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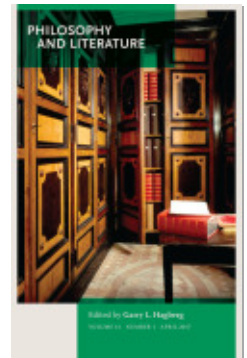
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Dillon Rockrohr

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DILLON ROCKROHR

THE MORALS OF STORIES: NARRATING JUDGMENT IN CARVER, BORGES, AND ENGLANDER

Abstract. In short-fiction pieces by Raymond Carver, Jorge Luis Borges, and Nathan Englander we continually find characters telling stories in order to influence other characters' moral judgment. Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, and Peter Goldie, I demonstrate how narration accomplishes such an impact on judgment by working through the functions of narrative identity, ultimately serving to direct our empathy and to complicate our application of principles. The stories here considered illustrate the centrality of narrative in moral reflection, in the sense that certain configurations of narrative may have the effect of unhinging our moral presumptions.

ONCE UPON A TIME, a prophet named Nathan narrated a story to David, the Israelite king who had recently ordered the death of his mistress's husband. The story concerned a rich man who pitilessly slaughtered a poor man's lamb for a feast. When Nathan asked King David what the rich man's punishment should be, David declared, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die." Nathan then replied, "You are the man!"¹ Despite the fictitious nature of Nathan's story, its point was not lost on David, who responded with contrition and repentance, having been made dynamically aware of the truth of his own crime. Somehow he arrived at this realization through a fabricated story about a different man in a different place committing a different wrong.

This essay will examine three instances in short stories where a character uses narration in a way similar to the prophet Nathan in order

to provoke a distinctive moral response in another character. By using these stories as case studies, I aim to analyze the particular means by which literary narratives can interact with a person's moral perspective and judgment, acting both on characters internal to a text in which the narrative is embedded and also on readers outside the text. My account of the relationship between narrative and personal morality has significant affinities with accounts of narrative identity. I will show how literary narrative connects in important ways to the reflective moral life of an individual, but also how it evinces the difficulty inherent to our reflective processes in applying moral principles to lived experience.

I

I draw primarily on the work of three theorists—Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, and Peter Goldie—for my conception of narrative identity. Before I discuss their contributions to a notion of narrative identity that will prove useful in what follows, however, I want to be clear about the sense of narrative identity I am using in order to avoid some of the more pressing criticisms of its use, particularly those directed at MacIntyre's view by Goldie² and Peter Lamarque.³ When I talk about narrative identity, I mean roughly that when we reflect on our lives to understand the type of person we are or have been, we often think of them as narratively organized. We imaginatively lay the events of our lives in an ordered sequence, recalling choices we made, how we reacted to the choices of others, and how the consequences of our choices extended into later moments, and then we plot our present situations along that line. Reflecting in this way, we more or less articulately narrate stories to ourselves in order to conceive of our pasts and the directions in which our lives have developed. This notion of reflection connects in relevant ways to our moral lives, since moral deliberation relies on an active process of reflection about our lives and about our choices.

What I do *not* mean when I talk about narrative identity is that this narrativity of our lives is in any way determinant of our metaphysical identity, or that we are fundamentally, in any essential way, characters living in a story. This is a leap that MacIntyre seems to make in several places, as when he says, "What I have called a history is an enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors."⁴ Goldie criticizes the statement, saying that "there simply is no author of our lives" ("NT," p. 103), and Lamarque more broadly criticizes the idea in MacIntyre's work that our lives are first and foremost lived narratives and

that narrative is the essential framework for conceiving of a self (“ONE,” p. 402). Whether or not such a metaphysical conception of narrative identity holds does not matter for my account, because I merely wish to show how narratives make sense of a life in a way that is relevant to purposes of reflection and judgment.

Criticisms aside, MacIntyre’s account does cast some light on the role narrativity plays in bringing out the significance of an agent’s action, as well as providing a framework through which we can evaluate actions. His account shows that the narrative in which we locate actions makes those actions intelligible. As he explains, there is no such thing as an atomistic act; no actions present themselves to our judgment isolated from other features of a situation or from the serial development of actions within which the action in question occurs: “the notion of ‘an’ action, while of the highest practical importance, is always a potentially misleading abstraction. An action is a moment in a possible or actual history or in a number of such histories” (*AV*, p. 214). Such histories, i.e., narratives, preexist the life of the agent: “We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making” (p. 213). When the agent acts, she continues a history within its material, chronological, and social constraints, and she creates a basis for its further development through later acts. This being so, we cannot examine the significances of her actions without making reference to her histories. I say *histories* because, just as actions do not exist in isolation, so also do narratives intersect. They gain significance in relation to one another, and an agent who occupies space on one narrative plotline, however construed, acts also in a hundred other stories that run through her moment of action.

Perhaps this is the plurality of narratives that MacIntyre points out, which motivates the external criticisms of his own account. Life is simply too complex a thing to allow us to say that a person truly *lives* a narrative. To leave it at only one story would be disingenuous of us if our goal is to explain what a life is, ontologically. However, we can say that we do live in narratives, in the sense that when we testify to an action we have done, we draw out one possible narrative strand from our intricate lives in order to make that action intelligible to our interlocutors. This is an idea Ricoeur gets at when he describes narratives as *configured*, intentionally organized within the constraints of material and social conditions. He explains narrative identity as importantly similar to the process by which characters gain definition in a fictional narrative:

Here, the question of identity is deliberately posed as the outcome [*l'enjeu*] of narration. According to my thesis, the narrative constructs the durable character of an individual, which one can call his or her narrative identity, in constructing the sort of dynamic identity proper to the plot [*l'intrigue*] which creates the identity of the protagonist in the story. . . . The narrative identity of this character will only be known correlative to the discordant concordance of the story itself.⁵

Like MacIntyre, Ricoeur sees narrative as providing a framework for conceiving of the life and character of an individual. However, Ricoeur's account shows that this process of identity formation is not a simple activity of self-authoring, as MacIntyre would have it; rather, identity comes out of the dialectic between the persisting elements of the continuous ontological self of the agent, simply construed, and her conceptual interaction with the configured narrative in which she understands herself to be living. Likewise, a character is formed in relation to the configuration of the narrative.

While MacIntyre shows us that narratives make actions intelligible, we can go further, using Ricoeur's account, to demonstrate that narratives help us understand the character of an individual. To put it a bit differently, our conception of someone's moral identity—whether the hero, the villain, or the victim, and of what sort or in what ways—is at least in part determined by the particular way the narrative *about* them is shaped. Different configurations of plot produce different figurations of character. This explains instances where a person (or fictional character) holds a conception of her own character that conflicts with others' conceptions of her. The conflict emerges from contrasting narrative configurations of her life, though all the material conditions and the ontological aspects of her self remain the same for all observers.

Often, though unaware that it is happening, we become captive to the narratives we imagine ourselves participating in, and these narratives can at times be false or incomplete. I think here of cases where a person is especially critical of other people, comparing them to a standard set by her own self-conception that perhaps characterizes her life as unrealistically saintly and meanwhile fails to remain open to *self*-criticism. In such cases, the person must be introduced to—and convinced of—a reconfigured narrative in order to achieve more accurate self-knowledge. Ricoeur describes the mechanism of such reconfiguration: “the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly, through the detour of cultural signs of all sorts, which articulate the self in symbolic mediations

that already articulate action, among them the narratives of daily life” (“NI,” p. 80).

This reconfiguration will be made clearer when applied to the fictions under investigation, but the key ideas to draw out are, first, that our understanding of self can be mediated through stories, even fictional ones, similar but not identical to our own, forcing us to become aware of the places where the stories come apart. Second, recognizing these differences between the former configuration of our narrative and the newly refigured narrative—and experiencing the outcome of the synthesized story figuring our character anew—is basically a process of reinterpretation. We interpret our own lives and judge our own character similarly to the way we interpret a novel, using textual evidence to inform our judgment of the central characters.

I have explained, through citing MacIntyre and Ricoeur, that narratives both frame our lives in a way that we can make some sense of and can also reframe our lives so that we gain new knowledge about ourselves. Such reframing can even occur through reading fictional narratives, and, through the differently configured story, having our own story, as we would tell it, mediated and informed. Before exploring this process at play within particular fictional works, I also want to draw out an important feature of narrative that Peter Goldie describes, namely, that different narratives of the same event carry different emotional imports. He uses the term “emotional import” to describe how the formal features of a narrated story reveal “that a certain kind of response is thought to be called for or to be appropriate” (“NT,” p. 98). For an example of this, Goldie says that when he tells the story of being mugged on the street, he tells it in such a way to evoke feelings of indignation in his audience (p. 98). He distinguishes emotional import from two separate but related features of narrative. First, the emotional import of a narrative is not necessarily the same as the emotional response to a narrative. At times, the emotional response may differ greatly from the emotional import, as when audience members chuckle at a poorly executed horror film; the film fails to evoke the horror the writer and director intended. The second distinction Goldie makes is between emotional import, which is a part of the external narration, and the internal emotions contained in the events narrated (p. 99). These often separate, as when a villain’s reveling in the success of his schemes is narrated with an import of disdain or despair.

We can apply the concept of emotional import to Ricoeur’s idea of refiguring a narrative, since often we narrate stories to people in

order to adjust their emotions or attitudes toward a particular event. This happens where we wish to convince someone of his or her guilt, as was the case with Nathan narrating to David and as we will see in Raymond Carver's story, and inversely where we wish our audience to feel empathy toward someone they feel suspicious of, as we will see in Nathan Englander's story. If a person does not respond to an action of their own or someone else's in a way we think appropriate to the situation, then often we must refigure the narrative concerning the action in such a way that it elicits the appropriate response. Ricoeur has shown that this can occur indirectly, through a fiction that carries symbolic resonances to the case at hand and provokes a reinterpretation of the situation, though the setting, characters, events, etc., of the fiction are not the same as the reality.

All of this—the concepts here of narrative intelligibility, narrative configuration, refiguration, mediation, and emotional import—provide a backdrop of key terminology through which to discuss the way narration is working in the stories under consideration. These stories all combine characters' embedded narratives to evoke a particular moral response or reevaluation of persons or events. I will show both how these processes work through features of narrative identity discussed above in order to achieve their effects and also the ways these stories complicate too-simple conceptions of this process. Narratives exist within a complex, though quite potent, relationship with morality, as these stories make clear.

II

"You know writers," Mrs. Morgan said to Paula. "They like to exaggerate."

"The power of the pen and all that," Morgan said.

"That's it," Mrs. Morgan said. "Bend your pen into a plowshare, Mr. Myers."

—Raymond Carver, "Put Yourself in My Shoes," p. 143

Myers is a writer between stories who meanwhile spends his time cleaning the house. He and his wife, Paula, rather than going to her office Christmas party, decide to visit the Morgans, recently returned from Germany. Myers does not know them well but arranged to sublet the Morgans' house for them while they were away. When Myers and Paula arrive, the Morgans greet them cordially and invite them in for a hot holiday drink. The conversation is pleasant and light for a while.

The Morgans, on finding out that Myers is a writer, begin telling him about stories they have happened upon—some fodder for his creative work, they say. However, as the stories go on, the tone in the living room shifts, becomes tense, uncomfortable. We get a sense of something upsetting going on beneath the surface of their talk. Myers laughs. The more intense the Morgans' stories get, the more hysterically Myers laughs.⁶

Raymond Carver's story "Put Yourself in My Shoes" presents us with a clear case of someone telling stories in order to affect someone else's attitude toward a situation. As the plot develops, the narrative makes apparent that the Morgans wish to make Myers feel guilty for subletting their house to irresponsible people who made a mess of it. However, the connections between the stories they tell him and the reality of the present situation take a while to materialize. After all, the content of the first few stories has nothing at all to do with Myers. We might see the series of narrations as methodically organized, each one intended to effect a further step in Myers's guilty verdict.

Morgan begins with a story about a fellow he used to know who taught at a university and entered into a torrid affair with one of his students. The fellow told his wife of twenty years that he wanted a divorce. The whole family became enraged. The wife demanded that he leave the house. "But just as the fellow was leaving, his son threw a can of tomato soup at him and hit him in the forehead. It caused a concussion that sent the man to the hospital. His condition is quite serious," Morgan says, and that is where he leaves it. "Think of the story you'd have if you could get inside that man's head," he says. Mrs. Morgan, however, imagines the betrayal the wife must have felt, while Paula feels sorry for the little boy who nearly killed his father.

The characters realize the diverse levels of empathy that a story facilitates, how it takes on a unique resonance depending on the character we opt to empathize with. By constructing particular characters, the narrator conjures into our presence new potential objects for our empathy. The narrator may also structure the story so as to direct our empathy toward a particular character; to use Ricoeur's terminology, the configuration of the narrative shapes the characters in particular ways that make them either more or less attractive to us, more or less apparently deserving of our empathy. The emotional import of the narration will also call for empathy in particular places. And in cases like this first story Morgan tells, the narrator actually articulates which character listeners should empathize with, forcing a readjustment of our interpretation. Morgan says, after the women have suggested imagining the perspectives of the wife and the son,

Yes, that's all true. . . . But here's something I don't think any of you has thought about. Think about *this* for a moment. Mr. Myers, are you listening? Tell me what you think of this. Put yourself in the shoes of that eighteen-year-old coed who fell in love with a married man. Think about *her* for a moment, and then you see the possibilities for your story. ("PY," p. 139)

Morgan takes the character who, in his mind, comes across as least likely to receive the audience's empathy, and singles her out. In doing so, Morgan attempts to shake loose the perspectival moorings to which he thinks Myers may be tethered. Myers must be made to consider the perspectives of those whom he had not thought to consider in order to adequately receive the import of the story Morgan wishes to tell him in the end.

The Morgans tell Myers a second story about a woman who died on their couch in Germany after having returned Mrs. Morgan's lost purse but also having stolen the cash from inside it ("PY," p. 146). The Morgans attempt to evoke a sense of tragic irony at their betrayal by the woman. The problem is that, because of the Morgans' inability to execute the narrative well, the emotional import is not the slightest bit reproduced in Myers's response. Their story is melodramatic, its form unfit to its subject, and so Myers laughs hilariously. Myers is therefore not prepared to receive the next story—the consummate story of the messy tenants—in the right spirit to feel the intended guilt. More than that, the story is told so poorly, becoming increasingly sensational and with Morgan confusing the characters' names in places, that it becomes to Myers even more laughable than the prior ones. But this story is directly about *him*, here named Mr. X.

"That's the real story, Mr. Myers," Morgan said. . . . "That's the real story that is waiting to be written."

"And it doesn't need Tolstoy to tell it," Mrs. Morgan said.

"It doesn't need Tolstoy," Morgan said. ("PY," pp. 148–49)

Yet perhaps it does need a Tolstoy. Characters receive their identity, are figured, through the shape of the narrative told about them, in dialogue with the narrative's interpretation. If the tale is not well told, the intended figuration of its characters may not be achieved. Myers approaches the stories with his own preformed sense of self, his sense of how he arrived at that point in his life, what he values. All of these elements go into his interpretation of the stories used to mediate his

identity. If the stories fail to change his sense of self, it is because the perspective and identity he brought to them in the first place are more resilient than the power the stories have to alter him.

Carver's short story highlights the influence of directed empathy in the interpretation of stories. In each narrative embedded here, despite the emphasis laid on considering other perspectives—putting yourself in someone else's shoes—even the Morgans consistently fail to consider the perspective of at least one of the characters: the fellow who cheated on his wife, the dead woman, Mr. X, and implicitly, Myers himself. We, as readers of the overarching story, empathizing with Myers as its main character, understand that this lack of empathy allows them to feel blindly indignant. Empathy complicates harsh judgment, an idea that motivates the narrative choices in the two stories that follow.

III

To you alone, Borges—you who are a stranger—I have made
this confession.

Your contempt is perhaps not so painful.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Shape of the Sword," p. 142

Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Shape of the Sword" works in misdirection and concealed identity, and in so doing reveals the effect of narrative framing on our moral evaluation of another's character. In the story, the traveling narrator, also named Borges, is forced by circumstance to stay the night in La Colorada. There he meets a man of local legend known only as "the Englishman," who bears a vicious scar across his face. In their initial conversation, Borges attempts to find common ground on the basis of patriotism, but "the Englishman" tells him that he is not actually English—"he was Irish, from Dungarvan. That said, he stopped, as though he had let slip a secret."⁷

After several drinks that night, Borges asks the Englishman to tell him the story of his scar. He responds, "I will tell you the story of my scar under one condition—that no contempt or condemnation be withheld, no mitigation for any iniquity be pleaded" ("SS," p. 139). Borges agrees, and the Englishman goes on to tell him about a man he knew during the Irish war for independence back in 1922, a man named John Vincent Moon. One night as they were running for cover from gunfire, Moon froze up in terror, so the Englishman had to knock him down and carry him until they made it to the shelter of a general's house.

Moon thanked him for saving his life. Later, when it was time to return to the fight, Moon made excuses to stay in the house—a fever, a pain in his shoulder. “It was then that I realized he was a hopeless coward,” the Englishman says (p. 141). For nine days Moon remained in the house, and on the tenth, the Englishman overheard Moon selling him out to the enemy. He chased Moon through the house until he cornered him and slashed a half-moon scar on Moon’s face with a scimitar. The enemy soldiers arrived and arrested him. When Borges asks him what became of Moon, the Englishman says, “He was paid his Judas silver and ran off to Brazil” (p. 142). After a moment of silence, Borges asks him to go on. The Englishman gestures toward the scar:

“Do you not believe me?” he stammered. “Do you not see set upon my face the mark of my iniquity? I have told you the story this way so that you would hear it out. It was *I* who betrayed the man who saved me and gave me shelter—it is *I* who am Vincent Moon. Now, despise me.” (“SS,” p. 142)

The Englishman, who is actually an Irishman, narrates a story to a fictional Borges about John Vincent Moon as though it were an identity separate from himself. He does so not because he no longer identifies with Moon; besides admitting in the end that he *is* Moon, he also has not rejected the moniker “Englishman,” which perhaps in his mind is a constant reminder of his turncoat past.

But why not narrate the story as it happened, with the narrator himself as the traitor? Moon gives his reasons both before and after the tale: first, so that Borges will withhold no contempt where it is deserved, and second, so that Borges will hear out the whole story. Moon seems to be under the impression that if Borges knew from the start that he was, after all, John Vincent Moon, the man who betrayed the one who saved his life, then Borges would not respond with the attitude Moon feels his confession requires. He wants to be seen with all the “contempt” and “condemnation” he is owed for his actions. He wants Borges to know who he is, and the only way to do this is not only to tell Borges the narrative that gives definition to his identity but also to tell it in such a way that Borges might receive it with clear understanding, without any prejudice that would obscure the truth of Moon’s moral character. For Moon, this narration is a confession, a testimony about his past actions that is required before any sort of absolution or redemption can happen. His cowardice still haunts him, though, still maintains its grip on him, and for this reason, he elects to narrate his story to a stranger of

no consequence, perhaps to achieve a sense of closure without suffering retribution.

Vincent Moon understands better than the Morgans the dialectic involved in storytelling. The act of narration involves not only the one telling the story but also the one receiving the story, reading or hearing it and interpreting it. In both the Carver and the Borges stories, the embedded narrators express a strong desire for their particular audiences to respond to their narration in a particular way. The Morgans wish that Myers would respond with contrition, understanding the weight of his wrongdoing, but they fail to reckon with the elements other than their iteration that intrude on the process of narration, such as Myers's present state of being, the amount of significance Myers lays on responsible housekeeping, and Myers's attitude toward the Morgans themselves. Moon, on the other hand, wishes simply for Borges to hear his story in full, for him to understand the actions and relationships of its characters, and to respond to it with the exact judgment an action such as Moon's requires. Moon realizes that people tend to feel more solidarity with the narrator of a story, as well as with people whom they have met as opposed to complete strangers. Since Moon desires an honest adjudication from Borges, he casts himself as the third party to avoid favorable bias.

IV

Do you want to know why I can care for a man who once beat me?
Because to a story, there is context. There is always context in life.
—Nathan Englander, "Free Fruit
for Young Widows," pp. 195–96

Notice that both of the stories I have discussed so far work against our presumptions about their characters. The narratives are structured so that integral facts about the main characters or the relations between characters are suspended, only to be revealed to us late into the story. With the narratives configured in such a way, our own process of presumption-forming is brought to the surface, forcing us simultaneously to call into question the reliability of our ideas about the moral character of another and, for that reason, to suspend our judgment of the characters in the story. Nathan Englander directly thematizes this unreliability of holding moral presumptions about someone else in his story "Free Fruit for Young Widows."⁸

The story centers around Shimmy and Etgar Gezer, a father and son who work a fruit-and-vegetable stand in Jerusalem. Every day, Shimmy gives away free produce to war widows and to one man, Professor Tendler. Etgar questions his father's generosity toward Tendler, given the past that Etgar knows occurred between the two men during the 1956 Sinai campaign. We as readers begin the story with this past: One day, as Shimmy unwittingly ate his lunch with four enemy Egyptian soldiers, Tendler walked up, set his cup down, and abruptly shot all four of the other men ("FF," p. 191). Seeing the violence as unnecessary, Shimmy became enraged and began to punch Tendler, who in order to get control of him, gave Shimmy the worst beating of his life. Following this account, the narrator gives us Etgar's childhood understanding of the story:

At that age, knowing only a child's version of the story—that Tendler had done something in one of the wars that upset Etgar's father, and Etgar's father jumped on the man, and the man had (his father never hesitated to admit) beat him up very badly—Etgar couldn't understand why his father was so nice to the Professor now. ("FF," p. 193)

From the outset, we are introduced to two configurations of the same narrative: the more detailed one with which the story begins, which depicts with clarity the shock of the violence, and the more distilled version understood by the young Etgar. These stories constitute our, and Etgar's, entire basis for knowing the moral character of Professor Tendler, and so we are as confused as Etgar by Shimmy's generosity to this man. The stories figure him as cruel, undeserving of such largesse. Later on, Shimmy would explain more of the story to Etgar—that war forced people to make difficult decisions, that it forced Israelis into a hazy, gray space of action—but "Etgar wasn't one for the gray. He was a tiny, thoughtful, bucktoothed boy of certainties" ("FF," p. 194). He is certain that either Tendler's actions were wrong or they were not.

When Etgar is older, his father tells him what drives his decision to have compassion for this man: it is because he places the man's actions in relation to their context in time. "There is always context in life," he says ("FF," p. 196). Finally, when Etgar is thirteen, Shimmy tells him the entire story, which provides the context for what Etgar knows of Professor Tendler. The story occurred at the end of World War II and Tendler's liberation from one of the Nazi death camps:

He made it through the camps. He walks, he breathes, and he was very close to making it out of Europe alive. But they killed him. After the war, we still lost people. They killed what was left of him in the end. (“FF,” p. 197)

Tendler returned to his home after the liberation, after walking miles and miles to get there. He was greeted fondly by his old maid, Fanushka, and her family, who now resided in his family’s house. All of his family died in the camps. But the joy everyone expressed upon his return was only on the surface. When Tendler went outside to urinate, he overheard Fanushka through the window, plotting with her family to kill him that night—this returned son who would take from them everything that had become theirs. So that night, after feasting and drinking and sharing fond memories, once they had all gone to bed, Tendler killed each member of that family, including the two sons and the baby girl, “because he did not know from mercy, and did not need to leave another of that family to grow to kill him at some future time” (“FF,” p. 205).

After the retelling, Etgar and his father have a dialogue about how to judge Tendler’s actions. Etgar thinks he ought to be judged guilty, because he committed murder. His father replies,

“If it is, then it’s only fair. They killed him first. It was his right.”

“But you always say—”

“Context.”

“But the baby. The girl.”

“The baby is hardest, I admit. But these are questions for the philosopher. These are theoretical instances put into flesh and blood.” (“FF,” p. 205)

Shimmy notes that they are not considering abstract moral concerns of isolated actions—questions such as *can killing another person ever be just?* or, *can one justify a preemptive attack on an as-yet-innocent other?* Furthermore, Shimmy does not seem to believe that an approach to moral judgment of actions such as Tendler’s that examines only the bare, formal aspects of the issue could adequately appraise what happened. Instead, by casting the issues at stake in the context of a narrative, by giving them flesh and blood, as it were, Shimmy complicates Etgar’s perception of the moral question’s resolvability. Etgar began with a resolute judgment of Tendler’s character—that he was a cruel man who had done wrong—and the only way Shimmy knows how to ensure that Etgar views the situation adequately is to configure it for him as narrative. By including other

relevant chapters and so telling the story differently than Etgar had heard it before, Shimmy hopes to provide Etgar with a more nuanced figuration of Tendler as a person and of the significance of his actions as they occurred in the course of his life.

As the story concludes, we notice Etgar changing his mind on the morality of the murder question in the account of Tendler's life:

"I guess," Etgar said. "I can see how they deserved it, the four. How I might, if I were him, have killed them."

Shimmy shook his head, looking sad.

"And whoever are we, my son, to decide who should die?" ("FF," p. 206)

As we see, despite the fact that Shimmy has been attempting to stir up the boy's empathy through telling this story, he still wishes for the boy to hold his empathic understanding in tension with right moral principles. This tension must include, first, the recognition—which Shimmy states earlier in the story—that "a similar life is not the same life," that no one can hope to know precisely how they would act were they in another person's shoes ("FF," p. 196). All that one has access to in the life of another are the narratives that can be told of this other; one cannot know the sum of another's experience directly. The tension between judgment and empathy must also include a sense of the necessity of empathizing with *all* persons involved, both the shooter and the victim, before an adequate judgment can be made that resonates with not only the bare facts of a case but also the emotional and personal stakes in the matter. We see this tension playing out in the development of Etgar's thought and his life:

Etgar decided Professor Tendler was both a murderer and, at the same time, a *mishken* [pitiful person]. . . . Still, every Friday, Etgar packed up Tendler's fruit and vegetables. And in that bag Etgar would add, when he had them, a pineapple or a few fat mangoes dripping honey. Handing it to Tendler, Etgar would say, "*Kach*, Professor. Take it." This, even after his father died. ("FF," p. 207)

Note that Etgar's actions at the end only make some sense to us as readers because the story has provided context for his choice to continue giving the fruit to Tendler. Such a story involves both Etgar's own story—his relationships with his father, his country, and Professor Tendler—and his experience of having been told Tendler's story. The narration Etgar's father tells him has indeed affected his judgment,

which is now far more complicated and nuanced. The moral principle he is able to articulate is that Tendler is both a murderer and a victim, someone to be pitied. That is the nearest Etgar can get to a hard evaluation, but his compassion has deepened, has become more important than his principles. He is now more fully aware of this man's textured identity, which has been figured for Etgar through narrativity.

V

As we confront situations with our moral deliberative capacity, we represent the situations in a particular way to ourselves. We set a moment's action within an imaginatively linked chain of other actions through time in order to understand the nature of that action sufficiently for evaluation. But these stories have also shown that new problems emerge as a consequence of this process, because our judgment is affected differently by however we choose to organize the actions in our minds and whichever direction we choose to orient our empathy when we reflect on this configuration. These problems seem to be endemic to moral theorizing. We hope, in reasoning about morality more broadly, that we can arrive at true principles that will guide our conduct and allow us to rightly judge the actions of others. However, when we take the principles produced by reason and attempt to apply them in the world of flesh and blood—the only place that matters for the work of moral theory—we meet tensions, paradoxes, a whole new mess of nuances that we must try to disentangle in order to apply our principles. Yet, in disentangling the nuances and articulating them in a way that we feel adequately represents the moral problem, we have already made a judgment.

These stories by Carver, Borges, and Englander have revealed narration's centrality in the reflective process involved in moral judgment. Even in moral philosophy proper we tell stories about people tied to trolley tracks or children drowning in ponds, but these stories are told just schematically enough to highlight the particular aspect of moral truth we wish to make evident. If we contextualize the stories more particularly, giving them the texture and complexity that lived moral experience actually involves, the stories fail to be useful for much more than unhinging our moral presumptions. We end up with principles that conflict with empathy, and both our principles and our empathy are susceptible to alteration through an encounter with either a new story or an old story, differently construed. Any substantial theory of

applied ethics must account for the effect the representation of moral problems has on our deliberative process, and until such an adequate theory is developed, literature will continue to remind us of its need.

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1. 2 Samuel 12:1–15.
2. Peter Goldie, “Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and Planning,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 1 (2009): 97–106; hereafter abbreviated “NT.”
3. Peter Lamarque, “On Not Expecting Too Much from Narrative,” *Mind & Language* 19, no. 4 (2004): pp. 393–408; hereafter abbreviated “ONE.”
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 215; hereafter abbreviated *AV*.
5. Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” *Philosophy Today* 35, no. 1 (1991): 77–78; hereafter abbreviated “NI.”
6. Raymond Carver, “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), pp. 130–50; hereafter abbreviated “PY.”
7. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Shape of the Sword,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), pp. 138–42; hereafter abbreviated “SS.”
8. Nathan Englander, “Free Fruit for Young Widows,” in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (New York: Knopf, 2012), pp. 189–207; hereafter abbreviated “FF.”