

NARRATIVE, CASUISTRY, AND THE FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE IN THOMAS AQUINAS

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Abstract. Both the function of one’s conscience, as Thomas Aquinas understands it, and the work of casuistry in general involve deliberating about which universal moral principles are applicable in particular cases. Thus, understanding how conscience can function better also indicates how casuistry might be done better – both on Thomistic terms, at least. I claim that, given Aquinas’ descriptions of certain parts of prudence (*synesis* and *gnome*) and the role of moral virtue in practical knowledge, understanding particular cases more as narratives, or parts of narratives, likely will result, all else being equal, in more accurate moral judgments of particular cases. This is especially important in two kinds of cases: first, cases in which Aquinas recognizes universal moral principles do not specify the means by which they are to be followed; second, cases in which the type-identity of an action – and thus the norms applicable to it – can be mistaken

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Introduction

‘Casuistry’ has a bad reputation in some circles. It tends to be associated with formalized, but too legalistic, approaches to determining and enumerating moral faults. In a more generic sense, though, casuistry just refers to deliberating about and discerning what universal moral principles apply in particular cases, based on relevant details of the case at issue. As Thomas Aquinas understands things, casuistry parallels the ordinary, everyday function of one’s conscience, which specifically regards particular cases in which one deliberates about one’s *own* morally relevant actions.¹ Given this, we might be able to gain insight to how formalized casuistry can be done well by drawing an analogy from what it takes for conscience to function well. In this paper, I draw such an analogy – albeit a limited one, based solely on the accounts of conscience and ethics in general in Thomas Aquinas.

¹ The name ‘casuistry’, used to describe the more formalized process, is taken from the medieval term ‘*casus conscientiae*’, meaning “cases of conscience.” Jonsen and Toulmin [1988] p. 127.

In this paper, I focus first on what Aquinas says about judging which moral principles are relevant in particular cases. Given important details of this treatment, I find that insight to reasoning well about cases can be found in a perhaps unlikely place: narrative. After differentiating narratives from non-narratives, I claim that understanding individual cases as either narratives or parts of narratives (as opposed to non-narratives) likely results, all else being equal, in more accurate moral judgments about them, particularly for judges who are virtuous. I claim this holds both when casuistry is done “online,” (as one makes individual moral decisions for oneself in the ordinary function of conscience), and when it is done “offline” (in the formalized sense of ‘casuistry’). I conclude by giving examples of situations in which, on Aquinas’s own terms, such an analysis of individual cases turns out to be particularly important.

Errors in Conscience

For Aquinas, conscience is an act that is “nothing but the application of knowledge to some ... act.”² This act is thus said to be the “result of a kind of particular syllogism” – that is, a syllogism with a judgment about a particular as the minor premise and a universal judgment as the major premise.³ Aquinas gives this example:

Major Premise: I must not do anything which is forbidden by the law of God.

Minor Premise: Sexual intercourse with this woman is forbidden by the law of God.

Conclusion: I must abstain from this intercourse.⁴

According to Aquinas, the universal judgment in the major premise comes from the “special, natural” *habitus* of *synderesis*, which is the source of our understanding of “first practical principles.”⁵ Such principles serve as a sort of necessary condition for a rational understanding – and, subsequently, evaluation – of any action.⁶ Since this universal principle from *synderesis* is understood as a necessary

² Aquinas [1953] q. 17 a. 2, co. Cf., also, Aquinas [1947] I q. 79 a. 13, co. N.B., in this paper, quotations from Aquinas in English are taken from translations cited unless otherwise noted.

³ Aquinas [1953] q. 17 a. 2, co.

⁴ Ibidem. Cf., also, Aquinas [2001] q. 3 a. 9, ad 7.

⁵ Aquinas [1947] I q. 79 a. 12, co.

⁶ For Aquinas on the work of *synderesis*, cf. Aquinas [1953] q. 16 a. 2, co. For any action to be intelligible, it must be seen as either the pursuit of some good or avoidance of some evil. So, if the performance of some particular action is to be intelligible at all – i.e., describable as the result of a sort

condition of any action whatsoever, it cannot be false as such. Hence, Aquinas writes, “although a mistaken reason starts from principles, it does not derive its falsity from first principles, but from wrong *use* of the principles.”⁷ Put another way, the error is in the *particular* judgment, the minor premise of the practical syllogism.⁸

On this Aquinas writes, “mistakes can happen ... either from the use of false premises, or from faulty construction of the syllogism.”⁹ Regarding the first of these two kinds of mistakes, he uses the example of a heretic who mistakenly believes that “oaths are forbidden by God.”¹⁰ To describe the second, he describes a situation in his treatment of incontinence in *De malo*, in which fornication with some person turns out to be wrong; here, he differentiates between the practical syllogisms of those who have the virtue of temperance and those who lack that virtue. The temperate person makes the appropriate judgment in the situation; on the other hand, the intemperate person ends up employing this syllogism:

Major Premise: Everything pleasurable is to be enjoyed

Minor Premise: This act [of fornication] is pleasurable.

Conclusion: This act [of fornication] is to be done.¹¹

In this case, the problem lies in the particular judgment, but not in the same way as the case of the heretic above. In this case, the error is in applying the wrong universal in the particular situation; in the example, the temperate person’s syllogism contains different premises. That is, the intemperate person misidentifies “Everything pleasurable is to be enjoyed” as *the* morally relevant aspect of the action being considered.

In sum, errors in practical reasoning, as occur when conscience errs, can arise in two ways: first, when a particular action or kind of action is judged incorrectly to violate or follow from some universal moral principle; second, when one’s

of syllogistic reasoning, even if the syllogism is not consciously done – this necessary condition of action must be a universal judgment.

⁷ *Ibidem*, q. 16 a. 2, ad 6.

⁸ Referring to those who kill the Apostles of Jesus, Aquinas writes, “in that choice by which the murderers of the Apostles thought they were offering worship to God, the error did not come from the universal judgment of *synderesis* that worship should be offered to God, but from the false judgment of higher reason, which considered the killing of the Apostles as pleasing to God.” (Aquinas [1953] q. 16 a. 2, ad 2.) Those who killed the Apostles have an erring conscience in the judgment that the particular action of killing the Apostles in the circumstances is an action that would be pleasing to God.

⁹ Aquinas [1947] q. 17 a. 2, co.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*. The heretic correctly thinks that what God forbids ought not to be done.

¹¹ Aquinas [2001] q. 3 a. 9, ad 7.

syllogism appeals to the wrong universal moral principle by falsely identifying the most morally salient aspect of the action. The cure to these ills will be whatever helps one to discern the particular situation properly.

Synesis, Gnome, and Moral Virtue in the Work of Conscience

Much like Aristotle, Aquinas elucidates an account of the virtue of prudence, because of which the function of discerning what is true of particular situations for the sake of action is perfected. Understanding this will help us understand what it takes to discern particular situations well, in Aquinas's terms. Associated with prudence are several subsidiary virtues, which are more precise perfections that having prudence implies.¹² Aquinas names three such subsidiary virtues; his descriptions of the last two – *synesis* and *gnome* – are of particular interest.

When describing *synesis*, Aquinas writes:

... in speculative matters some [people] ... [can argue quickly] from one thing to another ... due to a disposition of their power of *imagination* ..., yet such persons sometimes lack good judgment ... due to ... a defective disposition of the *common sense* which fails to judge aright.¹³

Synesis is the habit needed to perfect that judgment; it perfects the functioning of the common sense (*communis sensus*) in practical reasoning. The common sense is one of the *interior senses*, which allow humans to process sensory (i.e., particular, contingent) information; it is the faculty “to which ... all apprehensions of the [external and other internal] senses must be referred.”¹⁴ It is a faculty that is able to take on and sort through particularized content of varied kinds. Even more precisely, Aquinas writes, *synesis* affords one the habit of making the “right judgment about the things that happen in the majority of cases,” since “what is legally just is determined according to what happens in the majority of cases.”¹⁵ In sum, *synesis* allows one to understand what norm of moral law is appropriate in a particular situation, based on its similarity to a number of particular cases, as such particular cases are processed by the common sense.

¹² Cf. Aquinas [1947] II-II q. 48 a. 1, co. These subsidiary virtues are called “potential parts” of prudence and are “directed to certain ... [more specific] acts or matters, not having, as it were, the whole power of the principal virtue.”

¹³ Ibidem, II-II q. 51 a. 3, co. (*emphasis mine*).

¹⁴ Ibidem, I q. 78 a. 4, ad 2.

¹⁵ Aquinas [1964] Bk. vi, Lec. ix, §1243.

Regarding *gnome*, Aquinas writes, “what is *equitable* is *directive* of the legally just thing because the law necessarily is deficient in the minority of cases. ... [*Gnome* is about ensuring] a right judgment about the *direction* of what is legally just.”¹⁶ Such deficiencies in the applications of rules that the common sense will make are inevitable, Aquinas says, on account of the irreducible complexity of particular cases, relative to human cognitive capabilities.¹⁷ One recognizes, then, that too rigid an application of a true law can violate the direction of justice – the “spirit of the law,” as it were – in any given case.¹⁸ *Gnome* is the habit according to which one is reminded that virtuous exceptions to rules exist. Regarding *gnome* as part of the work of prudence implies that the work of prudence is not as precise and exact as a *scientia*. Further, it is a reminder that the broader *telos* behind applying the dictates of justice and the moral law – the common good and the development of virtue – must not be lost in practical deliberations.

Aquinas says this discernment will tend to come with age “as *physical* nature is changed. Indeed ... old age ..., by the cessation of bodily and animal changes, has understanding and good sense.”¹⁹ This is instructive for two reasons. For one, he thinks the old have understanding and good sense because they have more, and fuller and more genuine, experiences. The more cases truly encountered and remembered, then, the more grounds one will have for judgments made *via* the faculties of interior sense. (Recall that *synesis* and *gnome* operate *via* interior senses, which rely on a storehouse of particular experiences for their determinations.) Second, Aquinas writes that a *bodily* disposition *not* subject to “animal changes” is needed to excel at this discernment. Among such changes are those associated with *passiones*, which can subvert judgments when unchecked, according to Aquinas. *Passiones* are checked by moral virtue; hence, Aquinas believes that the possession of moral virtues has epistemic benefits for practical reason.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibidem, Bk. vi, Lec. ix, §1243 (*emphasis* mine).

¹⁷ Cf. ibidem, Bk. v, Lec. xvi, §1082–1084.

¹⁸ Cf., “by equity [i.e., what *gnome* affords one to sense] a person is obedient in a higher way when he follows the intention of the legislator where the words of the law differ from it.” Ibidem, Bk. v, Lec. xvi, §1078.

¹⁹ Ibidem, Bk. vi, Lec. ix, §1252 (*emphasis* mine). He also remarks, “dealing with practicable principles follows from experience and age, and is perfected by prudence. Hence we must pay attention to the thoughts and decisions of experienced, old, and prudent men on what is to be done.” Ibidem, Bk. vi, Lec. ix, §1254. Cf. also: “prudence does not reside in the external senses whereby we know sensible objects, but in the interior sense, which is perfected by memory and experience so as to judge promptly of particular cases.” Aquinas [1947] II-II q. 47 a. 3, ad 3.

²⁰ In several places, Aquinas is explicit about this. For example, when discussing *synesis*, he writes: “the cognitive power [is] well disposed to receive things just as they are in reality ... through the

In sum, judging particular cases well involves having a storehouse of particular cases (apprehended *via* interior senses) from which one will be able to draw similarities to a case being apprehended, an awareness of both the broader aims of the moral law and justice and the fallibility of our ability to apply rules to particular cases, even at our best, and moral virtue to make certain correct estimations of the ends of action. With this, for Aquinas, we can better (though not completely) avoid errors endemic to making particular judgments detailed above.

On Narratives

The descriptions above give some guidelines for what Aquinas thinks it will take to judge particular cases well. I believe these desiderata could be met better, all else being equal, by understanding particular cases as narratives as opposed to non-narratives, whether in the abstract exercise of casuistry or in the actual exercise of one's own conscience. First, I consider what makes narratives definitively unique from other forms of reports of facts and the processes involved in typically appreciating narratives as such.

There are a number of working definitions of what it means for something to be a narrative (or a story); there is, however, a general enough consensus from which to start. For example, Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, cited by Anna Gotlib, uses the following characterization: "using the word 'narrative' somewhat interchangeably with 'story' I mean ... a more or less coherent written, spoken, or (by extension) enacted account of occurrences, whether historical or fictional."²¹ Noël Carroll accepts a similar characterization, as Sarah Worth reports:

... narrative discourse is comprised of more than one event and/or states of affairs that are connected, are about a unified subject, and are represented as being perspicuously ordered in time (the ordering must be at least retrievable if not implicitly obvious).²²

For Carroll, several other things that manifestly are *not* narratives fit that provisional definition. Carroll conceives of two such things, against which he can

good disposition of the *appetitive power*, the result being that one judges well of the objects of appetite." Ibidem, II-II q. 51 a. 3, ad 1. Cf. also ibidem, II-II q. 47 a. 16, co. and Aquinas [1964] Bk. vi, Lec. iv, §1169, 1170.

²¹ Hunter [1996] p. 303. Cited in: Gotlib [2014].

²² Worth [2005] p. 2; The work Worth cites is: Carroll [2001]. N.B., the paper that I am referencing from Worth is a conference paper that has been made available publicly at the website listed above. Worth has published a paper with many of the same themes I reference here, but will not cite in the text of this paper: Worth [2008] p. 42-56.

compare narratives to sharpen his characterization: “annals” and “chronicles.” A narrative differs from an annal insofar as its “primary principle of organization” is “*merely* a temporal list of events,” which may or may not have a unified subject.²³ For example, a bulleted list of all the events that occurred in the year 2000, starting in January and ending in December, would count as an annal, but not a narrative. A chronicle is described as a “discursive representation that (temporally, but non-causally) connects at least two events in the career of a unified subject such that a reliable temporal ordering is retrievable from it (and/or from the context of the enunciation).”²⁴ For example, a list of events that occurred to *me* and involved *me* in the year 2000 could count as a chronicle, but not necessarily a narrative.

There is something about the way that events are presented in a narrative as pertaining to a unified subject (or subjects) whereby one or several typically are able to come alive in the course of the description of the events involving them. There is something about narratives that typically invites a certain kind of active engagement in the lives of a subject (or subjects) whose events are being described. One suggestion is that narratives capture this insofar as they portray causal relationships between earlier events and later events involving a subject (or subjects), whereas annals and chronicles do not. For Carroll, this does not quite capture the unique factor at play here. Causation, he claims, is not the “singular necessary relation that unifies narrative structure,” else it would follow that “earlier events in narratives would always ... causally entail later events.”²⁵ Instead, he accepts a similar but weaker condition: that “earlier events in the sequence [of events and/or states of affairs concerning the career of at least one unified subject] are at least causally necessary [but perhaps not sufficient] conditions for the causation of later events and/or states of affairs (or are contributions thereto).”²⁶ The causes reported in a narrative often underdetermine their effects, but capture enough, and the right aspects, of the causal activity of a subject to help them come alive and become a *character* in a plot, not just the equivalent of a *thing* about which we know some facts.

What makes the genre of narrative unique for Worth is that human motivations are typically reported and featured in a unique way. Similar to Carroll’s characterization, Worth places human motivations among those important, yet un-

²³ Worth [2005] p. 2.

²⁴ Carroll [2001] p. 25; quoted in Worth [2005] p. 3.

²⁵ Worth [2005] p. 3–4.

²⁶ Carroll [2001] p. 32; quoted in Worth [2005] p. 6.

derdetermining, aspects of the causal story involving a subject that are represented in narratives in a way that is unlike that of non-narratives. She writes, "One of the main reasons we read narratives, or perhaps one of the main motivations to continue once we are in it, is to see how human motivations are played out in the context of the story."²⁷ The genre of narrative is somehow apt for capturing and helping readers grasp motivations as causes of later effects, even if only partial, in a way that an annal or a chronicle cannot. This again gestures in the direction of Hunter's thought above that narratives have the potential to be "enacted accounts."

Eleonore Stump captures the point that Carroll and Worth offer by claiming that narratives are particularly apt vehicles for what she calls "knowledge of persons." Stump describes this knowledge as follows:

There is ... a broad array of knowledge commonly had by human beings that cannot be formulated adequately or at all as knowledge *that* [i.e., just propositional knowledge]. Such knowledge is provided by some ... experiences ... in which the qualia of the experience are among the salient parts of the knowledge. One important species of such knowledge is the ... knowledge of persons.²⁸

Knowledge of persons is a non-propositional kind of knowledge of the mental states (e.g., actions, intentions, emotions, etc.) of another "in a direct, intuitive way analogous in some respects to perception."²⁹ The discovery of mirror neurons and direct studies about their functioning, which Stump references, have helped to give a scientific basis for the possibility of this kind of knowledge and, by extension, some analogues.³⁰ Taking this to be genuinely *knowledge*, Stump writes:

... knowledge of persons is gained paradigmatically through *second-person experiences* [i.e., experiences of *another's* mental states mirrored in ourselves] ... [Such experiences] can be made available to *others* ... by means of a story that re-presents the experience. A story [i.e., a narrative] is ... a second-person account.³¹

²⁷ Worth [2005] p. 6.

²⁸ Stump [2010] p. 80.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Cf. Stump [2010] p. 67–77. In sum, what research about mirror neurons has revealed is that, across a wide number of cases, the neural pathways that fire when we are doing certain actions are the same pathways that fire when we observe that action being done by another with a certain amount of attention.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

To help prove this point ostensibly, she directs us to notice “what we lose if we try to reduce a narrative to expository (that is, non-narrative) prose. ... Cliff Notes, even ideally excellent Cliff Notes, ... of *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, would lose what is best about the novel itself.”³² Insofar as the experience of reading a summary or book report about a narrative with suitable attention is substantively different from the experience of reading the narrative itself with suitable attention, particularly when it comes to having an inward understanding of the minds of the characters in said story, Stump’s point is demonstrated.

Summarizing the points of Carroll, Worth, and Stump, narratives can capture the human experience (of causation, motivation, and other inner states) because they have a unique structural capability to re-present the mental states associated with such motivations in a way that might engage the same kinds of mental states in its (suitably attentive) readers in a way that is analogous, if not directly related, to how mirror neurons operate. Put another way, narratives can be second-hand re-presentations of experiences – both of those like ourselves and those very much unlike ourselves – that engage us, meaning they can mirror closely the way first-hand experiences are had. In this sense, narratives have a capability to capture and re-present experiences in the way they are lived. Insofar as narratives occur across a span of time, they also have the capability to represent this in the context of a more or less whole character in the course of a more or less whole life, or period of life. Martha Nussbaum appears to summarize these points well when she writes that novels in particular can be “an extension of life [both] horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, ... [and] vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life.”³³

Nussbaum, among others, has argued extensively that novels (i.e., longer and richly detailed narratives) have an irreducible and irreplaceable role to play in moral deliberation and education for various reasons. Nussbaum’s argument is largely Aristotelian. For her, the structure and typical content of novels captures many features desirable given “an Aristotelian ethical position,” including prioritizing perceptions and particulars over universals.³⁴ She writes, “novels, as a genre, direct us to attend to the concrete; they display before us a wealth of richly realized detail, presented as relevant for choice.”³⁵ It is as if, given the amount and

³² Ibidem, p. 78.

³³ Nussbaum [1990] p. 48.

³⁴ Cf. ibidem, p. 35–43.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 95.

depth of complexity they can possess and represent about human life, as well as given the mode in which these are represented, they cannot help but be better at representing particularities, as opposed to generalities. Nevertheless, novels need not be seen as lacking any universal element, according to Nussbaum. Rather, they start with particularity by focusing on how certain principles play out in concrete circumstances for others – then, by extension, ourselves; this implies a kind of universality. She writes:

[Novels] ask us to imagine possible relations between our own situations, thereby perceiving ... similarities and differences. ... [Novels'] structure suggests ... that much of moral relevance is universalizable: learning about [a character's] situation helps us understand our own.³⁶

Insofar as novels help with understanding ourselves, Nussbaum thinks they also have the potential to help with moral self-growth. She claims:

[N]ovels exemplify and offer [training of how to read a situation and single out what is relevant for thought and action]: exemplify it in the efforts of their characters and the author, engender it in the reader by setting up a similarly complex activity.³⁷

That is, what the (appropriately attentive) reader can do is actively engage in the narrative in a way that is much more existentially familiar and relevant than engaging with a non-narrative work; they can insert themselves as a character here much more readily. Much more of the reader's own experience as an agent may be invested in the narrative. Hence this is at least a potential venue for effective practice – that is, habituation – in moral decision-making, more so than a non-narrative text at any rate.

Why and How Narrative Works for Conscience and Casuistry

Given the above, I think that considering particular cases as full narratives or parts of narratives, as opposed to non-narratives, will lend one towards making better judgments of those cases, all else being equal, on Aquinas's own terms about judging cases. More specifically, I think the structural and definitional properties of narratives imply that they, as opposed to non-narratives, can better deliver what Aquinas would claim is necessary to process for the sake of judging particu-

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 44.

lar cases well, as indicated in his treatment of *synesis* and *gnome*. Further, the structural and definitional properties of narratives imply that they, as opposed to non-narratives, are better vehicles by which to engage one's own moral virtue when one is making judgments about a case – whether that case is directly before one's conscience or being considered in the more formal version of casuistry.³⁸ Three reasons follow.

First, narratives can *capture certain elements relevant to the moral judgment of particular cases more accurately and more completely*, as opposed to non-narrative descriptions of cases. For one, narratives, as Worth and Stump are at pains to point out, capture certain aspects of the human experience – e.g., a person's intentions, emotions, motivations, etc. – in a way that non-narratives do not and with a complexity that non-narratives cannot. For example, consider Aquinas oft-cited example of judging whether or not to return a weapon one has borrowed to the lender, who has evidently gone mad.³⁹ Given the situation, grasping the lender's intentions, emotions, and motivations more completely, as one would do in a narrative, would help one to determine more accurately if the lender was in fact mad. Further, insofar as narratives tend to have an arc or plot, one is likely able to perceive and predict more concretely the implications of one's action for the common good. Hence, thinking narratively will tend to help expand one's thinking beyond immediate sensory experience. These things would cause the difference between judging one should return the borrowed weapon and judging that one ought not to return it. Simply apprehending the lender as a lender and unflinchingly divesting of one's moral duty to return borrowed goods to any lenders, may be perilous – even positively morally wrong to do for Aquinas. By considering only a non-narrative account of the particular situation, you run a higher risk of making a mistake in this case..

Second, narratives, more so than non-narratives, *capture the experiential complexity and depth of particular situations in a more relevant, relatable, and usable format*. That is, the experiences related in a narrative way are being encoded, as it were, in a manner that is more natural to the interior senses' mode of operation, as Aquinas sees such senses. Given the descriptions of narratives given by Worth, Carroll,

³⁸ N.B., this project is not new in a sense. To say nothing of the vast literature on narrative ethics and moral particularism (regarding casuistry), there are thinkers who have attempted to link narrative and the work of conscience more precisely: e.g. Arras [1994] p. 983–1014; Depaul [1988] p. 552–565, among others. I have not, however, seen this done specifically with the nuts and bolts of *Thomas Aquinas'* view of conscience, though some have referenced Aquinas.

³⁹ Cf. Aquinas [1964] Bk. v, Lec. xvi, §1085. A similar example is used at Aquinas [1947] II-II q. 51 a. 4, co.

Stump, and Nussbaum, among others, it is likely that engaging well with a wide and vast variety of narratives almost certainly involves, and thus enriches, the work of interior senses, such as the common sense, imagination, and sensory memory, as Aquinas would understand these faculties. Aquinas's belief about how important this functionality is in driving effective and intelligent action, even for those with universal knowledge, is captured in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, when he writes, "men of experience act more effectively than those who have the universal knowledge of an art but lack experience."⁴⁰ In principle, all the universal knowledge in the world will not help one apply such knowledge to any of the particulars in the world.⁴¹ It is also not unlikely that non-narrative accounts (e.g., annals and chronicles) would not engage the interior senses just as narratives do, or at least not as much. They are said to lack that very sensory and experiential depth of content that differentiates them from narratives in the first place. The kind of content delivered by non-narratives, as well as the manner in which that content is delivered, will not supply the interior senses with the same amount or depth of relevant content.

Further, if it holds that narratives are largely processed at the level of one's interior senses, then, in principle, the kind of "reasoning" one is led to engage in with narratives will not be fully the same as the discursive reasoning that underpins many non-narratives, such as scientifically-minded reports.⁴² Hence, the kinds of reasoning involved in narrative processing and the kind of reasoning that occur in the inner senses do not contradict each other. By engaging with narratives instead of non-narratives, we will be operating in a mode of processing that does not impel us towards *scientia*-like discursive precision. We are not without standards in our processing here; however, the standards refer to *applications* of moral principles to particular cases, *not* the absolute justifications of such moral principles in general. The former will tend to be much more experientially real and veri-

⁴⁰ Aquinas [1953] bk. I, lec. 1 §20.

⁴¹ This claim holds insofar as the kind of particularity (of experience) that narratives are good at grasping is functionally the same as the kind of "particularity" (of experience) that a human's full sensitive functionality is able to grasp, as Aquinas sees it. Given Aquinas's accounts of other interior sense faculties such as the cogitative power (*vis cogitativa*) and certain of Aquinas' explanations of connaturality, this is not unlikely. Cf., for example, the work of Daniel D. DeHaan: e.g. DeHaan [2014] p. 287–328; DeHaan [2010] p. 179–196. The work of Mark Barker is also instructive here: e.g., Barker [2012] p. 199–226. Certain of these themes are implied in the work of Jacques Maritain as well: e.g., Maritain [1951] p. 473–481.

⁴² For more on "narrative reasoning" and its differences from "discursive reasoning," see Worth [2005] p. 7–11.

fied, albeit fallible, just as Aquinas envisions it – hence the need for both *synesis* and *gnome*.

Third, processing a case as a narrative, as opposed to a non-narrative, *better allows for the epistemic benefits of a judge's moral virtue to be operative in understanding what principles are relevant in a particular case*. Supposing Nussbaum's analysis holds, narratives do provide the kind of context within which one's *own* experiences are tested, within which one can participate *for oneself*. Insofar as one possesses moral virtue, then, one can participate with one's virtues and the moral light they shine on a situation. Since Aquinas states that judgments about some matters of moral concern are best discerned by someone with the virtues – the more likely such habits are to be activated while deliberating, the better the chances are of one being correct in one's relevant moral estimation.

This claim hinges on the idea that one's moral virtues are not as actively engaged, as it were, when considering non-narratives – and that this makes a real difference. One could argue for this claim as follows: considering a non-narrative explanation of a situation likely implies a certain intellectual distance from the case, given that such an explanation likely does not engage one's sensory faculties as deeply or richly as a narrative would. Where there is less content that *could* stimulate such faculties, the virtues that perfect such faculties remain present but are rendered less operative, remaining in something like a state of first actuality (present, but not active) as opposed to second actuality (present and operative). It follows, then, that a non-narrative explanation of a case is less likely to actively engage the faculties that are perfected by virtues; hence, the epistemic benefits of moral virtue are not as present in one's deliberation. This is problematic when such benefits are needed to accurately discern some case. So, to use the example of fortitude, where the right action in some particular case is determined by what the brave person would do *on account of their fortitude* in that case, that insight is effectively lost if that fortitude is not actively engaged while discerning the situation.

When is Analysis of Particular Cases Especially Important for Aquinas?

In principle, making any moral decision involves discerning about a particular case. For Aquinas, however, there are some situations where the *particularity* of such judgments is more important to keep in mind. In such cases, the relative utility of narratives should be greater. I identify here two such kinds of cases, derived from Aquinas's treatment on law.

The first kind is the case in which universal principles do not adequately specify by what means a particular action should occur, but only that it should occur. For example, Aquinas claims this is true of the specifics of punishing evil-

doers: “the law of nature [says] ... the evil-doer should be punished; *but that he be punished in this or that way, is a determination of the law of nature.*”⁴³ That is, natural law of itself does not have a blanket rule for *how* any given evil-doer must be punished. More generally, he writes,

... as to the proper conclusions of the practical reason, ... [some principle of] reason ... is true for the majority of cases: but it may happen in a particular case that *it would be injurious*, and therefore unreasonable, to [follow that principle]. And this principle will be found to fail the more, *according as we descend further into detail* ... because the greater the number of conditions added, the greater the number of ways in which the principle may fail.⁴⁴

This is to indicate that layering more and narrower principles upon the law does not make it any easier to grasp the particular judgments that need to be made in some cases. Thus, while understanding the minds and lives of those who do wrong in a narrative fashion may not excuse the wrong that is done, it may help direct our responses to such wrongs.

To adapt the example given above, the narratives of those convicted of crimes likely should be given heavy consideration in deliberations about sentencing. For example, a convict’s past may have been marked by neglect, abuse, and systemic oppression. This may not *excuse* them from a particular act of wrongdoing; but understanding the realities of such factors may be directive for the kind of rehabilitation in punishment that justice demands to be offered, as well as other practical directives of justice. Limiting one’s understanding of mitigating and aggravating circumstances of a crime to just immediate circumstances surrounding the event(s) of a crime, and describing them without narrative structure could lend one towards a misguided understanding of both the convict’s motivations and what an appropriate punishment may be. As for a more mundane case, one’s own response to being disrespected by a close friend might be tempered by coming to understand, say, the stresses the friend is under at work. This likely is understood more clearly in a narrative way. Again, this may not *excuse* the friend’s outburst, but truly understanding it may be directive of a response better befitting a friend. In both of these cases, the words of Aquinas here are telling:

⁴³ Aquinas [1947] I-II q. 95 a. 2, co. (*emphasis added*).

⁴⁴ Ibidem, I-II q. 94 a. 4, co. (*emphasis added*). Cf., also ibidem, I-II q. 94 a. 4, ad 2 & I-II q. 95 a. 2, ad 3.

The obligation of observing justice is indeed perpetual. But the determination of those things that are just, according to human or Divine institution, must needs be different, according to the different states of mankind.⁴⁵

Narrative is likely better suited to capturing what Aquinas would regard in such cases as the differences that make a difference.

The second kind of case is one in which the rule under which a certain action is governed is not what it first appears to be. This may occur either when the type-identity of an act is wholly different than initially suspected or when there is a situation-dependent dispensation (for the sake of either the common good or a higher law) from the general rule corresponding to the act's type-identity.

One can see an example of the first of these when Aquinas discusses the Ten Commandments, all of which he claims are in the natural law. He writes:

... the precepts of the Decalogue, as to the essence of justice ..., are unchangeable: but as to any determination by application to individual actions – for instance, *that this or that be murder, theft, or adultery, or not* ... they admit of change.⁴⁶

That is, while it may *appear* that a certain case falls under a given law, the appearance may be deceptive; the details of the case will be needed to correctly discern the case at hand. Among his own examples of cases that appear to violate these laws but do not is Abraham's consent to kill his son Isaac. He writes:

[Abraham] did *not* consent to *murder*, because his son was due to be slain by the command of God, Who is Lord of life and death ... [If] a man be the executor of that sentence by Divine authority, he will be no murderer any more than God would be.⁴⁷

As it reads, Aquinas seems to think that divine commands can override natural law, so that Abraham's act would *no longer even be murder*; in fact, this act of consent is rendered to Abraham as an act of faith. One might wonder if this is the whole story; that divine overrides for the sake of testing faith are, all told, appeals to *merely* arbitrary commands of God. Eleonore Stump does not believe so, even while granting Aquinas' own views. In fact, Stump writes:

⁴⁵ Ibidem, I-II q. 104 a. 3, ad 1. It also seems to be no surprise that Aquinas impugns those who are harsh and unyielding judges, praising instead the "equitable man," who is "inclined to kindness, as it were tempering judgment with a certain clemency." (Aquinas [1964] Bk. vi, Lec. ix, §1244; cf. also §1246.). Cf. also Aquinas [1947] I-II q. 97 a. 4, ad 2.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, I-II q. 100 a. 8, ad 3.

⁴⁷ Ibidem (*emphasis* added). Cf. also ibidem, I-II q. 94 a. 5, ad 2.

In order to understand the nature of the faith being attributed to Abraham in the binding of Isaac and its relationship to the desires of the heart, ... we need to look carefully at the details of the whole narrative of Abraham's life, within which the story of the binding of Isaac is set.⁴⁸

The narrative in Genesis details Abraham's interpersonal relationship with God and the numerous ways it changed and was challenged throughout his life. Outside of understanding and engaging with that broader narrative, Stump claims it would be virtually impossible to uncover the act Abraham is ultimately consenting to, as well as anything resembling the rationale behind God's purposes in so testing Abraham. As it turns out, God's command is far from arbitrary; without the narrative, though, one likely would not grasp this, nor would one grasp what kind of thing Abraham *actually* is doing – and *why*.

Another situation like these may be judging whether or not to participate in certain acts of revolt or civil disobedience in the face of civil and structural injustice. Aquinas writes, "in some cases, [following the letter of the law] is ... hurtful [to the common good]," in which cases, dispensations from the law are allowed; such are typically only allowed by an appropriate authority, but "if ... the peril [is] so sudden as not to allow of the delay involved by referring the matter to authority, the *mere necessity* brings with it a dispensation."⁴⁹ Such a necessity might arise if the rulers themselves, or the laws themselves, or the structures of justice set up by those laws both embody and perpetuate certain injustices even when operating properly; in such a case, ordinary legal recourse for injustice is itself rendered unjust. Surface-level readings of a situation of oppression like this will not be sufficient to determine whether this necessity exists in a given place at a certain time. Mere non-narrative facts likely underrepresent the gravity of unjust oppression occurring at the level of human experience, consciousness, and motivation, for one; further, non-narrative facts admit of varying (often contradictory) interpretations regarding their causes, some accounts of which may be subtly biased. Understanding historical narratives, the narratives of those who are and have been in power, and those who are and have been oppressed under that power likely will help to understand better several important factors: namely, the mental states of those in power (past and present) and those oppressed (past and present) and

⁴⁸ Stump [2010] p. 259. Her thesis is: "the narrative makes the recommended response of faith [for Abraham] ... clear and demanding. ... Faith of the sort exemplified by Abraham consists not in detachment from the desires of one's heart ... but rather in trust in the goodness of God to fulfill those desires." See *ibidem*, p. 258–307, for her full exposition.

⁴⁹ Aquinas [1947] I-II q. 96 a. 6, co.

whether or not the common good is foreseeably served by any action short of revolt – that is, whether or not there is a real necessity for revolt or disobedience.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In sum, I have claimed that narratives, as compared to non-narratives, can more clearly and more realistically present material relevant to the work of either casuistry or conscience to the faculties Aquinas claims are relevant for making particular determinations and applications of universal moral laws. I have also claimed that processing individual cases as narratives can also allow for the exercise of virtue, as Aquinas understands it, in decision-making, better than non-narratives can. These possible benefits are true, I take it, on account of definitional and structural properties of narratives, as opposed to non-narratives – saying nothing about the properties of *good* or *well-formed* narratives. The ability to process particular cases well is of paramount importance for Aquinas in situations where the moral law is silent on particular courses of action in particular situations, as well as situations where the specific universal law under which a particular action falls is not immediately clear – either by reason of dispensation or of having a different identity as an act altogether. As such, narratives may be helpful to deliberation in these kinds of cases especially. All told, by treating the non-scientific domain of knowing particulars for the non-science it is, I conclude that, perhaps paradoxically, one will likely gain the “scientific” currency of accuracy in judgment.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Hence, Aquinas writes, “even as it is lawful to resist robbers, so is it lawful, in a like case, to resist wicked princes.” *Ibidem*, II-II q. 69 a. 4, co.

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