NARRATIVE ETHICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Christian ethics, despite the qualifying adjective, "Christian," works a territory with no well-defined borders and no generally accepted organizing principle. Catholic moral theology, for example, developed from the needs of church discipline and the confessional as those were defined by medieval canon law; it had frequent recourse to 'natural law.' Protestant ethics, on the other hand, has often been attracted by powerful philosophical currents in modern thought (Kantian, or utilitarian, or phenomenological) and has sometimes been little more than a restatement of these. Social ethics has its own history, having taken its rise (especially in America) from the young social sciences, adding to historical or sociological or economic data its intuitions in shaping action programs not especially notable for their theoretical coherence. Recent theological ethics (especially in Europe) has wavered between the attempt to find only revealed guidance for Christian conduct (Barth) and the attempt to relate itself to a world that is by definition not Christian, for this purpose employing 'orders of creation,' or (again) 'natural law.'

In this rather muddled situation, while no clear and common program of work appeared to draw the assorted Christian ethicists together, a common motif, decision-making, played a large role in one way or another in most of the camps just mentioned: Catholic moral theology issued in quasi-legal decisions summarized in rules in confessors' manuals; utilitarian and Kantian and emotivist ethics in different ways emphasized the decisive role of the moral agent; social ethics strove to affect decision-making processes in civil society; and a theological ethicist such as Karl Barth was able to locate a "free and individual decision" between the constraints of Christian reflection and every moral act. Christian ethics in our century became a theory of decisions, thereby lining up with trends in ethical reflection outside the Christian community. This had not been the focus either of classical philosophical or classical Christian ethics. Yet the twentieth century Christian question was not whether ethics was about deciding, nor even what it meant to 'decide,' but merely on which grounds—natural law or revealed command, social program or deontological demand, situation or principle—the inevitable decisions were to be made. From the standpoint of decisionist Christian ethics, philosophy was expected to provide some satisfactory basis for Christian decision-making. For example, are Christians morally justified
in basing their decisions upon the will of God? Philosophy might also be asked
to provide satisfactory universalization of the decision-making process. Can the
decisions of Christians be universalized to become the decisions of all the world?
The trick was to answer yes to this question without depriving Christian ethics
of its qualifying adjective, "Christian."

The focus on decision was not without an interesting, if less well defined,
encircling penumbra of other concerns. Among these, narrative, character, prac­
tices, and virtue have recently received special attention. If these have not
placed the decisionist focus, they have at least softened or widened it. Moral
decisions cannot be seen merely as the isolated acts of a natural (or rational, or
society-regarding, or obedient) will; they must as well be seen as the display of
character with its virtues and vices, or as the unfolding of an integral vision, or
as participation in practices whose goals are the goods that the practices evoke—in
a word, as elements of an ongoing narrative in whose episodes the moral agent
is a character, and against whose setting the values of these decisions can be
weighed. Insofar as the philosophical task had been seen in relation to free­
standing decisions, the new developments have provided a new philosophical
task while foreclosing an old; there are no free-standing decisions; both justifi­
cation and rationalization must take place on a broader stage of action or not at all.

Several sorts of objections to this revisionary program quickly arise and can
as quickly be laid to rest; others are more serious. In the former category, it is
easy, for example, to point out that Christian narrative ethics is not situation
ethics, with its consequent (if misplaced) norm versus context debate. Situationism
did indeed bring narratives into the discussion of moral decisions, but the narratives were usually cut to fit the dilemmas already perceived by the ethicist; biography was reduced to short story and short story to episode, while
character was contracted to the episodic will of moral agents. Situationism was
no more engaged by the full Christian narrative than its parent utilitarianism had
been. Likewise, Christian narrative ethics is not to be identified with the eccentric
capers of some sorts of recent 'narrative theology' better left unnamed, with
their blithe fondness for koans and parables, for autobiography and self-display,
for sitting in a circle on the carpet and holding hands construed as theology.
Insofar as it overlooks the likelihood of self-deception by each of us, as well as
the demand of the Christian gospel for repentance and self-denial before the
judge of all flesh, such bumptious 'theology' (or 'ethics') lies outside the scope
of this essay.

Save by derisive characterization, then, I will not explore here such alternatives
to the Christian narrative ethics I have in mind. Instead, I will seek to define
another sort of narrative ethics, show the sense in which it is ethics, and indicate
some of the philosophical work that arises in connection with it, in contrast to
the tasks that have arisen in connection with the decisionism of the last half
century. That there are also objections to narrative ethics of the sort I am interested in here will come out as we proceed; these objections will help to make clear the philosophical work needed.

I

Convictions are a characteristic feature of human beings, and unmistakably a feature of Christian religion. At least on outward view, Christians are human beings who acquire and live by Christian convictions. Convictions themselves may be distinguished from doctrines (doctrines at their nearest approach are the formal, conceptual restatement of convictions). Convictions may also be distinguished from opinions. Opinions come and go, while our convictions are here defined as those tenaciously held beliefs or attitudes that constitute us the individuals (or the communities) that we are, convictions are not readily abandoned, and if we do give them up or change them, we are significantly different persons (or communities) than we were before. Since human beings are often inconsistent or erratic, and may even be perverse, we do not invariably express or live out our own convictions. Nevertheless, we do live them out most of the time—or else they are not ours, after all.

It follows that convictions constitute an important interpretive nexus, linking actual life and moral theory, ethics and conduct. In fact, they may serve as the ‘propositional handles’ by which ethicists grasp concrete human existence. Hence it is quite important to see that every conviction has a context, without which it cannot be understood at all. This is so commonplace a truth that it may easily be overlooked. For in understanding one another’s convictions (or our own) we may and often do silently supply the necessary interpretive narratives. If for example we think that Admiral Mahan was convinced that America’s security depended upon sea power, we supply more or less unreflectively those American and naval narratives, the stories (myths, they may be) upon which we take the Admiral’s conviction to depend; without such a narrative basis we might misunderstand “America’s security depends upon sea power” to be about organic salt-water gardening, or about the aesthetics of marine oil paintings. Similarly, if we are to understand that Reinhold Niebuhr was convinced that original sin makes all our attempts at righteousness pretentious (and thus to some extent sinful), we must, in order to understand this conviction of his, not only supply the Christian narrative, and specifically that version of it that focuses upon the Fall; we must also have some sense of Niebuhr’s place in modern religious history, his own story as part of the American church. That understanding does depend upon such narratives is a truism of those in the teaching professions—how else, in the classroom, do we make Niebuhr’s guiding convictions plain to students? That we do not usually spell out our narrative knowledge at full length
is a daily mercy; that we could do so to the degree required is entailed in the
claim to understand.

That understanding requires a knowledge of context, most will grant, but is
it correct that the context is necessarily a narrative context, when it comes to
understanding convictions? This is indeed one of those places where the new
developments invite new philosophical reflection: it is a question that, like the
question how we can determine what the just mentioned "degree required" for
understanding is, will engage us in what follows.

One way of investigating these matters is speech-act theory. Every utterance
that we count as meaningful discourse (as illocution, not mere locution or sen­tence-saying) is related to speaker and hearers (for convenience we can include
writers among speakers, and readers among hearers), but also to the world in
which the utterance is issued, and also to the language in which that utterance
is formed, with its dictionary and grammar. This three-fold relation gives each
utterance a three-dimensional force: (1) its affective or psychological force, as
it is spoken by and to certain individuals with certain intentions, feelings, and
attitudes; (2) its representative force, as it relates or in crucial ways fails to relate
to the world external to itself; (3) its primary, or 'performative', force, as it
states or confesses or advises or proposes—its role as action, or in
Austin's term, as "doing things with words." Linguistic failure, the failure to
say anything, or to achieve illocutionary success, is a sufficiently common
occurrence that we can readily find instances of it. The failures occur in one or
more of these three dimensions. So they will be either failure to mean what we
say (cases of this being insincerity, or simple inattention to our own mouthings),
or failure to stick with the way things are in the world in which we speak (e.g.,
mistakes), or failure to issue a speech-act that is suitable in the circumstances
(e.g., purporting to promise when the speaker is in fact unable to promise, but
at best in position only to wish for the desired outcome) or (worst case) failure
to issue any speech-act at all. Or there can be mixed cases—the liar does not
mean what he says, and does not stick with the way things are, but does issue
a (lying) statement or report or explanation. Successful lying is therefore paradox­
ically a ‘failure’ in this technical sense; that it is a failure in another, moral sense
is a different though I think related matter.

Thus each of the elements of a speech-act, any speech-act, whether it be "I’ll
fail any student who turns in a paper that does not mention Quine" (spoken as
a warning) or "Barbarians invading the Roman Empire provided a splendid new
gene pool for the invigoration of Europe" (as an explanation) has a treble link
to some narrative or narratives, so that our understanding of the speech-act in
question is proportionate to our knowledge of, or capacity to supply, its relevant
narrative background. For a speech-act cannot have an affective dimension save
by being linked to the ongoing affects or feelings (intentions, drives, hopes,
fears, loyalties, loves, and the like) of some speaker and some hearer or hearers, and it cannot have a representative dimension save by being linked to an ongoing world that is, at least in the cases we will be interested in, a human world that coheres as a world by means of its own narrative form, and it cannot have a primary dimension save by constituting action in the world, that is, by making a move in the world of which it is a part, and thus advancing the narrative of which it is a part as well. I think there are no exceptions; if there are some, say in mathematics or technical philosophy, they are not interesting exceptions for present purposes. The question, what exactly counts as a narrative here, must be addressed; it will be in what follows. Till then our concept of narrative can remain a minimal one, and no harm done.

If now we accept that convictions, including Christian convictions, can be expressed in speech (to say that they can be is not to say that in a given case they have been), that is to say, convictions can be expressed in some speech-act or series of speech-acts, it follows from the previous paragraph that Christian convictions (among others) are all narrative-linked. Christian convictions, if they are genuinely Christian ones, will thus display an affective dimension that involves those affects in which those who participate in the Christian community have a share; they will also display a representative dimension that relates them to the world that Christ has redeemed (a truly human world, indeed), and they will display a primary dimension by being moves in the ongoing Christian story of which both the conviction and the speech-act that is its temporal expression are, in their respective ways, parts.

All convictions bear upon what we are and what we do, and are thus in some sense moral, but Christian convictions include in their number explicit moral convictions as well: not only are there such as “Christ is the bearer of God’s truth,” but also “Christ is the paradigm of God’s way”; not only “We believe in one God,” but also “We must forgive our debtors.” These are all (so far) successful candidates for convictional status in Christian communities; whether they are to remain so, if it is a live question, is one that Christian theology must address. Where Christian theology addresses moral convictions, it may be called moral theology or Christian ethics, just as when it addresses doctrinal convictions, it may be called doctrinal theology or Christian dogmatics. The point here is that moral convictions, like doctrinal ones, are narrative linked, not in the first instance by virtue of some unique feature of Christian morality (though it has unique features), but by virtue of being convictions. The unique features may provide other reasons why Christian convictions are necessarily linked to particular Christian narratives. It is enough to see here that by the mere fact of addressing convictional material, Christian ethics is narrative linked; that the narratives it confronts are the Christian ones follows from their content. Christian ethics must attend to these narratives to which the convictions themselves are
linked. To fail to attend to them is not just to give an incomplete or one-sided or partial account of Christian moral convictions; it is altogether to fail; it is to be in no position to understand them at all. Christian ethics, if it truly be without its own narrative, is no ethics at all, no understanding of moral convictions at all.

II

Now this is just the point that was to be made clear. I set out to say what was the relation between narrative ethics and Christian ethics, and I have made (as I see it, I have made good) the claim that Christian ethics is narrative ethics. We cannot speak of taking the way of the cross without evoking the passion story; we cannot speak of Christian justice in ways disconnected from the justice or righteousness Jesus' kingdom inaugurated; we cannot speak meaningfully of love in Christian terms, cannot produce a 'Christian ethic of love' apart from the long and haunting love story of God with his people Israel. By the nature of Christian convictions themselves, Christian ethics is linked to (at least one) narrative, and that narrative is the Christian story: the story of Israel, and of Jesus called the Christ, and of the church that followed him.

It seems that the case is made, yet a profound disquiet may have set in. "What about the recent history with which you began? Weren't those non-narrative ethicists whom you scornfully labeled 'decisionists' doing ethics at all? Have they been defeated by a definition? Isn't that too easy a victory to claim?" And more perceptively, another voice: "I concede your claim that willy nilly, we all do our work as part of some history, our minds being in part formed by some (true or false) stories. But isn't that beside the point? Ethics is not the story of ethics any more than mathematics is the history of mathematics or philosophy the history of philosophy." This latter objection must be confronted; if possible it must be answered. In answering it, we may see more clearly what "Christian ethics" and "narrative ethics" have to do with (just plain) ethics.

Let us state more fully the perceptive objection of the non-narrativist, representing as it is meant to do the various forms of decisionism in moral theology, and behind these, much modern moral philosophy. Remember that the claim I uphold is that Christian ethics is narrative ethics, that is, ethics that can only be understood in terms of the Christian narrative(s). The objection might go like this: "Your account simply begs the question. Behind narrative ethics lies mere ethics. Now ethics is the statement and development of a theory of right and wrong, good and bad, the nature of persons, the place of decisions, and the like, together with the relations obtaining among these. Although any particular person may live in a community, and although as you say various communities have their stories, there is no story of persons, no story of human beings as such. An ethics that crucially depends on a narrative not only has to deal with the probable
falsity or incredibility of important parts of it (matters you neglected to mention); even if the narrative is in some sense true, the ethic dependent on it not only will commit the naturalistic fallacy, if it is a fallacy; worse still, it can never as such be more than the mores of that particular group. It can never delineate a true morality, except on the unlikely assumption that the whole human race finds itself in that one community. Even then, there would be a difference between that contingent fact and the claims of the moral point of view. True morality must be based on those logically necessary or empirically common features of all persons—such features as rationality, or freedom, or desire for pleasure. The fact that the parochial stories relate only contingently to our universal values (or principles, or categorical imperatives) is no weakness in the universals, any more than the existence of kangaroos only in Australia or polar bears only in the arctic betrays a weakness in the genetic laws. The stories are the local adaptations of the universal; ethics is not natural history; your account, while locally interesting, has missed the point of ethics.”

Here is a nest of troubles, certainly more than can be cleared up in a paper like this one, since some of them represent deep assumptions, conflicting with my own, that would require considerable digging merely to expose. What can be done is to take up a couple of the non-narrativist’s strongest claims, showing at least the first reply that narrative ethics will be constrained to make to these. Just by doing that, some light may be shed on the work philosophers now confront as a consequence of the (re)appearance of narrative ways of ethical reflection.

The first, although not necessarily the most convincing, reply the narrative ethicist can make is a *tu quoque*: your work is as story-laden as is ours. You should acknowledge your own story before criticizing us for attending to ours. One element in your story, the story of modernity, is the dominance of the will. Already in the Renaissance, the will was perceived as a baleful threat to human well-being. Luther sought to deny it (no free will). Shakespeare dramatized its growth (ambitious Caesar, willful Lady MacBeth, malevolent Iago). Nietzsche was fascinated by it (*Der Uebermensch*). William James chronicled its sickness and its health (*Varieties*). Good or bad, destiny or fate, the will is at the heart of your story, and ethical decisionism, like Minerva’s owl, celebrates a story one surmises is nearing its end. In any case, decisionism has its (unacknowledged) story, too, and what it represents as being the concepts of pure freedom, pure utilitarian calculus, pure moral choice (at least in the original position) can rightly be comprehended only as abstractions of the story into your non-temporal propositions.

But sophisticated decisionists are not likely to be persuaded by this *tu quoque*. They need not deny the facts in the record. They have only to deny that such facts as new modern interest in the will, or the rise of modern science, or the rise or decline of nationalism, constitute a story or narrative in any way relevant
to morality. The fact, they will say, is not relevant to ethics in the way that the Christian story is relevant to Christianity. For the fact is not a story. There is, they may say, a true account of the course of voluntarism in modern thought; it is no story, and to confuse even that account with their theories commits the genetic fallacy.

I believe the objection to be well taken in its own terms. Indeed, it is time to say more exactly what is meant by narrative in “narrative ethics.” Thereby we may eliminate loose verbiage and help focus debate. Henry James, in “The Art of Fiction,” comes close to the center of the matter in a famous sentence: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” So incident (or plot) and character (and its development) are interdependent narrative elements. If we add to these setting (which James certainly did not mean to omit) we have what some recent theorists take to be the necessary and sufficient ingredients of narrative. Frank Kermode has nicely captured this in an illustration: to say “the king died, and then the queen died” is not yet a narrative (though it may be a part of the mortuary table of a monarchy, and thus the setting of a narrative). But to say “the king died, and then the queen died of grief” is to turn the table into elemental narrative. By adding to chronology and setting the ingredient of character (she was a woman whose grief would have such a consequence as this) the incident becomes plot, and we have all three elements.

Now in this sense, and in their own terms, the non-narrativists are right: Their account of the place of voluntarism in their own theory will be no story, for it will lack plot and character; it will be mere incident in a setting (the Western world). For the narrativist, however, the ‘account’ is for that very reason defective as an account of what has happened: it fails to acknowledge the self-involving aspect of what has occurred, and thus fails to plot the course of the West in modern times. Distorting that account, moral theories become sterile because they are ignorant of their own roots; their rational abstractions constitute an ethnocentrism of pure intellect. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it, “We lose the ability to locate the history of which we are a part.” Morally speaking, that is a deadly loss. So there is disclosed here a deep difference between narrativist and non-narrativist, about what matters, about what the truth of human beings consists in, about what there is in the world that morality must engage. It is just the sort of difference that should evoke the interest of moral philosophers, for we have no easy way, no non-philosophical way, to resolve it.

III

Narrativists insist on understanding the propositions of ethics and morality by means of stories with which the propositions are necessarily associated. For
instance, “You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31 and par.) may be regarded by a narrative ethicist as a distillation of Torah made by Jesus (and of course by others as well) for the purpose of displaying the intent of Torah in all its rich, narrative complexity. (And Torah itself, it will be remembered, is narrative law, a narrative morality: the very word torah means direction, as of a path, a way to be taken, a guide for the journey.) The giving of the Law in Exodus does not just incidentally appear in a narrative setting (Exodus 1-19).\(^{22}\) The instruction for explaining its meaning to younger generations (Deuteronomy 6:20-25) is not just incidentally the instruction to retell that very story. Jesus’ two-fold summary of the Law, a part of which I have just quoted, must be understood both in the context of his ministry (and the evangelists’ account of it) and in the wider context of the Hebraic narratives of which it is a focal portion. Non-narrativists, though, must insist that these associations are no part of the moral meaning of the propositions of morality, no part of ethics proper. For what if the stories with which the Law, or the Great Commandment of Jesus, are associated, turn out to be false, or in any case cannot be shown to be true, so that some will wish to discard or ignore them? Would not, should not “Love your neighbor as yourself” still rest secure on ethical grounds alone? If it is thus separable, are the stories not dispensable, mere illustration, mere homiletics? But if it and others are not, should not they be replaced with genuine ethical propositions—the Golden Rule with the categorical imperative; the injunctions of Jesus with the utilitarian calculus, perhaps?\(^{23}\)

To this line of objection the narrativist has two responses. One is to turn again to speech-act theory. If the categorical imperative is seriously advanced by someone as an ethical principle, then it is someone’s act of speaking or speech-act. As such, it is subject to the categories of interpretation that any speech-act is. It has its affective force, and the affectivity of speaker and hearer is involved, and so on through the dimensions of speech action, each of which is narrative involving. To deny this is to remove the principle from the sphere of language and to claim immunity from the tests of meaning (and meaningfulness) that apply to all the rest of our speech. To acknowledge it is to anchor the principle firmly in the speaker’s history, and more generally in the history of the community of speakers who acknowledge the Kantian heritage, do their work as its heirs, understand one another in its terms. In a word, it is to acknowledge as crucial to the meaning of their principle the story-like background from which the principle reappears when it is now employed. It is also to acknowledge the close links between that story and the Christian story that was Kant’s own acknowledged heritage.\(^{23}\)

The other response is a broader one. It is to point out that what narrativists and non-narrativists disagree upon here can be expressed as a broader difference in the understanding of ethics and of morality itself. The non-narrativists (as I
have represented them) are at pains to limit morality to certain acts of the will, to decisions, and ethics to the rule or principle to which these acts must as they believe conform. The narrativists challenge the limitation of morality to such episodic elements because they cannot see these separated from the wider currents of human life. Their scale is different. Non-narrativist focus on decisions can be understood, in these terms, as a choice of focal length by which to observe human conduct. Seen through a decisionist lens, decisions stand out in sharp focus and all else is blurred, or framed out. The narrative ethicist will call attention to the other photographer's imposed focus and will show how much clearer the scene appears when viewed through a different photo apparatus. It will not do here, however, simply to invoke 'reality' over against the non-narrativist; the narrative focus is also a focus, also a selection of apparatus and its use, also a way (and not just the way) of seeing the whole. Here, too, the picture is deliberately framed, and presumably there is something (decisions?) beyond the frame, or within it but left blurred. So the two photographic styles appear side by side, and there is so far no way to say that one is just right, the other just wrong. Certainly we can criticize one for not showing us what the other does, not knowing what the other is up to, but that is a criticism that might in one case or another cut either way.

When we reach this stage of the matter, though, narrative ethics has gained its point. For now all sides say it is a matter of focus, say that there is perhaps more to the picture. For narrative ethics (as I have construed it) never wanted to deny that people decide, or that their decisions are sometimes morally significant, or that those significant decisions might be framed by rules or principles of so high a degree of abstraction that they would no longer have the appearance of narrative summaries. It only wanted to insist that the principles, even such principles as the principle of utility or the categorical imperative, have a context, as do the decisions they are meant to guide, only to insist that that context is a narrative one, and that the meaning of both the propositional principles adopted and the decisions these are meant to guide is to be found in terms of their narrative setting. The narrative ethicist can even concede that the best workers in the field, though embracing decisionist techniques of one sort or another, have always known this; good casuists have known how to include the full story, good deontologists and utilitarians and phenomenologists have, too. In this way narrative ethics could be seen as a corrective, helping those in other ethical traditions to live up to the highest potential of their own work.

Still, that does not exhaust the matter. The conflict is not so easily resolved. Narrativists can make room for non-narrativists (it's a matter of focus); non-narrativists can acknowledge narrativists (the stories make good illustrations of what we say). Yet neither side is likely to be satisfied with the other's 'inclusiveness.' It appears that here, too, more work remains to be done. The new question, as
I see it, has to do with scope or scale: What is the appropriate center of moral and ethical attention, and what is the fitting context for that center? Stated in this way, it seems to be an aesthetic question, calling for judgment more like that demanded of artists or architects than, say, machinists or engineers. To the extent that ethics engages narratives, it returns to a sphere in which artistry is indeed called forth, and artistic criticism must follow if the ethical ‘artist’ is to be held to standards of judgment and fittingness and coherence—to moral beauty as well as moral truth.

It is from this angle that response should be made to the charge that the narrativist has made morality contingent upon stories that may turn out to be false. Indeed any failing of the story on which moral meaning depends does, and should, call its contained morality into question. We require of the stories we live by that they be in some sense true. Whether the narrativist works in a mythic tradition, whose stories have the ‘truth’ of myth, or in an historic tradition (such as I take Christianity to be) whose stories claim the truth of history, the truth of the story is just another side of the truth of the morality it embodies.

IV

The territory of truth seems to provide narrative ethics with both its deepest pitfalls and its most inviting avenues. Among the inviting avenues, there is the relation of truth to truthfulness. Perhaps it will be helpful to unfold this relation by recalling one of the moral narratives of the Hebrew Bible, II Samuel 12:1-15. The passage relates the confrontation of King David by the Prophet Nathan; its well-known centerpiece is Nathan’s parable of two men who owned livestock, one having many flocks and herds, the other a single ewe lamb.

As the interview begins, its ostensible topic is a just king’s quest for truth. To be sure, the previous paragraph in II Samuel has just revealed that this King had his foibles, but it is a commonplace that public and private morality are separable and must of course be separated. Here then the reader will see the public figure at his public task: discerning the truth that justice demands. How excellent that Nathan has turned informant! Surely this is a prophet’s proper place, to be the state’s moral agent and detective, the King’s right arm? So who is the rich culprit? But Nathan’s reply turns the tables, deflates the royal pretense, demands truthfulness as the price of truth. The hunter is now the hunted; the hound a hare.

Two other, more shadowy, figures hover outside the margins of this story and the other stories that constitute the books named Samuel. One is the (implied) narrator who has arranged the narrative as just described, set a trap with the narrative in somewhat the same way that Nathan set his within the story. The other shadowy figure is the (prospective) reader, in the present instance myself,
who has the opportunity as reader to be confronted with the claim of truthfulness just as he supposed he was confronting the claim of (objective, manageable) truth. That is, to the extent that I am able to accept the invitation of this chain of narratives in II Samuel and identify with their chief character, David the King, I find myself also forced to make the painful shift from a focus on mere truth (elusive though objective) to a more difficult focus on truth reached by way of truthfulness. Moral narrative here becomes for me moral formation. There is the story in the text, but there is also the story of the text, the engagement of narrator (or Narrator?) and reader by means of the offered story.

Another aspect of this story is its setting—not merely the ancient Near East, though that has its relevance, too, but the setting in the biblical Israel in which narrator and reader are quite likely caught up in some fashion, as are David and Nathan (and the parabolic rich man and poor man). What difference does it make that this community is Israel, the people of a well-remembered exodus from tyranny, the people of the Law, the people among whom God may allow kings but, more to his purpose, raises up prophets? We may answer by imagining these events translated into the courts of the royal tyrant Tiglath-Pileser. In this imagined revision, the prophet appears, the “thou art the man” is spoken, the King’s anger flares—off with his head. That in the biblical story the outcome is instead remorse, repentance, divine punishment, divine forgiveness (II Samuel 12:13-25) is not only revealing of the character of David, but also of the community setting in which such character can appear and flourish and be celebrated.

As to the hint above that the narrator or ostensible teller of these tales is none other than God, so that God is not only a character in the biblical stories (appearing, withdrawing, called JHWH, capable of jealousy, etc.) but also the implied teller of the stories, it cannot be explored here (as it is at least briefly explored in Brian Wicker’s suggestive essay The Story-Shaped World). Yet this much can be said: if God is one who shapes our moral lives by telling us stories within a story-formed community, then we may require a rather different view of God than that suggested by metaphors of Command (Barth, Brunner) or of the Lure of all possible occasions (Whitehead); the God of biblical morality is more intimate than a Commander will be; more complex than the eternal processive Lure. But that is another (and another sort) of philosophical-theological inquiry.

To link God and morality to a certain set of stories is also to raise problems of pluralism or relativism—pluralism if we are optimistic about the direction being taken, relativism if we are not. If the truth of morality and ethics is bound to these stories, does not its truth depend upon theirs? But how can it, if the moral is the universal, and if relativism entails moral chaos? Narrative modes are not alone in evoking relativistic (or fideistic) worries; on the other hand, it is possible that they may provide fresh ways of addressing them. In any case, it is evident that since the threats of relativism and fideism are not unique to
narrative ethics, banishing narrative cannot evaporate them. The hope is rather that narrative thinking may offer fresh insight into what is in any case an elusive set of problems of modern thought. At least it is down these lines that I would wish to address them.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful for critical readings of earlier drafts of this paper by James Smith, Nancey Murphy, Stanley Hauerwas, Michael Goldberg, and Robert Adams.

2. These themes are conveniently summarized, for example, in Timothy E. O’Connell, Principles for a Catholic Morality (New York: Seabury, 1978).


8. Here I have in mind the writing of Stanley Hauerwas, from his early Vision and Virtue (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides, 1974) and Character and the Christian Life (San Antonio: Trinity University, 1975, recently reissued with a new introduction) to his more recent Peaceable Kingdom (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983); also the ethical writings of John Howard Yoder, including The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) but also his more recent and more sophisticated work included in The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984); also that of Alasdair MacIntyre, notably Afer Virtue (2nd ed., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984). I should probably mention here my own Biography as Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974) and Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) which has appeared a little sooner than this article, and whose second and final chapters to some degree parallel it.


10. On the varieties of narrative theology and ethics see Michael Goldberg, Theology and Narrative (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).


14. 'Performative' in scare quotes, to remind us that Austin found the "performative-constative distinction" untenable and abandoned it for his later speech-act theory because he had noted a 'performative' aspect in every utterance, including those he had once thought constatives. See his *How to Do Things with Words*, op. cit., Lecture 6, and "Performative Utterances," in his *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) pp. 228-39.

15. I am indebted for the following paragraphs to a critical note from James M. Smith, based on an earlier version of this paper.

16. Some of them are addressed in Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

17. See this approach exemplified, for example, in Stanley Hauerwas' "From System to Story" in his *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1977).


20. I owe this illustration to Frank Kermode, but have not found it again.


25. See Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative*, op. cit. I am indebted also to Michael Goldberg for the suggestion developed in the following story from II Samuel.