselves as unified, essence-having beings, moving towards an irreducible *telos* through the development of habits and disposition. As discussed in Parts II and III, narrative allows us, even in our contemporary milieu, to conceptualize, analyze, and discuss ourselves as such.

In Part II, I consider narrative as a mode of thought (i.e. thinking of oneself and others as one thinks of characters creating stories). As a mode of thought, narrative affords consideration of ourselves and others as unified moral agents directed towards a resolution (*telos*) that corresponds with our habits and disposition. To defend this assertion, I find compatible claims regarding the capabilities of narrative in *The Language Animal* by Charles Taylor and *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre. These two works have dissimilar foundations and intentions but arrive at similar assertions regarding the capabilities made available through narrative. Referencing arguments from

both Taylor and MacIntyre, I assert that narrative allows us to unify the rich heterogeneity of a human life and its purposes, thereby supplying the means to understand ourselves and others teleologically and as unified moral agents aiming towards overarching goals or purposes. Narrative allows us to consider ourselves and others as moral agents within the framework of virtue theory.

In Part III, I move beyond my discussion of Taylor and MacIntyre and make my own assertions about how one can effectively understand narrative as a medium of discourse. I assert that storytelling allows us to present, disclose, and defend coherent conceptions of virtue more effectively than supposedly objective, propositional, or logical discourse. I describe morally-concerned stories as arguments which present and defend unified accounts of virtue (i.e. of what is virtuous), including the *telos* towards which virtue directs. Characters are defined by their disposition and habits and they move towards an end or resolution which corresponds with their disposition and habits. The *telos* is represented by the resolution of the story. A coherent, well-told story can present and defend a unified and profoundly substantive conception of virtue and the corresponding end towards which that virtue directs. Thus, I understand the disclosures of coherent, well-told, and morally-concerned stories as disclosures of virtue.

### **Part I – Aristotelian Conceptions of Human Nature and Virtue**

Before applying the meta-ethical framework of virtue theory to describe the capabilities of narrative, a coherent account of Aristotelian virtue theory must be established. Herein, I focus upon two fundamentals of Aristotle's virtue theory. The first is the role of habit in virtue. The second is the role of *telos*. In Part I, I introduce these

two fundamentals as components of virtue theory, then I describe how they are informed by and cohere with Aristotle's broader commitments and worldview. This approach allows consideration of the broad commitments and beliefs which are necessary for a coherent belief in virtue theory. To conclude Part I, I describe how these fundamentals of virtue theory establish the space in which to describe and defend the capabilities of narrative.

Becoming virtuous, for Aristotle, is developing virtuous habits and disposition through repeated acts.<sup>1</sup> Acting virtuously depends upon development of virtuous habit and disposition.<sup>2</sup> Those who have developed such habits and disposition have impulses, intuitions, and desires that are virtuous. Rather than appealing to some set of prescriptions or fundamental logical principles, the virtuous person acts virtuously by the force of developed habit and disposition. Virtuous action pours forth fluently from the person who has worked to develop the right habits and disposition. The importance of habit entails that “the virtues we get first by exercising them.”<sup>3</sup> Being able to act virtuously means having worked towards the ability to do so through the development of habits and disposition. This formation begins during childhood and the habits developed as a child make “all the difference” in a person's moral development.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this fundamental role of habit, teleological understanding of beings is a foundation of virtue theory. In becoming virtuous, a person becomes actually what

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a25

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1103a15-1103b25

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a33

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1103b25

they were potentially.<sup>5</sup> This development is extended over a lifetime and is movement towards an end or *telos*. For example, Aristotle writes of courage as directedness towards a noble end. “Each thing is defined by its end. Therefore it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs.”<sup>6</sup> The coherence of Aristotle’s ethical framework relies upon a notion of the ends towards which virtue directs. One must have some teleological conception of human life for Aristotelian virtue to gain coherence; the *telos* is that which virtue is directed towards, it is the “that for the sake of which”<sup>7</sup> virtue exists. To understand how and why virtue is understood teleologically and as a product of habit, it will be useful to describe teleological causes and human beings' actualization of potential more generally. Aristotelian virtue theory builds upon Aristotle's conceptions of nature and natural beings. Through consideration of passages in the *Physics* and their relationships to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, both the role of habit in virtue and the role of *telos* in virtue establish nuance and coherence.

In the *Physics* and elsewhere, Aristotle continuously emphasizes the unified and irreducible characteristics of beings. His commitment to a non-reductive mode of understanding is seen in discourses on change and becoming. Aristotle considers changes such as that of an unmusical person becoming musical. He notes movement between opposites (unmusical to musical) and survival of a 'simple' thing (the person who undergoes musical development).<sup>8 9</sup> Aristotle conceives of persons as enduring, unified

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1103a26

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1115b24

<sup>7</sup> *Physics*, 194a27

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 190a9

<sup>9</sup> The word 'simple' appears with these same single quote marks in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (McKeon)

beings that develop towards being in ways that they once were not. Aristotle conceives of a being as a whole entity developing from a point at which it lacks a property towards a point at which that property has been actualized. He asserts a threefold doctrine: the forms toward which beings direct, the corresponding opposites from which beings move, and the substratum which persists throughout.<sup>10</sup>

Development of musicality is actualization of potential akin to the development of virtuous habits and disposition. Another example of this general framework is Aristotle's description of the development of scientific understanding in the *Posterior Analytics*. Ensouled rational creatures develop scientific knowledge through experience but rely upon their natural capacity and potentiality in doing so. Experience (repeated sense-perceptions), combined with the natural capacity of the ensouled being, determines the understanding.<sup>11</sup> Fundamental similarities exist between Aristotle's conceptions of scientific, natural, and ethical growth. Akin to his notion of developing habits which actualize the potential virtue of persons, Aristotle's notions of scientific development and musical development use concepts of personal development and actualization over time. Unified, holistic conceptions of beings (i.e. conceiving of individuals as bundles of potentiality which develop and actualize over time) undergird his entire worldview, as seen in his discourses on development of scientific knowledge, development of musicality, and development of moral virtue.

In *Physics Book II*, Aristotle departs from Antiphon<sup>12</sup> in asserting that beings'

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Book 1 Ch. 9

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 99b26-100a8

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 193a13



nature subsists not only in their matter, but as dependent upon their being directed towards forms.<sup>13</sup> Hylomorphism and the form-dependence of beings are fundamental commitments that cohere with the conceptions of growth and development discussed in the previous paragraphs. He continues to write in terms of wholes (e.g. emphasizing the holistic nature of reproduction in stating that “man is born from man”<sup>14</sup>). This form-dependent, holistic understanding of beings informs Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle's ethical vision is of the whole, essence-having person developing towards what that person has been potentially. This vision is constructed of his general conceptions of change and becoming: change is actualization and movement towards the developed form which exists potentially in natural beings.

Aristotle asserts the need to consider the end, the form, the “that for the sake of which” towards which things develop.<sup>15</sup> Proclaiming a departure from Empedocles and Democritus, Aristotle asserts that the end (i.e. the form, the essence) and the matter by which beings are made are subjects of the same natural considerations.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle conceives of nature as directed towards a purposeful end and as *unable to be conceptualized without* consideration of this end. Even further, nature *is* this impulse and movement towards actualized form.<sup>17</sup> “It is plain then that nature is a cause, a cause that operates for a purpose.”<sup>18</sup> Humans contain a principle of development which propels them to actualize their potential to fully develop. The developed form is the 'that for the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 193b1-20

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 193b8

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 194a28

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 194a15-25

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 192b23

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 199b33

sake of which' or the *telos* in human terms.

Aristotle's general conceptions of nature (more specifically, human nature) inform his virtue theory. To develop moral virtue is to actualize the form which had already existed potentially. The coherence of this Aristotelian framework relies upon a holistic, unified account of beings as well as an account of beings' directedness towards a *telos* or developed form. In the *Physics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere, we find a language, conceptual structure, and mode of thought which is committed to unified conceptions of natural beings and their processes of change. Aristotle shows his commitment to these holistic notions in his discourses on science, nature, music, and ethics, among others. In this fundamentally holistic epistemology and methodology, we find the ability to think and speak meaningfully about character, moral agents, virtue, and the intrinsic value of action directed towards a good end, towards the developed form of the moral agent.

Virtue theory is not immediately coherent and understandable. Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the impossibility of arriving at knowledge of virtue by means of precise logic and reasonable discourse. "The whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely ... Matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity"<sup>19</sup> Aristotle returns often to acknowledge the unavailability of precise propositional, prescriptive, or systematic knowledge of virtue. Rather, virtue is something that must be developed to be understood. This experiential aspect is precisely what makes it such that the virtues we develop as children make "all

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 1104a1

the difference.”<sup>20</sup> We rely upon lived, experiential knowledge in order to grasp virtue. The audience of these theoretical discourses on virtue, then, consists of those who are already far along the path to an actualized virtuous disposition. This suggestion regarding the audience of Aristotle’s discourses on virtue is mentioned by Richard Kraut in his *Stanford Encyclopedia* article “Aristotle’s Ethics.”<sup>21</sup>

These acknowledgments reflect the crucial role of habit in the development of virtue. Virtuous acts, rather than being products of systematized, propositional, or prescriptive discourses, result from developed virtuous disposition. Those who have developed virtuous dispositions are those who understand virtue. Further, given that virtue is directedness towards a purpose (*telos*), this same reliance upon virtuous disposition and experiential wisdom exists in the pursuit to understand *telos*-in-human-terms. Recall that, for Aristotle, to understand is to have some substantial conception of the “that for the sake of which,” the teleological cause. Those who have developed virtuous habits and disposition are capable of understanding virtue and are thereby capable of understanding the *telos* towards which virtue directs.

Given that knowledge of virtue cannot be developed or understood by means of propositional, prescriptive, or systematized discourses, the philosopher interested in describing virtue faces great difficulty. For one who wishes to present an account of what is virtuous, remaining in the “realm of description,” as opposed to the “realm of action”,<sup>22</sup> presents significant limitations. Attempts to describe virtue with neutral,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 1103b26

<sup>21</sup> Richard Kraut, “Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, “Charles Taylor: ‘The Language Animal’ – Institute for Social Justice,” YouTube Video.

propositional, or reductive methods leave much to be desired. Propositional discourse cannot disclose a substantive account of virtue and the *telos* towards which virtue directs.

Virtue theory is a meta-ethical structure that is constituted by unified beings moving towards their *telos*. To understand ourselves as the unified moral agents which populate virtue theory, we must think of and discuss ourselves as such. The whole entities which populate moral truth-claims disappear once one has reduced below the level of beings, habits, and actions. Virtue theory is a model of human choice and action constituted by unified conceptions of beings. Narrative allows us to consider ourselves in a unified and directed manner, akin to how Aristotle envisions us as whole, essence-having beings moving from undeveloped potential to actualized virtuous disposition, towards a corresponding *telos*. Through narrative, we can substantively understand and discuss ourselves as unified moral agents directed towards a *telos*, without having to reduce and rationalize the concepts.

## **Part II – Narrative as a Mode of Thought: Understanding Virtue**

A coherent and actionable account of virtue (i.e. of what is virtuous) requires some knowledge of virtuous habits and dispositions as well as knowledge of the corresponding *telos* towards which these habits and dispositions direct. Holding a coherent account of what is virtuous requires our being able to consider ourselves and others as the agents which populate virtue theory. The irreducible character of these notions creates limitations for theoretical, reductive, propositional methods. Over and above theoretical and propositional modes of thought, we require a mode of thought that allows us to consider ourselves as the agents which populate virtue theory. Narrative is a

mode of thought that allows us to consider ourselves as unified moral agents directed towards a *telos* that corresponds with our habits and disposition. To defend this claim, I turn towards two recent and influential works: *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre and *The Language Animal* by Charles Taylor.

Alasdair MacIntyre claims that modern moral discourse is interminable and shrill because the conceptual framework that once allowed moral claims to be rationally defensible no longer exists.<sup>23</sup> He asserts that this lost coherence was originally afforded by Aristotle's teleological framework and the “fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature.”<sup>24</sup> In MacIntyre's argument, the guidance afforded by belief in human *telos* was lost after the Enlightenment. Consequently, post-Enlightenment ethical theories were doomed to fail.

After diagnosing the ethical failures of the Enlightenment, *After Virtue* makes positive assertions regarding a resurrection of virtue theory and renewed rational moral justification. A foundation of these positive assertions is MacIntyre's emphasis on understanding rooted in narrative. MacIntyre asserts that the contexts supplied by narratives allow individual actions to have meaning and allow us to make value-judgments about said actions.<sup>25</sup> Narrative is the form through which we understand the lives and actions of ourselves and others.<sup>26</sup> A human being is, for MacIntyre, “essentially a story-telling animal.”<sup>27</sup> Narrative, as a framework through which MacIntyre describes

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<sup>23</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 6

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 210

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 216

actions and purposes, establishes coherent and unified accounts of persons moving through time, directed towards a “climax or *telos*.”<sup>28</sup> These assertions inform the assertions of this essay. Narrative allows us to understand our enacting of the Aristotelian *telos*, effectively allowing moral discourse and understanding to establish and maintain coherence.

MacIntyre is not alone in emphasizing the orienting and ineradicable roles of narrative. In *The Language Animal*, Charles Taylor is concerned with how we come to understand ourselves, our goals, and our social interactions, among many other things. Taylor asserts that language does not merely allow us to describe life, purposes, and meaning and work towards preexisting goals, but that language's expressive and constitutive character allows us to reveal new purposes and goals. Our ability to describe and reveal new purposes and goals is intimately connected with narrative, which is discussed by Taylor in Chapter 8 (“How Narrative Makes Meaning”).<sup>29</sup>

Taylor describes the “antiphonal relation between attempts to understand in two media – the medium of action and the medium of description.”<sup>30</sup> He asserts that we cannot discuss and learn ethical dispositions merely through descriptive statements about the contents of an ethical structure. The actions and stories of teachers such as Socrates, Jesus, or the Buddha allow their teachings to become substantive and compelling. Learning these teacher's ethical dispositions is a continuous and developmental process that requires engagement with the motivations and experiences – the stories – of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 217

<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, Belknap Press, 291.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, “Charles Taylor: ‘The Language Animal’ – Institute for Social Justice,” YouTube Video.

teacher.<sup>31</sup> These assertions also (i.e. in addition to MacIntyre's assertions) inform the meta-ethical assertions of this essay, for they assert that narrative allows us to coherently consider ourselves and others as unified moral agents directed towards overarching aims or purposes. Further, Taylor's approach towards understanding the capabilities of narrative as an endeavor in the philosophy of language informs this essay's emphasis on the effective conceptual frameworks afforded by virtue theory. As previously stated, the overarching claim of this paper is that the language and concepts of virtue theory can be applied to capably understand the ethical understandings and disclosures afforded through narrative and storytelling.

For both MacIntyre and Taylor, moral understandings and orientations rely upon narrative. These authors' descriptions of what is afforded through narrative are similar in some fundamental ways. MacIntyre asks and answers the following: "In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life."<sup>32</sup> Narrative holds together our conceptions of ourselves as unified beings directed towards the completion of an overarching project. And coming to similar conclusions from a different context, Taylor asserts that human meanings and goals learned through stories cannot be separated from whole stories. Understanding the outlook of an agent requires that one understands the experiences that led this particular agent to this outlook.<sup>33</sup> For both MacIntyre and Taylor, there is a wholeness (MacIntyre uses the term 'unity', Taylor uses the term 'gestalt') afforded by the story of an event or a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 218.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, Belknap Press, 311.

life.

Taylor reasons that it is the unity, or gestalt, afforded by narrative that links this discussion with ethics. An ethical judgment is, after all, a unification of diverse factors. Taylor imagines a man who, after drinking alcohol, crashes his car while driving through fog on an icy road. Taylor observes that atemporal generalizations such as “fog reduces visibility” and “ice makes roads slippery” factor into our judgment of the crash, but that our “all-in judgment” is more akin to a judge in the judicial process than a scientist analyzing causal factors.<sup>34</sup> Various factors can be considered separately, but the sense afforded by the whole narrative allows a final, all-in judgment to be made. This final, all-in judgment also takes into account our rich sense of what motivates individuals and their actions. As Taylor puts it, “a story, whether fictional or historical, will also involve human motivations, actions, interactions, differences of character ... in short, the vicissitudes of fortune, mutual sympathy, antipathy, and a whole gamut of attitudes to others.”<sup>35</sup> A coherent story (partially but effectively) captures a unified account of an unimaginably complex set of factors, many of which are profoundly familiar and intimate for us story-telling, language-using, animals. The all-in nature of ethical judgments requires our being able to capture a unified account of diverse factors and experiences. Narrative affords this unity and enables our arrival at coherent, substantive ethical judgments.

The manner in which we understand lives, actions, and purposes (of ourselves and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 295



others) is, for both Taylor and MacIntyre, intimately connected with narrative. MacIntyre suggests that we can understand a person suffering a sense of meaninglessness as having lost an intelligible notion of the narrative of his or her life.<sup>36</sup> The narrative of a life orients and gives meaning to individual actions. Taylor suggests that we cannot have a meaningful understanding of self or life “which doesn't include some such diachronic reading of the whole through an extended gestalt.”<sup>37</sup> For both Taylor and MacIntyre, narrative provides us with the means to make sense of and to endure life.<sup>38</sup> Narrative is a medium through which to conceptualize the purpose of a life. And with the orientation supplied by this sense of purpose, we can judge individual actions.

Aristotelian virtue theory presupposes the unity of persons who are extended over time and who actualize their potential through long-term processes. Virtue is not a product of established principles or prescribed logical maneuvers. Rather, it is an elusive and holistic quality of actions and persons that can not be perfectly rationally circumscribed or comprehended. There are serious limitations necessarily placed upon the philosopher attempting to comprehend virtue theoretically. This does not mean that we can not think about and discuss what is virtuous in a meaningful way, though. Narrative allows us to consider ourselves as unified moral agents in the framework of virtue theory. And as I will discuss in the following section, storytelling (which is narrative as a medium of discourse) provides us with the means to present and defend substantive and actionable accounts of what is virtuous. In the following section, I move

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<sup>36</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 216.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, Belknap Press, 295.

<sup>38</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 319.

beyond my analysis of MacIntyre and Taylor and I describe how storytelling allows us to present, disclose, and defend substantive conceptions of virtue.

### **Part III – Narrative as a Medium of Discourse: Disclosing Virtue Through Stories**

The impossibility of developing virtue as a result of rational discourse has been established, as has the impossibility of fully articulating what is virtuous in the form of principles or prescriptions. Virtue cannot be understood or developed by means of atemporal generalizations, logical reductions, and careful argumentation. Development of virtue depends upon development of habit and disposition, and virtuous persons act as such for their having worked towards the ability to perform virtuous acts spontaneously, by force of habit. Thus, there is no discourse, line of reasoning, or decision-making procedure which can allow a person with immoral habits and disposition to immediately begin acting virtuously. Rather, the process of developing virtue is an extended one, and one that requires belief in the goodness of the ends towards which virtue directs. To develop the capacity for virtuous acts, a person must have some conception of the ends towards which virtue directs, some “that for the sake of which” from which to draw inspiration to develop towards virtuous habits and disposition. Stories can help provide such inspiration and can capture rich, complex accounts of virtue and the ends towards which virtue directs. Stories allow authors to present claims about what is virtuous while remaining in the “realm of action,” taking advantage of the capabilities made available through narrative and discussed in the previous section of this essay.

A substantive and compelling conception of virtue and the *telos* towards which virtue directs will never be fully captured in any discourse, but it can be more effectively

discussed in the form of stories than in the form of logical, propositional discourse. Narrative, and thus storytelling, capably depicts unified moral agents, extended across time, moving towards ends or resolutions that correspond with their habits and dispositions. A story can present a coherent account of persons, their contexts, and their often irreducible and inarticulable purposes and goals. The complex and rich nature of our moral lives cannot be reduced and boiled down to principles and prescriptions. Stories cannot capture a moral perspective in its entirety either, but they can present, disclose, and defend moral perspectives and truth-claims more effectively than supposedly objective or propositional discourses. In this section, I will attempt to construct a useful frame through which to consider storytelling, and I will do so by using the concepts and claims of the first two sections. Herein, I understand morally-concerned stories as arguments or presentations about virtue which utilize the capabilities of narrative discussed in Part II.

Witnessing a story is often a revelatory and instructive experience. Stories have been used to disclose wisdom within a myriad of cultures and ages. Reading compelling moral literature, one feels that one is living the lives of the characters therein. Vivid writing allows the reader to feel the emotions and know the thoughts of the characters. One pictures oneself as the characters, choosing and living their actions. Authors often then reveal the consequences of these characters' dispositions, disclosing the degree of virtue and its consequences. Authors such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy immediately spring to mind. Their books are not merely entertainment, they are *arguments* that exist on the level of world-views and moral dispositions. The components of these arguments are the

characters (the unified moral agents making choices and developing that populate a story), the detailed contexts in which these characters exist and act (which allow the claims to establish nuances that generalized abstractions can not establish), and the resolutions at which these characters arrive (and which function as the Aristotelian *telos* functions). When readers exist alongside these characters, they realize what is realized by these characters. Engaged readers realize or acknowledge the consequences of developing the habits and dispositions of the characters. Moral literature is an argument for the degree of virtue expressed by particular habits and dispositions. The reader is afforded the opportunity to think (in a unified manner, akin to what was discussed in part I regarding MacIntyre's notion of 'unity' in narrative<sup>39</sup> and Taylor's notion of 'gestalt' in narrative<sup>40</sup>) about the viability of particular habits and dispositions. The author discloses knowledge of virtue through vivid, believable, and compelling descriptions of the consequences of particular habits and dispositions. These disclosures rely upon narrative's ability to unify diverse causal happenings as well as complex contexts, human experiences, and purposes.

Morally-concerned pieces of literature are arguments that rely upon the unifying aspects of the medium to maintain coherence. These arguments cannot be coherently disentangled from the medium through which they are disclosed. Taylor writes, “what we grasp as an important truth through a story ... is so bound up with how we got there – which is what the story relates – that it can't simply be hived off, neglecting the chain of

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<sup>39</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 218.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal*, Belknap Press, 295.

events which brought us there<sup>41</sup>.” Taylor rightfully asserts that the diachronic process which allowed us to arrive at the insight is itself part of the insight, and that the insight must remain embedded in the story. The moral perspective gained through a story cannot be removed from the story, it cannot be reduced and explained without the coherence gained through the whole story. It is not just that stories are entertaining and clever ways to present moral claims which might otherwise be stated in clearly-reasoned, propositional ethical discourses. The nature of stories is such that they are capable of presenting claims that rational discourses cannot present. Stories present ethical truth-claims in the form of unified moral agents, the contexts in which they act, the habits and dispositions which inform their actions, and the resolutions towards which their actions direct. In other words, stories present coherent and unified accounts of virtue (i.e. what is virtuous) and the ends towards which virtue directs.

The characters, dispositions, and lessons disclosed through storytelling do not exist but beside each other as part of a coherent and unified whole. If one wishes to understand the truth-claims of great literature, reductive and neutral explanations of the “moral of the story” will not suffice. Narrative, and thus storytelling, is irreplaceable; it cannot be replaced with descriptions of what is gained by the stories themselves. This reflects earlier assertions that narrative is an integral and irreplaceable component of our self-understanding and our knowledge of orientation and movement towards a resolution or *telos*. Accordingly, the concepts which populate the framework of virtue theory – character, growth, development, habit, disposition, purpose, *telos* – capably describe what

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 300.

is gained through the disclosures of storytelling and moral literature. In describing the capabilities of storytelling using the language of virtue theory, we arrive at a more nuanced and substantial understanding of what is afforded through storytelling.

The coherence of a story is of critical importance. If our conceptions of virtue and *telos* are to be inclusive, substantial, and just, the stories we share and exalt must present coherent and just accounts of the world and its characters. Franz Kafka wrote that a book should be an awakening blow to the head and a hatchet which strikes the frozen seas inside us.<sup>42</sup> Our ability to judge the coherence of stories relies upon such felt intuitions and revelations. Stories re-frame and reshape the content of our ethical beliefs, and they often do so by imploring us to realize and articulate what has already been just beyond the reach of our awareness. Like a scientific theory affording the means by which to conceptualize and describe some physical phenomenon, a story can afford the means by which to conceptualize and describe moral phenomena. As should be accounted for in any meta-ethical perspective, the possibility for flawed or unjust ethical beliefs still exists. In this particular perspective, flawed or unjust ethical beliefs indicates the exalting of flawed or incoherent narratives.

There is no absolute and timeless text which captures all there is to be said about virtue. This much is indicated by the range of compelling and coherent moral literature from diverse cultures and ages. Stories from different cultures and time periods and about people enacting different social roles make different sorts of claims about virtue. This is in keeping with the given account of Aristotelian virtue theory. Virtue, as stated, is not a

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<sup>42</sup>Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, Schocken Books, 16.

product of learning a set of prescriptions or rules to follow. Acquainting oneself with the stories of persons – their historical and societal contexts, their actions, purposes, disposition, habits, and corresponding resolutions – is not acquainting oneself with rules and prescriptions. Rather, if the stories are coherent and well-told, it is the gathering of new information about and frameworks through which to consider the complex, rich process of developing and enacting virtue.

Narrative is both a mode of understanding ourselves and others as well as a medium of discussing these understandings. Through storytelling, a medium of discourse, we can communicate in what Taylor calls the medium of action and we are able to describe our own experiences as we understand and experience them – as a unified bundle of complex factors and meanings. A story, if it is told well, discloses the consequences of enacting particular habits and dispositions. The resolution of the story - the consequences of the characters' actions, habits, and dispositions - discusses and educates upon the role of *telos*. The movement of unified beings (characters) towards their ends directly mirrors our own senses of orientation towards *telos*, our movement towards the purposes which allow us to experience life meaningfully. Stories tell of persons moving towards their ends, perhaps straying from this path and having to overcome some difficulty or otherwise traversing easily with developed, virtuous disposition. Stories unify and discuss the degree of virtue expressed by particular habits and dispositions more effectively and intimately than atemporal generalization and logical reductions. Storytelling is and will remain to be an effective medium for the disclosure of virtue.

## **Conclusion**

This essay is a meta-ethical project and is concerned with describing the nature of our moral understanding and discourse. The framework of virtue theory affords a litany of useful terms and concepts, the application of which affords arrival at capable descriptions of moral understanding and discourse. By combining an analysis of virtue theory with an analysis of the moral capabilities made available through narrative, I arrive at a substantial meta-ethical perspective. The capabilities made available through narrative (and thus, through storytelling) can be effectively understood with the conceptual framework of virtue theory, and vice versa. Through storytelling, a medium of discourse, we become capable of discussing and educating virtue because storytelling communicates narrative, a mode of thought that is a fundamental and irreplaceable component of our moral understandings. Accordingly, disclosures available in stories can be effectively understood as disclosures of virtue. Coherent, well-told, and morally-concerned stories present and defend substantive accounts of virtue and the *telos* towards which that virtue directs; and stories do this more effectively than supposedly neutral and reductive rational moral discourses.



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