

On Some Moral Implications of Linguistic Narrativism Theory

Natan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert

In this essay we consider the moral claims of one branch of non-realist theory known as linguistic narrativism theory. By highlighting the moral implications of linguistic narrativism theory, we argue that the “moral vision” expressed by this theory can entail, at worst, undesirable moral agnosticism if not related to a transcendental and supra-personal normativity in our moral life. With its appeal to volitionism and intuitionism, the ethical sensitivity of this theory enters into difficulties brought about by several internal tensions as to what morality and moral judgements involve. We contend that the proponents of linguistic narrativism theory must strongly recognize and take responsibility for the “moral vision” their theory professes, in so far as they want to think of their theory as a morally responsible one.

1. Linguistic narrativism theory and moral life

Is theoretical investigation of the human being separable from explicating a vision of human life? If it is inseparable, how do proponents of theoretical perspectives reflect and explore the life-visions that they develop and advocate in theory? Usually we think that description and evaluation in virtually every type of inquiry are ontologically separable as a matter of basic principle. On this principle, both empirical descriptions of states of affairs and theoretical descriptions of conceptualized relationships avoid involvement with judgements of value, particularly with moral value.¹

Philosopher Iris Murdoch, however, argues that evaluative features stand in any description of matters concerning the human being and that these features necessarily involve elements not fully explicable through concepts and propositions. Theoretical and empirical descriptions of human matters are, as she says, expressions of a certain “vision of life.” They therefore commit us to ethical evaluation.²

Proponents of discursivist or linguistic narrativism theories of culture, such as Michel Foucault or Hayden White, would generally agree with Murdoch that descriptions and, even more so, narrations necessitate evaluations. White, for example, writes: “The important point is that although one can ‘explain’ any worldly phenomenon without

¹ In this essay we used morality/morals and ethics/ethical interchangeably, with no necessary normative distinction between the concepts.

² Iris Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, p. 81; Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 25-26.

assessing a value to it, it is impossible to describe anything without also assessing a value or set of values to it.”³

For both Foucault and White, this means that each person assesses what is “good” and “evil” in particular instances of narrated stories on her own evaluative preferences. Each person endows each narration, so to speak, with such-and-such ethical or political meanings because narratives must always have contemporary ideological force.⁴

The difference between Murdoch on the one hand and Foucault and White on the other, however, is that for Murdoch the evaluative features of our descriptions or narrations do not necessarily express political or ideological sympathies, nor are they adequately explained by such sympathies. In her view, ethical evaluations are not restricted to the categories of “good” and “evil” but instead involve a range of less strong moral concepts that our ordinary decisions in life incorporate. “It is,” she says, “in terms of the inner complexity of such concepts that we may display really deep differences of moral vision.”⁵ Thus, in any particular description at hand we will, according to Murdoch, have to investigate and understand just what “vision of life”, or “moral vision”, that description necessitates or entails. This is less a suspicious, ideology-critical undertaking than a close moral understanding of what someone’s words and ideas mean through the way they are uttered.

In this investigation, we start by supporting Murdoch’s notions that theoretical descriptions contain degrees of ethical evaluations that express “moral visions” regarding what our relationships with other persons ought to be and that the relationship between the ideological and the moral is not inescapable. This “moral vision” need not be (and in fact seldom is) an articulated part of the theoretical perspective itself, but it can be implied through the epistemological (and metaphysical) claims of the theory. In order to concretely emphasize the ethically evaluative character of theoretical descriptions, we continue by describing the subject of our investigation: a theory that, according to us, forwards normatively difficult moral claims. The theory is inspired by the linguistic turn in the humanities and may properly be called linguistic narrativism theory, a non-realist theory that is prominent within the philosophy of history, to which our work responds.

Under the linguistic turn, language is regarded as the condition of the possibility of both having and making sense of experience. Linguistic narrativism theory takes language, rather than any extra-linguistic referents, as the condition of the possibility of forming narratives. We hold that it thereby (1) strongly separates meaningfulness and judgment on the basis of a supposedly non-phenomenological, epistemic cleavage between discourse and the extra-linguistic, factually past and present, reality⁶; and (2) appeals to the moral philosophies of volitionism and intuitionism in order to deal morally with the epistemic cleavage it presupposes, and sets for itself.

³ Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), pp. 72–73.

⁴ Hayden White, ‘The Public Relevance of Historical Studies: A Reply to Dirk Moses’, *History and Theory*, 44:3 (2005), p. 335; Michel Foucault, ‘The History of Sexuality’, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 193.

⁵ Iris Murdoch, ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 73.

⁶ Kalle Pihlainen, *The Work of History: Constructivism and a Politics of the Past* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. xiii; Eugen Zelenák, ‘Who Should Characterize the Nature of History? The Wrong Question?’, *Storia della Storiografia* 59–60 (2011), pp. 173–174.

In order to avoid confusion, it is necessary to distinguish the two broad kinds of narrative theory in the philosophy of history. The first is phenomenological, associated with the work of Paul Ricoeur and David Carr, by which the meaningfulness of human life has a narrative structure.⁷ On this account, the horizon of our lives is a coinciding of meaning and storytelling, within which explicit moral assessments are a part. The other is linguistic narrativism theory as described above. This second type of narrative theory – i.e. linguistic narrativism theory – is what we address in this study.

By highlighting the moral implications of linguistic narrativism theory, we argue that the “moral vision” expressed by this theory can entail, at worst, undesirable moral agnosticism if not related to a transcendental and supra-personal normativity in our moral life. We will show that the theory expresses a “moral vision” that involves, on the one hand, an implicit evaluation of what our relationships with other people look like, and on the other, an explicit understanding of the character of ethical assessments and moral judgments. Thus, even if these higher-order moral commitments are not philosophically argued for within linguistic narrativism theory as such, the kinds of normative ethics, as explained below, that remain for this and related non-realist theories may, by merciless subtraction, stunt the moral aims of their own proponents. In the analysis, we contend that the proponents of linguistic narrativism theory must strongly recognize and take responsibility for the “moral vision” their theory professes, in so far as they want to think of their theory as a morally responsible one.

2. Theoretical description and its moral implications

Amidst the boundaries that some philosophers hold language, or psychic drives, or socio-economic pressures, or the conservatism of logic to impose, how do we salvage reflection on moral life in order to parse out what is good? Murdoch’s concept of “visions” are the changing observations, reflections, and conclusion, by which we can work our way towards deeper states of moral deliberation and understanding. How one sees the world affects how one thinks about it and, by the same logic, how one lives in it; acting and thinking connects in what we call moral life. The improvement of vision helps us to understand morality better, as well as allowing us to see people in a truer light, improving our judgments and choices in the world.⁸ The process of vision is Murdoch’s move against the Humean separation of facts from values in the various forms it took in the post-War Anglophone philosophy of her day. It points away from propositionalist concept analysis and empirical research and points toward accounts of the dynamic, temporal, and historical course that people’s “moral visions” often takes.⁹

Before giving a more in-depth description of the “moral vision” of linguistic narrativism theory, it is necessary to provide a critique of the customary Humean bifurcation of “is” from “ought” and of facts from values that the description/evaluation distinction tends to rest on. The distinction seems in some lights to protect values from reduction to facts and in other lights fatally expose them to the same disintegrative peril.

⁷ David Carr, *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, volumes 1 and 3, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985).

⁸ Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, pp. 79–83.

⁹ Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

This situation of opposing outcomes is the reason that G. E. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy" failed to solve the problem of the status of ethical values that it was intended to solve. If values are ontologically other than facts in a profound way, then they are unintelligible in terms of facts. In this case they (1) might be senseless as things other than facts and intelligible solely as facts about what people believe to be good and bad or (2) are ineffable and require discourse, practices, beliefs, or speculation of types wholly outside the domain of empirical verification.¹⁰ Both results are possible from the is/ought distinction, although of course many people rigidly take one side or the other. Nevertheless, thinkers, sometimes without being unaware of it, breach, or even reject the fact/value binary, for instance, for the reason that when scientists attempt to find moral direction in immanent natural ends, their approach requires the surreptitious re-insertion of intuitive, teleological, political, religious, or metaphysical claims that subvert the original enterprise.¹¹

Elizabeth Anscombe attempted to answer some of the difficulties in the ontological separation between fact and value. Her examples, derived from David Hume, tell us not only that evaluations of what we recognize as relevant to the factuality and truth of a situation concerning human states of affairs—such as the evaluative difference between "delivering the potatoes" and "supplying me with potatoes"—are intimately connected to how we come to frame or describe such states of affairs.¹² Her examples also emphasize that evaluation in terms of understanding or even judging human matters of fact supervenes on the way human states of affairs are described in the first place.¹³ Descriptions of human matters—"supplying me with potatoes"—are, one could say, already *evaluations* that lean on what we ordinarily mean when describing such-and-such a deed, unless the circumstances are such that one must suspect one means something different. That, too, however, is an evaluation—namely a judgement that one should not understand the action the way we normally mean.

This is relevant to our understanding of theoretical perspectives not only because evaluative features do not belong exclusively to our descriptions of concrete human state of affairs, helping us to recognize what is relevant and not relevant when determining facticity and truth in a situation, but also because, as Murdoch argues, different degrees of evaluation belong to theoretical or hypothetical descriptions that are systematic expressions of a world view. For one could argue that in our life, even when we reiterate a theory: "...*various* values pervade and *colour* what we take to be the reality of our world; wherein we constantly evaluate our own values and those of others, and judge and determine forms of consciousness and modes of being."¹⁴

Theoretical descriptions often express, Murdoch argues, the values of what we take to be fundamental relationships or characteristics of our human lifeworld. Theories of

¹⁰ George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 10–14; cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, 'On Brute Facts', *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers Vol. III* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 23.

¹¹ In philosophy, see Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp. 25–26; in philosophy of science, see John Dupré, 'Fact and Value', *Value-Free Science? Ideals and Illusions*, edited by Harold Kincaid, John Dupré, and Alison Wylie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 27–41; and in discursivist theory of culture, see White, *The Practical Past*, pp. 72–73.

¹² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being and Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects: Book I-III*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), p. 458.

¹³ Anscombe, 'On Brute Facts', pp. 22–23.

¹⁴ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 26 (italics in original).

language, of mind, of ethics, and of culture hinge on predispositions that guide our ideas of consciousness or our “modes of being.” Structuralism, one of the principal drives of linguistic narrativism theory¹⁵, is an example of a world-view that leans on strong ethical presuppositions: “Structuralism, in so far as it offers itself as ‘scientific’, must profess to be morally neutral; but the large and various volume of structuralist writings contains innumerable value judgements.”¹⁶

Structuralism, in which she includes most post-Saussurean theory of language and culture, makes strong value-judgements on the concept of “truth” in language, presumed as the morally neutral description of language from no particular point of view that posits that language in certain ways is estranged from the world it should denote.¹⁷ Nevertheless, while we will not here inquire into the vision of life that Murdoch’s presentation of structuralism entails or presupposes, the perspective we need to take for present purposes is that theory is explicated from a certain evaluative point of view in life. “Theory” itself is a certain vision of life. It expresses a relationship to the persons with whom we live.

From Anscombe’s and Murdoch’s claims that different evaluations enter any empirical and theoretical description of human states of affairs, we now turn to a prominent example of linguistic narrativism theory in order to understand its moral implications and the vision of life it professes. In *The Ethics of Theory* Robert Doran describes Hayden White’s prominent theoretical vision of (historical) reality in the following way:

As for relativism, White admits to being a pluralist with regard to the view that no single, overreaching perspective on reality or history can claim epistemological priority. But this does not thereby render moral judgment impossible or moot. On the contrary, moral judgement is returned to the realm of ethical responsibility (choice), from which it had become estranged by the supposedly “value-neutral” perspective of historical objectivism.¹⁸

Doran shows us that White’s vision contains several *a priori* statements about the relationship between, on the one hand epistemology and reality, on the other epistemology and ethics. Analysis of this relationship leads us to three insights into linguistic narrativism theory:

(1). Different “perspectives on reality” – i.e., interpretations and narrations based on what is factually asserted as true or false by our world-view – cannot have epistemic status because they cannot be “subject to epistemological conditions of true and false.”¹⁹ White himself writes that “the plot-structures used to fashion the different stories are not in themselves in the nature of propositions that can be submitted to tests of verification or

¹⁵ Kalle Pihlainen, ‘The Work of Hayden White II: Defamiliarizing Narrative’, *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory*, edited by Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), pp. 121–123.

¹⁶ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp. 46–47.

¹⁷ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp. 192–195. One example of linguistic structuralism is Roland Barthes, ‘Historical Discourse’, *Structuralism: A Reader*, edited by Michael Lane, translated by Peter Wexler (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 145–155.

¹⁸ Robert Doran, *The Ethics of Theory: Philosophy, History, Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p. 123.

¹⁹ Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 122.

falsification in the way that ‘singular existential statements’ (i.e., facts) can be tested.”²⁰ Thus, “perspectives on reality,” conditioned by these plot-structures, or forms of story-telling, cannot be subject to epistemic evaluation as to “epistemological priority.” Linguistic narrativism theory holds that only facts— “singular existential statements” — can be subject to such evaluation.

This distinction, however, rests on one deeper ontological assumption, or what Murdoch called a “mode of being.”²¹ Doran writes that “of course, on a deeper level, what counts as a fact is itself dependent on a priori world-disclosure...in our case that of the scientific-naturalist view of the world.”²² In other words, the judgement of what has “epistemological priority” (what is factually true and not) belongs not to narrative construction but to the deeper ontological stratum of one particular scientific and philosophical world-view:

What counted as historical “fact” in medieval Europe was very different from what counts as fact in a contemporary context. We no longer permit miracles and witchcraft to serve as factual elements in the historical account; they are simply described with ironic distance. Thus, in the most general sense, all facts are dependent on a priori interpretation.²³

Fact, then, refers to one particular vision of the world that conditions everything that we take as a state of affairs in our contemporary way of life. To use Bernard Williams’ terms, one could say that the medieval fact of miracles and witchcraft is not factually “possible” in our world governed by the scientific-naturalist world-view.²⁴ This idea of the relationship between epistemology and reality, or in actual fact between epistemology and “perspectives on reality,” has implications also for the relationship between epistemology and ethics. That consequence may be put as follows.

(2). The theory pursues the claim that what is epistemically true or false on the naturalist estimation is an epistemic judgment that is “subject to epistemological conditions of true and false.”²⁵ Thus, fact is not a matter of ethical choice or interpretation; moral judgements typically belong to the practical construction of a story, which stipulates what is contextually true and false, aesthetically beautiful, or politically or ideologically effective. In other words, epistemology (with its epistemic judgments about states of affairs) is categorically separated from the realm of ethics (with its moral judgements about how one should *arrange* and *understand* these states of affairs).

There is, however, also a third result that is important for understanding the nature of linguistic narrativism theory.

(3). In this theory ethics is itself fundamentally envisioned as volitionism, that is to say, as a matter of making present choices on individual intuitions and preferences.²⁶ The

²⁰ Hayden White, ‘Historical Pluralism and Pantextualism’, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007*, edited by Robert Doran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 232; cf. Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 122.

²¹ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 26.

²² Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 122 (italics in original).

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 139–140, 142.

²⁵ Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 122.

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 23–28.

naturalist's assertion of fact is, in this respect, not subject to an ethical choice (a moral judgment) even if he describes facts (states of affairs). Facts are not evaluated on ethical decisions but are instead conditioned by what is epistemically true and false according to the naturalist world-view. The human scientist, by contrast, is inherently subject to an ethical choice, because any emplotment of story (even if it refers to states of affairs) is inevitably made on moral preferences. The story is written in the human scientist's ethical decisions.

The point of looking at linguistic narrativism theory in this way is to show what "vision of life," or "moral vision," it expresses.²⁷ On this description, Doran even argues that the theory involves strong categorical presuppositions that should be treated analogously to the categories in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thus, to say that linguistic narrativism theoretically legitimizes immoral histories, is "like asking if the Nazi also perceives the world according to the categories of the understanding and the forms of intuition as outlined in Kant's first *Critique*. From a metahistorical perspective, emplotment is simply what every historian does, Nazi or not."²⁸ This is where ethical tensions tend to arise. A generous reading of this idea would imply that theoretical legitimation of narrative work as simply the categorical forms that any writing of narrative as well as scholarly description of such work must take are quite different things from judging what that work morally means. This must mean that the author's epistemic responsibility is (exactly as a positivist or empiricist would claim) tied to being true to the asserted facts, whereas her moral responsibility is tied to the moral consequence of what her emplotted narrative may play out to mean in the present. The question is, however, against what normative background one is to judge whether an author is true to the things she claims, both epistemically and morally?

What distresses the "moral vision" to which linguistic narrativism theory can lead is the fact that descriptions of the mere nature of narrative can theoretically legitimize immoral narratives by virtue of describing *only* what anyone does when writing narrative. This entails that one will not be able to distinguish a theoretical description of the fact that such-and-such a narrative is undertaken from the agnostic or morally relativistic response to the fact that such-and-such a narrative is undertaken but not responded to as immoral. In that way the moral idleness of linguistic narrativism theory challenges Doran's own, or anyone's, claim that the existential and philosophical underpinnings of this kind of discursive cultural theory should be understood purely as "epistemological relativism" and not as an agnostic form of "moral relativism."²⁹ Nevertheless, on the assumption that this theoretical approach itself does not entail morally agnostic visions of life and that it should not do so, because one needs to distinguish theoretical description from moral response, moral agnosticism announces itself also in yet another sense. From the viewpoint of a writer of a narrative herself, in order not to provide justification for her own possible agnosticism or immorality, linguistic narrativism theory would need a normativity that is not bound to the intuitions and choices of the author herself. We will argue that it is not possible to establish this moral normativity by the means of Doran's and White's volitional

²⁷ Murdoch, 'Vision and Choice in Morality', p. 81; Murdoch, 'Metaphysics and Ethics', p. 73.

²⁸ Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 119; see also Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, 'Ethics and Method', *History and Theory*, 43:4 (2004), pp. 75-76; and her *History in the Discursive Condition: Reconsidering the Tools of Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 94.

²⁹ Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 119.

choice-ethics insofar as volitional ethics has only the resources of moral intuitionism by which to justify or deliberate moral claims.

3. Moral vision, volition, and intuition in linguistic narrativism theory

Even if linguistic narrativism theory is constructivist and non-realist in nature, its proponents take on a normative stance derived from moral intuitionism and volitionism regarding ethical matters—a stance that may arguably involve a sense of “realism.” This may sound like a contradiction. As a meta-ethical theory, intuitionism, as in G. E. Moore’s thought, is a form of “moral realism.”³⁰ Our question, however, is how proponents of linguistic narrativism theory think of the “reality” that their moral judgements are supposed to be grounded in; furthermore, what “moral vision” does linguistic narrativism theory that appeals to the normativity of moral intuitionist and volitionist theses imply?

In this regard, although volitionism is sometimes used as a descriptive meta-ethical or “psychological” thesis whilst intuition is assigned to carry out the normative task, we use both terms chiefly to name prescriptive theses, although they both do some descriptive work as well.³¹ On the one hand, this is because proponents of linguistic narrativism theory seldom themselves know whether they move on a meta-ethical or normative level. And on the other hand, as Murdoch argues, since all the objects of meta-ethical theory are normative ideas, it is difficult even in theory to empty the moral concepts from their evaluative content.³²

Volitionism holds that it is justifiable to assign values and to make consequential choices on the basis of will, and according to one’s interests or emotions, without strictly requiring evidentiary or philosophical reasons for the sake of moral responsibility.³³ Intuitionism (though the term sometimes also refers to psychological states or mechanisms) holds that assigning values and making consequential choices are sufficiently *justified* by intuitions because intuitions are direct cognition of right and wrong in so far as humans can possibly know what is right and what is wrong.³⁴ The important prescriptive purchase of the two approaches is that they provide what our moral judgements *should* be or, at the least, *must* be, since they are never anything else.

Regardless of whether we refer to the existentialist “doctrine”³⁵ or to the naturalist “psychology”³⁶ of volitionism and intuitionism, they both connect intimately to linguistic narrativism theory because it, in its canonical form, holds that the use of discourse constitutes our individual imaginative acts of enunciation and is not “epiphenomenal” to

³⁰ For a discussion of how Moore’s “moral realism” in *Principia Ethica* can be understood, see Camilla Kronqvist, ‘Westermarck and Moore on the Sources of Morality’, *Evolution, Human Behaviour and Morality: The Legacy of Westermarck*, edited by Olli Lagerspetz, Jan Antfolk, Ylva Gustafsson and Camilla Kronqvist (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 129–141.

³¹ Pascal Engel, ‘Volition and Voluntarism About Belief’, *Belief, Cognition and the Will*, edited by A. Meijers (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1999), pp. 9–25.

³² Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, pp. 80–82.

³³ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 23–32; cf. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 69–71.

³⁴ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 184–197.

³⁵ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 18–20.

³⁶ Brian Leiter, ‘Normativity for Naturalists’, *Philosophical Issues: A Supplement to Noûs*, 25:1 (2015), pp. 64–66.

some other “reality” or some other human activity, including the classically humanistic subject or self.³⁷ It argues that analysis pursuant to this idea unsettles habit and undermines convention.³⁸ Kalle Pihlainen has emphasized the way this insures our taking moral responsibility away from the spurious authority of an empirically unavailable reality and onto one’s self.³⁹

In Pihlainen’s terms, proponents of linguistic narrativism theory often want to actualize the emancipatory possibilities of theoretical reflection by thinking of language as performative acts and by not relying on the authority of “the reality of the past.”⁴⁰ With this intention, although the scholar in one sense frees herself, she has also limited herself to her own sentiments and choices in the absence of “facts.” She may well proceed beyond those choices through analysis, but what activates the impulse to do so? Although the theory itself, as Doran suggests, does not necessarily entail agnostic forms of “moral relativism,”⁴¹ the scholar’s volition nonetheless faces toward her own self and toward the self’s intuitions if she has no other subject of moral inquiry to which she must be responsible. In that case, her preferred prejudices, or habits, or contemporary conventions take over—a result exactly the opposite of that which post-modernist approaches to understanding the world are supposed to yield.⁴² The reason for this reversal lies in the ambiguous character of moral volition and intuition to which this kind of thinking resorts in default of any transcendental ground for judgment.

The fundamental tension as to what constitutes the normative ground for moral judgement in linguistic narrativism theory can be exemplified by a statement of Hayden White’s. He writes: “...the ethical opens up a space in which ‘something has to be done’. This is quite different from morality that, on the basis of some dogmatism, insists on telling us what we *must and must not do* in a given situation of choice.”⁴³

White tries to save the ethical responsiveness of moral agents by the distinction between a supposedly non-normative concept of “ethics” and a normative concept of “morality.” Hence, if only the person herself can demand what she “must and must not do” with regard to her own action in a volitional situation, it strongly infers that normativity is not a supra-personal or transcendental “moral” demand but a matter of personal (what he calls “ethical”) sentiment. On this view, demands on the moral agent are thought to be *intuitively instilled* on whatever principles or sentiments the moral agent herself happen to ethically appeal to (e.g., what she desires or chooses).

The difficulty of this vision is that recognizing “a space in which something has to be done” is not a non-normative claim. Instead, it is a normative one in two important senses: (1) it is normative because it proclaims that one *should* recognize a space as “ethical” (and not, say, as mechanical or natural)—a space in which one knows that one’s actions will be judged morally by others in a human life-world; and (2) it is normative because it

³⁷ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 116–119; cf. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 70.

³⁸ Ermarth *Sequel to History*, pp. 41–44.

³⁹ Pihlainen, *The Work of History*, pp. 48–51.

⁴⁰ Pihlainen, *The Work of History*, pp. 92–93.

⁴¹ Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 119.

⁴² Pihlainen, *The Work of History*, p. xvii; cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 31–34.

⁴³ White, ‘The Public Relevance of Historical Studies’, p. 338 (italics in original); cf. Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984: Vol I*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), p 263.

stipulates that one actually *must* do *something* in this “ethical” space of moral agency – thus, one must do not just *anything* but must do that which belongs to being a moral agent in a human lifeworld. Therefore, to critique the normativity of what is called “morality” – moral prescriptions about what we “must and must not do” – is not necessarily to undermine the normativity of what is called “ethics,” to wit, that certain things (and not just *anything*) have to be done in certain situations given that we act with other people. In truth, even for White, to break with the first dogma already seems to presuppose the mandate of the second one.

The source of the paradox or tension in this vision is that “ethics” put normatively as “a space in which something has to be done” itself subverts the very possibility that normativity of moral intuition can be intuitively instilled.⁴⁴ The reason for this undermining is that, on this account, even if one thinks that the normativity of what exactly should be done in the “ethical” space is a personal, sensible, and volitional act (of enunciation) with no supra-personal or transcendental backgrounds, it is nowhere denied that “ethics” and “morality” are meaningful solely in being and acting for *another*. To recognize this, however, is already in important senses to relate to a supra-personal demand. In other words, if “ethics” is the “space in which something has to be done”, it cannot possibly be instilled on my own sentiment, even if my sentiment may be my response. This exact thought reveals the tension in White’s thinking.

Thus, from the tension within White’s vision, we submit that linguistic narrativism theory invites two categorically different ways to take on what we, despite White’s distinction, synonymously call ethics or morality. (1) It can either take the route that any talk about “ethics” and “morality” in linguistic narrativism theory presupposes a supra-personal human lifeworld against which the actions of the moral agent are judged on a normativity that is not instilled by the agent herself. Or (2) it can take the route of denial of any meaningful talk about normativity altogether (thus any meaningful talk about “ethics” and “morality”), falling into a morally agnostic description of “ethics” as textual code, or at worst solipsism.

Within the theoretical cluster of linguistic narrativism theory, Pihlainen is the one scholar who most strongly emphasizes the importance of the first of these two alternatives. He argues that any reasonable vision of morality cannot in theory overlook the fact that it constitutes a relationship to other real people. Regarding non-fiction, we are, he says, steadily reminded that:

...historical narratives represent *particular real people*. Rather than always appropriate texts to our own personal concerns and particular points of view, we can thus at least aspire to another kind of understanding. As authors of historical accounts we are similarly reminded of our responsibilities in representing others, thus perhaps becoming better aware of the difficulties involved in understanding those who are different to ourselves.⁴⁵

Despite the possible difficulties of understanding other people, the relationship to others prevents linguistic narrativism theory from falling into descriptive moral agnosticism or

⁴⁴ See this tension in Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 23–26; and Keith Jenkins, ‘The End of the Affair: On the Irretrievable Breakdown of History and Ethics’, *Rethinking History*, 11:2 (2007), p. 283.

⁴⁵ Kalle Pihlainen, ‘The Moral of the Historical Story: Textual Differences in Fact and Fiction’, *New Literary History*, 33:1 (2002), pp. 56–57 (italics in original).

solipsism because of the normative demands that the existence of other “particular real people” force on us. Even in narrative construction, other people limit our actions and choices by being those for whom we are responsible. This is, indeed, the normativity that we contend proponents of linguistic narrativism theory must more carefully explicate and recognize in order to avoid the claim that the normativity of moral intuition is intuitively instilled on the agent’s own performative acts.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, for proponents of the second vision, such as Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “ethics” should be understood as a “multiplicity of...semantic systems,” or “codes,” whereas it seems to lack its normative relation to the other.⁴⁷ Therefore, she argues that in the discursive condition “...thought cannot linger long on an ‘ethics’ of ‘good’ or ‘should’ because adequacy involves qualities of enunciation: such as degrees of originality, proportion, flexibility (play), complexity, completeness.”⁴⁸

It may be true that moral assessment requires these heterogeneous qualities of the individual. Our argument, however, is that it is doubtful that any meaningful “conception of individual responsibility” survives if normativity is anchored in intuitive individual acts of “enunciation.” If “ethics” is re-described as a set of textual “codes,” and if “only enunciation adds value” to our preferring one “code” over another, while at the same time our moral compass cannot concern any transcendental “good” or “ought” responding to the demands that the existence of other persons put on us, one would have to conclude that normativity is instilled by the individual herself or ultimately that it is undone as senseless.⁴⁹ In the following section, we will consider more closely what moral implications that theoretical route may entail.

4. Difficulties of intuitively instilled normativity

One imperative principle of moral intuitionism is, as Walter Sinnott-Armstrong puts it, the “claim that some moral believers are justified in believing some moral claims independently of whether they are able to infer those moral beliefs from any other beliefs.”⁵⁰ Moral intuitions are conceived as direct truths requiring no other moral substantiation. Advocates of moral intuitionism often suggest that as a practical matter intuition sufficiently supplies moral principles. In the case of the moral intuitionism attached to linguistic narrativism theory, proponents, such as Foucault (or Ermarth), confine themselves to problematizing the structure of moral justifications through discourse analysis of texts (and sometimes other media, such as paintings) of historical interest. The subjectively problematized history, or “genealogy,” then, is reality as it is intuited or seen—and indeed it is very much a reality, a true understanding of the real things in human behavior, especially the cracks in our reasoning that we cover up—but it

⁴⁶ Émmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media), p. 10; Anton Froeyman, ‘Never the Twain Shall Meet? How Narrativism and Experience can be Reconciled by Dialogical Ethics’, *History and Theory*, 54:2 (2015), pp. 162–177.

⁴⁷ Ermarth, *History in the Discursive Condition*, pp. 94–95; Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 75–76; cf. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, pp. 63–68.

⁴⁸ Ermarth, *History in the Discursive Condition*, p. 95; cf. Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, p. 76.

⁴⁹ All quotes from Ermarth, *History in the Discursive Condition*, pp. 94–95; Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 75–76; cf. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 67–69.

⁵⁰ Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, pp. 188–189; cf. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, pp. 143–144.

is also generally the circumference of the real that is analyzed.⁵¹ Thus, reality (be it “historical reality” or “morality”) cannot on this account be grounded in moral reasoning, but can only be discursively appealed to by a subjectively enacted imagination related to an intuited politics of the present⁵²; and so from a philosophical point of view, meta-ethical intuitionism or volitionism is tacitly accepted.

The chief advantage of this idea is that if it is correct it unburdens us of much of the effort to find axiomatic first principles for morality. This approach charms some proponents of linguistic narrativism theory because it helps in eluding the hard problems incident to piloting a normative system between notions of inward and outward, individual and social, rationalist and emotional, and empirical and evaluative.⁵³ Thus, when moral knowledge is granted validity or esteem because it is emergent from natural knowledge or continuous with it, rather than meaningless, or when one agrees with pure intuitionism on the plain good sense of not using old metaphysical and epistemological conundrums to dismiss the human activity of evaluation, what is allowed is a comfortable way to rely on a supposedly direct relation to the empirical or natural external world – or even an unreflective path to moral truth – for ethical guidance.

What, then, is regarded as instilling normativity in moral intuitions? First, it arises from the idea that intuitive judgments are conceived as quick ones. If we look at what we are told is a painting of a lemon, we can readily agree or deny that it is a lemon because we are familiar enough with lemons to tell at a glance. Were we less familiar with lemons, we would look more closely, maybe use a loop, and perhaps bring along a botanical field guide. Second, what enables this idea of judgements to be consonant with *moral judgements* is the supposition that “common sense” morality has survived because it is trustworthy.⁵⁴ Because common sense may be quick, it can provide sufficient directly intuited knowledge; its status as knowledge (justified true belief) is conferred by its longevity and its handy celerity. The “self-evidence” to which moral intuitionists restrict moral knowledge is as instantaneous as perception, unless other conditions, such as consistency or conformity to consensus, are added. However, when consistency or conformity are added to intuitions, the resulting moral claims are in fact no longer grounded on intuition.

Nevertheless, the view that our beliefs about right and wrong do not have any ground other than intuition commits theory that relies on intuition to the position that unless the justification of moral statements is itself intuitive, discussions of morality are undermined by the post-modern anti-foundationalist analysis of discourse.⁵⁵ Thus, it is necessary for the defenders to offer this disjunction: either moral knowledge is intuitive, or there is no normativity. However, on this logic, the only supposed justification for normativity would be the normativity with which moral psychology, or common sense, is credited by virtue of its intuitivity.⁵⁶ This leads to a syllogistic error: moral knowledge can be intuitive *and* there can be normativity; but these two premises do not add up to a valid conclusion about anything. Nothing, in fact, requires moral knowledge to be intuitive, or

⁵¹ Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’, pp. 262–269; Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 73–78.

⁵² Foucault, ‘The History of Sexuality’, p. 193; cf. Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 75–76.

⁵³ E.g., Ermarth, *History in the Discursive Condition*; Barthes, *Empire of Signs*.

⁵⁴ It needs to be noted that “common sense” is also sometimes critiqued for being a morality of prudence. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 32–34.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 61–83; Ermarth, *History in the Discursive Condition*; cf. Jenkins, ‘The End of the Affair’, pp. 275–285, Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 28–31.

⁵⁶ Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, pp. 187–192.

normativity to be instilled therein. Even if this were the case, it cannot be made a matter of necessity, especially not on the naturalistic syllogism that it must be true because certain pieces of natural (or moral-psychological) knowledge are true.⁵⁷

Thus, from the gap between intuitive knowledge and natural properties arises the naturalist's skeptical position as to moral claims. It is for the consistent naturalist as it is for the linguistic narrativist who appeals to that vision: normativity ceases to "exist" because it is claimed to be unsubstantiated as a natural (factual) "property."⁵⁸ Furthermore, the presentation of moral claims is sometimes conceived to be advocacy or rejection of feelings,⁵⁹ not facts as to what does and does not suffice in the world when we respond to other people in our lives. The difficulty of this vision is that if proponents of intuitionism claim that "deontic or normative properties" are always "related to reasons" and also reject such reasons and their "properties," it suggests that normativity, even when described as a deontic matter, is framed as (1) a property or object and (2) a particular that should determine what justifies one's moral beliefs.⁶⁰ On the contrary, what is unique about the normative relationship we have to other people is not that it is best understood as a property, nor that it should justify one's own actions, nor that our relationship to others requires justification.⁶¹ For one could claim that anyone's and everyone's moral agency, regardless of whether it is intuitive or reasoned, already constitutes a normative relationship with other persons that no skeptical regress can obliterate without then invoking moral nihilism as to other real people and beings.⁶²

Prudence supports logic here in rejecting intuitionism: under moral intuitionism, what has already been learned, or is quickly conceived, would have to differ with regard to normativity from what is yet to be learned or more slowly conceived. This is a difficult way to approach moral reflection, because, as Sinnott-Armstrong claims, such intuitive particularism may justify the possibility of "moral nihilism" as a qualified take on morality.⁶³ The supposedly normative force of the quickness and particularity of moral judgment is thereby an assertion by which moral intuitionism enables an indifference to recognizing the world of laboring, struggling humankind, just because a person is comfortable with herself and her own intuitions, instead of asking herself how her own intuitions possibly disable her to responsibly care for others. Were we to follow this way of moral thinking, not only in accepting immediate understanding but also in hanging onto our received notions, we must be like Prince Oblonsky in *Anna Karenina*, whose:

...tendencies and opinions were not his by deliberate choice: they came of themselves, just as he did not choose the fashion of his hats or coats but wore those of the current style. Living in a certain social set, and having a desire, such as generally develops with maturity, for some kind of mental activity, he was obliged to hold views, just as he was obliged to have a hat.... Thus [his views] became habitual to Oblonsky, and he

⁵⁷ Cf. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, pp. 10-14; Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, edited Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 90-91.

⁵⁸ In line with naturalism, linguistic narrativism theory argues that fact is determined by a naturalist-scientific worldview. Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 122.

⁵⁹ Leiter, 'Normativity for Naturalists', p. 74.

⁶⁰ Leiter, 'Normativity for Naturalists', p. 65; Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, pp. 189-192.

⁶¹ Cf. Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 86, 90-91.

⁶² Cf. Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, p. 167.

⁶³ Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, p. 191.

loved his paper as he loved his after-dinner cigar, for the light mistiness it produced in his brain.⁶⁴

The distinction between the most upright and impartialist intuition and the smugness of a rich prince or plutocrat is thinner than one thinks at a quick glance. And it is a fair bet that intuitionism underestimates the scrutiny to which people put their moral opinions or the percentage of people who put their morality under high scrutiny. Whether verbal and educated or not, people feel very deeply, such that they look for the moral good in what they do. Everything will come into question in life as it is actually lived with others.

If the force of our ratiocinative, affective, and even unconscious ways of living morally responsible lives is so evacuated by the scepticist critique that moral deliberation and normativity are deflated to intuition, then we are mistakenly purging some of the visions, ideas, and stories that enable us to be moral agents and to renew that agency in the first place. While critique valuably leads us to de-stabilize and complicate the stories and discourses comprising our “moral visions”, we must necessarily rethink those human relationships and discursive reflections on life that enable us to have a “moral vision” at all. Even if intellect complicates and might erase the meaningfulness of narrative, even if this erasure and uncertainty of meaningfulness is our intuition, we must ask whether that intuition is true to the other beings we answer to. That moral understanding requires reflective thought about our responsibilities through experiential and deliberative temporal depth of our “moral vision” where our relationship with others is a presupposition and not itself a choice.

The proponent of linguistic narrativism theory may well readily admit this. However, if she nonetheless relies on intuition and nonetheless does not return to that meaningfulness of actions that grows quite separately from personal will and from the automatism of materially willed or desired actions, then she has not understood the moral or immoral meaning of her own “moral vision” implicated in the theory she pursues. In order to retake responsibility, as linguistic narrativism theory claims to do⁶⁵, she must consider the moral responsiveness of moving beyond volition and/or intuition in the light of what it normatively means to be with and to care for other persons.⁶⁶ Without this self-reflection, the proponent of linguistic narrativism theory will, again, end up in the morally agnostic loop of re-confirming the correctness and goodness of her own intuitions on her own intuitions.

5. Conclusion

Whether or not one regards moral volitionism and moral intuitionism as two different roads that linguistic narrativism theory can take, its proponents must still engage the really hard problem of aligning a forceful and humane way to understand how the theory affects people and their relationships to one another. In other words, even if it is claimed that moral volition and intuition should be able to lead proponents of linguistic narrativism theory back to reference to “reality,”⁶⁷ the position does not escape ethical evaluation and

⁶⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by L. and A. Maude (New York: Knopf, 1999), pp. 7-8.

⁶⁵ Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 75-76.

⁶⁶ Cf. Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, pp. 87-89.

⁶⁷ Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, pp. 75-76; Barthes, ‘Historical Discourse’, pp. 153-155.

reproach. Our analysis shows that the position clearly consolidates, rather than liquidates, the gap between facts and values and invites moral skepticism. As a “moral vision,”⁶⁸ it leaves not only the agent’s personal sentiments and choices, but also her normative commitments, up to individual will and intuition, on the epistemic presumption of an empirically unavailable “reality” and on the ethical presumption of the unavoidable subjectivity and freedom of judgment.⁶⁹

However, if what makes theoretical description different from an index of facts or causes or from a fairy-tale is that it helps us step into intimate, ethical connections with other persons, then these people themselves cannot be the product of subjective will or intuition. Pihlainen suggests that if theory-based accounts are not to become “entertainment” or to stay trapped in a “dead in the water fact-fiction debate,” one must turn to “experientiality and emotional impact” in order to envision right action.⁷⁰

In other words, one may reasonably hold that non-referentiality and non-realism makes exploration of experience and emotion in moral life possible, but only with a certain normative preunderstanding. As Georges Didi-Huberman has argued (in a line of thought descending chiefly from Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin), not only do personal accounts and the testimony of memory not need “a clearly visible...referent,” but also the very absence of the referent in a verbal or even visual account of past experience can enhance its affective power.⁷¹ Passing-away and loss outline the notion of the past, and what is represented must be at the least what is no longer unequivocally intelligible through reference.⁷² The moral philosophical insight, however, is that even if the referent is fragmentary, there is no theoretical reason for us to deviate from the normative preunderstanding that even in theoretical reflection we relate to “particular real people.”⁷³

In this investigation, we have contended that linguistic narrativism theory needs to rethink the moral implications of its presuppositions and claims in order not to justify morally agnostic “moral visions.” Relying on Murdoch’s philosophical insight that theoretical descriptions involve degrees of ethical evaluation and express a “moral vision,” we have contended that scholars who forward theoretical perspectives, such as linguistic narrativism theory, in the end cannot elide relationships to other real people. Our normative contention is that in so far as the proponents of linguistic narrativism theory want to think of their theory as a morally responsible one, they must clearly recognize the moral implications of the theory and take responsibility for those implications, accordingly to the kind of “moral vision” their theory professes. Exactly as there is never a result in consciousness that floats entirely away from reflection, like a helium balloon flying up from earth when its ropes are cut, there is no theoretical inquiry about ethics and responsibility without the face of the other.

⁶⁸ Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, pp. 82–87.

⁶⁹ Doran, *The Ethics of Theory*, p. 119; Ermarth, ‘Ethics and Method’, p. 79; White, ‘Historical Pluralism and Pantextualism’, pp. 230–236; see also White, ‘The Public Relevance of Historical Studies’, p. 338.

⁷⁰ Pihlainen, *The Work of History*, pp. 29–30.

⁷¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Bark*, translated by Samuel E. Martin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 81.

⁷² Edith Wyschogrod, *The Ethics of Remembering* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 20–22.

⁷³ Pihlainen, ‘The Moral of the Historical Story’, p. 56; Bennett Gilbert, *A Personalist Philosophy of History* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

Natan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert
natan.elgabsi@abo.fi, bbg2@pdx.edu

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