

THE ARTISTIC PATH TO VIRTUE:

*Make your own notes.
NEVER underline or
write in a book.*

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MASTERS IN PHILOSOPHY

By

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Abstract

Most people share a strong intuition that there is much to be learned from great literature and other forms of narrative art. This intuition is, however, philosophically contentious. Plato was the first to argue against the possibility of learning anything from narrative art, but he founded a tradition that persists to the present day. I will engage in this debate in order to examine the role narratives might be able to play in acquiring virtue on Aristotle's ethical account, as it is presented in *Nicomachean Ethics*. I will claim that narratives have so long seemed a problematic source of learning because philosophers have traditionally approached the issue in the wrong way. They have typically tried to show how we might acquire propositional knowledge through our engagement with art, but this approach has failed because of insoluble problems involved in satisfying the justification criterion. Fictions may be rescued from their problematic status by realising that what we truly get from them is, instead, a type of knowledge-how. I will argue that Aristotelian virtue is itself a kind of knowledge-how and so the type of learning that takes place in engaging with narratives has a role to play in its acquisition and exercise. Virtue depends on types of reasoning that are themselves kinds of knowledge-how and which are employed and improved in engaging with narrative art. These types of reasoning will be described as conceptual, emotional and imaginative understanding. I will show how each is important in relation to virtue and how each is a kind of knowledge-how that may be improved through exposure to narrative art.

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*Pencil, ink marks and
highlighting cover books
for other readers.*

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Introduction

Many of us are brought up to believe that there is much to be learned from great narrative art. For centuries one could not lay claim to a respectable education without a strong familiarity with the works of great writers. Such illustrious names as Shakespeare, Homer and Ovid were the brightest jewels in the crown of learning. Sadly it seems that, in recent times, the role of narrative art in education is diminishing. The great classics no longer occupy a place of prominence within school, or even university, curricula: but is this a loss?

Though there is a long tradition of regarding narrative art as crucial to education, there is an equally long philosophical tradition that denies narratives any capacity to educate. Going back at least as far as Plato, philosophers have contended that there is nothing that can be learned from fictional narratives.

As our understanding of what is required to properly interpret and understand the world has evolved so much in the last century, it is useful to ask whether, given what we now understand, great narrative art should be an important part of what we teach and learn.

My own belief is that fictional narratives are too valuable to be regarded as dispensable. In particular, I think that they can improve the way we interpret and understand the actual world. In doing so, they are hugely valuable in helping us to lead richer lives, in the sense that they allow us to understand ourselves and the circumstances in which we live in more varied, textured, and sensitive ways.

Such understanding is vital to leading a good and moral life and it is for this reason that I think every person should spend a great deal of time in the company of great fictions. My main focus in this thesis is on the role narrative art can play in educating a person towards the Aristotelian ideal. I am concerned with how they can help us to become good people and lead good lives according to Aristotle's understanding of these notions. I am not concerned here with how Aristotle thought narrative art may be used in a moral education. Rather I want to show how, given recent changes in our understanding of what is involved in moral thinking, narratives can contribute to the attainment and exercise of virtue.

To do so, I will need to enter into the long-standing debate of how, or whether, we can learn from narratives. If they can help us learn to be virtuous, then it must be shown how they convey knowledge that is useful in the actual world. This is, however, no simple matter.

The main difficulty is that the narrative art at issue is fictional. It is, by definition, made up. Yet it must be asked how we can learn from the description of events that never occurred, and from characters that never existed. How can an imaginary world offer truths about the actual one? Even if a story is set against the background of events and characters that did actually exist and even if it contains accurate facts about them, how are we to separate what is true from what is false? How then, are we supposed to learn from these falsities?

There are no quick and easy answers to these questions, but there are answers to be had nonetheless and in this thesis I will try to show what they are. I will argue that narratives can help us to develop and improve rational faculties, required for the exercise of virtue. Above all, I will argue that we can acquire knowledge of how to understand and respond to the people and situations that face us in our actual, day-to-day, lives: knowledge that is crucial to proper ethical practice.

While my concern here is with Aristotelian ethics, the kinds of reasoning involved in the exercise of virtue are not solely of interest to the Aristotelian. Knowing properly how to understand and respond to people and circumstances is useful knowledge on any normative theory. Consequently, narratives will have a role to play in any moral education. It would certainly be a worthwhile project to see how they might fit into other popular conceptions of ethics but here I can only investigate how they will fit into the one I think best.

I will begin, in *Chapter 1*, by dealing with some important preliminary issues, necessary for the wider project. In the literature, the debate on learning from fictions has centred on the acquisition of propositional knowledge. Some of this literature is relevant, particularly those parts concerning how claims about the actual world may be made and understood in fictions, and I shall detail what has been said in this area. I will argue more broadly, however, that it is not propositional knowledge that we acquire from fictions. This is simply the wrong approach to make. Problems of justification make it highly

unlikely that an acceptable account of this nature could be given. Instead I will argue that what we get from narratives is a type of knowledge-how. Narratives contribute to our knowledge of how to deal with the world. They do so by providing us with ways to approach and understand it. This chapter will focus on knowledge-how. I will try to show that, despite recent controversy, knowledge-how is a different type of knowledge to propositional knowledge and, because of their differences, knowledge-how provides a superior avenue of approach to the problem of learning from narratives.

In *Chapter 2*, I will give a brief overview of Aristotle's ethical account. In doing so I will try to show that virtue is itself a kind of knowledge-how. As such, it is well-placed to benefit from the kind of learning that occurs through narrative engagement. More accurately, virtue turns out to depend on several faculties that are themselves types of knowledge-how and which may be acquired from narratives. As a consequence, narratives have a rich role to play in the acquisition of virtue by providing the know-how necessary for it.

I turn, in *Chapter 3*, to the first of three abilities and faculties that I claim to be necessary for virtue. In this chapter I examine conceptual knowledge, which I take to be a faculty that depends on knowing how to organise information into concepts. I detail accounts given by Noel Carroll and Ayn Rand in order to show that narratives can provide us with knowledge-how concerning two different types of concepts: what Bernard Williams has called thin and thick moral concepts.

In *Chapter 4*, I examine the remaining two faculties. I argue that emotion and imagination are also types of knowledge-how and that literature provides a rich source for acquiring knowledge relevant to them. I first outline two theories that currently dominate understanding of emotion and show how they may be merged to form a remarkably Aristotelian picture of emotions. On that account, I argue that the emotions will, at the least, require knowledge-how. I also argue that in some cases emotions can themselves be a kind of knowledge-how. I then turn to imagination, in order to show how it is a critical faculty for understanding the world and also one that is a kind of knowledge-how. Finally I try to show how narratives may improve each faculty by providing knowledge-how requisite for their proper exercise.

In the final chapter, *Chapter 5*, I shall use the film *American Beauty* as a case-study in order to apply the arguments from earlier chapters and show how that particular narrative can provide us with the three kinds of knowledge-how that I claim may be acquired from narrative art.

I am concerned here with all forms of narrative art: films, literature and plays. Most of the established debate, however, deals with only one of these forms, usually literature. I will use 'literature', 'film', 'fictions', and 'narratives' interchangeably as I am concerned with what they offer us qua fictions rather than with what they offer as unique mediums. As a result, words such as 'reader', 'audience', or 'viewer' will also denote simply that person, or those people, that experience a work of narrative fiction.

I will also ignore the usual distinction made between 'ethics' and 'morality'. 'Morality' usually refers to a subsection of 'ethics' that is concerned primarily with the status of actions. 'Ethics' denotes a wider realm that includes the nature of agents, as well as with the status of their actions. While this distinction is often made, and might well be useful in some contexts, I tend to think it is artificial and not entirely accurate. As I will be using an Aristotelian framework, any comments I make will fall within the ambit of the more holistic 'ethics'. Nevertheless, for the sake of variety, I shall regard 'morality' and its derivatives as interchangeable with 'ethics' and its derivatives.

Chapter 1: Knowledge-How and Knowledge-That

If narratives are to play a role in the development of a virtuous person, then there must be some way that we can learn from them. The term 'learn' might be a poor one to use in this context, for it is often thought that learning requires that there be something to learn, something of the sort that we can *know*. This tends to limit the use of the term to a sphere where 'learn' delineates the acquisition of beliefs. Yet it is clear that we also learn things that seem as if they should not be described as beliefs, or at least things that cannot be described solely in this way. Learning to walk, or to play tennis or to sing, are all things that seem to fit into this category. It might also be the case that Aristotelian virtue is the sort of thing that belongs with them.

In this chapter, a start can be made by investigating what types of knowledge are available and seeing how narratives might be conducive to their acquisition. From that foundation I will be able to proceed, in the next chapter, to examine Aristotle's account of virtue and determine what kinds of knowledge it depends on. If it turns out that virtue depends on a type(s) of knowledge acquirable from narratives, then there will be a case for claiming that narratives provide a source of moral knowledge.

Philosophers typically divide the vast majority of human knowledge into two types: knowledge-how and knowledge-that. Briefly put, knowledge-that is knowledge that something is the case, it is propositional in nature. Much of what is usually considered to be moral knowledge will be of this type. Knowing that 'it is wrong to kill', or that 'it is wrong to steal', or that 'it is wrong to get drunk and stumble naked through the streets howling rude gibberish at passing strangers' are all examples of propositional knowledge. There is also a type of knowledge that is non-propositional: the knowledge involved in exercising certain abilities, knowing how to play a guitar, or knowing how to build a house are the sorts of things that are taken as paradigmatic examples of knowledge-how. This could be considered a distinct type because it seems to have necessary properties that are surplus to knowledge-that. Knowing how to play a guitar seems to involve not just the knowledge of propositions about music theory, but also physical abilities, and other subordinate types of knowing how, like knowing how to keep time, and finally, it also seems to involve knowing how to integrate these things. Even

though they could be different types of knowledge, knowing-that and knowing-how are not unrelated. . Knowing-how will often require, or imply, or lead to knowledge-that. Knowing how to build a house will require knowing numerous propositional facts about any number of things: building materials, human physiology, municipal by-laws etc. Similarly knowing-that might require, or imply knowledge-how in many circumstances: knowing that you can drive to a destination entails knowing how to drive. If these two types of knowledge are in fact different it must be the case that there really are distinct differences between them: that despite their interrelationship they have features such that they cannot be reduced to a single type. Whether there are such differences and whether these really are two different types of knowledge are questions I will answer in the affirmative, in Section C. I will however assume the distinction in the earlier sections.

When it comes to learning from fictions, most philosophers have tried to develop accounts of how we acquire propositional knowledge. This is, *prima facie*, a perfectly sensible approach, for it seems obvious that we acquire all sorts of beliefs on the basis of exposure to fictions, while the sort of know-how involved in acquiring skills seem to belong more properly to instruction manuals and actual experience. I will argue in this chapter, however, that accounts of this sort are unlikely to succeed and that it is better to focus on acquiring knowledge-how. In terms of my overall project, I make this claim because it seems that virtue, on Aristotle's account, is a type of know-how and that narratives do provide a rich source for developing the knowledge-how required by the virtuous person.

The Chapter will proceed as follows:

In Section A I will discuss several theories of how propositional knowledge may be acquired from narratives. I shall focus particularly on how fictions may be understood to make claims about the actual world, for this is equally pertinent to acquiring knowledge-how. Section B shall explain why one cannot acquire propositional knowledge from narratives and so why an attempt to defend narratives as a source of learning about the actual world should focus on a different type of knowledge. In Section C I introduce Gilbert Ryle's distinction between propositional knowledge and knowledge-how and defend that distinction. In doing so I pinpoint certain features common to all types of knowledge-how, with the intention of showing in later chapters

that Aristotelian virtue both has these features and also depends on several types of thought that have them as well. I conclude by showing why the problems that make knowledge-that unsuitable to fictional learning leaves knowledge-how untouched and so why knowledge-how offers a way that we can learn from fiction.

A) Cognitivity in Fiction

If fictions are to provide knowledge of either sort, they need to be able to make claims about the way things are in the world. How they might do this is debatable. It is commonly held, in the literature, that fictions do make explicit claims about the world and it is in recognising these claims that we acquire knowledge. I will argue that while this is certainly the case, claims may also be made in weaker forms that can still contribute to the education of an audience. Within this discussion, I will use the term 'Cognitive' to describe a work as containing claims that an author makes that are recognizable by its audience.

Because this thesis is concerned with how narratives may provide knowledge of the actual world, it is not enough for them to make claims about a fictional world. It seems unproblematic that fictions can provide knowledge of fictional worlds. It is a bit trickier to see just how they can do the same with respect to the actual one.

While it is commonsensical that authors do often intend to make claims about the world through their fictional works, it is no simple matter to provide an account of just how this may be done, nor of how such claims may provide knowledge of the world. The problem is that in engaging with narratives it is not always clear what claim is being made or whether, if an identifiable claim is made, the audience can be justified in believing it to be true.

A claim is typically propositional in nature. It is an assertion that something is the case. As a consequence, a good deal of the literature deals with the making of claims in fiction as it relates to the acquisition of knowledge-that. While I will argue later on that claims made in fiction can contribute to knowledge-how, the way claims are made is the same for both types of knowledge. Consequently in this section I will talk only about

propositional knowledge, as it makes it easier to deal with the established debate on its own terms, but my remarks should be taken as intended to be true for both.

The question of how we learn from fictions was initially approached, in the modern debate, by asking how we acquire propositional knowledge from non-fictions like text books, or encyclopaedias. In terms of their sentence structure, there are no significant syntactic differences to be found between the sentences used in fiction and those used in non-fiction, so if non-fictions can make claims about the world in their use of words it was thought that there might be an analogous way that fictions can do the same.

Martin Steinmann has argued that there are three different ways we can acquire knowledge-that from non-literary discourse¹, which can be extended without modification to include all non-fictions. These are:

- 1) *The Statement Way*: Textbooks, encyclopaedias and other non-fictional works can convey knowledge-that by making direct statements about its subjects such as 'Bob Dylan, born Robert Allen Zimmerman 24 May 1941, is an American singer-songwriter, musician and poet.'
- 2) *The Expression Way*: By expressing the attitudes, emotions, or feelings of the writer, a non-literary discourse can be a source of knowledge-that about him.
- 3) *The Betrayal Way*: In the way that she writes or the statements she makes, a writer may betray psychological facts about herself. This is similar to the expression way, except it is not the writer's intention to reveal her attitudes, emotions or feelings.

Because, ultimately, we are concerned with how narrative art can serve as an important source of knowledge about the world, there is little use in seeing whether the latter two ways also work for fictions.² Whatever truths may or may not be available about the authors, seem irrelevant to the larger project. This leaves Steinmann's first way as the

¹ M. Steinmann, 'Literature Knowledge and the Language of Literature', pp. 902-911.

² By 'important source of knowledge about the world' I exclude facts about the author. While in some instances this may be the type of knowledge we would like to acquire, in general such information will be irrelevant to the knowledge of the world required for virtuous living on Aristotle's account.

only one worth investigating. The question then is whether it can work for fictions, i.e. can the explicit statements made by fictions serve as claims that can provide propositional knowledge about the actual world?

Steinmann argues that a work of fiction cannot make claims about the world, as a claim is a type of statement and fictions cannot make statements at all. A statement must be something that is true or false, but for Steinmann the explicit phrases found in literature are not the sort of things that can be true or false. They are not truth-apt. He argues that it is a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition of making a statement that its noun phrases refer to something but, because fictional entities do not exist, the noun phrases in fictional discourse that refer to them actually refer to nothing at all. If they don't refer to anything they cannot be truth-apt, because there is nothing for them to be true or false about. This might rule out some fictions, or some seeming claims made by fictions, but it is also clear that in some instances fictions do make reference to things that exist, or did exist, in the real world. Steinmann again denies that a phrase making such a reference can count as a statement. He reasons that, in the normal case, a person making a statement assumes the responsibility of certain conditions: such as that he has the belief that the phrase is true. The listener knows, as a result, that the speaker is intentionally saying something he expects the listener to understand as a truth. In the fictional case there is no guarantee that the author does assume responsibility for the satisfaction of such conditions. There is little to indicate that any particular sentence is meant to be taken as a truth about the actual world. Steinmann's point is somewhat ambiguous, however, for it is unclear whether the problem is that the author cannot accept these conditions with respect to some of the phrases he writes, or simply whether there is no way for the audience to discover it even if he does. In other words does the difficulty lie with the fact that a claim cannot be made, or with our being unjustified in believing that it has? Steinmann seems to argue for the former possibility, but I think the latter one is the more probable and will discuss it shortly. Steinmann's position is that phrases found in narratives cannot impart knowledge-that, as they are not the sort of things that can be true or false. Either they refer to nothing at all or, if they do refer to actual objects, truth or falsity is not a property of the phrase that makes the reference. If phrases in literature cannot be truth apt then they cannot be used, by the author, to make a statement.

It seems strange to suppose that when a writer makes explicit claims that refer to things in the real world he does not make a claim that can be regarded as true or false. It seems fairly obvious that writers often do make claims in their works that are clearly meant as statements about the world, statements that they think are true. Corroboration is widely available that many authors believed the same things to be true that they claimed to be true in their fictional works. We often seem to have as much reason to suppose that an author accepts responsibility for truth conditions in a fiction as we would when we hear a person utter the same sentences in common conversation. It seems to me though that the real problem lies with distinguishing between when the author does assume responsibility for truth conditions from times when he does not, which creates a problem for identifying when a claim is actually being made. If we cannot distinguish between phrases that are statements and those that are not, it would seem difficult to be justified in believing that a claim is true, for recognition that a statement is being made must precede any assessment of its truth.

A large part of the problem is that claims made in narratives are often made in order to advance the narrative, not to impart crucial information about the world. While authors might intend for these claims to convey truths, and while they might also think it is favourable if the claims are true, their truth is often largely irrelevant to their function, which is what the audience has access to.

To illustrate this point let us consider the film *Enemy at the Gates*.³ The film makes the explicit claims that 'the battle of Stalingrad was a vital turning point in the Second World War,' and that 'the Soviet victory there was crucial to the allied forces gaining the ascendancy'. If we consider that the film makes these claims in order to aggrandize the events it depicts, we can see how problematic it would be to also think that they are made in order to convey truths about the world, for the claims make the events seem far more important and relevant than they might actually have been. Their effect is to up the stakes in the personal battle between the two main characters, so that it seems that their duel is crucial to the outcome of the battle for Stalingrad and, by

³ Jean-Jacques Annaud, Paramount, 2001. The film's plot revolves around a personal duel between a German and a Russian sniper in the midst of the battle of Stalingrad, during the Second World War. Initially, the success of the Russian at eliminating German officers has a radical affect on the morale of both sets of troops, forcing the Germans to recruit an accomplished sniper from Germany for the express purpose of killing him.

implication, crucial to the course of the Second World War. The reason the claims are made is to influence how we react to the imagined events of the narrative. The truth or falsity of the claims as they apply to the actual world is largely irrelevant for that purpose⁴ and we could expect similar 'claims' to be made even in possible counterfactual situations, such as one where no actual battle for Stalingrad took place during the Second World War. So while the authors of the film may have researched these claims, and fully intended their audience to regard them as true of the world, it seems difficult to see how we may be justified in regarding the claims as intended to be true of the world on the basis of the narrative⁵ itself.⁶

If authors can accept responsibility for the satisfaction of truth conditions for explicit claims about the actual world, if they can believe that they are true and intend for their audience to understand them as true, then there seems to be no reason to deny that truth-apt claims can be made in fictions. To deny such a thing would be to assert that one of the conditions for making a statement is that the audience to the statement is aware that the speaker/writer intends for their phrase to be taken as true. Such a condition seems impossibly demanding, for it would mean that a speaker's speech-act could vary solely on the way his audience takes what he says. This would result in a situation where if an audience mistook as a joke a statement a speaker fully intended to be taken as true, he would in fact not have made a statement at all. Consequently the fact that it might be difficult to distinguish when a statement is being made in fiction, is no reason to suppose that statements cannot be made in this form.

How we might be justified in regarding some claim that we are able to recognise as being true of the world, is a separate question. More precisely it is two separate

⁴ Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen make a similar point in *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, see especially pp. 332-333.

⁵ A great illustration of this point was given to me by my supervisor Dr. Ward Jones. At the beginning of *Fargo* (MGM, 1996), the Coen brothers put up a statement saying 'The following is based on true events.' Most viewers took this claim to be true, and some journalists went and attempted to find the real history, but there were no such events. The Coen brothers' statement was *part* of the film, not a statement preceding it. Anyone who assumed that the statement was true, or intended to be true of the world, was in error.

⁶ To be fair, it must be pointed out that some philosophers think that the comments of authors, or other people involved in the creation of a work, may rightly be taken to be part of the narrative experience. What they say about the work can justify our beliefs about claims made in it. There are some good points to be made in favor of this position, but I tend to think that if a narrative is to stand as a source of learning it is best to ask if it can stand alone. See Noel Carroll's, 'Art and Interaction', for a strong statement of this view.

questions for, I will argue, there are different justificatory requirements for the two different kinds of knowledge and so how we may be justified in believing the claims made in fiction will differ for each kind.

It could also be argued that Steinmann's approach to the question is misleading. It seems intuitively plausible that narratives might convey truths about the actual world that are not revealed in explicit statements. *American History X*,⁷ for example, might well be construed as making the claim that 'neo- Nazism is a bad thing' even though this is never directly stated in the course of the film. Nevertheless it seems that the statement is implied by numerous direct statements that are made by characters in the film. It also seems to imply that the truth of that claim is not restricted to the fictional world, for logical consistency requires that if someone asserts that neo-Nazism is bad in one set of conditions, then they need to hold the same view in conditions that are relevantly similar. In so far as the story is relevantly similar to what may occur in real life, the view can be supposed to extend to it. It may be argued that the fact that the movie is made up essentially makes whatever events occur necessarily dissimilar to any real-life situation. There seems to be no reason to accept such an objection, for moral rules do not seem to be affected by a situation's fictionality.⁸ Indeed most moral philosophers turn to fictional thought experiments to provide evidence for their points and never regard their fictionality as problematizing that evidence.

This suggestion does raise some problems, however, for what is actually implied may often be difficult to distinguish. A single work can often give rise to differing interpretations, which imply different, or even contradictory, propositions, just as statements made by different characters may imply contradictory claims. This has led to several attempts to explain just how claims may be implied by narrative works or by the explicit phrases in them, as well as to various suggestions of how such implied propositions might be justified.

John Hospers seems to have been the first to argue that implied claims derived from explicit statements should be treated as hypotheses, which can be tested in the

⁷ Tony Kaye, New Line Cinema, 1998. In this film a former leader of a neo-Nazi organization returns from prison reformed and tries to prevent his brother from following the same path as he did.

⁸ In his famous essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' Hume showed how it is impossible to imagine a world where the moral rules that hold in the actual world do not apply, though it is possible to imagine one where its inhabitants think they don't.

actual world. It doesn't matter if a precise formulation of the claim is clear from explicit statements, nor whether different interpretations imply different claims, because they will be tested by experience and 'since some of these suggested propositions are doubtless true, we have here surely an important sense of truth in literature.'⁹

Yet, if this reasoning is good, there seems no reason to limit such hypotheses to implied claims, which is why Peter Mew has extended Hospers' argument to suppose that even explicit statements can be treated as hypotheses. Mew argues that explicit statements form general universal factual statements that may be tested against the background of our own past and future experiences. He thinks that these hypotheses may be especially relevant when they pertain to human nature and personal relationships as, in this area, actual facts given in non-literary sources may be shallow and unrevealing, whereas fictions can develop interesting and rich hypotheses that can help shape the way we approach ourselves and other people.¹⁰

If fictions do imply claims that serve as testable hypotheses we need to have a clear idea of the type of implication that is involved. How do fictions imply a hypothesis? Are particular formulations suggested? Finding answers to these questions turns out to be one of the major stumbling blocks in the literature for, as M. J. Sirridge has argued, it is not at all clear what type of implication fictional implication can be. He has shown that it cannot be logical implication, nor can it be represented as a truth table tautology. Also there is generally too much room for different interpretations in fictional phrases for propositions to follow by strict entailment. Inductive inference is also unlikely, as the link between explicit phrases and putative implicit statements are supported in too few cases to warrant a belief in the truth of the inductive conclusion.¹¹ While Sirridge does think that fictions are cognitive he concludes that their cognitivity cannot be a result of implying true propositions about the world.¹²

David Lewis has, however, offered a counterfactual version of fictional implication that might serve as a better candidate than the models Sirridge objects to.¹³ Lewis argues that we need to regard fictional truths as those that would be true were the

⁹ J. Hospers, 'Implied Truths in Literature', p. 45.

¹⁰ P. Mew, 'Facts in Fiction'.

¹¹ M. J. Sirridge, 'Truth from Fiction?', p. 460.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 471.

¹³ D. Lewis, 'Truth in Fiction'.

story to be told as known fact. As in fictions many truths are relied upon that aren't explicitly stated, Lewis gives the additional condition that, in deciding what truths may be implied, we need to assume as few changes as possible from the actual world to the fictional world.¹⁴ This still leaves some difficulties, for authors have held very different beliefs about the actual world, as a result of the time and place they were writing in, so it is unclear whether truth in a fictional world should be interpreted against the background of what the author believed to be true of the actual world, or against what we believe, now, to be true of it. Lewis opts for a version of the former possibility, arguing that in judging what un-stated assumptions are true of the fictional world, it should be construed against the background of the beliefs generally held by the community in which the fiction originated. He concludes that a fiction is a source of learning in the sense that it is able to impart knowledge of a fictional world, which can be used to form hypotheses that can be checked to provide knowledge of the actual world.

Peter McCormick offers an alternative model for deriving the cognitive content of a fictional work, based in part on Lewis's, which I think it is the best model available.¹⁵ He argues that a work should not be regarded as a thing separate from the experience an audience has of it. It is the experience of the work that is ultimately cognitive and not the work itself. The events depicted in a fiction as well as statements explicitly made by its characters may *abductively* imply certain claims. McCormick is particularly concerned to show they may abductively imply moral claims. So the claim that "Vronsky's and Anna's adultery is to be judged a morally bad act" may well be the best explanation of what happens to Vronsky and Anna in the world of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.¹⁶ The person experiencing the work is able to make these inferences about his experience, just as he would about an actual experience. McCormick claims that these abductive assumptions must still be interpreted against the background of the commonly held beliefs in the community the fictions originated in but, unlike Lewis, he does not think they can properly be said to offer a source of knowledge. He contends that the sense in which fictions are cognitive should be construed more weakly as a source of beliefs that

¹⁴ So, for example, though the definition of a woman might not explicitly mention that she has legs, unless it is expressly contradicted by something that is said, we should assume that she does possess legs, as most women in the actual world do possess legs.

¹⁵ P. McCormick, 'Moral Knowledge and Fiction'.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 406. The *Anna Karenina* example is the stock example of the debate.

we might come to have about the world. If these beliefs are to be construed more strongly as knowledge *they need to be justified on the basis of actual experience of the world.*

There seems no reason, though, to limit McCormick's account to claims abductively implied by events in a narrative. It seems, that in our experience of narratives, we can apply the same abductive criteria to many of the explicit claims as well, i.e. that the best explanation, based on our reading of the work, for their being stated is that the author intends for those explicit claims to be regarded as true (of the actual world, or of relevantly similar situations in the world).

If we accept that fictional claims may be identified abductively there seems little difficulty in supposing that not only do narratives make claims, but that there is a sensible way that they may be identified by their audience. The degree of success that an individual might have at identifying fictional claims would also seem on this theory to be variable in relation to their ability for abductive reasoning, and possibly with how frequently they engage with narrative works. This seems an intuitively plausible result as it seems that people's ability to understand what an author is trying to say does in fact improve with age and experience.

To sum up then, it seems that narratives are cognitive in the sense that claims may come to be recognised, abductively, on the basis of explicit statements and what they imply, as well as through abductive reasoning about the events that occur.

B) Acquiring Knowledge-That from Narratives

From the preceding discussion it seems that narratives have cognitive content, which result in the formation of beliefs or hypotheses in their audience, but this is not enough on its own for the provision of knowledge-that. It is standardly held that in order for a proposition to be known, it must be believed that the proposition is true, one must be justified in believing it to be true and it must, in fact, be true. The main problem for narratives as a source of propositional knowledge lies with the justification criterion. Given their 'made up' nature, how can we be justified in believing that the beliefs we acquire from them are in fact true?

It seems, in fact, that the accounts of cognitivism given above preclude narratives from serving as justification for the claims they make. However one tries to formulate how a hypothesis is arrived at, on the basis of exposure to narrative fiction, it remains that it is merely a hypothesis. It is not yet propositional knowledge of any kind. This is true whether you call it a hypothesis, a belief, or anything else. The parties to the debate, advertently or not, seem to have conceded through the way they have formulated their accounts that though a fiction might have cognitive content it remains the task of experience outside of the work to provide justification for the truth of that content. Whether it is from prior experience, or from actively checking its truth in the world following the experience of a work, if the most a work can do is to provide a hypothesis for us to test, then it seems to be doing very little to convey propositional knowledge about the world. While fictions may lead to knowledge, they do not provide it themselves.

This is particularly true of knowledge-that, for the justification criterion is typically satisfied by the mode of acquisition. How one comes to hold a belief is usually the determining factor in its being justified or not. If one acquires a belief on the basis of authority, or evidence, or rigorous argument, it is typically regarded as justified, if one garners a belief on the basis of astrology, or from wild rumours, it is not.

One might want to hold, with many of the contributors to the debate, that narratives offer a source of rich and interesting hypotheses that lead to knowledge we would not have otherwise learned. While not providing a direct source of knowledge they are therefore an important tool in its acquisition, through providing novel insights into the world for us to confirm.

This claim points to a further problem. Even if narratives do lead us to formulate complex hypotheses, the burden of justification will need to be extended to include how the hypotheses are confirmed. As most lay-people are not expert in confirming hypotheses in most fields that fictional hypotheses will deal with, it is questionable whether they will be able to confirm the complex hypotheses they acquire on the basis of their fictional experience. The audience should not be expected to expertly confirm hypotheses that deal with science, psychology, ethics, sociology etc. Our intuition that narrative fictions are a rich source of learning is, in part, based on the idea that we can

learn from them without any expert knowledge of the things they describe, which seems necessary if we are to adequately confirm hypotheses ourselves.

It also seems that if fictions are cognitive in this way then there cannot be anything unique, or especially valuable, in them that contributes to our education. Hypotheses, or beliefs, may be garnered from many sources. They may be more or less interesting, more or less likely to be true, but if this is all narrative fiction can do then its status as an important part of a proper education, or as a unique source of knowledge, is highly questionable.

Consider, for example, that a man might have a dream about his wife cheating on him. As a result of the dream he comes to formulate the hypothesis, or to hold the belief, that his wife is cheating on him and given the feelings of desolation that accompanies this hypothesis he also comes to believe that adultery is a very bad thing. Has this man learned less than another who comes to similar hypotheses on the basis of reading *Anna Karenina*? If we are to accept the thrust of the above accounts, then it seems that the two men are in similar positions. They are both in the position of needing to check their hypotheses against the actual world, either from past or future experience. If a fiction has nothing more to offer us for the acquisition of knowledge—that about the world than testable hypotheses or beliefs, it seems that it has remarkably little to offer us at all. It should properly be viewed as valuable as entertainment, but not as an important source of knowledge about the world.

It might be argued that the case is not as hopeless as I make it out to be. While it might be true that there might be some difficulty in establishing just how it is that we come to regard fictions as making certain claims, it is an empirical fact that we do. If, in addition, we are so worried about how these beliefs may be justified, might we not just accept that authors are often very intelligent people who really know what they're talking about? In general practice we usually accept the testimony of authorities as suitable justification for our beliefs and many of those would be far less erudite than an author like Tolstoy. Given that fictional narratives are often written by people who are expert in their fields, or at least as such experts are often consulted in the course of creating narratives, surely the claims they make are the sort of claims that we can consider to be justified by appealing to authority?

Whatever intuitive plausibility this suggestion might have, I think it may be dismissed by pointing once again to the nature of fictions. For a start, though expert opinion is often involved in the creation of narratives it is impossible to tell, on the basis of a narrative itself, whether this has been the case in that particular narrative. At best we could only establish the authority of those involved on the basis of outside knowledge. Even then it would often be difficult to determine that a person is an authority with respect to the type of claims he is making. This is particularly true of some of the areas of knowledge that are most often held to be the special domain of art, such as knowledge of ethics and 'the human condition'. Joseph Conrad, for example, was a sailor. How can I take him to be an authority on the things that seem most valuable in his work? I might take myself to be justified in believing many of his statements about ships and the sea, but not those that deal with psychology, or human conduct. This point is particularly relevant with respect to the overall project of this thesis, which is to show how narratives contribute to the acquisition of virtue. What would it be for an author to be an authority on virtue? Would she need to be a moral saint of some sort? At the least, it seems that many great works of art would be irrelevant to the acquisition of virtue, for many are created by people who possessed questionable moral values and practices.

It should also be noted that if all narratives can do is offer broad moral claims about the world then it is possible that the only types of truths they can convey are essentially trivial.¹⁷ The criticism is that narratives have only broad, common-sensical truths to offer us. We hardly need to read *Anna Karenina* to grasp that adultery is a bad thing. Moreover, it seems that our understanding of these works often depends on our prior understanding of exactly these types of truths. It seems unlikely that we could appreciate the things that happen to Anna and Vronsky within the novel unless we already understood that their affair should be regarded as wrong. We make an abductive implication to that truth because we already understand that an appeal to it makes sense of what is going on. Consequently even if we can say that narratives do convey some truths, it seems that the truths they do convey will be of the sort we will already know and so be un-useful and uninteresting.

¹⁷ For versions of this objection see: M. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* and C. New, *Philosophy of Literature*.

In conclusion, it seems that an attempt to defend narratives as a source of propositional knowledge is a doomed and hopeless enterprise. It would require the provision of a satisfactory account of cognitivism in narratives, not only able to explain how recognisable claims about the world are made, but also such claims may be justified from within the narrative itself. It doesn't seem that such an account could be constructed.

C) Knowing-How and Knowing-That: The Difference

If it is unlikely that we can acquire knowledge-that from narratives, then we must look to knowledge-how as a possible alternative. I will argue that this is the knowledge we do in fact get from narratives and that because of its difference to knowledge-that, particularly those involving justification, it is not affected by the type of criticisms given in the previous section.

The distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that has been widely accepted since it was first introduced by Gilbert Ryle,¹⁸ but has recently been subjected to criticism. Because I intend to argue that we are able to acquire knowledge-how from narratives, the distinction requires some defence, which I will undertake in this section. I shall examine an influential argument, given by Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, which attempts to show that knowledge-how can be reduced to knowledge-that without any loss of meaning or substance. Their claim is that knowledge-how is simply a sub-species of knowledge-that; a conclusion that has some disturbing consequences for this thesis. If we cannot acquire knowledge-that from narratives and if knowledge-how is a type of knowledge-that, then it follows that we cannot get knowledge-how from narratives either. It would seem therefore that we would need to wholly abandon narratives as a source of knowledge. I will attempt to show, however, that Stanley and Williamson are mistaken. There is a genuine difference between knowledge-how and knowledge-that and while I will not attempt to develop a positive account of this difference, I will highlight some of its features in order to show why narratives can provide knowledge-how.

¹⁸ See the second chapter of *The Concept of Mind* and also 'Knowing How and Knowing That'.

I will proceed by first examining some of Ryle's main points in order to bring out what type of things he intended to identify by 'knowledge-how' and to bring to the fore some of the differences between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. I will then outline Stanley & Williamson's argument against there being two distinct kinds of knowledge. Finally I will critique their argument and in doing so I will highlight some final, important, differences between the two types of knowledge.

Ryle's terms are somewhat unfortunate, as in common usage phrases of the sort 'x knows how to v' do not always pick out the type of knowledge Ryle had in mind¹⁹. Not all actions, or abilities, are knowledge-how. Ryle is particularly concerned with *activities that are performed intentionally in order to achieve a purpose that a person has*. These types of activities admit of degree, i.e. they can be performed in a way that is better or worse. In order to explain why such an activity is done in a way that is better than it might have been, one is required to attribute intelligence to the performance: an intelligence involving knowledge of how to perform that activity. Raising ones arm, for example, is an ability people have but is not an example of know-how in Ryle's sense, for it cannot be performed more or less well and it is very rarely the sort of thing done for its own purpose. One also need not attribute knowledge to a person who raises their arm in order to explain their successful performance of the action. Activities like playing an instrument or a game of chess, constructing a building, cooking a meal, or even thinking²⁰ are the types of activities that Ryle would consider to be proper examples of knowing-how.

Ryle's basic intuition is that knowing how to perform these types of activities requires that there be a type of knowledge that is not propositional in nature: something beyond the knowledge of a fact. For, ultimately, *knowing that x is true and knowing how to make use of that truth are two different types of knowledge*.²¹ Being able to play a guitar well is a type of knowledge not reducible to the knowledge of facts about the instrument or to those of music theory. The intelligence involved in playing well requires

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion on the appropriateness of the labels see D. G. Brown, 'Knowing How and Knowing That, What'.

²⁰ Ryle is particularly concerned to show an ability to think intelligently is a type of know-how. I agree with him and think that much of the thinking required for Aristotelian virtue is of this type. This will be discussed in detail further on.

²¹ It is important to note this point, as it will be relevant in the coming chapters. Knowing how to use propositional knowledge is a kind of knowledge-how.

explanation in terms of a different type of knowledge, which involves knowing how to apply propositions, how to choose between different ways of playing, how to integrate physical abilities with knowledge and purpose and so on.

Ryle claims that, in such examples, the knowledge of propositions and facts about music theory or his lack thereof, has nothing to do with our ascribing to him the knowledge of how to play. That ascription is made solely in virtue of his ability to perform. Playing a guitar is not an instinctive ability, nor is it mere habit, it must be learned and knowledge of how to do so is ascribed because the performance is a visible instantiation of that knowledge. Ryle's point is that knowledge-how does not have content identifiable apart from the actions that instantiate it. So while the good guitarist needs to have physical abilities like strong, agile hands and a developed ear, knowing how to play a guitar is not these things, nor their co-ordination. Similarly it is not knowing all the notes that can be played nor combinations of these, nor different techniques for sounding them. There are an infinite number of possible combinations that can be used and it is in choosing between these ways that knowledge-how is instantiated.

It might be thought that perhaps the type of propositions that are involved in playing need not be those given in musical theory. Perhaps what the 'theory-ignorant' guitarist knows are propositions like 'that note sounds good with that other one', or perhaps what he knows can be specified as a set of rules that he obeys even if he cannot articulate what they are.

Ryle rejects this type of possibility by arguing that there is a logical need to postulate a type of knowledge different from knowledge-that. He claims that intelligently performing a complex activity would not be possible if there was only knowledge-that. His argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, based on the essential difference between knowing a proposition and being able to apply such knowledge in practice.²²

... I argue that the prevailing doctrine leads to vicious regresses and these in two directions. (1) If the intelligence exhibited in any act, practical or theoretical, is to be credited to the occurrence of some ulterior act of intelligently considering regulative propositions, no intelligent act, practical or theoretical, could ever begin... (2) If a deed, to be intelligent has to be guided by the consideration of a regulative proposition, the gap between that consideration and the practical application of the regulation has to be bridged by some go-between process which cannot by the pre-supposed definition itself be an exercise of

²² Ryle offers various formulations of the argument but he has only one.

intelligence and cannot, by definition, be the resultant deed. This go-between application-process has somehow to marry observance of a contemplated maxim with the enforcement of behaviour. So it has to unite in itself the allegedly incompatible properties of being kith to theory and kin to practice, else it could not be the applying of the one in the other. For, unlike theory, it must be able to influence action, and, unlike impulses, it must be amenable to regulative propositions. Consistency requires, therefore, that this schizophrenic broker must again be subdivided into one bit which contemplates but does not execute, one which executes but does not contemplate and a third which reconciles these irreconcilables. And so on forever.²³

It is important to keep in mind that Ryle is concerned here with intentional actions. If an intentional act is to be considered intelligent only in virtue of being accompanied by the intelligent consideration of a regulative proposition, then an infinite regress threatens. The consideration of a regulative proposition may itself be an intentional act of just the sort Ryle has in mind, i.e. one made for a purpose and capable of being executed with a greater or lesser degree of skill. If the contemplation of the proposition is itself to be intelligent, then it must itself be accompanied by the contemplation of another proposition and so on *ad infinitum*. If the contemplation of a regulative proposition is not what makes the act intelligent then, Ryle argues, it is the fact that the act is itself the exhibition of a type of knowledge that gives us reason to call it intelligent. We call a guitar performance an exercise of intelligence because it is an instantiation of know-how, not because we presume the guitarist is contemplating regulative propositions about his performance.

A seemingly obvious criticism arises, however, for many intelligent acts are not accompanied by the *conscious* contemplation of a proposition. One can utilise propositional knowledge without consciously considering the propositions involved. So Carl Ginet writes that:

I exercise (or manifest) my knowledge *that* one can get the door open by turning the knob and pushing it...by performing the operation quite automatically as I leave the room; and I may do this, of course, without formulating (in my mind or out loud) that proposition or any other relevant proposition.²⁴

This seems to bypass Ryle's objection. If the contemplation of a proposition is not required for the performance of an intelligent action, one need not consciously contemplate the proposition in order to apply it, so no vicious regress threatens. Ryle might reply that Ginet is conflating the two categories of knowledge-how and

²³ Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p. 213.

²⁴ C. Ginet, *Knowledge, Perception and Memory*, cited in Stanley & Williamson 'Knowing How', p. 415.

knowledge-that. On Ryle's account one cannot, by definition, exercise knowledge-that but only knowledge-how. So what Ginet has put as exercising his knowledge-that he can open the door by turning the knob and pushing it, should properly be described as Ginet exercising his knowledge-how to open the door. This is the explanation for why Ginet need not contemplate a proposition in order to execute the action, knowledge-how does not require propositional content. Ryle's whole point is that knowing a proposition and knowing how to apply it are two different things. *The application of a proposition is not an exercise of knowledge-that, it is knowing-how.*²⁵ If we consider the alternative, that there is no such thing as knowing-how, but that intelligent acts do not require the conscious contemplation of regulative propositions, then we might well be left wondering how these propositions relate to the actions at all.

Ryle's use of the terms 'knowledge-how' and 'knowledge-that' might be responsible for some confusion, for if we do consider a simple action like opening a door, there might seem little difficulty with supposing that it might be done intentionally, but without conscious consideration. In such a case, it would certainly seem then that there is no need to postulate any knowledge beyond that of the proposition 'one can open a door by turning its handle and pushing it.' This is a little less obvious if we consider more complex cases, for opening a door is not the type of knowing-how that admits of degrees of performance, which is what Ryle has in mind when he talks of intelligent actions. One can open a door or one cannot, but it makes little sense to say someone can open a door superbly well. Ryle's point becomes more forceful when we consider examples of the type of knowing-how he has in mind for, in these examples, deliberation about the situation at hand and deliberating about ways to bring about a purpose in that situation seem to be intrinsic parts of what is going on. Where intelligent deliberation must precede intelligent action, the knowledge involved cannot only be knowledge-that for then the regress threatens as described above. Ryle's stock example is of a game of chess between a clever chess player and a stupid one. He supposes, and it does seem plausible

²⁵ This is an important point, for a crucial part of knowing-how of any sort will be knowing how to apply propositional knowledge that one has. An Olympic runner, for example, will know how to run in a way different from most people. Part of the knowing-how will involve knowing how to apply propositional knowledge about such things as the way diet affects performance, how far one should run in days preceding a race and so on. The kinds of knowledge-how I examine in later chapters all involve knowing how to apply propositional knowledge that one has. This point will be elaborated on in the coming discussion.

to suppose, that both players might have the same knowledge of the rules and strategies of the game, but still have very different levels of skill. The difference in calling the one player clever and the other stupid does not lie in the possession of more comprehensive knowledge of propositions relating to the game. The difference lies in their ability to apply that knowledge in response to the moves of their opponents, in response to the circumstances of the game. They do this not by habit or instinct, but by conscious deliberation. Their ability to deliberate about the game is not only conscious and intentional, but it is a type of skill that can itself be performed more or less well. Deliberation of this type is itself knowledge-how.²⁶ For instance, thinking about the game only partially involves the application of propositional truths about the rules and strategy, for part of what the players do is form and test hypotheses that might be true. The clever player might come to suspect, on the basis of the way his opponent moves a knight in a particular situation, that the stupid player has a particular strategy in mind. He might then make a move to see whether the stupid player's response confirms or disconfirms the hypothesis²⁷. What the clever player is doing in this example is exercising knowledge of how to discover propositional truths²⁸; it is not only an application of truths he already knows. This can be done more or less well and contributes to his success as a chess player. The way he chooses in order to discover what his opponent is planning must not only be suitable to discovering what he wants to know, it must also be integrated with his broader purpose of winning the game. It wouldn't help to make a move that confirmed his opponents' intention, but which left him open to check-mate a move later. Given these points we can see why Ryle thinks an infinite regress threatens. If the plays are intelligent because they are accompanied by the ulterior act of intelligently considering regulative propositions, and if such

²⁶ It is interesting to note that Aristotle also holds that 'practical thought' is a type of action that needs to be governed by the same principles of practical wisdom that direct the virtuous person's physical attempts to achieve the goals they choose. Thinking well is understood as requiring the same knowledge and character as acting well. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b, p. 105.

²⁷ It will be argued, in Chapter 4, that the thinking required, in an example like this one, depends on a kind of knowledge-how called imaginative understanding, which is an important way in which we understand other minds.

²⁸ This, as I will become evident from the discussion, is a type of knowledge-how that will also be required for the types of knowledge-how that will be forwarded in the later chapters.

deliberation is only intelligent when it is itself accompanied by the intelligent deliberation of further propositions, then a regress does seem to loom.

Ryle seems to think that his explication of the difference between knowing-how and knowing-that does a good deal to show what knowing-how is, for he pays little attention to his positive account of knowing-how. He argues simply that it is a type of complex disposition, related to ability in some way²⁹. He writes:

Knowing *how*... is a disposition, but not a single-track disposition like a reflex or habit. Its exercises are observances of rules or canons or the applications of criteria, but they are not tandem operations of theoretically avowing maxims and then putting them into practice. Further, its exercises can be overt or covert, deeds performed or deeds imagined, words spoken aloud or words heard in one's head, pictures painted on canvas or pictures in the mind's eye. Or they can be the amalgamation of the two.³⁰

As David Carr has shown, Ryle's positive account has certain intractable difficulties, but I will not repeat his discussion here, for it is of limited interest in this discussion.³¹ What is relevant is Ryle's repeated assertions that an ascription of knowledge-how can only be justified if someone is able to perform an action successfully and that often this type of assertion can only be made on the basis of 'a modest assemblage of heterogeneous performances,'³² which establish that success in a single instance wasn't a result of accident or luck. I will return to this point later.

Stanley and Williamson have dismissed Ryle's account, but I think they do so precisely because they fail to apply his distinction in the way he intended. They examine Ginet's example of the door and conclude with him that one can employ knowledge of how to do something without contemplating the propositions that it involves, and as a consequence they conclude that 'Ryle's argument does not get off the ground...the argument is unsound. It...fails to establish any difficulty for the thesis that knowledge-how is a species of knowledge-that.' They do not consider types of knowing-how more complex than the door example and so dismiss Ryle too hastily.

They are also far too quick to dismiss Ryle's positive account. While I concede that it is flawed, it is not flawed for the reason they suppose and I will try to show that their dismissal leads directly to their adopting a problematic account. They write:

²⁹ Ryle's positive account can be found in *The Concept of Mind*, pp. 40-51.

³⁰ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, pp. 46-47

³¹ Carr's objections can be found in 'Knowledge in Practice', pp. 55-57.

³² G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p. 46

According to Ryle, an ascription of the form '*x* knows how to *F*' merely ascribes to *x* the ability to *F*. It is simply false, however, that ascriptions of knowledge-how ascribe abilities...ascriptions of knowledge-how do not even entail ascriptions of the corresponding abilities...a master pianist who loses both of her arms in a tragic car accident still knows how to play the piano. But she has lost her ability to do so. It follows that Ryle's own account of knowledge how is demonstrably false.³³

Stanley and Williamson have straw-manned Ryle's view, which is not that knowing how is merely an ability but that it is a complex set of dispositions to act. It is not that they are unaware of his dispositional account; it is just that they do not engage with it in dismissing him. In fact the pianist example would not trouble him, for he would be unlikely to hold that a disposition to play a piano would be actualised in such circumstances. Crucially, though, Stanley and Williamson discard ability as having an important role to play in knowing-how on the basis of this type of example, but they are mistaken to do so. To say of someone that they know how to *F* is not to say that they are able to *F* in every circumstance, but it certainly seems to imply that they are able to in some³⁴. External, or even internal, obstacles may result in a situation that prevents someone from being able to actualise their knowledge-how. Not having arms is an impediment to being able to play a piano, but it is not an impediment to knowing-how because in more favourable circumstances she would be able to play. It is precisely because we know that she is able to play piano in suitable circumstances that we are willing to attribute to her the knowledge of how to play.

If we take the type of know-how Ryle has in mind seriously we can see why an ability to perform in proper circumstances is crucial. If one cannot intentionally engage in an activity in circumstances conducive to its performance, one cannot know how to perform that activity. This requirement necessarily precedes, in Ryle's account, the type of intelligence exercised in performing the activity well. If I were to claim to know how to play guitar but, despite having physical health and holding a working guitar in my hands, I could not play, my claim would be false and nobody would be justified in believing otherwise.

³³ Stanley and Williamson, 'Knowing How', p. 416.

³⁴ Please note that the mix of the singular 'someone' and the plural 'they' is intentional. I have tried to avoid here, and throughout this thesis, using gender biased terms. For this same reason, where I haven't been able to avoid doing so, I have randomly mixed the use of masculine and feminine pronouns.

Having dismissed ability as necessary for knowledge-how, Stanley and Williamson conclude that if any account of the difference between knowledge-how and knowledge-that will do the job it will be something like David Carr's formal account, which holds that knowledge-how statements describe a relation between people and actions, while knowledge-that statements describe a relation between people and propositions³⁵. As a result, the task they set themselves is to show that know-how statements, such as 'Hanna knows how to ride a bicycle', can be formally stated in a way such that it describes a relation between a person and a proposition and does so in a way that does not result in a loss of meaning.

They note that the difference between statements like:

1) Hanna knows how to ride a bicycle.

And

2) Hanna knows that Bob Dylan is a musician.

is that (1) contains an embedded question, whereas (2) does not. An embedded question is a section of the statement that can serve as a question that the statement is an answer to. So 'Hannah knows how to ride a bike' contains the embedded question 'how to ride a bike', which would serve as the answer to the question 'What does Hanna know?'. I take an untensed clause to be one that does not contain anything to denote that the sentence refers to a particular tense, past present or future³⁶. For Stanley and Williamson, the

³⁵ Carr's account can be found in the aforementioned paper 'Knowledge in Practice', as well as in 'The Logic of Knowing How and Ability'. His formal account is developed in the latter paper, but he also offers some convincing informal arguments for the claim in the former.

³⁶ Stanley and Williamson do not themselves explain or define what embedded questions or untensed clauses are. The definitions just given should, however, be sufficient to allow the reader to follow their arguments. What should be kept in mind is that Stanley and Williamson are trying to reformulate know-how sentences into know-that sentences. To do so they try to identify which type of know-how sentences are contentious. They identify ones with embedded questions and untensed clauses, and take into account their particular syntactic features in order to implement their reformulation. Their reasoning for choosing this type of know-how sentence, however, is less important for this argument than the way they go about affecting the reformulation. So long as one understands that their argument is constrained by the need to interpret sentences of these kinds, one should have all the information needed to follow what they are doing and understand why it ultimately fails.

putative difference between know-how and know-that statements rests on confusions in understanding differences in embedded questions in untensed clauses³⁷.

The standard structure of an embedded question with an untensed clause such as (1) is:

Hanna knows[how PRO to ride a bicycle *t*].

‘PRO’ is a phonologically null pronoun³⁸ that occurs in the subject position of untensed clauses and it is in its proper interpretation that Stanley and Williamson think the seeming differences between knowledge-how and knowledge-that arise.

An embedded question denotes the set of its true answers so a sentence like

(3) Hanna knows where to find wild strawberries.

is true if and only if for each proposition *p* of the form ‘wild strawberries can be found at *x*’ Hanna knows that *p* is true. Such a statement can be limited by the context of its usage, so if the speaker intended for it to be understood as meaning that Hanna knew where to find wild strawberries in Grahamstown, the set of propositions denoted by the embedded question would be limited to places within Grahamstown. So ‘Hanna knows where to find wild strawberries’ is true if she knows that the set of propositions denoted by the embedded question in the more limited context is true.

What is worth noticing about their strategy is that by formulating the truth of statements such as (1) in terms of embedded questions, Stanley and Williamson essentially require that questions of know-how be answered in terms of propositions; one can usually only answer a question with a proposition. If this is a legitimate move, if so-

³⁷ Tensed clauses such as ‘Sheena knows how Mike rides a bicycle’ seem to ascribe propositional knowledge, so they are not candidates for providing a difference between knowledge-how and knowledge-that.

³⁸ Again, Stanley and Williamson do not provide an explanation of what a phonologically null pronoun is and I’m sorry to say that I cannot do so either. They do say that PRO is ‘an empty pronominal element which occurs in the subject position of infinitives in English.’ All one need know to follow the argument, however, is that a sentence such as ‘Hannah knows how to ride a bike’ can be interpreted in various ways and ‘PRO’ is used to stand in for those ways. So the sentence can be interpreted as ‘Hannah knows how she could ride a bicycle’, ‘Hannah knows how she ought to ride a bicycle’, ‘Hannah knows how one could ride a bicycle’, or ‘Hannah knows how she could ride a bicycle.’

formulated there is no loss of meaning from how we normally construe the truth of such sentences they will then have succeeded in showing that knowledge-how statements are reducible to knowledge-that statements.

Without repeating the linguistic arguments that get them to it, Stanley and Williamson take the proper interpretation of

- Hanna knows[PRO how to ride a bicycle t].

involved in knowing-how statements to be

- Hanna knows how she could ride a bicycle.

Reformulated like this, the statement is true if and only if for all the propositions p denoted by the embedded question ‘how she could ride a bicycle’, Hanna knows that p is true. Yet, Stanley and Williamson claim that because know-how statements are limited by contextual use, it is enough to regard Hanna as knowing how to ride a bike if there is any one way to ride a bike that Hanna knows is a way she could ride a bike.

So:

- Hanna knows how to ride a bike.

Is true if and only if for some way w to ride a bike, Hanna knows that w is a way she could ride a bike.

At this point a possible objection can be given to their account, for it seems in most cases that, despite Stanley and Williamson’s assertions to the contrary, it is not sufficient for someone to know of *any* one way that they could do something for the attribution of knowledge-how. So, for example, if Hanna knew that she could ride a bicycle by balancing her hands on the pedals while steering with her feet, but knew of no other way she could ride a bicycle, it is unlikely that we would be willing to say ‘Hanna knows how to ride a bike’ and this is because that in using this way, Hanna would be unable to use a bike for the purpose that bikes are used for, i.e. transport or exercise. I

submit, for the moment, that the ways we accept as justifying a statement of know-how relate in some way to the purpose the know-how is supposed to bring about. I will return to this point below.

To conclude the details of Stanley and Williamson's account, it remains to show how statements that make knowledge-how claims relate people to propositions. They adopt a Russellian account such that propositions relate people to ways of engaging in actions. These ways are taken to be properties of propositions but, on the Russellian account, the proposition must be able to be entertained under different modes of presentation. Yet not just any mode will suffice for establishing the truth of 'Hanna knows that w is a way she could ride a bicycle'. Hanna could see Mike riding a bicycle and conclude from the sight that the way Mike rides a bicycle is a way for her to ride a bicycle. So where 'Hanna knows that w is a way she could ride a bicycle', is presented under a demonstrative mode, where w refers to the way Mike rides a bicycle, it seems that the statement can be true, but Hanna could still not know how to ride a bicycle herself. Stanley and Williamson conclude, as a result, that a proposition needs to be able to be entertained under what they call a *practical* mode of presentation, if its truth is to be substantially similar to that contained in its know-how formulation. Unfortunately they never explain what is meant by this mode, saying only that it is a substantial philosophical task to give a non-trivial characterisation of a practical mode of presentation of a way; a task they do not try and undertake.³⁹ They do however say that 'thinking of a way under a practical mode of presentation undoubtedly entails the possession of certain complex dispositions.'⁴⁰ Yet they think there is nothing unusual about this for there are also dispositional relations in some propositional statements, such as those concerning first-person thought.

They summarise their final position as follows:

Suppose modes of presentation are semantically relevant. Then (29) [[Hannah, knows [How PRO, to ride a bicycle].] is true relative to a context c if and only if there is some contextually relevant way w such that Hannah stands in the knowledge-that relation to the Russellian proposition that w is a way for Hannah to ride a bicycle, and Hannah entertains this proposition under a practical mode of presentation. If modes of presentation are not semantically relevant, then the truth of (29) does not require that Hannah entertain the

³⁹ Stanley and Williamson, 'Knowing How', p. 429.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

proposition in question under a practical mode of presentation, though a use of (29) pragmatically conveys that she does.⁴¹

What Stanley and Williamson have done is to formally re-construe 'Hannah knows how to ride a bike' as equivalent to Hannah being able to think of the proposition 'that w is a way I could ride a bike' under a practical mode of presentation. And while it remains unclear precisely what a practical mode of presentation is, it seems that it requires Hannah to know how to instantiate the way, w , that she knows.⁴²

Two questions must be asked about this reformulation:

- (1) Does it succeed without any loss of substance or meaning? Is there something that we typically mean by 'Hannah knows how to ride a bike', that is not conveyed by its reformulation?
- (2) Stanley and Williamson have reduced knowledge-how to a sub-class of knowledge-that, if it remains that the sub-class is too different from other forms of knowing-that then have they merely re-created the traditional distinction in other terms?⁴³

I will try to show that both these questions can be answered in the affirmative.

I will begin with the first question. Part of Ryle's point about knowing how is that it is exercised in choosing a way to fulfil a purpose that a person has. Such choosing is an intelligent operation that can be done in a way that is better or worse, based on the suitability of the chosen way to the circumstances. This leads to there being a property of degree in the know-how activities he is concerned with. There is a loss of meaning between saying that someone knows how to play chess well and Stanley and Williamson's reformulation. It makes little sense to say that Billy knows that w is a way for him to play chess well, for this seems to suppose that there could be a way to play chess well that is independent of the particular facts of the actual games that are played. If one knows-how to play chess well it is because one can choose an approach in response to what is happening while one plays. A way to play chess, which will satisfy the purpose of winning, cannot be chosen independently of the situation in which the purpose is to be actualised. A single way will never be suitable for success in every

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 430.

⁴² John Koethe, 'Stanley and Williamson on Knowing How', p. 326.

⁴³ This is a potential objection Stanley and Williamson forward themselves, in 'Knowing How', p. 434.

situation. It is in choosing between ways to fulfil one's purpose of winning, where that choice is made on the basis of intelligent deliberation of the circumstances of the game that the attribution of skill is made. The assignation of degree to a particular way that a person knows will therefore be unsuitable in most circumstances, whereas it will always be sensible to assign degree to a normal statement of knowledge-how.

One might want to argue that degree is not a property of a way itself. It might be that when, in common usage, we credit someone with knowing how to do something well, or poorly, all we mean is that they have chosen a way that is better or worse than some alternative way, for the purpose they are trying to bring about. Perhaps the assignation of degree is made in respect of the knowledge of a number of related propositions about ways along with propositions that assign preference of one over another. So, for example, saying that Billy knows how to play chess well may mean something like: he has chosen a strategy in this game that is more likely to lead to a victory than other strategies, he could have adopted.

While one might perhaps be able to make sense of assignations of degree in this way, such a response would seem *ad hoc* for it doesn't seem to get at what we are really trying to pick out when we say that someone plays well. Part of what is involved in making such a claim is that we applaud the thinking involved in choosing between ways, in deciding what way is suited for the purpose we have.⁴⁴ This brings us back to Ryle's intuition that the type of thought involved in preferring one way over another is a type of knowing-how. To know that one way is better than another is to know of features of each way, and of the situation, that *should* lead a person to prefer one way over another. If knowing how to do something is just to know of some way to do it, what are we to make of the idea of knowing how to choose between two ways? This seems to translate, on Stanley and Williamson's account, into knowing that w is a way to choose between a way $w1$ and another $w2$. But this doesn't seem to account for the notion that a person can choose between two ways more or less intelligently. We call people clever, or stupid, on the basis of the thought process that leads them to adopt certain ways of achieving their purposes, precisely because that process of thought is itself something that can be done

⁴⁴ I will go on to argue, below, that attributing knowledge of why a way will fulfill the purpose a person has is an important component in an attribution of knowledge-how.

more or less well and something that can be improved by education and by practice⁴⁵. More importantly, it is on the basis of a person's ability to consistently choose good ways of doing things over a number of instantiations of the act that we make the ascription that they know how to do whatever it is that they are doing.

If I know of two ways to open a bottle, the first by using a bottle opener and the second by smashing the neck with a rock, and also of a handy way to choose between those two ways, then Stanley and Williamson would need to say both that I know how to open the bottle and I know how to choose between the two ways of opening a bottle. Suppose, however, that the way I know of to choose between the two alternatives is to toss a coin: heads I use the bottle opener, tails and I smash it with the rock. If I do this I still satisfy Stanley and Williamson's criteria for knowing how, but in the common sense of what we mean by 'knowing-how' it seems that I neither know how to choose between the two ways, nor even how to open a bottle, for if I can consider using a rock instead of a bottle opener then it seems that I really have no idea of what's involved in opening bottles. An ascription of know-how, such as that made in saying that I know how to open a bottle, implies that the way chosen must be suitable for the purpose that it is chosen for. Smashing the bottle with the rock is unsuitable because I won't be able to drink it once it is open.

It is also clear that a Ryle-like regress threatens if we want to postulate an explanation for making a choice in a way that is better or worse, for I would again need to postulate some alternative proposition, to knowing that I can toss a coin, to decide between my two ways and for choosing between my two ways of choosing and this process can continue infinitely.⁴⁶

It might be argued in response that the reason this problem seems to loom is because a statement like 'I know how to open a bottle' underspecifies the purpose involved; it is really a shorthand for a statement like 'I know how to open a bottle in a

⁴⁵ This is probably the kind of education involved in studying a subject like philosophy, where improvement is not measured in terms of the acquisition of facts, but rather in terms of how well the student is able to think about those facts. Being able to weigh up competing propositions, or ways of understanding them, and being able to compare and contrast their strengths and weaknesses seems, probably, to be the primary skill the subject seeks to improve. This is also the type of thinking involved in judgement, which is crucial for assessing and responding to new information. Judgement is, therefore, a type of knowledge-how. It is also a type of knowing-how that will be crucial in the coming chapters.

⁴⁶ A similar objection has been forwarded by John Koethe in 'Stanley and Williamson on Knowing How'.

way that is efficient and will not leave shards of glass in the wine.’ Filling out what is involved in the assignation of knowledge shows that using a rock isn’t a legitimate way to open a bottle, but knowing any legitimate way is sufficient for knowing that *w* is a way to open a bottle. A legitimate way would here mean something like a way that would successfully bring about the result demanded by the proper delineation of the purpose. This response is, unfortunately, inadequate. It remains that there will be activities where purposes are multi-fold and where the regular ascription of know-how involved cannot be filled in by making one or all of these purposes explicit in the way that knowing how to open a bottle can be made explicit. For example, a guitar can be used for many purposes and when we say of someone in common usage that they know how to play one, this can mean using it for any number of purposes such as: to play some number of songs written by other artists, to provide an original rhythm accompaniment for another person’s song, to improvise technical solos against someone’s song, to be able to improvise music that expresses personal emotions or attitudes etc. It is unclear what purpose would commonly be involved in saying of someone that they know-how to play a guitar. We don’t commonly say that a person knows how to play a guitar to cover someone else’s music, or that he knows how to use a guitar to give voice to his soul. *We make the ascriptions we do in response to a performance*, or a number of performances, so it seems that ‘knowing how to play a guitar’ is not underspecified. Consequently saying of someone that they know-how to play a guitar, as with the type of complex example Ryle forwards, cannot be reduced to saying that they know of a way to play a guitar that satisfies some specified purpose without a loss of meaning. In addition, if knowing-how is not knowledge-that, there is no difficulty in explaining why Jimmy Hendrix and I can both be said to know how to play the guitar, but why he can be said to play significantly better than I can. For knowing how to play it well is a matter of being able to use it for many purposes, or of knowing of many ways to achieve one purpose, or of being able to discover ways to use it for purposes you have. It is precisely because Hendrix discovered unique ways to use the instrument that it is often said that he knew how to play a guitar better than anyone else ever has. Being able to discover ways of achieving one’s purpose is a paradigmatic kind of knowledge-how.

This is an important point, for if all knowledge is knowledge-that it seems that no knowledge-that could ever be discovered. *One needs to know how to discover propositional truths before one can know propositional truths.*⁴⁷ Our knowledge of the vast majority of propositional facts is not acquired through instinct, nor is it simply innate to us. Knowledge of propositions can only occur through discovering their truth in engaging with the world, or by learning of their truth from others. Nevertheless what one learns from others must first have been discovered by someone. Therefore most propositional knowledge a person has depends on someone's knowledge of how to discover propositional truths. In many cases being able to discover the truth of propositions is a hugely demanding task, which requires extensive expertise to perform. Consider that the greatest scientists are not those that know the most facts about the physical world, but the ones that know how to go about discovering facts that are not known. We know that the earth orbits the sun, but we would not have known this fact were it not for Copernicus who discovered its truth. Even the simplest propositional fact needs to be discovered. Knowing how to identify cause and effect, for example, requires that one know how to make and relate observations.⁴⁸ Stanley and Williamson cannot account for this type of knowledge-how, for the infinite regress threatens again if discovery is just knowledge that *w* is a way to discover that something is the case. How, after all, do we discover that *w* is a way to discover that something is the case?

Knowing how to do something requires that there be a certain relation between the knowledge you have, your purpose and the conditions that form the context within which one tries to actualise one's purpose. Knowing-how requires a process of discovery, for conditions tend to be variable and we need to be able to adapt the ways we know to them.⁴⁹ Knowing-how to do something involves understanding why what you do will achieve your purpose. Propositional knowledge doesn't have this requirement. Knowing that *w* is a way to achieve your purpose in no way implies understanding why it

⁴⁷ Knowing how to discover propositional truths about a situation, or thing, will be an important component in all the types of knowledge-how dealt with in the coming chapters.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that Hume thought that identifying cause and effect required an act of imagination. In Chapter 4 I will argue that an imaginative act, which I call imaginative understanding, is a type of knowledge-how required for the discovery of various facts about the people and situations that one encounters.

⁴⁹ I will go on to show, in the following Chapter, that knowing-how to respond to the particularities of a situation is crucial to exercising virtue, on Aristotle's account.

will bring the purpose about, nor knowing how to adapt that way if circumstances vary in the future.

Consider Ryle's chess example once more. The stupid player might be placed in check by a trap stunningly executed by the clever player. Suppose the stupid player's coach, a former grandmaster, surreptitiously whispers advice into his ear telling him of a way to escape the trap. The teacher is, in addition, correct in his advice. Nevertheless, as he studies the board, the stupid player does not understand why the move his teacher suggested will get him out of the trap. He makes the move anyway, because he trusts his teacher, who is brilliant beyond his own ken. It seems that, on Stanley and Williamson's account the stupid player now knows how to evade the trap and win the game, for he knows that the move the teacher suggested w is a way for him to win the game. The situation also satisfies all the conditions for knowing-that. The player believes that w is a way for him to escape the trap and win the game. He is justified in believing it, for his teacher, a grandmaster, is a noted authority on the game. And finally it is true that w is a way for the stupid player to escape the trap and win the game. It seems, however, that in common usage we would deny that the stupid player does know how to escape the trap for, despite knowing of a way to escape the trap, he doesn't understand why w is a way for him to escape it. This is an important loss in meaning between 'the player knows how to escape the trap' and the reformulation 'the player knows that w is a way for him to escape the trap.'

It seems clear then that Stanley and Williamson have not shown that knowledge-how can be formally reconstituted into knowledge-that without loss of meaning. It is still worthwhile considering whether their re-formulation of knowledge-how is significantly different from other types of knowing-that, for doing so brings to the fore an important difference between the two types.

To prove that knowledge-how wouldn't be different from other forms of knowledge-that, Stanley and Williamson consider a potential disanalogy involving Gettier cases. They write that:

We can imagine cases of justified true belief that fail to be knowledge-that, because they fail to satisfy some extra condition, it may appear difficult, however, to formulate examples that fall short of being knowledge-how for a similar reason...but if knowledge-how is really a kind of knowledge-that, there should be such cases.

and proceed to provide the following example of what they think is a Gettier type example for knowledge-how:

Bob wants to learn how to fly in a flight simulator. He is instructed by Henry. Unknown to Bob, Henry is a malicious impostor who has inserted a randomizing device in the simulator's controls and intends to give all kinds of incorrect advice. Fortunately, by sheer chance the randomizing device causes exactly the same results in the simulator as would have occurred without it, and by incompetence Henry gives exactly the same advice as a proper instructor would have done. Bob passes the course with flying colours. *He has still not flown a real plane.*⁵⁰ Bob has a justified true belief about how to fly. But there is a good sense in which he does not *know*⁵¹ how to fly.

As with any thought experiment, this supposed Gettier type case plays on one's intuitions. In this case the intuition that Bob does have the requisite true beliefs about how to fly, but because of the circumstances of the acquisition cannot be said to know how to fly. It is highly debatable, however, whether we would in the ordinary case suppose that Bob does know how to fly, even if he was in a properly working flight simulator and had a more qualified instructor. The intuition that Bob does not know how to fly a plane can be better explained by the fact that we would be unlikely to ascribe knowledge of how to fly a plane to someone that has never flown a plane, than it is by the unusual way that Bob acquired true beliefs about flying. We do not consider pilots qualified until they actually log hours in the air. A flight simulator might be enough to impart some knowledge of how to fly a plane, but we aren't justified in believing that someone knows how to fly a plane until he has actually flown a plane and done so in circumstances suitable for making such an ascription, i.e. where his actions were intentional and the circumstances were such that it was clear that the ability was an exercise of his knowledge rather than because of some alternative factor like a freakish updraft that keeps the plane in the air. The crucial point here is that *unlike propositional knowledge, where justification depends on the mode of acquisition, knowledge-how depends on actual performance for its justification.*⁵² Regardless of how Bob gained his beliefs about flying, if he were to get into a plane and fly we would have to say that he knows how to fly a plane.

An important point related to this example is that, just as there are degrees of knowing-how, it is possible to have partial knowledge of how to do something. It makes

⁵⁰ My emphasis

⁵¹ Their emphasis

⁵² See Carr, 'Knowledge in Practice', for further explication and defense of this point.

sense to suppose that someone trained on a flight simulator partially knows how to fly. He is partially trained. He is still learning how to fly, but he does possess some knowledge of how to fly. The idea of partial knowledge—that is, on the other hand, nonsensical. One can suppose that someone knows some part of a body of truths, but one cannot suppose that they know part of a truth. Either someone knows that x or they don't.

This point will be important to this thesis because if narratives can provide us with some knowledge-how, or partially teach us how to do something, then there is an important sense in which we can garner knowledge from them. They would be useful in teaching us in much the same way that a flight simulator is useful in teaching us how to fly, even if it turns out that they cannot completely impart knowledge-how on their own.

It will be my contention that this is exactly what we get from narratives: partial knowledge of how to act virtuously. Virtuous action is itself a complex type of knowing-how that requires integration of mental capacities that are themselves types of knowing-how.

To sum up then, the main features that differentiate knowledge-how from knowledge-that are:

- A) Knowledge-how admits of degree.
- B) It requires a proper relation between the circumstances at hand, the purpose a person has, and the way they choose to achieve that purpose. So knowing why certain ways will achieve that purpose, knowing why some ways are better than others and being able to choose one appropriate to the circumstances are crucial to knowledge-how, as well as to the assignation of degree.
- C) It receives its justification not by the mode of acquisition, but rather through performance.
- D) It is a composite ability that may involve the integration of propositional knowledge, physical abilities and even additional subordinate know-hows.
- E) One may have partial knowledge-how.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the best way to understand cognivity in narratives is through abductive inference to claims an author makes. I have also argued that we cannot obtain propositional knowledge about the world in this fashion. I went on to claim that there is a real difference between propositional knowledge and knowledge-how.

The relevance of this distinction may now be evident. The problems relating to the justification of propositions, which prevent us acquiring propositional knowledge from fictions, are not applicable to knowledge-how. The latter type of knowledge is not justified through the mode of acquisition, but rather in its successful application.

In fictions, an author offers ways of understanding the characters and events, as well as an understanding of why they should be understood in these ways, which may be recognised through the reader's abductive appreciation of the text. In doing so, they acquire partial knowledge-how for understanding relevantly similar people and events in the actual world. This partial knowledge may become full knowledge through the reader's attempts to apply it against past or future experience. I will not defend this claim here as it is the primary task of this thesis to do so and it will be undertaken throughout the remainder of this work, particularly in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

In the following chapter, I will argue that this type of learning is essential to moral learning on the Aristotelian account. I will also argue that virtue depends on several types of reasoning that fit Ryle's definition of knowledge-how. I will, in Chapters 3 and Chapter 4, further explicate how these faculties are types of knowledge-how and how they may be improved through exposure to narrative art.

Chapter 2: Aristotelian Ethics

The focus of this thesis prohibits an in-depth discussion of Aristotelian ethics, but I will try to give an adequate account of those parts of the theory that are particularly relevant for my arguments in the coming chapters. I will focus particularly on Aristotle's conception of the virtuous agent: on the type of person that he is, on his education and development, and on his moral conduct.

I will try to show that virtue is a type of knowledge-how. It possesses all the features of knowledge-how outlined in the previous chapter. I will also try to explain how virtue depends on types of thinking that are themselves kinds of knowledge-how, so that in later chapters I may go on to show how narratives can improve the faculties of thinking necessary for the exercise of virtue and so aid in the achievement of virtue.

My primary task in this chapter will be to examine Aristotle's ethical picture, as it is formulated in *Nicomachean Ethics*. I will, however, depart from him at times in order to point towards areas where narratives might be able to play a role, as a prelude to more detailed discussion in later chapters.

I will proceed by making explicit, in Section A, some of the assumptions underlying Aristotle's account. In Section B, I will give a preliminary picture of Aristotle's ideal agent and of the type of abilities he has. Section C will deal with the virtues of character and Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. I will try to show here that hitting the mean is a type of knowledge-how. In Section D I will outline practical wisdom, the intellectual virtue most centrally required for leading a good life. Finally, In Section E, I will outline Aristotle's account of moral learning.

A) The Foundations of Aristotelian Ethics

Aristotle's ethics is an agent-centred theory. Its aim is to explain what is involved in living the best sort of human life and to show how this may be achieved. Consequently, it incorporates the entire range of human action within the moral domain. Everything a person might think, or feel, or do, has moral relevance.

While all aspects of human life are subject to ethical censure, the demands of virtue are not construed as a stern check on human behaviour, preventing us from indulging our natural inclinations. The person is not seen as a fundamentally flawed creature whose instincts must be curtailed for society to flourish. Instead, the ethical life is construed as the ultimate expression of humanity. Its goal is the provision of a happy human life, one that contains all human goods.

The question, 'What is the right way to live?' might strike many people as an important one that requires resolution. Most of us have probably given it a good deal of thought at one time or another. Nevertheless it most probably won't strike most of us as an ethical question. Ethics seems instead to be about what is right or wrong, particularly with respect to actions. Is abortion wrong? Is the death penalty? These seem like ethical questions. How we ought to live seems like a question for a career counsellor rather than a philosopher. Nevertheless this is precisely the question Aristotle takes as driving his ethical inquiry. For Aristotle, the question of how we ought to live is the fundamental question of ethics.

While he answers it by suggesting that we ought to live in a way that produces a happy human life, this does not refer to some fleeting human emotion. Rather the focus is on living the most rewarding type of life: a life that contains all the goods a human life should contain⁵³. The reason Aristotle's ethics has such a powerful appeal is that the ideal he sketches is, a paradigmatically human life. He does not view the basic human appetites we have, qua animals, as inherently wrong or problematic. Their satisfaction is part of a good life. Their exclusion would lead to a life that was deficient in an important way. While acknowledging our animal nature Aristotle, at the same time, recognises that we are much more than mere beasts. In virtue of our rationality, we each contain a spark of the divine and as a consequence are capable of higher, more uniquely human goods.

⁵³ It should be noted from the outset that Aristotle is an objectivist (in the sense that the world is taken as being a certain way independent of the way it is perceived by human minds). His objectivism is revealed in all aspects of his account. As evidence one may take the 'function argument' (discussed below) which is dependent on the notion that there is some objective thing that constitutes the greatest human good and, regardless of what we happen to desire, virtuous activity will result in the most satisfactory life for every human. Similarly the doctrine of the mean (which will be dealt with later in the chapter) relies upon there being an objective mark that a person must learn to hit. As I am interested in how narratives may contribute to learning on the Aristotelian model, I will assume the truth of objectivism throughout this thesis.

On Aristotle's view what are truly important are not simply the goods a life contains, but how they are pursued, how they are enjoyed and how they fit together within the course of a life.

I find Aristotle's basic conception of humanity to be inherently appealing. While he holds a dim view of the masses of humankind his picture is, despite his cynicism, positive about human potential. At birth we have enormous potential for achieving excellence, but we become what we are primarily through environment and upbringing. If we are raised well, we are capable of attaining greatness in character and spirit. It is simply an unfortunate empirical fact that very few people will receive the type of upbringing that Aristotle believed to be essential for the proper fulfilment of human potential.

Aristotle's idea of humans as intrinsically rational and social creatures, leads to a moral system that takes the proper development of an individual as its central focus⁵⁴, i.e. 'agent-centred'. Aristotle is concerned to show how excellence may be attained even whilst acknowledging that for most people this will be impossible.

Nevertheless, to say that most people are not capable of virtue is not to say that they are not capable of doing the right thing. This is important to keep in mind. 'Virtue', as Aristotle uses the term, means excellence. To do something excellently is to do it as well as it can be done. It is to do it for the right reasons, in the right way, with the right feelings and at the right time. Yet one can do the right thing without doing it excellently. One can do it for the wrong reasons, or accidentally, or not as well as possible. There is room in Aristotle's ethics for people who act rightly, but do not instantiate the virtues. The temperate person, for example, does the right thing despite a felt inclination to

⁵⁴ The question of whether ancient ethical theories, centred as they are on the achievement of *eudaimonia*, are inherently egoistic is one that has been the focus of some debate. Julia Annas has, in *The Morality of Happiness*, argued that though these theories, Aristotelianism among them, might be formally egoistic they in no way preclude concern for the interests of others, for their own sake and not just in so far as they contribute to our own achievement of *eudaimonia*. For my own part Aristotle's theory does strike me as inherently egoistic. Friendships, particularly of the best sort, are depicted as valuable because of the role they play in contributing to a person's happiness. Social responsibilities arise because of the benefit social interaction has on an individual's life and not because there is any inherent value, moral or otherwise, in securing other people's happiness or well being. To say that concern for others, for their own sake, is not precluded by Aristotelianism is perfectly true, but Annas seems to assume that such a concern is incompatible with egoism. Yet concern for others, for their own sake, is depicted by Aristotle as part of concern for self, for such concern is required for true friendship and no one would willingly choose to go through life without friends.

something else and so falls short of virtue. To act virtuously is to act expertly and, as with any expertise, getting it right depends on knowledge of how to act in that way, and an ability to instantiate that knowledge in action. I will later argue that virtue is a paradigmatic kind of knowledge-how, which fits all the criteria given in the previous chapter.

The excellent human life, *eudaimonia*, will be the life that contains all the goods a human life should contain, in the proper proportion and in the right way. Aristotle's conception of what such a life looks like proceeds from the observation that a human is a uniquely rational animal and so an excellent human life will be one that consists in properly applying those capacities that make us unique to all the actions that are performed. This is true of activities like satisfying bodily appetites, which other animals also perform, as well as those that we are distinctively capable of. The life that most properly instantiates our rationality will be the best type of life. It must include all goods, but especially the highest goods, those resulting directly from our rational capacities.⁵⁵

B) A Preliminary Picture of the Virtuous Person

At the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle warns his audience that he will not provide precise rules for moral conduct. Such rules are impossible. No rule will ever be able to cover every situation that will arise amidst the complexities of a human life. At best such rules can serve as a general guide to behaviour. Yet the truly virtuous person will not need a detailed guide for action. He is a man⁵⁶ of understanding. He assesses each situation and possesses a character that enables him to see what the right thing to do in any given situation is. He will be aware of when action is required and, when it is, he

⁵⁵ For fuller discussions of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* see Thomas Nagel, 'Aristotle on Eudaimonia', as well as J.L. Ackrill's paper of the same title. There is a distinct tension in Aristotle's writings between two different conceptions of *Eudaimonia*. The first seems to hold contemplative activity as the determining factor in the good life. The other puts across the exercise of the full range of human capacities in accordance with the virtues, as constitutive of *Eudaimonia*. My own inclination is to view the latter account as the one Aristotle intended as primary. Both papers examine the seeming vacillation between the different conceptions.

⁵⁶ I employ the masculine here, as in the rest of this chapter, because Aristotle thought that only a man could be a virtuous person, even though there is no reason, when free of ancient biases, to restrict the attainment of virtue to men.

will act at the right time, in the right way and for the right reasons and he will do so successfully unless chance circumstances or bad luck intervenes.

It must be noted that Aristotle's assertion that moral rules cannot be sufficient for virtue entails that propositional knowledge cannot suffice for virtue. It is the knowledge of how to assess and respond to a situation that characterises virtue and, as has already been shown in the previous chapter, the thinking involved in discovering truths about the particulars of a situation and knowing what to do with them, is itself a kind of knowledge-how.

Of course, an ability to respond to the particulars of a situation is deemed valuable on all moral theories.⁵⁷ Whatever theory one might prescribe to, properly understanding the situation that one applies the theory to will be crucial for getting moral action right. So too, proper motivation and successful action will be valued, on any account, to a greater or lesser extent. The proper reading of a situation, proper motivation, reasoning and action are all factors in a person's moral life. While other theories will place more emphasis on one or another of these aspects, Aristotle regards them all as equally important. The virtuous person is the type of person who is able to go right in all spheres. If narratives can aid us in acquiring these abilities they will prove to be valuable to our development as moral agents.

Aristotle conceived of a two part division of that part of the soul that is uniquely human: one with reason, one without⁵⁸. Each part has its characteristic activity and virtues (i.e., excellences) related to it. The part that has reason gives rise to the intellectual virtues, of which practical wisdom is the most important for ethics.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁷ R. Crisp, 'Particularizing Particularism'.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2000, 1139a, p. 103. All references to *Nicomachean Ethics* are taken from Roger Crisp's edition unless stated otherwise. Please note also that Crisp usually provides only one margin number per page, so the margin numbers I cite are all the closest preceding numbers that Crisp provides.

⁵⁹ Just how important the other intellectual virtues are for the achievement of *eudaimonia* is somewhat controversial. While it seems inescapable that the virtuous person would require some theoretical excellence in order to exercise the virtues, it doesn't seem that excellence in all areas of theoretical inquiry should be necessary for *eudaimonia*. Some philosophers, like Nancy Sherman, have argued that the virtuous person need only be able to know how to locate facts he needs, he need not possess theoretical excellence himself. Others, like Richard Kraut, take theoretical wisdom as being more important to the achievement of *eudaimonia* than practical wisdom. Part of the disagreement rests on the way Aristotle's vacillations between the two conceptions of *eudaimonia* are interpreted. My own understanding lies along with Sherman's here, for if all the theoretical virtues were required for a virtuous character the bar for virtue would be set too high. A person would essentially need to be a genius before they could be good and this just seems wrong.

part that is not rational is still related to reason, for it is capable both of obeying reason and of opposing it. The virtues related to this part are the virtues of character, such as temperance, generosity and so on.

The virtuous person possesses both practical wisdom and the virtues of character. Aristotle repeatedly reminds us, however, that virtue is not a state. It is an activity⁶⁰. Excellence is achieved not in being a certain way, but in acting the right way. To act in the right way requires that one act at the right time, for the right reason and from a firm and unchanging character. Our ability to act in this way depends on our having practical wisdom, an ability to reason excellently about our actions and ourselves.

While I will be treating the virtues of character and practical wisdom in different sections it is important to realise that they are intimately related and so discussion of one will inform and enrich discussion of the other. I turn first to the virtues of character.

C) The Virtues of Character and the Doctrine of the Mean

If activities are, as we have said, what really matter in life, no one blessed could become truly wretched, since he will never do hateful and petty actions. For the truly good and wise person, we believe, bears all the fortunes of life with dignity and always does the noblest thing in the circumstances.⁶¹

The focus of the good life, for Aristotle, is proper action. The ‘truly good and wise person’ always does what’s noblest in the circumstances. Yet what is important is not just that these actions are performed, but that they are done so from the possession of a steady character: from a virtuous character. While the virtues of the intellect have a role to play, the virtues of character are most centrally concerned with action. For every sphere of human action there is the potential to act and feel rightly or wrongly. In acting and feeling, one can go wrong by doing too much or too little, but to get things right is to find the mean between these two extremes and this is what the virtuous person does: he hits the mean. Virtue is a mean between the two extremes of excess and deficiency in

⁶⁰ This might be putting the point too strongly, for Aristotle also tells us that virtue is a disposition. Nevertheless, it is a disposition only in so far as possessing a virtuous character disposes a person to act properly. Aristotle refers to virtue as a disposition primarily in referring to situations where a person lacks the time to deliberate and come to a reasoned response. In such cases a person acts ‘according to character’, which is to say that they act as their character disposes them to act. Virtue is still instantiated through action, but a person who has a virtuous character will be disposed to act virtuously in all situations.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1101a, p. 18.

feeling and in action. I will try to show, later, that hitting the mean is a kind of knowledge-how.

Unlike many other ethical theorists, Aristotle considers the affective component of our actions to be crucial. Part of acting the right way consists in feeling the right way towards the action and situation. The virtuous person is not an impartial, or indifferent, actor. He has an appropriate emotional response both to his environment and his actions. So it is not enough that we perform the action the virtuous person would, we must also perform it in the way he would, i.e. for the right reason, with appropriate feeling.

Right reason and appropriate feeling are, however, intimately related. The virtuous person possesses a character that finds its greatest pleasure in doing fine and noble actions. As a result, the reason he acts is from love of the good, because he has learned that the good is what is most pleasurable and best. A large part of ethical education is developing proper feeling, coming to learn that right action is essentially pleasurable.

While I will undertake an in-depth discussion of how the virtues of character are developed later in this chapter, a few words on the subject will be useful to help explain what they are. Aristotle begins his discussion on the virtues of character with the claim that humans have the capacity to acquire them, but they can only be gained through proper habituation. They are similar to a skill, for just as becoming a good guitarist requires that one play guitar, so too to with virtue. To become virtuous one must perform virtuous actions.

So Aristotle writes:

...by acting as we do in our dealings with men, some of us become just, others unjust; and by acting as we do in the face of danger, and by becoming habituated to feeling fear or confidence, some of us become courageous, others cowardly. The same goes for cases of appetite and anger; by conducting themselves in one way or the other in such circumstances, some become temperate and even-tempered, others intemperate and bad tempered. In a word, then, like states arise from like activities. This is why we must give a certain character to our activities, since it is on the difference between them that the resulting states depend.⁶²

The virtues of character are, crucially, properties of a person's character. The way a person interprets a situation, the things he thinks merits response and the way he acts are all the result of the type of person he is. They are the result of his character. While

⁶² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b, p. 24.

people might be born with dispositions to act in particular ways, their actual characters are formed over time. They are influenced by environment, education and, as Aristotle rightly points out, by the things they do. Someone who often enjoys going out and getting drunk will become an alcoholic, unless he changes his behaviour. A person who often enjoys spending time reading, will become bookish. Similarly, performing evil actions will result in the development of an evil character and performing virtuous actions will result in a virtuous one. This is not to say simply that our characters are the result of the things we do. They are, more properly, a result of engaging in activities we enjoy doing. There may be many reasons why we do certain things, but when we do them because we enjoy them then can we most credibly be called someone for whom doing a thing is in character.⁶³ It is through gaining pleasure from an activity that it becomes part of who we are. If someone doesn't enjoy drinking he is unlikely to become a drunk and if someone doesn't enjoy virtuous activity he cannot become virtuous. In performing actions we exercise the qualities and abilities they call upon. The more we exercise them the more they become a part of who we are, but it is in deriving pleasure from them that we become inclined to exercise them. If we spend a great deal of time engaged in particular activities we come to be a certain kind of person; one who does those things.

Yet the acquisition of the virtues depends not only on performing right actions, but also on doing so in the right way. The right way, for Aristotle, means finding that mean between deficiency and excess:⁶⁴

Virtue, then, is a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to and determined by reason - the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. It is a mean also in that some vices fall short of what is right in feelings and actions, and others exceed it, while virtue both attains and chooses the mean. So, in respect of its essences and the definition of its substance, virtue is a mean, while with regard to what is best and good it is an extreme.⁶⁵

The doctrine applies both to feeling and to action. One can go wrong by feeling too little or too much, just as one can go wrong by acting in a way that is excessive of or deficient in what the situation calls for. If one is to hit the mean, one must do so both with respect

⁶³ Urmson makes this point in *Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 27.

⁶⁴ For a fuller account of the doctrine of the mean see J. O. Urmson's excellent discussion in 'Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean'.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a, p. 31.

to feeling and action. Getting it right requires that we feel and act in relation to the right thing, in the right degree, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way.

It is important to be aware, though, that the doctrine of the mean is not a doctrine of moderation. While it is a mean between two extremes this is not to suggest that it calls for us to land midway between some overwhelming action and a failure to act. To hit the mean is to perform the action and feel the emotion appropriate to a situation. Sometimes that might be one that seems 'extreme'. Extreme anger, for example, might be just the response required when witnessing an innocent person being lynched. Extreme love might be just the appropriate response to your wife. That is why Aristotle says that with regard to what is best and good the mean is an extreme.

One can miss the mean in two ways, each corresponding to a vice, one of excess and the other of deficiency. So if we see a person being lynched, if we watch as he is stripped and beaten and mutilated and we feel nothing, we miss the mean by having a deficient emotional response. If we then do nothing to help the person we miss the mean again, by doing less than the situation requires of us. Similarly, if we become so angry that we cannot move, or if we respond by gunning down the mob, we miss the mean again through feeling and acting excessively.

Hitting the mean requires that we respond correctly to a situation. There is, however, no one response that is correct for everyone. The mean is determined relative to each person. Individual facts and circumstances are important in determining what the right response is. Yet this is not to say that the mean is subjectively relative, that it is determined by each person. Aristotle is a strict objectivist, what is right is not determined by our perceptions or desires. Rather to hit the mean is to do what the virtuous person would do in our circumstances. To say that the mean is relative to an individual is simply to account for the fact that personal differences may be ethically relevant. So generosity, for example, is a virtue in the sphere of giving and retaining money. If a person is very poor then, in giving away R100 to charity, he might miss the mean by giving more than he should. Giving this amount might leave him unable properly to support his family. On the other hand, if someone is very wealthy and gives away the same amount he might miss the mean by giving too little. They can both give the same amount and miss the mark in different ways, because the mean is determined relative to them. Their personal

financial circumstances are objectively relevant in influencing what the right amount for them to give is.

It is important to notice, in the account of the mean, Aristotle's emphasis on what is required for right action. It requires proper feeling, and it must be performed in a way that is appropriate to the circumstances. The virtuous person, who is able to get all these things right, is an actor sensitive to the requirements of each situation. He is also able to do so on every occasion, for his ability to get things right stems from his stable character. Hitting the mean is not an instinctive ability that results from possession of certain character traits. The intellect has an important role to play. Proper feeling relies on proper reasoning, as does effective action.

Yet hitting the mean in action cannot be solely the result of knowledge-that, for two reasons. Firstly, the mean is primarily determined by the particulars of the situation. Coming to know what the mean is requires the type of thinking involved in discovering facts, a type of thinking that is a kind of knowledge-how⁶⁶. Secondly, in acting one will apply knowledge in order to bring about a result appropriate to the situation. Knowing how to apply facts, particularly knowing how to do so excellently, similarly involves knowledge-how.

The virtuous person's hitting the mark is analogous to Ryle's clever chess player, who is able to discover his opponent's strategy, understands what moves are appropriate to the circumstances of the game and is able to implement his own strategy effectively.

To hit the mean one must similarly understand why a way of responding to a situation is appropriate to it. One must then know how to instantiate that way in the situation.

Hitting the mean with respect to feeling seems, on Aristotle's account, similarly to be a kind of knowledge-how. The mean involves rational choice and is determined by reason. Yet determining the right way to feel about a situation must also be a result of apprehending the particulars of a situation and determining, on that basis, what emotion is proper and then being able to instantiate it. Aristotle holds that emotion belongs to that part of the soul that is related to reason, so it is amenable to reason in the way required for knowledge-how.

⁶⁶ See the previous chapter.

I will argue, in Chapters 3 and 4, that the type of reasoning that is involved in hitting the mark involve faculties that are themselves kinds of knowledge-how: conceptual, emotional and imaginative understanding. Importantly, I will argue, these are also kinds of knowledge-how that may be improved through exposure to narrative art.

D) Practical Wisdom

In order to be virtuous a person must have the virtues of character and practical wisdom. Yet one cannot possess any virtue without possessing all the virtues, one cannot possess the virtues of character without possessing practical wisdom and vice versa. Character can only be excellent if it is informed and guided by reason, just as reason can only be excellent if it aims for the right thing and its aim is determined by desires set by virtuous character. Though there is good reason for Aristotle to treat the virtues of character and practical wisdom separately, his approach may be misleading for they are intimately connected, as will become clear from the discussion to follow.

The virtues of character are excellences of that part of the soul that is responsive to reason. If one is to cultivate them successfully they must respond to right reason. So if one is to acquire the virtues of character one must possess right reason, particularly right reason as it relates to action for, as I have already discussed, character is a result of action. Practical wisdom is the virtue of the rational part of the soul that shapes character. If we are to develop virtuous characters we must acquire practical wisdom, for this is the intellectual virtue that most centrally concerns action. So Aristotle says that ‘virtue is not merely the state in accordance with right reason, but that which involves it. And practical wisdom is right reason about such matters.’⁶⁷ This statement makes clear that virtuous action involves practical wisdom essentially. Actions in accordance with what practical wisdom would dictate are not enough for virtuous action; rather actions must stem from the type of successful reasoning that the man of practical wisdom engages in.⁶⁸ Right actions must result from right reasoning and not some other factor.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 1144b, p. 118.

⁶⁸ In the following chapters I will try to show that the three faculties I mentioned at the end of the previous section, conceptual, emotional and imaginative understanding, are required for the type of reasoning that the man of practical wisdom engages in.

This should not be surprising. The virtuous person is one who always acts in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons, etc. An ability to act with this type of success is not possible without being directed by a process of successful reasoning. It might be possible to act in the right way through luck, or chance, but one cannot, in that way, do so for the right reasons. Similarly while we might act rightly on some occasions without doing so from a process of reasoning, we are unlikely to get things right often if we are not guided by an understanding of what virtue requires us to do. Practical wisdom is a matter of knowing how to act rightly, *of knowing how to reason properly about one's actions*.

The ability to do so is, generally speaking, what practical wisdom is. A precise definition is, however, very difficult to give. One reason for this difficulty is suggested by the discussion of knowledge-how given in the previous chapter. Knowledge-how does not have clear, easily definable content. It is exhibited and identifiable only in action. If a person always acts rightly it would be fair to say that they know how to do so, or that they possess practical wisdom.

Urmson also points out that an Aristotelian definition is not intended to give us the meaning of a word, rather it tells us what the thing defined really is.⁶⁹ This often involves telling us what it is not. Practical wisdom, for instance, does not deal with what cannot be otherwise, for its sphere is intentional action and what is done intentionally could always have been different. A proper understanding of practical wisdom will need to be obtained from a discussion of what it involves. To explain what is involved in knowing-how to do something one must explain what is involved in getting that thing right.

Practical wisdom is concerned with action. Action, however, is the primary focus of Aristotelian virtue. To say that practical wisdom is concerned with action is to say nothing more helpful than that practical wisdom is a large part of virtue, for the virtuous person is ultimately little more than an excellent actor. Practical wisdom, in so far as it is required for proper action, is therefore crucial to living a virtuous life. The role it plays must therefore extend well beyond reasoning about individual actions to reasoning about the role actions play within a life and all that involves. So Aristotle assigns it a role in

⁶⁹ Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics*, p. 15.



determining and modifying the motivation and reasons for acting and a role in directing the way actions are performed. Beyond this, actions are merely the means for attaining particular values and because there are many incommensurable values that we may pursue, practical wisdom must determine what role any given value should play within a life, it must determine how such a value should be pursued and the way it should stand in relation to other values. This is why Aristotle tells us:

Practical wisdom, then, must be a true state involving reason, concerned with action in relation to human goods.⁷⁰

Aristotle begins the discussion on practical wisdom by inquiring into how we are moved to act. He concludes that we are motivated by our thought and our desires. Being properly moved to action requires that both thought and desire be correct. It requires that we act on the basis of deliberative desire. He writes:

...since virtue of character is a state involving rational choice, and rational choice is deliberative desire, the reason must be true and the desire correct, if the rational choice is to be good, and desire must pursue what reason asserts. Such thought and truth are practical...in the case of what is practical and concerned with thought, its being good consists in truth in agreement with correct desire.⁷¹

Deliberative desire, and rational choice, must be for something. Humans pursue things that they desire, but the virtuous person pursues what is, objectively, most desirable and does so in the right way, through proper action. Reasoning correctly about what is most desirable is the first part of practical wisdom. Aristotle holds that, independent of what a person might happen to think, value, or desire, there are better and worse things to do in a situation and better and worse values that a person might pursue. Practical wisdom enables the virtuous person to apprehend what the right thing is, but it is not alone sufficient to produce virtuous action. A person must still be one whose desires are responsive to reason. Having apprehended that something is the best thing to do, one must want to do it as a result of the process of successful reasoning. Once one has decided that some goal should be pursued, one must reason about how to go about doing so. This is the second part of practical wisdom, reasoning about purposeful actions.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 1140b, p. 108.

⁷¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a, p. 104.

These two parts are, however, interrelated so it is impossible to separate their treatment entirely, but it will be helpful if their distinction is kept in mind as the discussion proceeds.

I've already spoken about the importance of proper feeling in the Aristotelian account. An action cannot be virtuous unless it is accompanied by proper emotion. The desires motivating our actions must be similarly proper if our actions are to be virtuous. Aristotle states that 'desire must pursue what reason asserts.' Our desires must follow from our proper understanding of what is actually desirable and this is what is objectively to our benefit. It is in our interest to be healthy, so it is proper that we desire to be healthy and desire to take what action is needed to ensure our health.

Proper feeling is related to reason in a similar way. Like desire, feelings should respond to reason in the sense that if an action/situation arises that is valuable, then one should feel positively towards it. If a situation arises that is disvaluable one should feel negatively. Practical wisdom is therefore involved in proper feeling. Our emotions must follow from our proper reasoning about what emotions are warranted by particular circumstances in the world. Having the emotion where such situations arise, is part of the proper assessment of the situation and also a rational judgement in its own right. To feel in a certain way about what is occurring is part of what it is to judge a situation properly; while proper construal of the situation is itself informed by proper feeling. If proper emotion does not accompany the judgement then the judgement is deficient in an important way⁷². An example might help make this point clearer:

A mother's only daughter, who she loves deeply, is dying from terminal cancer. As she sits by her bedside emotion should already colour her construal of the situation in a certain way. She should perceive it in a way appropriate to her love for the girl who is suffering. She should not see the situation as a neutral observer might. Similarly her emotional response to the situation should follow from a proper assessment of it. If she appeared carefree, then her lack of powerful emotion would seem suspicious. One might be tempted to ask her if she's aware that her daughter is going to die. If she replied in the affirmative, one would be inclined to think that the information hasn't been internalised

⁷² I will outline, in Chapter 4, two modern accounts of the emotions and show how they may be merged to form one that is very close to Aristotle's own understanding. I will also show how it results in emotion being a type of knowledge-how and that this knowledge can be improved by exposure to narrative art.

in a proper fashion, because if she truly understood these facts she would be grief-stricken. Part of properly understanding the unfortunate facts of the situation seems to require this type of emotional response. If this is absent it seems to imply a problem somewhere in the mother's understanding, or reasoning, or in her character.

Just as emotion must arise from the proper judgement of a situation, judgement can't be proper if it is tainted by unsuitable emotion. If, for example, I was in a foul mood and misinterpreted a friendly comment because of it, I would be guilty of faulty reasoning for my entire construal of the situation had been influenced by feelings inappropriate to it. A faulty construal leads to a faulty judgement. Similarly, an improper emotional response is itself a faulty judgement. If I correctly interpreted the comment as friendly, but still got angry, then the anger seems to show that my understanding was deficient. If I properly understood that the comment was a friendly action, that it is something positive and valuable, then I would not have reacted with anger. Part of practical wisdom is properly construing a situation, but how we construe it is determined by the character we have, an important part of which are the emotions we feel. Nancy Sherman writes:

On Aristotle's view, an ethical theory that begins with the justification of a decision to act begins too far down the road. Preliminary to deciding *how* to act, one must acknowledge that the situation requires action. The decision must arise from a reading of the circumstances. This reading, or reaction, is informed by ethical considerations expressive of the agent's virtue. Perception is thus informed by the virtues. The agent will be responsible for how the situation appears as well as for omissions and distortions. Accordingly, much of the work of virtue will rest in knowing how to construe the case, how to *describe and classify* what is before one.⁷³

Before one can react virtuously to a situation a correct assessment must be made. Relevant features must be noticed and their relevance understood. The features that are perceived as being relevant, and the way they are understood, are influenced by the character of the person making the assessment and their general reasoning about what is or is not important. Knowing how to read a situation, being able to properly 'describe and classify' it is therefore key to practical wisdom.

The point must be made here that if it turns out that narratives can help us in developing skills of description and classification, then they can aid in a significant way the development of practical wisdom. Knowing how to classify is largely dependant on

⁷³ My emphasis. N. Sherman, '*The Fabric of Character*', p. 29

conceptual skills, which I will argue in the next chapter can be improved through our exposure to fictions.

Part of properly construing, or 'describing', a situation will also require that one imaginatively fill out details that aren't immediately perceivable. People's motivations, or expectations, or prior causes are all factors relevant to judging a situation, but how we fill them in will depend on our own 'imaginative understanding' of the circumstances. I will argue, in Chapter 4, that this is also a kind of knowing-how which may be improved through exposure to narratives.

Our readings of particular circumstances, as well as our reasoning about how to respond are also informed by the values that we have. So Aristotle says that:

We may grasp what practical wisdom is by considering the sort of people we describe as practically wise. It seems to be characteristic of the practically wise person to be able to deliberate nobly about what is good and beneficial for himself, not in particular respects, such as what conduces to health or strength, but about what conduces to living well as a whole.⁷⁴

It is important to remember that, though practical wisdom is necessary for arriving at the mean in a particular situation, Aristotelian ethics is far less concerned with individual actions than it is with the development of character. Practical wisdom is crucial to the development of a virtuous character.

Practical wisdom is crucial to deciding what goods a person should pursue over the course of a lifetime. It chooses between competing and incommensurable goods and is able to successfully decide which should be pursued, at what right time, in what circumstances etc. Deliberating about what conduces to living well as a whole is about getting the balance right and it only concerns goods that are achievable in action. There are many ends worth pursuing, but as to pursue one might prevent the pursuit of another, the person of practical wisdom is able to correctly judge when and in what way each should be pursued.⁷⁵ What we ultimately desire is therefore informed by this process of deliberation.

The person who deliberates well chooses the best goods for himself. Because, according to Aristotle, what is most desirable in life is living virtuously, a bad person

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a, p. 107.

⁷⁵ Martha Nussbaum argues that narratives are uniquely suited to improving our ability to make these kinds of decisions. See particularly 'Flawed Crystals', but also 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible' and 'The Discernment of Perception'

cannot deliberate well. The bad person chooses lesser goods over the acquisition of the virtues. He also gets the balance wrong, choosing, for example, an abundance of sensual pleasures at the expense of intellectual contemplation. As a result, the bad person cannot be practically wise. His faulty deliberation leads him to incorrect desires and their satisfaction cannot result in happiness.

It should also be noted that, on Aristotle's account, the virtues do not make competing claims. The demands on action made by the virtue of temperance cannot clash in a particular situation with demands made by some other virtue, say generosity. In any situation what is right to do is that which the virtuous person would do. As the virtues are an all or nothing affair, competing actions cannot be called for. All the virtues are intrinsic to the virtuous person's character and this character is not torn by internal conflict between some virtue or another because practical wisdom determines his values⁷⁶. Nevertheless, in the course of a life, we will be faced with a huge amount of possible choices for action and in many circumstances *prima facie* conflicts might arise between the demands of the different virtues, as we consider the options before us. Practical wisdom is the faculty that helps resolve apparent conflicts. Just as good deliberation enables us to properly decide on courses of action that contribute to good living, so practical wisdom can resolve apparent conflicts in particular situations, by making salient what the truly virtuous thing to do is.

Practical wisdom also determines how we go about achieving the ends we judge worthy of pursuit.

⁷⁶ The idea that if a person possesses any virtue he must possess them all is fairly controversial, as it seems counterintuitive in many cases. It seems strange to suppose that a man who lacks the virtue of wit could not still possess the virtue of courage. Nevertheless, I think that there is a very strong case to be made on behalf of the unity of the virtues. Any virtuous action needs to be performed from a love of the good and from proper deliberation about overall values and the particular circumstances of a situation. A person who finds their greatest pleasure in good action and who is able to reason properly about their life and about concrete circumstances already has a certain character that will be exhibited in all spheres. There is no reason for them to fail in one sphere if they truly possess the character requisite for virtue, as failure can only arise through improper feeling or judgement. If a person is capable of the high standards of character and judgement required to achieve any one virtue, then it seems that they must be able to achieve them all. If a person's wit is virtuous, then it must be exercised because they find their greatest pleasure in the good, of which it is an instantiation, and they will also exhibit sensitive judgement about what is funny generally and in particular situations. Someone of that sort is unlikely to then turn around and act cowardly in a fearful situation, because they find their greatest pleasure in the good, which guides their actions, and possess the sensitive judgement to see what the good in that situation is.

...our characteristic activity is achieved in accordance with practical wisdom and virtue of character; for virtue makes the aim right, and practical wisdom the thing towards it.⁷⁷

If courage is a part of our character we will desire to act courageously, but what the courageous thing to do in a situation is, needs to be determined by reason. Practical wisdom is the faculty that recognises that a courageous action is called for in this circumstance and shows us what action will satisfy our desire to act courageously. To illustrate this point consider a situation where my employer begins denigrating a friend of mine in front of several other employees. What he says is patently false. I am on the verge of a huge promotion. I know that my employer does not like to be corrected, or to hear opinions that oppose his own. I know that if I speak out in defence of my friend I am likely to lose the promotion. Nevertheless I am a courageous person and desire to speak out even if that puts my own job and security at risk. How am I to do this? When and in what way? Do I tell him right there, in front of everyone that he is wrong and demand an apology? Do I wait till we're alone? What tone of voice do I adopt? These questions and others need to be answered in deciding on a course of action and it is the job of practical reason to answer them. Virtuous action requires not only that we do what is right but that we do it in the best way and what that way is needs to be determined on the basis of the particulars of the situation. The practically wise person is able to resolve these difficulties and successfully bring about the end he wants.

This is why the practically wise person also possesses cleverness, which relates to the ability to achieve ends successfully⁷⁸. The virtuous person not only sets the right goal. He achieves it. It is characteristic of the virtuous person to bring about the good he desires in the world. Cleverness is the faculty that relates to successfully executing one's plans in the world.⁷⁹

We should note though that while proper judgement is crucial to practical wisdom it is, in many ways, dependent on experience.

What I have said is supported by the fact that, though the young become proficient in geometry and mathematics, and wise in matters like these, they do not seem to become

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a, p. 116.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 1144a, p. 116.

⁷⁹ As has already been mentioned, the type of thinking involved in assessing a situation in order to determine that action is required, in deciding on the way to approach a situation, and in applying knowledge successfully to the circumstances of the world are all types of knowledge-how.

practically wise. The reason is that practical wisdom is concerned with particular facts, and particulars come to be known from experience; and a young person is not experienced, since experience takes a long time to produce.⁸⁰

There are many aspects of a situation for which experience is required in order for a proper judgement to be made. I want to turn briefly to character judgement as an illustration of Aristotle's point. To properly understand why some people act in the way they do requires proper assessment of some fairly complex psychological information. Their state of mind, motives, goals, and how they might be influenced by factors outside them, as well as many other factors, need to be assessed. When we are young we tend to be poor judges of character. Due to our inexperience we are not yet acquainted with all the things that can cause people to act as they do.⁸¹ This is a result of lack of exposure. To become a good judge of character takes time and observation. To become practically wise requires experience.

There are also types of knowledge that require comparison, and so experience, to acquire. Knowing the difference between, for example, good works of art and bad ones requires experience of both. It is in comparing them that the good shows up the bad for what it is. Knowledge of particulars is like this, for it is in comparing many circumstances that one is able to properly understand the relevance of the particulars in one.

In addition, to acquire any of the virtues of character requires experience in the sphere of action they pertain to. Virtue in any sphere requires action to be based on deliberative desire and it requires that action be successful. It is often difficult to deliberate about situations that one has little experience of and so difficult to act successfully therein. For Aristotle, 'a large part of learning takes place in the experience of the concrete'⁸² and so one is unlikely to excel in areas where one has no experience of what is involved.

One cannot, for example, develop courage without having been in fearful situations. Remember, that to be virtuous requires that an action be done from right reason and with proper feeling. If one were in a fearful situation for the first time, one is

⁸⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a, p. 111.

⁸¹ This, it will be explained in chapter 4, is also a faculty that is dependant on imaginative understanding and may be improved through exposure to narrative art.

⁸² M. Nussbaum, 'Form and Content', p. 44.

unlikely to instantiate the virtue of courage, as to do so would require that one not act from fear, but from proper reasoning and love of the good. This is true even if fear leads one to act in the way the courageous person would.

It is possible that fictions may be able to provide experience requisite for virtue, as they offer a rich source for the vicarious experience of circumstances that one might never encounter in the course of an actual life. Consider, as an example, that many novels have been written about war, and many of those by authors who were themselves soldiers. Their detailed descriptions of what it was like to be in fearful combat situations can provide their audience with vicarious knowledge of the particulars involved. These might include the physiological changes that accompany the onset of a battle, or reasons that prevented or allowed a soldier to perform the required actions and so on. Becoming aware of such details through art might lead one to a heightened awareness when encountering a relevantly similar situation in practice, which might foster a proper responsiveness.⁸³

It is unlikely that Aristotle would himself be willing to accept vicarious experience as being of the kind relevant to the acquisition of particular virtues. Nevertheless because so much of virtue depends upon properly construing a situation, if the type of vicarious experience we get from fictions can aid us in approaching and classifying particular circumstances such as war in the right way, prior to our actually experiencing situations of that type, then they can be seen to contribute to virtue nonetheless. I will argue, in the coming chapters, that narratives can improve faculties such as conceptual organisation, emotional and imaginative understanding, which are utilised in assessing a situation. The vicarious experience gained from narratives will therefore aid a person in coming to a proper assessment of novel situations, by guiding how they construe them as a result of the influence they have on these faculties.

E) Developing a Virtuous Character

⁸³ It is also because of the way that an author presents the details as being relevant that the audience is led to know how they should be understood. This point will be elaborated on in Chapters 4 and 5.

Because virtuous action involves both affective and cognitive components, the development of good character requires the development of these faculties as well as the development of proper interaction between them. Aristotle identifies two stages in the virtuous person's development, the first is in coming to realise *that* virtuous action is pleasurable and desirable for its own sake, and it is here that I think narratives have a role to play. The lectures given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are intended for people who have reached this stage. They are designed to aid them to progress to an understanding of *why* virtuous action is in fact the greatest good. This is the second part of moral education and is necessary for the attainment of practical wisdom and full virtue, but I do not think that narratives can be of any great benefit here.⁸⁴ These stages aren't strictly separate. In understanding that virtue is desirable for its own sake, one will begin to understand why it is.

I will adopt Burnyeat's terminology and call coming to know that virtue is desirable for its own sake 'the that'. Whereas coming to understand why it is, is coming to 'the because.'

For while one must begin from what is familiar, this may be taken in two ways: some things are familiar to us, others familiar without qualification. Presumably, then, what *we* should begin from is things familiar to *us*. This is the reason why one should have been well brought up in good habits if one is going to listen adequately to lectures about things noble and just, and in general about political (social) affairs. For the beginning (starting point) is "the *that*," and if this is sufficiently apparent to a person, he will not in addition have a need for "the *because*."⁸⁵

These remarks should be interpreted in the context of Aristotle's repeated warnings that one cannot persuade, through reason, someone who doesn't have 'the that' that virtue is worth pursuing for its own sake. Such people will only respond to force. If one has never learned, through action, that virtuous activity is desirable for its own sake, no argument will be able to convince someone of this, as this knowledge can only be gained through experience.

⁸⁴ My understanding of Aristotle's account of moral development has been heavily influenced by Burnyeat, Sherman and Sorjabi. See M.F. Burnyeat, 'Aristotle on Learning to Be Good'. Richard Sorjabi 'Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue'. Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character and Making a Necessity of Virtue* and 'The Habituation of Character'. For other useful discussions on aspects of the acquisition of virtue see L. A. Kosman, 'Being Properly Affected',

⁸⁵ This translation is excerpted from Burnyeat in 'Aristotle on Learning to Be Good', p. 71. It may be found at 1095b, in the *Ethics*. I have taken the translation from Burnyeat as Crisp's translation does not use the same terms 'the that' and 'the because', which have become almost standard terminology as a result of the massive influence Burnyeat's paper has had.

In a sense, Aristotle's comments about 'the that' might seem to undermine the possibility of moral learning, for getting to 'the that' is the first part of moral education. Any young learner will not yet have 'the that', but if one cannot persuade someone who lacks 'the that' that it is desirable, how is the learner ever to understand that it is? Naturally Aristotle is aware of this point. His remarks about people not being able to get to 'the that' concern people whose characters are already formed. He thinks that once people are set in their ways they cannot be dissuaded through argument. The student is in a better position, his character is not yet formed, he is still learning what is most pleasurable and to his benefit, so he may still come to 'the that'. Nevertheless, argument alone is still insufficient for reaching 'the that'. While the learner must be told what is right and good, he must also be habituated to virtuous action. Habituation requires that the learner engage in right action in a way that approximates the way the virtuous person performs right action, i.e.:

Actions done in accordance with virtues are done in a just or temperate way not merely by having some quality of their own, but rather if the agent acts in a certain state, namely, first, with knowledge, secondly, from rational choice of the actions for their own sake, and, thirdly, from a firm and unshakable character... With regard to virtues, knowledge has little or no weight, while the other two conditions are not just slightly, but all-important. And these are the ones that result from often doing just and temperate actions. Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just and temperate person would do... So it is correct to say that it is by doing just actions that one becomes just, and by doing temperate actions temperate...⁸⁶

The learner, who still lacks virtue, is not yet capable of performing virtuous action in the way that the virtuous person does. Nevertheless, the process of habituation is the process of the learner coming to be able to perform in this way. Because virtuous activity involves reason essentially, habituation cannot be a mechanical process where the learner simply performs certain actions over and over. Such a process would not aid him in developing the deliberative and affective capacities necessary for full virtuous action.

Developing a virtuous character is often compared to developing a skill. In one such instance Aristotle writes:

...as in the case of a skill, the origin and means of the development of each virtue are the same as those of its corruption, it is from playing the lyre that people become good and bad lyre players.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a-1105b, pp. 27-28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1103b, p. 24.

Habituation is a form of critical practice. We learn by doing. As we engage in moral action we come to appreciate what aspects of a situation have moral relevance. Aristotle envisages a rational process, where engagement yields understanding: the learner learns from trial and error and experience as he repeatedly engages in moral action. It is not just in doing something over and over that one improves, but in constantly refining and improving the process. Without this rational component in habituation, if it were just a matter of mechanical repetition, the student would simply repeat his mistakes over and over, which would result in the corruption of the character states he is trying to improve. This is one reason why Aristotle places great emphasis on the role of educators (particularly family) in the process. The learner needs to be helped to see his mistakes. He requires guidance to help associate his early desires for pleasure with right action. He also needs an example of the finished product to guide his own efforts⁸⁸. If one is learning to play the lyre it helps to have a teacher who can point out mistakes and provide an example of how the instrument is properly played. Without this type of help it is easy for the learner to repeat his mistakes until they become habit, an ingrained part of his doomed technique.

Interaction with a teacher also provides the student with access to a different, more finely honed, perception of the world. In comparing his own evaluation of situations and action with that of his teacher, the student is able to improve on and expand his own interpretation of events. As so much of practical wisdom is about properly assessing a situation, the importance of engaging with differing interpretations cannot be underestimated. It must be noted though that this is certainly an area where narratives can play a crucial role. In engaging with them we engage, essentially, with the author's unique perspective of the world and are offered useful ways of understanding and interpreting situations and characters.

Aristotle's comparison of virtue with learning music is apt in many ways, not least because neither skill can be successfully exercised by the simple application of a set of rules, or principles. Aristotle insists that to tell what virtue requires in a specific

⁸⁸ It might also be possible that the characters in some novels may serve as moral ideals whose 'examples' a young reader might desire to emulate. I raise this point merely as a possibility. While I think it certainly would be the case with respect to some few fictional characters, it is unlikely that the characters in most narratives could serve as exemplars of the virtuous person. For this reason I don't think this point is worth defending as a significant way that narratives can help in attaining virtue.

circumstance requires a type of sensitivity, or perception specific to that circumstance. While general rules can provide a helpful guide to action, the learner needs to develop a sense of what is required in particular situations. This needs to develop from knowledge, in specific circumstances, that an action, or attitude, is the right one. 'What Aristotle is pointing to is our ability to internalise from a scattered range of particular cases a general evaluative attitude which is not reducible to rules or precepts.'⁸⁹

Learning that something is right in a particular case, will in the early stages of development often be a matter of having morally relevant aspects pointed out by a teacher and then coming to realise the truth of that instruction. I will argue, in Chapter 4, that narrative art can play an important role in showing the learner what is right in particular circumstances as well as making salient morally relevant factors.

To return to the main point, virtue is not simply a matter of doing the right thing, or of knowing what the right thing to do is. It is about doing them for the right reasons and with proper feeling. So the goal of habituation is not just to teach the learner what right action is, but to teach him that it is desirable for its own sake. Aristotle points out that when we are young we are usually motivated by our desire for pleasure. The main part of habituation therefore, is in coming to learn that virtuous action is pleasurable. It is training the learner to take pleasure in the right things.

There are three objects of choice – the noble, the useful, and the pleasant – and three of avoidance – their contraries, the shameful, the harmful, and the painful. In respect of all of these, especially pleasure, the good person tends to go right, and the bad person to go wrong. For pleasure... accompanies all objects of choice, because what is noble and useful appear pleasant as well. Again, pleasure has grown up with all of us since infancy and is consequently a feeling difficult to eradicate, ingrained as it is in our lives. And, to a greater or lesser extent, we regulate our actions by pleasure and pain. Our whole inquiry, then, must be concerned with them, because whether we feel enjoyment and pain in a good or bad way has great influence on our actions.⁹⁰

Habituation requires the learner to discover that noble action is also pleasant, that it is the most pleasant activity there is. In engaging with actions that are noble, the learner, even though he cannot yet engage in them in the way the virtuous person does, is able to get a sense of why virtuous activity is pleasant. This is because his actions resemble the actions of the virtuous person as does his pleasure, yet in so far as his actions only approximate the virtuous person's, so too will the pleasure that accompanies them. What

⁸⁹ Burnyeat, 'Aristotle on Learning to Be Good', p. 72.

⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b-1105a, pp. 26-27.

is important however is that, having been told that certain actions are right and pleasurable, he comes to know that this is true for himself, as a result of experience. Yet it is not enough to take pleasure in virtuous action, for one must do so for the proper reason, i.e. for its own sake and not for the rewards, or honour, that might follow from it. To do so requires the realisation that the value of virtuous action, and the pleasure attendant upon it, is greater than other ends for which such activity may be performed. This proper feeling can also be gained through habituation.

An example will help to make these points clear. The skill analogy is the one Aristotle uses most often so let us consider the case of learning to play a guitar. An excellent guitarist will take a great deal of pleasure in the exercise of his skill, while someone who is just beginning to learn the instrument will enjoy pleasure that resembles the expert, for his activity does the same. Nevertheless it is not nearly as pleasurable, for his attention is divided between the many cognitions and physical motions required to produce music and not on the pleasure of the music itself. He tries to remember where his fingers should be, where they're going next, he tries to ensure the strings are pressed properly down to the fretboard, that his timing is correct, etc. The expert has already made all these steps second nature and can concentrate only on the sound of the music. Nevertheless as the learner improves so the exercise of his skill becomes more pleasurable, for it becomes more familiar and successful. Nevertheless the activity can still be pleasurable for the wrong reason. The student may play in order to impress people, or to achieve wealth or fame. The pleasure he gets in playing and exercising his skill might be derivative upon these other ends. If so, his engagement in the action is deficient. It might be the case though that many people begin playing guitar for these other ends, whose value is clear prior to picking up the instrument. In playing, however, they come to discover that the pleasure intrinsic to performance is itself very great and they come to enjoy playing simply for its own sake and not for any contribution it can make to the achievement of other values.

In coming to understand how virtuous actions are desirable for their own sake, the learner acquires a character that finds its greatest pleasure in the performance of virtuous actions. Through the performance of virtuous actions, required to reach this point, the

learner develops the reasoning capacities required for proper judgement, though the capacity for proper reasoning need not be fully developed at this point.

‘The that’ is only the first part of moral education, though it is the greater one. Though he has come to understand that virtuous action is intrinsically pleasant and that the virtuous life is the best one, he must still learn why this is the case. The addition of ‘the because’ to ‘the that’ is no mean thing. Understanding what makes things good will better enable a person to reason about the good and so act rightly, particularly in difficult or unique cases. This is one area where I do not think narratives can help, or at least not typically. I think it requires analytical philosophical analysis about the nature of the good and while some narratives might engage in that type of discourse very few do. This type of analysis may, however, be informed by knowledge of ‘the that’ and will also draw on the type of thinking that may be improved by narratives, such as imaginative and conceptual understanding.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter I wrote that the main features that differentiate knowledge-how from knowledge-that are:

- F) Knowledge-how admits of degree.
- G) It requires a proper relation between the circumstances at hand, the purpose a person has, and the way they choose to achieve that purpose. So knowing why certain ways will achieve that purpose, knowing why some ways are better than others and being able to choose one appropriate to the circumstances are crucial to knowledge-how, as well as to the assignation of degree.
- H) It receives its justification not by the mode of acquisition, but rather through performance.
- I) It is a composite ability that may involve the integration of propositional knowledge, physical abilities and even additional subordinate know-hows.
- J) One may have partial knowledge-how.

It should be clear by now that what Aristotle is getting at is a kind of knowledge-how: the knowledge of how to act virtuously. (A) Virtue denotes the best type of actions, but actions are the sorts of things that may be better or worse. How closely they approximate virtue will depend upon (B) a relation between the desires and feelings that motivate them, an assessment of the circumstances at hand, and the way that is chosen to fulfil the purpose the actor has. In all these areas the virtuous person knows how to go right. He desires to perform virtuous actions for their own sake and is able to properly assess a situation to know that a response is called for and is then able to choose one that will successfully instantiate the purpose that he has.

As was discussed in the body of this chapter, having the right desires, being able to assess a situation properly and knowing how to hit the mark in practice, are all faculties that depend on practical wisdom. Practical wisdom requires being able to reason well about one's desires and feelings and about one's life as a whole. It also requires that one be able to reason about situations one encounters and be able to 'describe and classify' what is before one. As I have already said, this type of reasoning depends upon conceptual, emotional and imaginative understanding; faculties that I will argue, in the coming chapters, are types of knowledge-how that may be improved through exposure to narratives.

One may also (E) possess partial knowledge of virtue, which may be increased through experience. This is the position the learner is in. The more he comes to realise that virtue is desirable for its own sake and the better he becomes at assessing situations and acting in the right way the more knowledge of virtue he has. This improvement depends, in a large part, on improvement in cognitive faculties required for practical wisdom. While learning from narratives cannot, on its own, provide full virtue, it can provide significant help along the way.

The justification involved (C) in considering a person to be virtuous, would depend on the success of their actions in instantiating virtue and it would be an assessment that could only be made on the basis of numerous confirming acts.

Finally virtuous actions themselves depend (D) on various types of knowledge, on knowing how to assess, on knowing how to deliberate, on knowing-how to act, as well as on propositional knowledge and physical motions. Consequently virtue satisfies all

the conditions for knowledge-how, given in the previous chapter. As will be shown in the coming chapters it is also a kind of knowledge-how that may be improved through exposure to narrative fictions.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Knowledge-How

In the previous chapter I discussed how practical wisdom, and hitting the mark with respect to the virtues of character, requires being able to properly assess a situation, how ‘much of the work of virtue will rest in knowing how...to describe and classify what is before one.’⁹¹

In this Chapter I will argue that the most important type of knowledge used in describing and classifying what is before us, conceptual knowledge, is a type of knowledge how that can be improved through exposure to narratives. I will focus here on knowledge of moral concepts, but the arguments can be applied without alteration to any concepts one might choose.

I will examine two accounts, given by Noel Carroll and Ayn Rand, which detail conceptual relations in narrative art. I will try to show that while Carroll offers a strong account of how narrative art can provide conceptual knowledge, with many features worth embracing, it has a problematic emphasis and, as a result, conceptual learning is unlikely to take place in most instances of regular narrative engagement. I will employ Rand’s insights in order to develop an account, which though similar to Carroll’s, does not suffer from the same shortcomings.

I will argue that in engaging with narrative art we necessarily employ moral concepts in order to make sense of our experience. While this will usually occur unconsciously, these concepts may be altered by the way the narrative approaches the characters and events it portrays. I will also claim that the unconscious alteration of our concepts will count as the acquisition of conceptual knowledge and that it is one important way we can learn from exposure to books, plays and films. Consequently narrative art provides an important source of conceptual knowledge and, above all, of moral knowledge.

The chapter will proceed as follows:

In Section A I will make some preliminary remarks about what concepts are and what is involved in their use, in order to show that being able to use concepts is a kind of knowledge-how. In Section B I will introduce a distinction between thin and thick moral

⁹¹ N. Sherman, ‘*The Fabric of Character*’, p. 29.

concepts, which will be pertinent to the discussion. In Section C Noel Carroll's account of conceptual learning will be outlined and criticised. In Section D I introduce Rand's account of the role conceptual use and engagement plays in the narrative experience. In Section E I use Rand's account, and aspects of Carroll's, to show how our thin concepts are necessarily engaged by narratives and how such engagement might lead to their alteration. Finally, in Section F, I introduce and respond to a criticism in order to develop the position and to show that narratives can alter our thick concepts as well.

A) Conceptual Knowledge as Knowledge-How

The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy offers the following definition of a concept:

A concept is that which is understood by a term, particularly a predicate. To possess a concept is to be able to deploy a term expressing it in making judgements: the ability connects with such things as recognising when the term applies, and being able to understand the consequences of its application.⁹²

Conceptual knowledge is knowledge of how to classify, describe, represent and interpret the world. Concepts pick out commonalities in our experience. They bind these commonalities under the heading of a term so that they may be distinguished from everything else. Having knowledge of a concept entails the ability to apply it appropriately. It entails that one can say of a thing that it either belongs, or does not belong, under the heading of that concept.

We develop concepts to make sense of and deal with our general experience. So, for example, we can develop a concept of 'dog' where this allows us to classify and pick out various objects in the world and have a meaningful understanding of their properties, which are grouped together under its heading. Concepts are instrumental in nature and so are better or worse in relation to how well they enable us to deal with the world.

There are also many concepts, such as some moral concepts, that are fundamentally evaluative. Such a concept not only classifies what something is, it also includes a judgement of the thing itself. To say of some act that it is 'good' is to make a positive evaluation of its properties, either in relation to some set of criteria, or in relation

⁹² S. Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 72.

to the effect it has on something else⁹³. Being able to recognise when a term like ‘good’ applies is to be able to recognise when such a positive relation exists. This is not always easy to do. Sometimes it is far from clear whether moral terms like ‘good’, ‘bad’, or ‘virtuous’ should be applied. Often such an ascription will depend on intimate knowledge of a thing, or situation, before it may be made.

Knowledge of whether a concept is applicable requires the type of thinking involved in both the *discovery* and *application* of facts.⁹⁴ It requires that one be able to determine what properties a thing has and be able to determine whether these properly include, or preclude, it from being categorised under one conceptual heading or another.

Knowledge of how to apply concepts possesses all the features of paradigmatic knowledge-how⁹⁵. (A) Determining whether a situation, or thing, has certain properties is an investigation that may be performed in ways that may be better or worse. (B) Applying a concept depends upon knowing that there is a relation between the properties of the thing and the purpose for which the concept is used and such an application may be more or less appropriate.⁹⁶ (C) In addition, justification for knowledge of a concept arises through use. If one is successfully able to pick out the properties delineated by a concept then one can be said to know how that concept is used, so someone can only properly be said to know a concept when they can be seen to use it correctly.⁹⁷ (D) Being able to use a concept is also a complex ability that will depend upon propositional knowledge of various things⁹⁸, on perceptual faculties, on knowledge of a language and so on. (E) Finally, one may have partial knowledge of how to apply a concept if one can apply it properly some of the time, or if one can use it to pick out some, but not all, of the

⁹³ Such as on a life, or on an observer, or for someone’s happiness etc. As I will explain in section D, this is the type of concept that Ayn Rand describes as normative and it is the type of concept she thinks is most essentially engaged by narratives.

⁹⁴ I earlier discussed, in Chapter 1, how the thinking involved in both the discovery and application of facts are paradigmatic kinds of knowledge how.

⁹⁵ See Section C of Chapter 1. In the paragraphs that follow I apply the criteria given in that section to the application of concepts. At the end of Section C I summarized those criteria and labeled them as A-E. I re-insert those labels here in order to aid reference.

⁹⁶ A concept is a social construction that picks out actual features of the world. So in order to use a concept properly a person must recognize that a thing has the properties that the concept is meant to incorporate.

⁹⁷ As concepts are linguistic entities, one must also be able to use a concept in the same way that other people in the same linguistic community do. One cannot use ‘dog’ to pick out any group of properties at all. They must pick out the same group of properties that other users of ‘dog’ pick out under that heading.

⁹⁸ Such as that a thing has a particular property, that other things don’t, that one’s perceptual faculties are functioning properly, etc.

properties it incorporates. An example of such partial knowledge of how to apply a concept may be illustrated by a person knowing that ‘mammal’ picks out warm-blooded quadrupeds, but not knowing that it also picks out such things as whales or dolphins. If they later learned that ‘mammal’ also properly included the latter animals they would have improved their knowledge of how to use the concept.

Given their instrumental nature, concepts may be meaningfully altered without recourse to the actual world. Knowledge of how to apply concepts may be improved through applying them to whatever they may be applied to and this will include applying them to fictions, as a fictional vehicle may pose a challenge to their use and suitability. This point will be discussed in detail in later sections.

B) Thin and Thick Moral Concepts

Before beginning my discussion I must digress briefly in order to introduce a distinction that will have some relevance later on. In the introduction I introduced the claim that we necessarily employ moral concepts in engaging with narratives. This must be clarified, for while we necessarily employ *thin moral concepts* in this way, it is possible that this is not the case with respect to *thick moral concepts*.

It is somewhat difficult to provide a precise explanation of the difference between thin and thick concepts. In fact there has been some debate about whether there is a difference at all⁹⁹. Nevertheless I will follow Bernard Williams in saying that thick concepts are ‘world guided’: they include a description and are determined by some way that the world is. Thin concepts play more of an action guiding role.¹⁰⁰

To make this distinction clear it will be useful to give some examples that will be pertinent to my later argument. What I have in mind when I refer to thin moral concepts

⁹⁹ In ‘What are thick concepts?’ Matti Eklund attacks the traditional distinctions given by philosophers such as Alan Gibbard, Bernard Williams and Jonathan Dancy and tries to show that there really is no significant difference between thick and thin concepts at all. If Eklund is correct this can only strengthen my own argument for if there is no real difference, I need to do far less to prove my case. If they are different I need to show how each kind of concepts may be improved by narratives, but if they are the same then I only need to show that either of them may be so improved. Eklund’s paper can be found online at <http://spot.colorado.edu/~eklundm/thickconcepts.pdf>

¹⁰⁰B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 129.

will be general moral ascriptions like 'good', 'bad', 'valuable', or 'evil'. A concept like 'Good' usually plays the role of a moral place holder. It is agreed by all moral theories that we should pursue the good, or act so as to bring about the good, yet each theory will have a different idea of what 'good' is. For utilitarians it will be that which produces the greatest happiness, for Kantians it will be acting from duty out of respect for the moral law, for Aristotelians it will be right action, or that which the fully virtuous person would pursue. For Williams, the important property of a thin concept is that it is action guiding. To classify something as 'good' describes it as something to want, or pursue; to classify it as 'bad' describes it as something that is undesirable, or that should be avoided.

I will be using positive thin concepts like 'good', 'desirable' and 'approvable' interchangeably in a very broad way. To bring something under a positive thin concept is simply to classify it as being valuable in some way. Similarly to bring something under a negative thin concept like 'bad', or 'evil' is to say that it is disvaluable in some way.

Thick moral concepts like courage, temperance, or greed, include both an evaluative and definitional component. Particular thick concepts can only be applied to particular events and there is agreement across different moral theories about what events should be classified under particular thick concepts. They are world guided, in the sense that our application of them is guided by how the world is. 'Courage', for example can only be applied to certain actions in the world. Not every action can be labelled as courageous. To say that an action is courageous is to specify that it has certain properties in virtue of which it can properly be defined as an act of courage. Note that whether one is an Aristotelian, a Utilitarian or a Kantian one will still regard the same sort of actions as courageous. One will also be approving of those actions. To say that that they are courageous is to make a positive evaluation. Nevertheless different moral theories will still explain why a courageous action is a good one in different ways, because the evaluative part of the concept is subject to explication. What needs to be clear is that the same is not true of the definitional component.

What I have been trying to impart, in these last few paragraphs, is that thin moral concepts only convey an assignation of value. They cannot, in themselves, offer a reason for why that assignation is made. Thick concepts, however, assign value but also include

a definitional component that will often be able to serve as an explanation of value: an action is valuable *because* it is a courageous one.

C) The conceptual Nature of Narratives: Carroll

Let me now return to my main project. I will examine two accounts of the role conceptual knowledge plays in narrative art, given by Noel Carroll and Ayn Rand. I will utilise aspects of both accounts to develop one that shares some common elements with Carroll's, but also has a crucial difference in emphasis.

Carroll's main claim is that a narrative can provide a guided conceptual analysis that leads us to alter our standing concepts. He is particularly concerned to demonstrate that this is the case with respect to concepts of the virtues and vices, such as courage, friendship, etc. He thinks that a conceptual tool, which he calls a virtue wheel, is incorporated into many narratives for the purpose of demonstrating what is required by a particular virtue or package of virtues.

Carroll draws an interesting parallel between narrative art and philosophy. Philosophy is largely concerned with the pursuit of conceptual knowledge. In pursuing this, philosophers often employ a tool that has a great deal in common with narrative art; the thought experiment. These are generally narrative and fictional in nature, yet they also function as arguments. They do so by playing on our antecedent conceptual knowledge, relying on the reader's ability to employ concepts in order to 'clarify that knowledge and to bring it out into the open, or to dispel or unmask conceptual vagueness and/or confusion.'¹⁰¹ Because they do not make empirical claims about the world, thought experiments do not require outside justification. All that is required is that they get the mind moving over its conceptual map and this can be accomplished by fictional examples.

Even though thought experiments aren't intended to provide empirical knowledge about the world, Carroll rightly points out that they are 'productive of knowledge, since they make what in some sense is already known accessible and salient. They illuminate the relevance of what is already known to the question at hand by refocusing that

¹⁰¹ N. Carroll, 'The Wheel of Virtue', p. 8.

knowledge in a novel way.’¹⁰² In other words, they offer us more complete knowledge of how to apply the concepts we already have.

If thought experiments can yield knowledge when they get us moving over a conceptual map, then if fictional narratives can function analogously, they can also serve as a source of conceptual knowledge.

There seems little reason however to deny that narratives can, in principle, function as thought experiments. As I’ve already mentioned, thought experiments are often fictional and narrative in nature and it is also common for philosophers to use excerpts from narratives as thought experiments in place of originating their own.

Nevertheless when philosophers use thought experiments they are usually placed within the context of detailed discussions on the issue, so that it is clear what point they are trying to make and how the thought experiment relates to it. If narratives are to serve as thought experiments then we might well wonder, in any given case, whether it is actually intended as a thought experiment and, if so, what point it relates to.

Carroll offers a response to this objection. He claims that ‘Some...fictions are intended to make argumentative points and where a convincing interpretation of the text renders that interpretation plausible, there should be no reason, in principle, to treat the artist’s thought experiments...differently than the philosopher’s.’¹⁰³ Usually it would be clear from the narrative what point is being ‘argued’ for, but if not, Carroll supposes that this can still be gauged from the context and events surrounding the creation of the narrative.

It might be helpful to consider an example of a philosophical thought experiment and one performed in a narrative, in order to illustrate Carroll’s point.

Edmund Gettier famously offered a thought experiment¹⁰⁴ to show that the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief is insufficient. He asked his readers to suppose that a man, Smith, has strong evidence for believing that Jones is going to get the Job. Smith has been informed that this is the case by the President of the company, who is a very reliable fellow. Smith is thereby justified in believing that Jones

¹⁰² *Ibid*

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 9. Carroll offers several convincing examples for this claim. Note also that Carroll adopts an abductive account for the conveyance and interpretation of literary claims.

¹⁰⁴ In, ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’

will get the job. Smith also believes correctly that Jones has ten coins in his pocket, on the basis of having counted them. Smith infers from these two justified beliefs that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. He is justified in having this belief, because of the evidence he has for beliefs that logically entail it. Unbeknownst to Smith, it turns out that he himself is the one who will get the job. Coincidentally, he also happens to have ten coins in his pocket. As a result Smith's belief, that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket, is true. Smith does have a justified true belief that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Nevertheless, it seems that Smith does not actually know this.

This experiment works to show that some justified true beliefs cannot be properly classified as 'knowledge'. It does so by giving an example of a justified true belief that the audience would be unwilling to bring under the conceptual heading of 'knowledge'. Their unwillingness to do so illustrates that justified true belief is not sufficient for 'knowledge'. Gettier's thought experiment had the effect of fine-tuning how that concept was applied by forcing people to move over their conceptual map and understand what they already knew in a novel way.

In the book *A Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley offers a vision of, what is for most of its inhabitants, a utopia. In the course of the novel however, we find that though it has all the elements that most people would consider sufficient for a utopia it is not the perfect place we would expect it to be. The novel is able to do this by first showing how the people who live in the utopia live, how they have all the hedonistic pleasures they might want, without any bad effects, how they are bred to fit the jobs they have, but have to spend very little time working and so on. Later Huxley introduces a character, John, who has been brought up outside the utopia and the reader is then shown that society through a stranger's eyes; a stranger who abhors it for what it lacks. In showing, through John's reaction, what the utopia lacks the reader is given an idea of what properties should be picked out by the concept 'utopia'.

It seems that proper abductive reasoning would suggest that Huxley intended to conduct an analysis of 'utopia' and of which values are most important and so require actualisation within a perfect society. One may abductively infer that the reason Huxley

presents the 'utopia' as deficient is that he actually thinks, and wants his audience to come to think, that any society based on hedonistic pleasure would in fact be deficient.

Both thought experiments and narratives may influence their audience's conceptual knowledge through getting them to apply conceptual knowledge they have to some set of circumstances that provoke difficulties for existing concepts. In doing so they encourage change in the concepts, as the audience is forced to fine-tune the concepts they have to meet the difficulties the experiment, or the narrative, evoke.

It does seem fair then to grant that narratives *can* function as thought experiments, but it is not clear that they actually *do* this. The abductive inference to Huxley's intentions may, of course, be mistaken. Do writers and directors really sit down and intentionally incorporate conceptual analyses within their work? If they do engage in the type of conceptual analysis Carroll has in mind, do we as art goers actually learn from them? Do we sit and consider what implications a narrative may have for how we think about the world? Is conceptual learning really a part of the artistic experience, or is Carroll simply over intellectualising what we do when we read books or watch movies? After all, most people partake in these activities for entertainment purposes. Maybe this is a way that critics and academics engage with movies, but surely most other people don't.

Carroll argues that it is, in fact, quite common for narratives to engage in a particular type of conceptual analysis and that engaging with narratives on the conceptual level is a large part of most people's artistic experience. He is particularly concerned to show that this occurs with respect to concepts of virtue and vice.¹⁰⁵

Carroll identifies a conceptual tool he calls a 'virtue wheel' that he claims is present in many narratives.

A virtue wheel... comprises a studied array of characters who both correspond and contrast with each other along the dimension of a certain virtue or package of virtues – where some of the characters possess the virtue in question, or nearly so, or part of it, while others possess the virtue, but only defectively or not at all, even to such an extent that their lack of the virtue in question amounts to the vice that corresponds to the virtue.¹⁰⁶

Carroll claims that the variations encourage the reader to apply concepts of virtue and vice to the characters,

¹⁰⁵ Note that, in placing his emphasis on virtue concepts, Carroll is dealing with thick moral concepts.

¹⁰⁶ N. Carroll, 'The Wheel of Virtue', p. 12

...thus exercising and sharpening their ability to recognise instances of these otherwise often vaguely defined or highly abstract concepts. In this, such virtue wheels serve the purposes of moral education by enabling readers to recognize better...things like true honesty and false love.¹⁰⁷

The virtue wheel is supposed to contribute to conceptual learning in two broad ways. Firstly, by enabling us to better recognise when a person possesses a virtue or vice, our ability to make proper moral judgements is improved. Secondly, and more importantly, a virtue wheel replicates an important function of philosophical thought experiments, i.e. it 'calls attention to the criteria we depend upon in judging the characters of others... [and so] help to make explicit the conditions upon which those judgements rest by studiously varying the similarities and differences between the various characters.'¹⁰⁸

Carroll claims that virtue wheels function argumentatively, but that they:

...rely on the audience to note the relevant conceptual discriminations and to reach the pertinent conclusions. In this sense they are rhetorical...but...in a way that is not divorced from argumentation...The argument...occurs in the mind of the reader, either while processing the text, or *more likely*, during its reflective afterlife...Literary thought experiments...set up the argument, while pointing the way to certain conclusions, and they prime the analysis that is completed in the mind of the reader.¹⁰⁹

Carroll consciously places the emphasis on reflection after the direct experience of the narrative has ended and it is this emphasis that I want to turn to now.

In giving evidence to support his claim Carroll cites audiences' tendency to discuss their feelings about characters after watching movies. He claims that, where opinions differ, we point to the features of the characters that warrant our judgements for, or against them. And this involves pointing to the virtues and vices of the characters. As we debate our opinions, we engage in a process of reflection about the aptness of our applications of concepts of virtue and vice that brings to the fore an awareness of the conditions in accordance with which we make those applications and issue our judgements.¹¹⁰

What should be obvious from this is that, for Carroll, a large part of the conceptual analysis occurs in the reflective afterlife of the narrative. It happens when we

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ My emphasis. *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15.

try to get to grips with what we liked or disliked about it. It occurs in discussion or reflection on the narrative. If narratives do provide conceptual knowledge, on Carroll's account they do so contingently: if we do consciously engage with the analysis the narrative attempts to make.

I find this emphasis problematic. It seems that, on this account, it is quite likely that the real conceptual work is not actually being done by the narrative. Rather, it has inspired a conceptual investigation that results in the acquisition of conceptual knowledge. But the work is probably being done by the later investigation rather than the engagement with the narrative.¹¹¹

Carroll would certainly reply that the purpose of the virtue wheel is to guide that later investigation to a particular conclusion. The narrative is designed to impart a particular understanding of what the virtue requires and so when we reflect on the narrative that particular understanding comes to the fore.

It is not clear to me that this response is satisfactory. I am doubtful that people do generally engage in the type of focused reflection that Carroll requires, in conversation or otherwise.

Even if they do, it seems difficult for them to successfully perform the analysis. Because, for Carroll, narratives operate analogously to thought experiments, there needs to be a close connection between the way the narrative frames its investigation and the way the 'argument' is completed in the viewer's mind. When a philosopher offers a thought experiment in support of a particular point it is always clear how the experiment relates to it. The relation will be explicitly detailed in the text, or in discussion. In engaging with a narrative the audience will typically be unaware that the film is intended to function in support of a particular point, yet for a film to successfully function as a thought experiment its relation to the point it supports must be recognised. For this to occur, the viewer must formulate his own conceptual investigation in the same terms offered by the narrative's creator, but it is obviously difficult to do so if they are ignorant of the fact that the film is engaging in a particular conceptual investigation. It is not

¹¹¹ In *Knowledge, Fiction & Imagination*, David Novitz sketches an account similar to Carroll's, but he explicitly states that conceptual knowledge can only be gained once factual beliefs acquired from a work are projected onto, or tested in, the world itself. He concedes that the work itself is insufficient for the production of knowledge, but still sees no problem in describing this process as acquiring knowledge from the work. (See particularly Chapter 6, pp. 137-139.)

enough for the viewer to accept the narrative as evidence for just any conceptual investigation they choose to undertake. If Carroll's account is to be successful, the viewer must recognise that the narrative serves as evidence for a particular point, i.e. the one that the film functions as a thought experiment for.

If, for example, a film engaged in an analysis of the virtue of temperance, the viewer would need to be able to recognise that this is what the film deals with before he could begin to reflect on what the narrative implies about that virtue. He needs to be able to make the abductive inference to the filmmaker's intentions and be able to assess the narrative's events as evidence for a particular conception of temperance. This is the case, because Carroll wants narratives to function as *guided* conceptual analyses. To be successful as such it is not enough that the viewer applies the narrative's points to just any of his moral concepts. Rather, he must relate them to the same virtue concept that the narrative's creator undertook the guided analysis of; if the tour is to be meaningful, the guide and the guided need to be standing on the same conceptual terrain.

I think Carroll's account is problematic because of the emphasis he places on conscious reflection on the narrative. I think that he does offer an insightful way that we can learn from narratives in cases where we do consciously attempt to understand a narrative in a certain way and are successful in recognising the particular concepts that the narrative is intended to examine. Nevertheless, because I think that these conditions would very rarely be met, I believe that a different account is needed that would make conceptual learning from narratives a more usual occurrence. If we could find a way to maintain Carroll's useful insights, particularly those regarding the virtue wheel, but eliminate the need for conscious reflection, then we might still maintain that narratives do provide a rich source of conceptual knowledge. To do so I will try to develop an account that shifts the emphasis to what goes on during direct engagement with a narrative and supposes that the crucial conceptual learning that takes places is of thin concepts and that this occurs necessarily, due to the nature of narrative engagement itself.

D) The conceptual nature of narratives: Rand

With this in mind, I would like to turn to Ayn Rand. She does not offer an explicit account of learning from art, but I think what she has to say about the role concepts play in art can be used to formulate a plausible model that can also incorporate some of Carroll's good points.

Rand divides concepts into two basic types, cognitive and normative. Cognitive concepts are those that relate to the way the world is. Normative concepts are evaluative: they prescribe values and ideals. They suggest how the world should be. While Rand does think that art can help in the acquisition of cognitive concepts, her primary strategy involves normative concepts.

Rand claims that art deals essentially with metaphysical value judgements, which constitute a set of normative concepts that play a substantial role in our interaction with the world. She writes that:

consciously, or subconsciously, explicitly, or implicitly, man...needs a comprehensive view of existence to integrate his values, to choose his goals, to plan his future, to maintain the unity and coherence of his life - and...his metaphysical value judgements are involved in every moment of his life, in his every choice, decision and action.¹¹²

For Rand, this 'comprehensive view of existence' is essentially a person's metaphysics, which she seems to regard as man's evaluation of the facts of existence. She claims that

Metaphysics...involves man's widest abstractions...It involves such a long chain of concepts that no man could hold it all in the focus of his immediate conscious awareness. Yet he needs that sum and that awareness to guide him - he needs the power to summon them into full, conscious focus. That power is given to him by art.¹¹³

For Rand, art is a '*selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgements.*'¹¹⁴ In shaping a narrative, the artist necessarily employs her normative concepts. Every choice she makes is a result of what she determines is valuable, a result of how she sees the world and humanity's place in it. In her choice of subject she presents us with an 'abstraction'¹¹⁵ of some part of reality that she judges as being worthy

¹¹² A. Rand, 'Art and Sense of Life', P. 19. Martha Nussbaum makes a very similar point in 'Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature' (see especially p. 5), as does Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art* and Peter Goldie in 'Narrative and Perspective; Values and Appropriate Emotions (see especially p. 203.)

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 19.

¹¹⁵ The word 'abstraction' might seem somewhat out of place here, but I follow Rand in using it in this sense. She points out that an artist doesn't replicate every detail of some actual experience, or event.

of our attention and she then prescribes what she considers a proper evaluation of that subject matter by her treatment of it.¹¹⁶ To put this point another way, at every point in the creative process the artist has an almost infinite amount of options available to her. She can, for instance, choose almost anything as her subject matter. Her decision to pick one subject over another rests on her perception that the subject is worthy of her attention, and by implication her audience's as well. From that point on, every choice she makes is geared to *representing* her subject in a particular way, one that is appropriate to her evaluation of her subject. She includes what she considers important and relevant and excludes the trivial and the irrelevant. Every choice of inclusion reveals an evaluation of value in relation to the subject and, by implication, so does every exclusion.

To clarify this idea, consider the creation of a character. First an artist must pick what sort of character she wants to deal with and then she must decide how she wants to represent them. To do this she necessarily draws on her concrete experience of the world and abstracts from that those characteristics and traits that she considers essential to the type of character she intends to portray. In doing so she creates a concrete model that embodies those concepts. Take the film *Finding Forrester*¹¹⁷ as an example, the film centres on a ghetto youth who is a talented writer. He is shown to be intelligent, talented, sensitive and determined and ultimately he is able to ensure himself a good future, as a result of these positive traits. In choosing to show a character of a certain type (one that possesses certain characteristics and does not possess others) the writer of the film has made an evaluation that this character is interesting and worthy of our attention. In the way he is presented it is also shown that he is worthy of our attention because he is admirable, because he is able to achieve something rare and difficult through his own ability.¹¹⁸

Rather she picks out, or 'abstracts' those details of them that she regards as essential or defining and then emphasizes these in her re-creation.

¹¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum makes a very similar point in 'Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature' (see especially p. 5), as does Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art* and Peter Goldie in 'Narrative and Perspective; Values and Appropriate Emotions (see especially p. 203.)

¹¹⁷ Gus Van Sant, Columbia, 2000.

¹¹⁸ This example may be helped by a offering a contrast. Suppose instead that the boy had ultimately been drawn into a ghetto gang and was lost to crime and drugs. If this were to have been his fate the film would have a remarkably different treatment of its subject. Instead of supposing that a person of intelligence and talent could exert control of their world and transcend their circumstances it would show instead that the world and fate is ultimately in control of the character's life. It would suggest that talent and intelligence is

When a viewer engages with an artwork he is unconsciously engaging with the artist's metaphysical value-judgements. So if, for example, he enjoys a particular character and feels that the character should be emulated, then in attempting to do so, he is guided by the concepts that were embodied in that ideal: concepts of value. What occurs is a transfer of conceptual knowledge through a fictional vehicle. Rand puts this point by saying that 'the creative process resembles a process of deduction; the viewing process resembles a process of induction.'¹¹⁹ If we continue with the character example, Rand means by this that in the process of creation, the artist must deduce which properties should belong to a character and when the viewer sees that character she infers that it has those properties.

Rand would claim that through the filmmaker's conscious, or sub-conscious, selective re-creation of reality we are led to share and adopt the normative concepts embodied by the narrative.¹²⁰ The artist's representation involves the concretisation of normative concepts into a form that allows the viewer to perceive them directly.

It is not being suggested that this occurs consciously. We will not, in most cases, be consciously aware of the normative values that guided the artist's choices. Indeed, to be at all sensible, such recognition must be able to occur unconsciously for, contra Carroll, we very rarely consciously consider the writer's evaluative concepts when engaging with a narrative.

A viewer's judgement of a work's content will also depend, in a large part, on how closely the artist's metaphysical value judgements match his own. It is only where there is a large discrepancy between the artist's values and the viewer's that the process is likely to become conscious. So if the boy in *Finding Forrester* was presented as offensive in virtue of his traits of intelligence, sensitivity, and so on, then anyone who found those traits to be admirable would be likely to become aware of the judgements motivating such a representation. The representation would stand out in virtue of the way it clashes with their understanding of the world and they would consequently have

ultimately useless in the face of those uncontrollable forces. Needless to say, in reality, both scenarios probably occur, but for an artist to choose to show us one rather than the other suggests an evaluation of which one is more interesting and more appropriate.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 35.

¹²⁰ A. Rand, 'The Psycho-Epistemology of Art', p. 19.

difficulty enjoying such a presentation. I will discuss this point in more detail later in the chapter.

E) Narratives and Unconscious Learning

Let me return now to my initial claim that we necessarily employ concepts in our engagement with narrative art and that they can be altered necessarily in the process. It can now be shown how Rand's account can be used to justify the weak claim of conceptual engagement. If an artist must necessarily employ normative concepts in creating the content of a work, then those concepts necessarily imbue the narrative.

What remains is to show that the viewer necessarily engages with those concepts and that his own concepts may be changed in doing so.

When we engage with narratives, *qua narratives*, we need to be able to make sense of their content. Part of that requires us to be able to make sense of what is occurring in occurrent scenes, as a part of a sequence of actions and events. This point must be emphasised, for when we engage with narratives we not only respond to the depicted events, but also to circumstances surrounding their presentation, such as physical stimuli. These need not always be distinct; the musical score in a film is part of the narrative, it is one of the techniques the filmmakers use to persuade the audience to view the events in a particular way. There will often be, however, factors removed from the narrative that might influence the way it is approached and so should be discounted in so far as we are interested in learning from narratives *qua narrative*. If, for example, we approve of a character because we like the actor playing the role, then this does not qualify as engagement with the narrative *qua narrative*. A similar point may be made with respect to any physical stimulus that occurs during its presentation. If, for example, one is witnessing a love scene and becomes physically aroused by its depiction, this is, typically, not an experience associated with engagement with the narrative *qua narrative*. Rather one responds to the scene *qua erotic stimulus*. If a love scene is being appreciated as an event where two characters are engaging in particular actions relevant to the plot and one is interested in what occurs as such, then one is engaging *qua narrative* and is more likely to respond to the characters as a result. Thoughts such as 'I'm glad they're

finally getting together', or 'It's a pity this is happening, because he's such a bastard' are appropriate to engagement qua narrative, thoughts like 'Cameron Diaz has a fantastic buttocks' are not.¹²¹

When we engage with a narrative, qua narrative, we need to have some idea of why the characters perform the actions they do in the scenes we are currently witnessing. This requires that we maintain and integrate information conveyed in earlier scenes after the particular sense data that conveyed it has passed. This will necessarily involve some complex conceptual organisation.

We can see then that we will need to be able to engage our faculties of conceptual organisation in order to make sense of events in a narrative but this is, at least not yet, to show that we need to employ normative concepts in our engagement. The concepts required for organising sense data or arranging information together need not be evaluative. Could we not therefore make sense of the narrative without employing normative concepts? I don't think we can.

Narratives require not simply our engagement, but our interested engagement. They require that we take sides with particular characters and condemn others and that we do so *on the basis of what occurs in the narrative*. If we didn't do this we would be uninterested in their actions and the things that happen to them and any narrative that left us completely indifferent would have to be regarded as an absolute failure. The only way to get us properly to approve of, or condemn, a character is to portray them as performing actions, or having feelings/thoughts etc that we either approve of or condemn. We need to be given grounds on which to judge them, grounds that are relevant qua narrative. These will be the same grounds on which we judge people in the actual world. In the actual world, however, we might sometimes approve, or disapprove, of someone on grounds that will be superseded in the course of a narrative, as they would in real life were we to become aware of them. So, for example, we might initially approve of someone on the basis of their appearance or from having heard good things about them,

¹²¹ Of course when we encounter a narrative we need not engage with it qua narrative. If one witnesses a love scene and is unconcerned with it as an event in the characters' lives then there is a failure to engage on the appropriate level. This failure might be the result of the narrative itself. A poorly worked, uninteresting narrative may leave the viewer more interested in Cameron Diaz's buttocks than in her character. It could also be a failure on the part of the viewer, which could result from any number of causes, such as being tired and not paying proper attention to the film.

yet in the actual world, or in a narrative, such initial judgements will be changed, or enhanced, on the basis of knowledge more pertinent to proper judgement such as the way they act, their reasons for doing so etc. One may like a picture because it depicts a pretty person, but one cannot properly like who a person is because they have a pretty face. A face is largely irrelevant to a judgement about character and in a narrative it is judgements about character that are all-important. To successfully engage with a narrative qua narrative we must engage with its characters as characters of particular kinds and this requires that we do so on the basis of normative judgements about their actions, reasons for actions, thoughts, feelings and so on. What I am claiming is that, at the least, this will require that we bring the characters under thin concepts such as 'good', or 'bad'. This is what it is to approve or condemn a character. I will claim later that in doing so the audience will also usually apply thick concepts like 'courage', 'love', 'generous', etc to the characters as well.¹²²

Not only do we need to apply these types of normative concepts in order to engage with a narrative, we also need to do so in order to make sense of the characters' actions. We have to be able to assign normative judgements to them in order to make sense of why they do what they do. For example, consider what might be needed to understand a scene where a hero is currently battling a villain. We'll need to understand that the villain was trying to bring about something he considered valuable, but which the hero judged to be undesirable and that the hero believed that by stopping the villain he could prevent the undesirable state of affairs from coming about.

What is happening here is that our thin moral concepts are being engaged by the narrative. We are asked to regard certain characters, actions and events as 'good' and others as 'bad'. These thin concepts are our most basic normative concepts. So it must be the case that narratives do essentially appeal to the viewer's normative concepts.

We can now see that normative values imbue narratives and that the viewer is forced to engage with those values during the narrative experience. This is, of course, not

¹²² In footnote 1, of the previous chapter, I mentioned that Aristotle is an objectivist and so I would assume the truth of objectivism in this thesis. This is relevant here as objectivism is a type of ethical cognitivism and my argument for conceptual learning rests on an assumption of its truth. If one is a non-cognitivist then one need not think that concepts will be necessarily engaged in the way I am claiming here. As my concern is with how narratives might aid in learning on the Aristotelian model, I see no need to defend cognitivism here, as to do so would be beyond the scope of this thesis.

yet to show that their values are altered by the engagement with the narrative. This final point is certainly my most difficult and controversial and it requires some careful examination.

The claim is that *successfully* engaging with a narrative will often require a person to apply their concepts in a way they haven't previously and in doing so they will necessarily be altered *during* engagement with the narrative. This is in contrast to Carroll's emphasis on conceptual learning that occurs after engagement with a narrative.

I assume that successful engagement with a narrative occurs when we come to regard the characters and events that are depicted in the way the creator of the narrative wants us to. If this does not occur then the engagement is unsuccessful. If we went to a romantic comedy and did not become emotionally involved with the central romance, if perhaps we found the couple annoying and hoped they would die painful deaths in a gruesome accident, we would be forced to conclude that something had gone wrong with the narrative experience¹²³. Successfully engaging with a narrative may require a change in a standing conceptual understanding, where the narrative offers, and asks the viewer to adopt, a way of looking at the events that is novel, unfamiliar, or unique.

Having already shown that engaging with a narrative depends essentially on the engagement of our normative concepts, it seems a plausible move to suppose that unsuccessful narrative engagement is a failure to apply normative concepts in the way that the narrative demands. Responsibility for unsuccessful engagement can lie either with the narrative or with the viewer, but the source of the fault is unimportant for this discussion.

Before I move on I must flesh out what I mean when I say that our concepts are altered by engagement with the narrative. Here I will utilise Carroll's account and apply it to my own by saying that if we come to apply our concepts in a novel way, or see that they are relevant in a way we hadn't previously, or if they become more fine-tuned or distinct, then they will have been altered in a way that will count as the acquisition of conceptual knowledge. While I think this can occur unconsciously, as we engage with the narrative, the change is no less real or significant for that.

¹²³ Similarly, failure to engage qua narrative, as described in the previous footnote, would also constitute unsuccessful engagement.

The best way to show that concepts may be changed by successful engagement with a narrative is to consider extreme cases; narratives that clash strikingly with our pre-existing normative concepts. In most cases we will not be able to engage successfully with such narratives, as the conceptual leaps we are asked to make are simply too big, but I hope to show that if we do engage successfully, then our pre-existing normative concepts must have changed for this to occur.

Consider the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). In it, we are asked to view the Nazis and Nazism in a positive light. Nazism is depicted as being glorious and heroic. Most of us cannot successfully engage with such a film, the judgement it prescribes of its subject matter is too far from our existing normative concepts to be accepted. The Nazis are too insidious for us to view them with approval. To do so we would need to be able to adopt Riefenstahl's view that they are in some sense positive. Remember though that *Triumph of the Will* was a propaganda film, it aimed to persuade people that Nazism should be evaluated positively. So what would be required for it to be successful i.e. what would be required for us to successfully engage with the narrative? It would need to get us to classify Nazism under a positive normative concept, such as 'good'. Approving of the film *requires* that we apply this normative concept to the narrative content. If we wouldn't have done so prior to engaging with the narrative, but come to do so during the narrative, then conceptual change must have occurred. The film would have successfully got us to apply our pre-existing concepts in a novel way¹²⁴. It would have made the concept more fine-grained in allowing it to be successfully applied in a way it had never been applied before. Note however that for this to occur, the narrative must have, in itself, given us reason to make the judgements it demands and so given us reason to make those conceptual changes. It must have showed that some aspect of Nazism was in fact valuable in some way. The representation of the

¹²⁴ As was explained in Section C, applying a concept in a novel way counts as the acquisition of conceptual knowledge. A quick analogy might, however, be useful to help make this point here. If one were familiar with the concept of 'instrument' but was unaware that someone's voice could be labeled under this heading, then on learning that a voice can be an instrument one learns something new about the concept. One learns that it can be applied to something that one previously thought it could not be applied to. This might, in turn, force an adjustment in beliefs about the properties the concept picks out. Where before one might have thought an instrument needs to be a human artifact, thereafter one might exclude this requirement and adopt a more general definition like anything that may be used by a human to produce musical sounds.

subject matter must have made us realise that the Nazis could properly be viewed in a way that we never had previously, i.e. positively.

The same thing is as true in more mundane cases, though it may be less obvious because most of the movies we watch are made in cultures that hold similar values and so fail to significantly challenge our pre-existing normative concepts.

F) The Triviality Objection

At this point it might be objected that my account rests on changes in thin moral concepts and, while such concepts might well change during the course of exposure to the narrative, any such change is ultimately trivial. The fact that we might come to approve of some character or action in some way that we might not have before, is hardly likely to make much difference in our lives. I also conceded that change will be particularly difficult when we are asked to make relatively large conceptual moves, so surely significant conceptual learning will occur extremely rarely, if ever, on this account.

The objection seeks to show that whatever conceptual changes occur as a result of exposure to a narrative, qua narrative, will probably be so small and general that it will make little difference to how we act in and deal with the world.

There are several responses that can be made to this objection and they will involve some further explication of what I have in mind. Ultimately, my defence will rest on the idea that thin moral concepts such as 'good' and 'bad' are crucial to our moral and personal development. The type of change they undergo in response to narratives will prove to be significant in several ways, because of the important foundational role that these concepts play.

I intend to dismiss this 'triviality' objection by arguing for the following three claims:

1. Thin concepts are so hugely important that any change in them is going to be significant.
2. Changes in thin concepts are necessary for the evolution of thick concepts.
3. At the very least, the type of change in thin concepts that occurs through exposure to narratives will be important as those concepts are developed in childhood.

i) Thin Doesn't Mean Insignificant

Thin concepts, such as 'good' are essentially value predicates. To classify something under that heading is to classify it as desirable: to say that something possesses a greater degree of 'goodness', or is better, than another thing is to prefer the former to the latter.

To apply thin concepts such as 'good', in the minimal sense of valuable that I am working with, is to make a judgement that it is desirable in some way. To incorporate a thing within the domain of such a concept is, all things being equal, to think that it is worth having, or achieving, or pursuing.

When we consider the actual application of this concept its importance becomes indisputable. We apply it to our own characters, placing our various characteristics, habits and traits within its ambit. In doing so we decide what kind of person we should be. When faced with the huge amount of possible things we can do at any given moment, or that we can pursue over time, we come to decide what actions to take, what career to follow. In applying thin concepts to the people around us we decide who to befriend, who to avoid, who to love.

Ultimately ethics is really nothing but the hierarchical classification of things under the heading of 'good'. If things could be identified as belonging to that concept, in greater or lesser degrees, we would not need a formalised system of ethics. If we were always able to determine when one thing (action, choice, event etc) is better than another, we would always be able to choose between them. Unfortunately it is often a difficult task to decide what does properly belong under the heading of the good and that is why systemized ethical positions have been developed. Most people are not, however, familiar with comprehensive ethical theories. They successfully live their lives by deciding for themselves, for their own reasons, what should or should not be classified under the heading of 'good'.

Given the massive role that thin concepts do play in our lives, any change in how we value these things will be important. If we come to realise that something is 'good' in some way that we hadn't previously realised, this has implications for everything we value; for everything we are. Realising, for example, that euthanasia can be a good act,

someone might come to decide to renew a relationship with a friend that he had alienated, because he condemned her decision to euthanize her mother.

Consequently, whatever changes narratives do effect in thin concepts must be significant.

I must now point out that while I have been arguing for the importance of thin concepts, this is by no means to suggest that thick concepts are trivial. Thick concepts provide a more detailed understanding of the way in which things are good, or bad. They open up a moral domain that would be largely missing if we only possessed thin moral concepts.

ii) Through Thin to Thick

It is important to remember that thick concepts incorporate thin concepts within themselves. They inherently possess an evaluative or 'thin' character. They are either 'good' or 'bad', 'valuable' or 'not valuable'. So, for example, 'honesty' is a thick moral concept that is inherently 'good'. Typically to say that someone is honest is to approve of them. This point may be made more strongly by claiming that to say that someone is honest is always to approve of them. One cannot say that someone is honest and thereby disapprove of them. 'Approval', or 'goodness', or 'value' is built in to the concept. One might respond that there are circumstances in which honesty is a bad thing. So if one happens to be hiding a Jewish family in Germany during the Second World War, it is bad to be honest to a Nazi storm trooper that asks you if you're hiding any Jews in your home. Nevertheless the type of example does little to problematize my point, for it is not the properties of honesty the action has that is being disproved of, but the results it brings about. If one were debating the morality of the action, an appeal to its truthfulness would always serve as a mitigating factor, a property that provides some value to an action that incorporates it. Saying that something is honest is, all things being equal, to approve of it.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Given that I am concerned with how this all related to Aristotelian ethics, I can also make the Aristotelian point that an action only properly instantiates a virtue if it is an action which the virtuous person would do. If the virtuous person would not tell the Nazi that he is hiding the family to do so would not instantiate the virtue of honesty. The conception of 'honesty' is a little different here, for the

Let me return to the point at hand. Thick moral concepts incorporate thin moral concepts as an essential component. I gave the example of honesty above, but we can think of a number of others; ‘courage’, ‘respect’, ‘love’, ‘cowardice’, ‘temperance’, ‘sloth’, and ‘greed’ are all examples of thick moral concepts and they all have an evaluative, or ‘thin’, component. They all carry a judgment of approval, or disapproval essentially. This is true of any thick moral concept we can think of.

Now, while I already discussed the way thin moral concepts are necessarily altered by narratives, I have yet to say anything about thick moral concepts. They are easily incorporated into the account in much the same way, but because of the different features of thin and thick concepts there will be some differences.

As I’ve already argued, thin concepts are applied to narratives necessarily. They are a prerequisite for engaging with narratives at all. Thick concepts, on the other hand, aren’t engaged necessarily. We need not have, or apply, thick concepts to make sense of the narratives we watch, even when those concepts are important to the depicted events. So a young child watching a cartoon need not identify a hero’s actions as courageous in order to understand, or enjoy, the events that unfold. He might not even have the concept of ‘courage’ at all.

Nevertheless, having and applying thick concepts that are relevant to a narrative does allow a viewer to engage with a narrative in a more substantial way. It exposes layers of meaning that aren’t available to someone who lacks, or fails to apply, relevant concepts. So someone who has and applies the concept of courage to the actions of the hero will have a different and more substantial appreciation of the character than someone who does not.

While we need not have or apply thick concepts in order to be able to engage with a narrative I think it is highly likely that if we do possess such concepts we will employ them during the narrative experience. To see this, consider a non-moral concept like ‘euthanasia’. If someone already possesses this concept he will be unlikely to watch a scene where one person kills another in order to end their suffering without,

Aristotelian virtue requires positive results, and cannot be instantiated in their absence, whereas the modern conception of ‘honesty’ merely details a relation between an act (a speech act here) and the world, i.e. that the act accurately describes the way the world is.

unconsciously, identifying it under this conceptual heading, i.e. that the scene was an instance of euthanasia.

The same is true of thick moral concepts. If one already possesses them, one will almost certainly employ them in engaging with the narrative. This will obviously be the case where the concept plays an important role. So if one possesses the concept of 'friendship' and sees an example of friendship in a film, one will apply that concept to it.

It is because we use concepts to make sense of our experience that it seems inevitable that we will use them in this way. To borrow Rand's idea, narratives are simply a selective recreation of reality. It would make little sense to suppose that we employ our conceptual resources to make sense of reality, but to deny that this is what we do when we engage with a portrayal of reality.

So, let me return to my account for it is now clear how thick moral concepts should fit within it. Like thin concepts, thick concepts are also employed when we engage in the narrative experience. In classifying or attempting to classify events under the concepts they already possess, viewers will often be forced to apply them in new or novel ways, or to events that they might not previously have thought to classify under those concepts. They are therefore likely to change in a way analogous to thin concepts and so, in their exposure to narratives, viewers might be said to be acquiring conceptual knowledge. They acquire fresh knowledge of how to apply concepts they already have. So, for example, if one sees a film like *Paths of Glory*¹²⁶ one may come to apply a concept like 'honourable' to an attempt to blackmail a general, as the film successfully gets the viewer to see how this attempt is both required by a character's integrity and admirable in light of the events that precede it.

Nevertheless, as was the case with thin concepts, I am again faced with the question of what role the narrative has to play in the change of these concepts. As it

¹²⁶ Stanley Kubrick, United Pictures, 1957. In this film, set within the French army during the First World War, three soldiers are picked randomly from their platoons, court-martialed and sentenced to die to serve as examples for the putative cowardice of their division in their failure to take a German position. In actuality, the commanders in charge knew that the attack was impossible and undertook it because of mounting pressure from politicians and the press to make progress in the war. The general staff proceeds with the court-martial in order to pass blame for the failure of the attack onto the troops, thus negating their own responsibility for the inability to make significant gains in the war. The soldiers are defended by their colonel, a pre-war criminal attorney, who does all he can to secure their release, including attempting to blackmail the general staff.

stands, all I am saying is that thick concepts may be altered as they are used. What role is the narrative playing, qua narrative, in their alteration? If this is the best I can do it's not very good, because thick concepts could be changed in the same way by exposure to anything that calls on us to apply our concepts.

The answer lies in the interaction between thin and thick moral concepts as they occur in narratives. I've already talked about how thin concepts are an essential part of thick concepts. I now need to explain why this is relevant. Because thin concepts are so intimately tied to thick concepts, as changes in thin concepts occur, so do changes in thick concepts.

While we might sometimes fail to apply a thick concept where it is relevant, often it will be very obvious that certain thick concepts should be used in making sense of the events of a narrative. Where this is the case, being led to classify those events as 'good', or 'bad' by the narrative will also force one to apply the thin 'part' of the thicker concept in the same way.

So, for example, if a friendship plays an obvious role in a narrative such that the audience is led to regard what occurs as instances of the practice of friendship, then in so far as they classify those instances as being good or bad, they will also classify them as good or bad instantiations of friendship. This would lead to their regarding them as being the sort of things that friends should or shouldn't do. Consequently, their understanding of what sort of actions should or should not be classified under the heading of friendship is increased. So, as we come to see that certain events should be approved, or disapproved of, our thick concepts become more discriminating and fine-tuned.

Just to make the point clear, the change in the thick concept is a result of two things. On the one hand, they depend on changes in our thin concepts. On the other, they require application of the thick concepts we already do possess to the events of the narrative. So if we are to come to regard a certain act as being properly the action of a friend, where we would not have done so before watching the narrative, we need to have come to approve of that action and to have classified it under the heading of friendship.

Let's consider a more detailed example. Suppose you watch a film, such as *Million Dollar Baby*¹²⁷ whose two main protagonists are friends, and at the end of the

¹²⁷ Clint Eastwood, Warner Brothers, 2004.

film the one friend kills the other. If you are to classify that action as a proper action of a friend, one would need to regard that action positively and identify it as fitting within the friendship of the protagonists. The narrative does this is by portraying the action as an act of euthanasia. Whether you are willing to accept an act of euthanasia as an act of friendship (if you were not previously inclined to do so) will depend on whether the narrative was able to get you to approve of the action. In other words, if the narrative can get you to apply your thin concept of 'good' to the action, it will also get you to regard 'euthanasia' as potentially being the proper action of a friend.¹²⁸

This also suggests how virtue wheels offer a potentially potent tool for conceptual learning. In a virtue wheel characters are compared or contrasted in so far as they possess a certain virtue or package of virtues. If the narrative is successful in getting its audience to approve of its characters in the way it intends, it manages to get them to approve of the values embodied in those characters. To prefer one character to another is to have a higher regard for the values of the former to that of the latter. Whether one only engages thin concepts in reaching that preference, or if one engages thick concepts as well, one's concepts are undergoing a process of fine-tuning.

Having incorporated the alteration of thick moral concepts as a part of my account it might be wondered whether I have simply lapsed back into Carroll's position. If changing a thick concept requires that we apply the concept to the narrative events, are we not back to the point where we need to consciously identify the artists' intention in order to learn from the narrative?

While it will often be the case that we do identify the thick concept at play, we need not do so consciously and, more importantly, we need not be consciously aware of the moviemaker's intentions. All that is required is that we apply a thick concept that does play a relevant role in the narrative and either approve or disapprove of the events that occur under its heading. This means that the conscious reflection and crossover in intentions that are required by Carroll's account are not required by mine.

I think a strength of my position is that it is not difficult to identify when a thick concept is in use in a narrative and so our thick concepts will often be engaged and be

¹²⁸ Of course in getting you to apply the concept 'euthanasia' the film may also prompt conceptual learning related to that term as well.

subject to change. By their very nature, narratives deal in many of the crucial thick moral concepts we employ in living our lives. Characters will often apply thick concepts to the events they face just as we would. It is hardly a rare occurrence to hear a character say that someone is a friend, or has been a friend, or issue any other statement that explicitly raises a thick moral concept. Even when artists do not consciously or explicitly attempt to explicate points about those concepts, their narratives very often deal with such concepts anyway and in so doing they serve as important sources of conceptual learning.

iii) Thin Concepts Need to Develop

This brings me to my final response to the triviality objection. It is related to the first point, but I think it deserves attention under its own heading. This is that changes in thin concepts are particularly important during childhood. Children are likely to gain far more conceptual knowledge from narratives than adults will.

Let's begin with the obvious fact that our broad moral concepts of 'good' and 'bad' need to be developed over time. We do not start off with a clear understanding of what should or should not be approved of. While the type of conceptual change I describe may occur less regularly as our thin concepts become fixed, change is likely to occur fairly frequently when we are young.

While I do not think children (or adults) acquire concepts from narratives that they lack beforehand, thin concepts are probably the first that children acquire and are in an early stage of development by the time they begin to engage with narratives in any meaningful sense. Parents begin telling children that their actions are 'good', or 'bad' from the beginning, but narrative art plays an important role in helping these concepts become increasingly developed and fine-tuned.

To try and flesh out this point I will once again rely on Rand. She writes that:

...morality is a *normative* science – i.e. a science that projects a value-goal to be achieved by a series of steps, of choices - and it cannot be practiced without a clear vision of that goal, without a concretized image of the ideal to be reached. If man is to gain and keep a moral stature, he needs an image of the ideal, from the first thinking day of his life to the last.¹²⁹

According to Rand, what art offers a child is

¹²⁹ A. Rand, 'Art and Moral Treason', p. 147.

...not moral rules, not an explicit didactic message, but the image of a moral *person*-i.e., the *concretized abstraction* of a moral ideal. It offers a concrete, directly perceivable answer to the very abstract question which a child senses, but cannot yet conceptualise: what kind of person is moral and what kind of life does he lead?¹³⁰

In these passages, Rand is arguing for a particular view of how a child comes to decide what kind of person is valuable or 'good'. She thinks that art can provide an ideal that a child, or adult, can emulate.

From my account we can see how this is a viable point. It is common practice to expose children to narrative art that has obvious, clearly articulated, moral content. A prominent trend in these stories is the portrayal of heroes that embody strong moral characteristics. In coming to approve of characters in these stories children unconsciously come to value the possession of those moral characteristics, which they come to emulate in their own behaviour.

In getting children to approve of certain things, they are led to value them and so to pursue them. Given that a large part of childhood is character development, coming to value certain character types over others in childhood is hugely significant. If children are to come to value the pursuit and development of a moral character, they require an example. They must have seen a character (at least one, but the more the better) that is moral and come to admire, to value, him. If this occurs, they will have a goal that can be worked towards: a goal that can be achieved.¹³¹

Rand also makes the further point that art is really the only source most children have for the acquisition of an articulated moral ideal. While I need not incorporate this further claim I think it is certainly worth a brief examination, for I think it is plausible.

Her point is that very few parents will articulate a coherent system of moral values to their children. They will most often convey a series of moral prescriptions, a long list of do's and don'ts. To a young mind these prescriptions do not provide the kind of articulated moral ideal they need to shape their character and set their goals. Various prescriptions can often seem contradictory and pointless. If the values underlying those prescriptions are not articulated, morality can come to seem senseless and arbitrary.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 146.

¹³¹ This is of course a part of knowing-how to become a good person.

While children might later realise that these prescriptions did form a coherent system of moral imperatives¹³², the most important stage of character formation occurs while a child is very young and it is at that stage that a child needs a coherent model to emulate and the motivation to do so. Narratives offer children an example the type of moral ideals they need to guide their moral development.¹³³

One consequence of my account of learning from narrative art is that as our thin concepts become increasingly developed we will become less likely to learn significantly from exposure to narrative art. Yet the fact that we tend to be less open to conceptual learning as we get older is hardly surprising and surely not a problem for my account. It just happens to be the case that when our concepts are well-developed it will take something out of the ordinary to provoke change. This seems to accord well with common-sense observations. The narratives that have a large effect on us, particularly those that make us feel like we have learned something new or important, are rare. As we get older it becomes increasingly unusual to feel that a narrative has been significant in this way. It takes a narrative that is exceedingly well crafted to make us feel that type of effect.

This phenomenon can be easily explained on my account. Because our concepts are fairly well defined by the time we reach adulthood, it will take a fairly novel idea to require us to 'stretch' our standing concepts to incorporate it. It will also require a particularly skilful presentation of the idea to get us to make that 'stretch'. There are likely to be, relatively speaking, very few narratives like this.¹³⁴

Let us return to the example of *Triumph of the Will*. If it were successful it could significantly alter the concepts of adults, as it requires that a large conceptual move be made. Yet to get us to make the move, it would need to give us reason to make that 'stretch'. The fact that it fails is unsurprising given how big that leap is. On the other hand, a film like *Million Dollar Baby* might well get many people to see euthanasia as being an action that a true friend might make. Whether someone considers the film to

¹³² They need not have though.

¹³³ Of course, the best type of parents will themselves provide such an example.

¹³⁴ Put another way, when young we are only partially trained in the use of many concepts. We only have partial knowledge of how to apply them and so there is room for us to benefit from sources of knowledge of how to do so. By the time we reach adulthood we are normally expert users of standard concepts. We are fully trained. We know how to properly apply standard concepts.

have been successful in that regard will depend on their own reaction to it, but on anecdotal evidence it seems that it was successful for many people, as very few people disapproved of Clint Eastwood's character at the end. They did not leave the film feeling like he had betrayed his friend.

The difficulty in altering developed concepts is not a problem for the importance of narrative art as a source of learning. It is, in fact, an advantage. Given that it takes something exceptional to alter our concepts when they are well developed, narratives will provide a more likely source of conceptual change than any other, as they are uniquely suited to convey events that are out of the ordinary and which would otherwise go unseen and unconsidered in the regular course of things.

Chapter 4: Emotional and Imaginative Understanding

As we have already seen, Aristotle's ideal moral agent is highly sensitive to his circumstances and to other people. This sensitivity arises from a settled character capable of recognising the good in particular situations and able to respond in the right way, even when lacking time for a reflective response.

This type of character is one that possesses certain types of knowledge-how: the knowledge of how to understand a situation and the knowledge of how to respond.

Knowledge of which aspects of a situation are relevant, and in need of response, must precede any action that might be made, but this kind of knowledge cannot be furnished by pre-existing beliefs. The nature of any situation is highly particular and this entails that there will often be novel factors, which must be accounted for, that are relevant then and there but might never before have been relevant and might never again. The virtuous person is able to discover and respond to these particularities. This is why the type of understanding the virtuous person requires is more a type of knowledge-how than knowledge-that.¹³⁵ While one must have true propositional beliefs about a situation in order to respond well, part of what distinguishes the virtuous person is that he knows how to acquire such beliefs, even when they must be discovered there and then.

In this chapter I will examine two faculties that are required for the discernment of and response to such particulars.

The first of these is *emotional understanding*. It has become standardly accepted that our ability to experience emotion is a cognitive faculty tied, in some way, to our experience of situations and objects in the world. I will briefly outline two of the dominant conceptions of emotion. I will then show how they may plausibly be merged into an account that very closely resembles Aristotle's own. I will argue that the features of this joint account support a claim that emotional experience can constitute a type of knowledge-how, and that this can be improved by exposure to narratives.

¹³⁵ See Chapter 1, Section C. Knowing how to discover facts about a situation is a paradigmatic kind of knowledge-how.

The second faculty is *imaginative understanding*.¹³⁶ It is becoming increasingly accepted that at least part of how we understand other people and the world involves the use of an imaginative faculty. I will argue that imagination is crucial to the type of understanding required for ethical judgement and action. I will also make the further claims that imagination is a type of knowledge-how and that it may be improved through exposure to narrative art.

I will proceed by offering, in Section A, a short summary of the role the emotions play within Aristotle's account, before turning in Section B to a brief outline of the two currently dominant conceptions of emotion. In Section C I will show how the main features of these accounts may be merged to form a unified account, which I will argue in Section D is a type of knowledge-how. I will turn, in Section E, to imaginative understanding, first explicating what that term involves before applying the criteria of knowledge-how, in Section F, to show how imaginative understanding is a paradigmatic kind of knowledge-how. Finally, in Section G I will discuss how narratives may improve both emotional and imaginative understanding. There is a similarity in the way narratives affect each capacity, which is why this discussion has been deferred to the end, so that both faculties may be dealt with together.

A) Emotion in Aristotle¹³⁷

Before proceeding to discuss current theories on emotion, it will be worthwhile to recap their place within Aristotle's account. It will be remembered that there is a mean with respect to feeling. The virtuous person feels the right way, towards the right thing, at the right time and in the right degree.

This involves not only responding to a situation with proper feeling, but also properly allowing emotion to influence how a situation is construed. Proper feeling is supposed to influence judgement through assigning relevance and meaning to the circumstances under consideration.

¹³⁶ I adopt this term from Mathew Kieran and will provide his definition of it during its treatment in Section F.

¹³⁷ See Chapter 1, Sections C and D, for the fuller account of the role emotions play in Aristotle's understanding of virtue.

For the virtuous person to be able to find this mean on every occasion, the emotions must be rational in an important way, for there needs to be a proper relation between how they are experienced and the way the world is. Emotions must be 'world-appropriate'. They must promote an accurate assessment of it and must follow from the facts of the situation. Anger must be experienced in situations where it is right to be angry, pride where it is right to be proud, etc. This is why Aristotle places the emotions within the part of the soul that, though not rational, is amenable to reason.

Interestingly enough, recent work on the emotions has seen the emergence of a similar understanding of the emotions as rational. There is some debate as to exactly how they are rational and of what role they have to play within our rational lives, but there seem to be two dominant mainstream accounts of their cognitivity: either emotions are judgements of some kind, or they are a type of perceptive filter making salient certain aspects of situations. These two types of accounts need not be mutually exclusive. It is in no way incoherent to suppose that emotions have a role to play both in the formation of judgements and as judgements themselves. As was discussed in Chapter 2, Section D, Aristotle assigns emotion both these roles. He supposes that emotion should properly inform how we should construe a situation and that emotion forms part of a proper response to it.

B) The Rational Emotions

i

The first current conception of the emotions, which I will call the judgement account, conceives of them as being rational judgements of some kind. The second, which I will call the perspectival account, sees them as a faculty vital to the formation of such judgements. In either case emotions are conceived of as being an important component in rational understanding. In this section I will, very briefly, outline these accounts in

order to show later how narratives may contribute to our knowledge of how to emotionally understand the world¹³⁸.

The judgment account holds that emotions are simply particular kinds of evaluations.¹³⁹ It maintains that an emotion is a special type of judgement: one with an affective character.

Martha Nussbaum, who is arguably the most convincing proponent of this view, puts the point as follows:

... emotions are appraisals or value judgements, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's own control great importance for that person's own flourishing. It thus contains three salient ideas: the idea of a *cognitive appraisal* or *evaluation*; the idea of *one's own flourishing* or *one's important goals or projects*; and the idea of the *salience of external objects as elements in one's own scheme of goals*. Emotions typically combine these ideas with information about events in the world; they are our ways of registering how things are with respect to the external...items that we view as salient for our well being.¹⁴⁰

The account seeks to strictly identify emotion with judgement, but not just any judgement can be an emotion. Rather an emotion is a special type of complex judgement that contains three types of evaluations: an evaluation of the situation, an evaluation of one's interests and an evaluation of how external objects and situations might affect those interests. In order for an emotional judgement to occur all these elements must be present¹⁴¹. Someone who fails to respond with anger to an immoral situation may have a judgement that includes an evaluation of the situation, but not an evaluation of how it affects their interests. Whereas a person who gets angry realises not only that the situation is wrong, but that it constitutes a harm to them.

The types of evaluations that occur within an emotional judgement are themselves rational judgements. Being able to evaluate a situation requires that one be able properly to judge its nature. One must be able to pick out its relevant aspects, not only those that

¹³⁸ As this thesis is concerned with learning from narratives there is little room for detailed discussion of particular theories of emotion. As a result, I will go into very little detail here, only giving as much as is needed to ground my later claims that emotional experience is a kind of knowledge-how that may be improved through exposure to narratives.

¹³⁹ Philosophers whose accounts may be fit within this broad categorization include: Martha Nussbaum, Robert Solomon, Jerome Neu, and William Lyons.

¹⁴⁰ M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 4.

¹⁴¹ This is why many judgements are not emotions.

are accessible to the senses, but also those that are not.¹⁴² Beliefs about what is, or is not, in one's interests must also be discovered on the basis of reflection and knowledge of the objective facts of reality. Similarly, knowing how things, or people, might affect one's interests requires experience and observation. Being able to make such judgements well will increase the probability that one has appropriate emotions, as making the complex judgement that is an emotion, on this account, depends on being able to make these other kinds of judgements.

The account may be further elaborated by posing an objection, which is that it often seems that emotions are unrelated to any type of evaluation. The emotions we have can be unwarranted by the way we judge circumstances to be. So, for example, I can judge that the French poodle in my path is completely harmless, but still fear it¹⁴³. If emotions can arise in situations that are unrelated to the judgement one makes of it, then it seems unlikely that they can be judgements themselves. If they were, it would seem that a person can make two, contradictory, judgements based on exactly the same facts.

This objection may be answered by elaborating a crucial component in Nussbaum's account, which is that emotions are a type of judgement that is narrative in nature¹⁴⁴. The judgement that is an emotion does not result from a sudden evaluation of a single situation. Rather it arises from the background of a history of evaluations of the elements involved. If Bob is angry at Tim for sleeping with his girlfriend, his anger is not just the evaluation that Tim has wronged him by his present act. It is an evaluation of Bob's entire relationship with Tim and with his girlfriend and involves how he comes to make the emotion's composite evaluations. Bob's emotional response constitutes an evaluation of that act as an episode within his ongoing relationships.

If an emotion is a judgement that involves multiple heterogeneous factors in this way, it becomes easier to see why someone might have an emotional reaction that does

¹⁴² Aspects that are not immediately accessible might include such things as people's motivations, or feelings, or past facts relevant to the present situation (but of course knowing that they are relevant is an aspect of judgement).

¹⁴³ This is a derivation of an objection commonly forwarded against the judgment account, which is often thought to be unable to account for 'irrational' emotions such as phobias. See: Stocker, 'Emotional Thoughts' and Greenspan 'Emotions as Evaluations'.

¹⁴⁴ Nussbaum is not alone in thinking that emotions have a narrative component. It is almost universally accepted, in the current literature, that this is the case. Where Nussbaum differs is in the emphasis she places on this aspect of emotion. Her primary claim is that, because of their narrative form, emotions can only be properly understood through the complex interaction of form and content found in narrative art.

not seem to relate to the present situation. They may be responding to the way that situation connects with some historical factor not immediately apparent to an observer. The judgement that the poodle does not pose a threat to me is based on different set of facts to the more complex judgement that is my fear of it¹⁴⁵. It also seems intuitively implausible that someone could make a judgement about a situation that has the type of historical, personal, relevance advocated by Nussbaum and not have an emotional reaction.

More properly it seems that they couldn't fail to respond emotionally without being considered to have a seriously deficient reaction indicative of some psychological or cognitive problem. If Bob failed to react with some emotion, be it anger, or jealousy, or something else, some explanation would be needed for what would be regarded as a strangely deficient response.

On this type of account emotion is a judgement, but it also has an affective character, which may be viewed as a response to the situation motivated by a judgment of it¹⁴⁶.

It is also clear that the affective component of emotion has relevance to how we think and act. The pleasure or pain attendant on positive and negative emotions respectively, provides reason for action. It gives a reason to persist in a situation that produces positive emotions, or to avoid or terminate situations that are accompanied by negative emotions. The affective component has the additional effect of focusing attention on the evaluative component without the need for explicit reflection and it has been found that this results in an improved ability to remember events that have been accompanied by emotion.¹⁴⁷

If one adopts the position that emotions do include an affective evaluative response, it may be asked how people might respond in ways completely unsuited to the

¹⁴⁵ So my fear of the poodle may be motivated by an episode where I was mauled by a rabid poodle as an infant. The emotional judgement contains this past experience as one of the facts on which it is motivated. The judgement may still be a poor one, but it is relevantly different to the one that the particular poodle in front of me now does not constitute a harm to me, which is not based on past experience of mauling.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Solomon has gone so far as to suggest that it is a voluntarily chosen, conscious, response, though he offered this view in an early paper, 'Emotions and Choice', and has since modified his position.

¹⁴⁷ Recent work, particularly by Antonio Damasio, has revealed that emotions have an important role to play in making mental states, such as memories or imaginings, relevant to the world. Damasio claims that emotions function as 'somatic markers' helping the brain to remember and associate past responses in order to guide thought and action.

situation they are responding to. Why, for example, are people overcome by sadness when they have every reason to be happy?

But, if an emotion is a type of judgement that includes an affective response, there is no reason to suppose that it should be infallible in a way different to other judgements and responses. We should not be surprised to find that people make judgements that are not warranted by the circumstances, nor should we be surprised to find that their response interferes with them coming to one that is better warranted. People can, and often do, arrive at non-emotional judgements about situations that are wrong, or even completely inappropriate. People are liable to act poorly from time to time, even on proper evaluations of their circumstances.

It might be argued that what separates emotional from other errors is that emotions seem to be intractable in a way in which other errors in judgement are not. An emotion can persist even after it has been pointed out that the judgement that gave rise to it was erroneous.

Part of Nussbaum's point though, is that an emotion's history partially determines its nature. The way an emotion arises can consequently make it resistant to change. This type of resistance has a clear parallel with regular beliefs and judgements. If a belief is arrived at in a certain way it might well prove resistant to later correction in some circumstances. Consider the case of a tribesman, Bobo, who sincerely believes that guardian spirits can impart important knowledge to him. He has a dream that he interprets as a message from the spirits that his friend Tima has slept with his girlfriend. He comes to hold this belief on that basis and so leaves her. It may later be pointed out to Bobo that Tima has been away in the next village and could not have slept with his girlfriend. Nevertheless because Bobo believes the spirits have given him privileged knowledge of events, he refuses to alter his belief in the light of this evidence. This story is an illustration of the point that people can often persist in erroneous beliefs for reasons that have little to do with emotion. To realise this is to realise that when people do make bad judgements, or respond poorly, it is not because they are not capable of making good judgements, or responding well, but that in these instances they have merely gone wrong.

The fact that emotions too can go wrong is no objection to their rationality. Instead it seems to be characteristic of it, for all our rational faculties may go wrong. It

should be noted that, as with our other faculties, our emotions also often go right. They do often form appropriate responses to circumstances that occur in the world. This point may be reinforced by noticing that even inappropriate emotions are not completely arbitrary. We cannot simply choose to experience an emotion. Even when our emotion forms an inappropriate response they still relate to an experience that we have.¹⁴⁸

ii

The alternative account of emotional cognition holds emotion to be a kind of perceptive faculty that informs how we see the world, prior to making any judgement about it.¹⁴⁹ On this account, emotions constitute part of our perceptive faculty, influencing how and what we perceive. In any given situation there are an indefinitely high numbers of facts and objects that may be relevant to how we should understand the situation. Emotion acts as a kind of relevance filter, making us focus on some of these and ignore others. They do this by guiding our perception, by focusing our attention and making salient certain features of situations. They help determine the lines of inquiry we take and give weight to the objects of our inquiries.

Proper feeling can lead to better judgement by focusing our attention on facets of a situation that have personal relevance and by sparing us the need to consciously eliminate aspects that have little. Having love for someone can help us to get to know them in a way we would not otherwise, by focusing our attention and thoughts on them in a way that makes them central to our understanding. Improper feeling can have the opposite effect. Jealousy, for example, may lead a person to imbue aspects of a situation with relevance and meaning that they actually lack.

There is room, on this account, therefore, for perception to be focused in ways that are better or worse: better or worse in relation to what is actually important. This makes the emotions a part of successful rationality, for the person whose attention is focused on what is actually important will have a better, and more efficient,

¹⁴⁸ Any other type of judgement, of course, shares this characteristic. A simple judgement cannot be made simply because we choose to make it. Rather, it must arise from our assessment of an experience we have, even when it is incorrect.

¹⁴⁹ Amelie Rorty, Ronald de Sousa and Nancy Sherman all have theories that may fit under this heading.

understanding of the situations he encounters than one whose attention dwells on inconsequential.¹⁵⁰

This account might be interpreted in a way that fits remarkably well with a more time-honoured view of emotions, in that it seems to allow the emotions an important role in affecting, and possibly inhibiting, our judgement. It makes sense of the notion that emotion may 'blind' us to factors that would lead to a better understanding of circumstances. Love may blind us to seeing the faults of those we love. Anger may prevent us from seeing the good in someone who has angered us, etc.

This interpretation may be undermined by noticing that the judgement of what we perceive is in no way eliminated. The fact that some aspects of a situation are seen as more salient no doubt influences how a situation is perceived, but it does not preclude the need for interpretation and understanding. Our beliefs and values will still come into play when assessing how we should understand the objects of our emotion.

One potential problem with this account of emotion is that it makes emotional 'perception' prior to what we experience. The more common-sense understanding of emotion utilised in the judgement account pictures emotion as following our experience. Getting angry, for example, follows from the experience of something upsetting. This account seems to suggest that if I am angry I will be more likely to focus on aspects of the situation that I think are wrong, but it has little to say about why I am angry in the first place. If emotions do not arise as a result of our experience of a situation, then where do they come from?

How this question is answered has great bearing on whether, or how, emotions should be seen as rational. If emotions are to be an aid to rationality, they need to focus our attention on what is objectively relevant in a situation. They need to have some

¹⁵⁰ It should be noted that emotion is not the only factor that influences how our attention is focused and also that it does not uniquely allow for 'deficient' perception. Desires and values may also act in the same way. If a man at a dinner party, George, is experiencing a strong desire for food, it might cause him to fix his attention on the large buffet table, and miss the fact that another guest is mocking him. If George were a staunch Christian he might focus on another guest's uninformed criticism of Christianity. Either desire or value might direct attention in the way an emotion might, but that also need not preclude either desire or value from rationality. His hunger and his faith might both be completely rational and still cause him to perceive what goes on around him in a way that might be judged 'deficient'.

connection with reality that makes them appropriate to the circumstances of our experience.

This problem has typically been solved by appealing, in one way or another, to the narrative nature of emotions. One alternative is to postulate some basic desires, which might form the precursors of emotion later on. A desire for companionship, for example, might inform how we perceive a child's first day at school, but as he interacts with the children in his class he comes to form emotions about them which shape his perception throughout his school career.¹⁵¹ Another alternative, given by de Sousa, is to tie emotions to social conditioning. De Sousa suggests that the emotions highlight features that have social importance, which is learned by association with certain 'paradigm scenarios'. He claims that basic emotions, like anger, hatred, or love, are typically displayed by adults in situations that have particular features. Children learn to associate these emotions with those features, through their observations of adults. In observing the importance and attention adults give those features and then in seeing the response adults make to them, children learn to assign importance to those features and learn what affective response is appropriate. He claims that once such emotional basics have been acquired, the child comes to view the situations that face them through the influence of different paradigm scenarios. Each situation is viewed as a version of the paradigm scenario, which encourages the arousal of a version of the paradigm response.

These solutions seem however to be inadequate, for both responses seem to rely on judgement if they are to explain certain aspects of emotion. Consider that, on de Sousa's explanation, it is recognition that a situation has certain features that leads to the formation of an emotion. If the perspectival account is to be significantly different to the judgement account, then recognising that a situation has certain features cannot itself be a judgement, for the role of emotion is to make those features salient in order to facilitate judgement. Yet if emotions are supposed to arise in virtue of recognising paradigm features then it seems that the only way such recognition can occur, without judgement, is through direct perception. It seems though that this will not suffice in most cases of

¹⁵¹ A number of philosophers, who accept the perspectival account, have made the narrative nature of emotions essential to their accounts of emotion. Amelie Rorty, Richard Wollheim, Peter Goldie and Ronald de Sousa all stand out in this respect. They commonly view emotions as 'stories' that play out in the course of each emotional episode.

emotion, for it is very often those properties of a situation that are not directly perceivable that serve as the objects of emotion. Anger depends on an awareness of harm, yet while physical harm may be a directly observable feature of emotion, there are many other types of harm that aren't and judgement will be required to determine when these types are present. If recognition of paradigmatic features of a situation requires the exercise of judgement then it still seems as though emotion is a response to a situation, or an aspect of a situation, rather than a way of perceiving it.

A similar point can be made for desire as an origin of emotion. To know that a situation satisfies, or is inimical to, a desire will in many cases require an evaluative judgement of that situation. This will usually depend on the complexity of the desire. To know that a desire for a companion is satisfied might not require judgement. To know that a desire for a particular kind of companion is satisfied, for example one that is independent and moral, will. If an emotion, like love, is to proceed from a desire for companionship there will need to be some explanation of why that emotion rather than another like hate, follows. Unless one relies on judgements about the person involved and of how they satisfy the desires one has, it is difficult to see why desires should give rise to one emotion rather than another.

It seems then that, even on the perspectival account, judgement is a necessary condition for the formation of emotion. This might seem to rule out the possibility that emotion is a faculty directing how we perceive a situation, as emotion itself depends on the prior perception of a situation. Nevertheless the effect emotion has on guiding perception is empirically established, so the account can't simply be abandoned or ignored.

The insights of the perspectival account can be retained, and a more satisfactory account of emotions given, through combining it with the judgement account.

C) Merging the Accounts

The accounts may be merged through offering a more likely explanation for the way emotions that influence perception arise, which relies on incorporating the judgement account. One could hold that an emotion originates as an emotional judgement of a

situation or object and, once originated, goes on to shape future judgements by influencing how the agent perceives later situations involving those situations or objects. So George's love of Andrie can be explained initially as a result of his emotional judgement that she is a good person, that she loves him, etc. His love, once originated, continues to play a role in his cognition by influencing how he perceives situations that involve her.

This account suggests that emotions are complicated evaluative judgements, ones that have an enduring influence on perception. That a judgement may linger and affect how later judgements are made is in no way an alien idea. This seems to be a feature of even the simplest judgements. Judging that a person is untrustworthy in one situation is likely to make one view them with scepticism and doubt in future. It is also likely to affect how you judge them in other instances. An action that would be judged friendly if anyone else were involved may be judged as an attempt at ingratiation if performed by that person and so on.

Once an emotion is formed it will guide our perception, by focusing our attention and making salient certain features of situations. In doing so it helps to determine the lines of inquiry we take and to give weight to the objects of our inquiries.

The account can also hold, along with de Sousa, that emotions have a social origin. Rather than supposing that it is the salience of certain features that is learned, however, it would hold that a child will learn that there is a certain way that those features should be evaluated. It is learned judgement, rather than learned perception, that becomes relevant.

Such an account also has the advantage of explaining why emotions may have such a stable and enduring nature. Once an emotional judgement is made, future judgements are affected by the lasting influence the initial judgement has on perception. George's continuing love for Andrie, even in the face of 'evidence' that she is not worthy of love, is explained by the fact that what others perceive as 'evidence' is interpreted by George in a different way, because his love makes such 'evidence' salient, and weighs his experience of her, in a unique way.

This account is, significantly, very similar to Aristotle's own. As was discussed in Chapter 2, proper feeling is not exhibited only in responding to a situation, but also in its

construal. To properly construe a situation that involves a loved one, a person must not construe it as an objective observer might. Rather they must construe it under the influence of the love they bear. For Aristotle, a proper emotion that a person has is an important, occurrently relevant factor in construing and responding to a situation.

As my concern is to show how narratives may fit into the acquisition of virtue it is this combined account that I will work with for the remainder of the chapter.

D) Emotion as Knowledge-How

On the Aristotelian model, the emotions are improved through habituation, until the virtuous person is able to have the right emotion on every occasion. The virtuous person is a kind of expert at emotion, having the right one, at the right time, in the right degree and so on. If emotions are to be perfectible in this fashion, if they are to be something in our power to get right, then they must either be an ability, which may be improved with practice, or they must be a kind of knowledge-how. I will argue that though in the usual case emotions are an ability, in the type of case exemplified in the virtuous person they are themselves a kind of knowledge-how.

It must be immediately conceded, however, that viewing emotion as knowledge-how will depend on a type of objectivism.¹⁵² Unless one thinks that there are objectively correct emotions to have, one cannot hold emotion to be knowledge-how for then there is nothing for emotion to succeed at. Knowledge-how requires that there be some standard of success and, in this instance, that standard must be the Aristotelian one: feeling the right way, towards the right thing, at the right time, in the right degree and for the right reason.

What makes the emotions different in the case of the virtuous person from the ordinary one, is the same thing that transforms it from being an ability into a kind of knowledge-how. In the normal case the emotions just are a part of how we interact with the world. The virtuous person, however, has made the perfection of that capacity a conscious goal to be achieved. They have made correct emotional experience into a

¹⁵² As was mentioned in the first footnote of the second chapter, the objectivist position need not be defended here for Aristotle is himself committed to it.

purpose and it will be argued that it is the achievement of this purpose that constitutes knowledge-how. In other words it will be argued that emotional experience is an ability, but *emotional excellence is knowledge-how*.

This point may be put in another way. Knowledge-how describes the relation between a purpose and a person's ability to satisfy that purpose in appropriate circumstances. If emotion is to be knowledge-how then it must be able to be entertained as a purpose. Knowing how to build a house, for example, requires that one be able to construct a house that will suit the purpose we build houses for; it will need to be sturdy, keep the weather out, be habitable, etc. Every instance of knowledge-how requires that there be a purpose.¹⁵³ It is this feature of knowledge-how that gives rise to its feature of degree. Yet the achievement of every purpose will not count as an instantiation of knowledge-how. It is only those cases where knowledge is required for the achievement of the purpose that will count as exercises of knowledge-how. If learning is required in order to experience emotion in the way that the virtuous person does it will count as a type of knowledge-how¹⁵⁴

People are born with an ability to experience emotion. It is not an acquired capacity. Knowing how to play a guitar, or to devise experimental hypotheses are things that we learn, which is why we tend to think of them as types of knowledge. More properly it is because learning is required in order to be able to perform those actions well that they are considered to be instantiations of knowledge-how. Yet no learning is required for the simple experience of an emotion. It is simply an innate ability.

Nevertheless there is a difference between an innate ability and knowing how to use that ability for a purpose, or with knowing how to use it expertly. An example will help to make this point clear¹⁵⁵. Knowing how to run is an acquired ability that we all have. It is not usually an exercise of knowledge-how. Nevertheless there is a very real sense in which if a person entertains running as fast as possible as a purpose, then achieving that purpose becomes a result of knowledge-how and each time they run as fast as possible will count as an instantiation of that knowledge. Consider that an Olympic

¹⁵³ Though not necessarily one that is conscious at the moment of action.

¹⁵⁴ (see discussion below).

¹⁵⁵ Although the examples of certain types of knowing how to think that were mentioned in Chapter 1, in discussion of how Gilbert Ryle considered certain kinds of thinking as paradigmatic cases of knowledge-how, also count as innate abilities that can be knowledge-how.

100m sprinter can be said to know how to run in a way that properly refers to an expert kind of knowledge, for in running they exercise knowledge that most people who exercise their ability to run do not. Knowing of ways to combine different bodily motions, knowing how to breathe and knowing how to exercise and coordinate various other kinds of abilities in order to run as quickly as possible represents a kind of knowledge-how. Yet this knowledge is not only exhibited in running a race. It is also exhibited in the actions taken in preparing to run. Eating the right foods, doing the right exercises in the right way, running specific distances at the right times etc, are all instantiations of the knowledge of how to run as quickly as possible on race day.¹⁵⁶ The fact that knowledge of how to run may require the prior performance of other actions in advance of the actual event, in order to actualise an ultimate goal, is simply a feature of many types of knowledge-how. Learning how to do these earlier actions, learning that they must be performed to achieve the goal and learning why they will do so, is all part of what is required in learning how to run well. It is learning that is required for attaining the goal the runner has set and is instantiated on race day where he is able to run as fast as is possible for him.

Emotion may be considered as a parallel case for, though emotions may be innate, in cases where a person has set their perfection as their goal and where we are justified in believing that this has been achieved¹⁵⁷ then we will have every reason to call that person's emotions an exercise of their knowledge-how.

To see this we must consider what has been said about emotion and what will be involved in perfecting that faculty. In doing so, we will also be able to see why emotions will still involve knowledge-how even in cases where their perfection is not entertained as a purpose.

The preceding sections showed how emotions are a special type of judgement that has certain lasting effects on perception. There is a straightforward sense in which a judgement may be better or worse and also a straightforward sense in which knowledge is what separates good and bad judgements. If a judgement accurately assesses the way

¹⁵⁶ It will be remembered, from the first chapter, that knowledge-how will often involve the application of propositional knowledge.

¹⁵⁷ Such justification arising through seeing that the person does indeed always experience the right emotion at the right time, in the right way, etc.

things really are then it is right, if not, it is wrong. The difference between a good and bad judgement is a difference in how close that assessment matches the way things really are. Knowing how to assess a situation well will result in good judgements and so in appropriate emotions.

Yet while judgement is often improved with experience it seems unlikely that the simple repetition of an emotion would make one more likely to get it right. Getting angry often does not increase a person's likelihood of experiencing anger at the right time, in the right way and to the right degree. In fact it is more likely to have the opposite effect. An ability, however, may be improved through simple repetition. Constantly doing finger exercises will make one's fingers more coordinated simply through constant repetition of the same movements. Because more than simple repetition is required for the improvement of emotional experience, there is at least one reason for thinking that emotion will involve knowledge-how.

This point may be defended by remembering that, in the first instance, an emotion is a complex evaluation of a situation that involves knowing how to make accurate assessments of the circumstances of the situation and of their relevance to one's self. One must have the right values, accurate knowledge of the world, a proper understanding of one's relation to it and so on if one is to make these assessments well. This in turn requires that we be able to discover facts about world and self and be able to apply them properly. To experience proper anger, for example, one will need to know that there is a property of a situation that constitutes a harm to oneself. To experience it in the right degree will require that one know the extent of that harm as well as being able to apprehend mitigating factors in the circumstances: discovering whether the harm was intentional, or what the motive behind it was. To experience it at the right time requires being able to make these judgements in a timely fashion, etc. As was discussed, in Chapter 1, knowing how-to discover facts and knowing-how to apply them are paradigmatic kinds of knowledge-how. Often, though, the properties relevant to the evaluation will not be open to discovery¹⁵⁸ in such cases a person must be able to form probabilistic beliefs in the light of available evidence. Knowing how to do so will depend on sensitivity to the relevant factors of the situation. It will also depend on the

¹⁵⁸ As may be the case with, for example, other people's subjective mental states.

characters we have. Are we the sort of people who are inclined to give others the benefit of the doubt, are we cynical, do we dislike changing our minds once they are made up, etc? Such character traits will influence what we are inclined to believe is true in any given circumstance and affect the suitability of our emotions.

In a similar way, being able to alter emotional judgements on the basis of new evidence is required for emotional excellence. Previous judgements should influence new ones, but they cannot supplant the need to judge current situations and new evidence. Reason for thinking that this can be done may be provided by noticing that introspection, such as that done in therapy, often leads people to the realisation that some of their emotions are unjustified and also leads them to change. Knowing that one's hostility to one's wife is caused by a deep-seated anger at one's mother may lead to 'seeing' them both in a new light and replacing old judgements with new ones. In such a case the knowledge gained through introspection is clearly important in affecting the change.

Once an emotion is formed, it must go on to influence future perception in the right way. Knowing how much weight to give emotion in directing attention will be crucial to proper emotional experience. Emotion must not blind us to details that should be relevant, but lead us to properly weigh factors that ought to receive our attention. Part of what is involved in the maturation and improvement of the emotions is learning what should receive attention and what should not. A child, whose egocentric focus results in immature emotions, will often give attention to the wrong things, or attach small things with great importance, or important things with little. With age and experience the child's understanding of the world matures and so his emotions improve, resulting in an improved perceptive faculty, which will in turn allow for more appropriate emotional judgements.

Emotions do, therefore, depend on knowledge-how: the knowledge of how to make proper judgements. Nevertheless for emotions to themselves be a kind of knowledge-how they must be able to be instantiated, in the right way, in circumstances conducive to their instantiation.

Unfortunately I am not an expert at emotion and so cannot provide any detail into what steps one would need to take to develop the type of character that experiences emotion in the way the virtuous person does. I can only speculate that to do so would

require that such things as becoming expert in making the evaluations constitutive of emotion. It would probably require consciously trying to ensure that one's emotions are appropriate and that they influence one's perception and actions in the right way. It would require forcing oneself to abandon them when realizing they are inappropriate and so on.¹⁵⁹ I expect that this would not be the sort of thing one could do at will, but rather that it would require conditioning oneself, over a lengthy period of time, to be a certain way, perhaps to be the sort of person whose responses are amenable to reason. Learning to take whatever steps are required to experience proper emotion, would be part of what would be involved in the knowledge-how of emotions. It would be the sort of knowledge-how that the virtuous person would need to have, in order to be the sort of person that he is.

Regardless of how we become expert at emotion, if narratives can affect the way we make emotional judgements, or if they can affect how we perceive the situations we encounter, then they can contribute to the education and growth of a faculty crucial to the virtue. Whether narratives are in fact capable of doing this is a question that will be deferred until the final section.

E) Imaginative Understanding

Typically coming to a judgement requires that we act without possessing knowledge¹⁶⁰ of all the relevant facts. Often we need to make reasonable assumptions about what may be the case and then act on the basis of those assumptions. The psychological states of other people and the possible consequences of actions, for example, are two determining factors in how we might understand and act in any given situation, but they are also the sort of facts that we do not often have direct access to. In conducting our lives, however, we need to form and act on the basis of such beliefs. Because they cannot usually be acquired through direct perception, another faculty is required to explain how they are assumed, as well as to explain how they are often correct.

¹⁵⁹ Just as if one wants to become an expert runner one should consult a specialized trainer, so too one would need to consult a virtuous person to learn how to become expert in this area.

¹⁶⁰ I use knowledge here in the strict sense as requiring justified true belief.

In this portion of the chapter I will examine imagination, which is one faculty often thought to be crucial to the acquisition of such beliefs. I will be making four related claims:

1. Imagination is crucial to acquiring beliefs about the psychological states of other people, as well as about the possible effects of actions.
2. Imagination is a paradigmatic type of knowledge-how.
3. Because such beliefs play a critical role in moral judgement and moral action, the imaginative faculty will be essential to the acquisition and practice of virtue.
4. Exposure to narrative art can improve our imaginative faculty.

‘Imagination’ is a term that encapsulates a wide range of abilities and acts. Gilbert Ryle insists that there is no core feature that acts of imagination share and that an assortment of acts can properly be considered to be exercises of imagining:

The mendacious witness in the witness-box, the inventor thinking out a new machine, the constructor of a romance, the child playing bears, and Henry Irving are all exercising their imaginations; but so, too, are the judge listening to the lies of the witness, the colleague giving his opinion on the new invention, the novel reader, the nurse who refrains from admonishing the ‘bears’ for their subhuman noises, the dramatic critic and the theatre goers.¹⁶¹

The diverse range of activities that qualify as imagining precludes a precise definition of the term, but what seems to be involved in these activities is that some person attempts to arrange a set of ideas in order to grasp, or to create, a coherent picture of some aspect of the world for a purpose that they have. The dishonest witness needs to offer a way of fitting events and facts together that is coherent, but which will successfully conceal the truth. The child playing bears associates ideas of the way that animal looks and behaves and integrates them within a world of his own creation, for his own amusement. The novel reader associates ideas of image and action within the confines of the novelist’s descriptions, in order to follow the story...and so on.

The focus of this argument however is not imagination widely construed, but rather a specific activity that falls within that broad concept: imaginative understanding. I adopt this term from Mathew Kieran, who describes it as involving striving to ‘imagine,

¹⁶¹ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, cited in D. Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction & Literature*, p. 8.

to grasp, and appreciate what the appropriate way of looking at and acting in the world is.’¹⁶²

In trying to imaginatively understand a situation, a person attempts to arrange ideas in order to come to a correct assessment of some aspect of the world, be it with respect to a person, an action, or something else. As a consequence, an imaginative understanding will be better or worse in relation to how well it represents the facts of the matter.

Like the novel reader, the person engaged in imaginatively understanding a particular situation is constrained in their imaginings. They cannot imagine the world to be just any way at all. They are restricted by observable facts and prior knowledge, which must be used to reach understanding of how things are. Seeing the distraught expression on a stranger’s face, we cannot imaginatively understand them as being happy. Imaginative understanding is distinguished by these characteristics: it is an imagining made in order to understand some objective aspect of the world and so it is constrained, and directed, by the way we believe the world to be.

Imaginative understanding incorporates the type of imaginings that may be involved in forming beliefs about other people’s psychological states, or about the effects our actions may have. It is a possible method of filling in the lacunae caused by the limited nature of direct perception. Imagining how someone might be feeling, or why they might have acted in the way that they did, or imagining what effect an action might have on them, seems to be one way for us to establish beliefs requisite for our assessment, or actions, in a particular situation.

But if imagining is a possible way of filling these gaps, is there any reason to think that imagining is actually a way we do so? The emergence of *simulation theory* suggests that it is. Simulation theory holds that human beings ‘are able to predict and explain others’ actions by using the resources of their own minds to simulate the psychological aetiology of the actions of others.’¹⁶³

While simulation theory is by no means an unchallenged model of how we understand other minds, there is an ever-increasing reservoir of empirical evidence that

¹⁶² M. Kieran, ‘Art, Imagination and the Cultivation of Morals’, p. 341.

¹⁶³ M. Davies, ‘The Mental Simulation Debate’, p. 194.

suggest that simulation is at least one important method we do employ to do so.¹⁶⁴ The alternative to simulation theory is theory theory. Theory theory holds that people possess a type of 'folk psychology', a primitive theory about other minds that they apply in order to make sense of what other people do or say. There seems, however, to be no need to enter into the debate between simulation theory and theory theory for, whichever tactic may be the dominant means of understanding other minds, it is clear that simulation is one important tactic that people do employ for doing so. Resolution on which tactic may be dominant, or on whether each requires the other, or on other questions crucial to the debate between the two types of theory are not pertinent to the current project.

So how does simulation work? It seems to do so in two ways:

- 1) *Projection*: In attempting to understand another's mental state a person, call him Steve, will imagine himself in the same situation as the other and then imagine how he would react. When he does this he reacts as he would were he actually in that situation, with the exception that his responses are run 'off-line'. To say that his responses are run 'off-line' is simply a way of delineating that though his response is imagined, he never actually responds in the way he would were he actually in that situation. He never physically enacts the responses that he imagines he would were he in that situation. On this position, simulation achieves success because there is a high degree of similarity in the way humans think. Steve's ability to accurately simulate the mental state of another depends on his enacting a similar process of thought in response to imagined circumstances as the other person would in the face of the actual circumstances that are now imagined.¹⁶⁵
- 2) *Transformation*: While projection may often be sufficient for understanding another, there are occasions when it is not. Sometimes, particularly when we are trying to understand what is different or unique about an individual, imagining how you would respond in their

¹⁶⁴ For a useful overview of the psychological and neurological evidence related to simulation and imagination see N. Sherman, 'Empathy and Imagination'.

¹⁶⁵ This is the position pioneered by Alvin Goldman. See 'Interpretation Psychologized', 'In Defense of Simulation Theory' and 'The Psychology of Folk Psychology'.

situation will not bring you to the type of understanding you want. What you are after is an understanding of how *they* react so it is necessary for you to simulate being *them* in their situation, rather than being yourself in the same circumstance. What occurs is an imaginative re-centering of one's ego-centric map away from the self and onto the other. One imaginatively 'becomes' the other in order to understand them. This is similar to what a method actor might do in order to 'become' the character that he plays.¹⁶⁶

It is important to realise that these are not competing models of simulation, but rather alternative simulation tactics that may be employed under different conditions, varying with what the simulator is trying to understand. If for, example, the simulator is trying to decide whether the response the other made is justified, she could project into the other's situation and decide what she, herself, would do and then compare that response with the other's. If, on the other hand, she wanted to know why the other responded as she did she would be more likely to use transformation, as what she is trying to understand requires that she gets to grip with the other's unique character. Imagining herself in that situation would explain her reaction, but it wouldn't explain the other's, precisely because they are different people and those differences need to be taken into account.

Transformation requires a greater degree of imaginative flexibility than projection, as it does not require only that we place ourselves in someone else's shoes, but rather that we be able to imagine ourselves, as closely as possible, as being that person in order to see how they respond. Nevertheless, even projection requires a strong imaginative ability. It requires that one be able to imaginatively place oneself into someone else's position and then imagine how one would respond¹⁶⁷. Despite the fact that this is a complex feat, it need not occur consciously. People are able to perform such imaginative feats almost automatically. However, if there is a great difference between the person simulating and the person being simulated, or if one is attempting to

¹⁶⁶ This is Robert Gordon's position. See 'Folk Psychology as Simulation', 'The Simulation Theory: Objections and Misconceptions' and 'Sympathy, Simulation and the Impartial Spectator'.

¹⁶⁷ G. Currie, *Image and Mind*, p. 144.

understand a situation that is vastly different from anything in one's experience, the imaginative process may often be a conscious one.¹⁶⁸

Simulation is a tactic crucial to understanding other minds and so is vital to understanding and responding to a huge number of the situations one is likely to face. As a result, it is not surprising to find Robert Gordon claiming that simulation is critical to moral thinking. He claims that the understanding it affords is essential to the application of reciprocity principles such as the Golden Rule and is probably also needed for the application of principles of universalizability.¹⁶⁹

Whether one is imagining oneself in someone else's situation, or trying to imagine what it is like to be someone else, one is engaged in coming to an imaginative understanding of some aspect of the world. Simulation, however, is not the only form of imaginative understanding. There are others.

Raimond Gaita has argued¹⁷⁰ that proper understanding of most facts requires that we comprehend them not simply as descriptions of some aspect of the world, but as things that exist within a 'realm of meaning'. By this he means that proper understanding requires that we grasp the meaning a fact has within a wider narrative context. The fact that someone has lost their only child, for example, isn't properly comprehended until one understands what that might mean for that person: how it might resonate within the context of their life. Unless one understands that the loss of their child will cause pain and grief and so on, one doesn't properly understand that fact. Placing something in the realm of meaning is, however, an exercise in imaginative understanding. It is an attempt to grasp more fully some aspect of the world. It is an attempt to go beyond a shallow fact to a deeper understanding of context and relevance through imagining what a person might be going through, or by imagining what relevance a fact may have in a wider context.

Mathew Kieran has argued that practical deliberation involves both rules and autonomous nonrule-governed judgement¹⁷¹. Imaginative understanding is a crucial part of what is involved in 'nonrule-governed judgement'. Taking moral deliberation as his

¹⁶⁸ R. Gordon, 'Sympathy, Simulation and the Impartial Spectator', p. 735.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 740.

¹⁷⁰ in 'Narrative, Identity and Moral Philosophy'.

¹⁷¹ M. Kieran, 'Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals'.

focus, Kieran argues that if one is to apply moral principles like ‘always act honestly’, one must have an imaginative understanding of the situation and people that one applies the rule to. Consider, for example, my wanting to tell a girl who is attracted to me that I am not interested in her. I want to do so in a way that is honest. With this as my motivation I tell her that I don’t want to go out with her because I think that she is horribly ugly. This, though true, might possibly be the wrong thing to say on the occasion: to instantiate the virtue of friendship requires knowing how to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time etc. Knowing how to do this requires sensitivity and understanding of the situation, including understanding what she feels and how she might react to the way I phrase my reasons. Yet this is not the sort of thing that can be contained in predetermined rules. Rather, it is a faculty required for the proper application of those rules. According to Kieran it is, above all, an imaginative faculty that is required.

Kieran is by no means the only philosopher to claim that imagination is crucial for proper moral practice. Martha Nussbaum, Nancy Sherman, John Deigh, Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft are just some others who have made the same claim¹⁷². We need only return to Aristotle to see how important imaginative understanding is for the exercise of virtue.

It was previously discussed, in Chapter 1, how virtue consists initially in being able to construe a situation properly. Yet knowing how to construe a situation will require that one be able to fill in facts, not open to direct perception, through imaginatively understanding such things as other minds. Virtue then consists in acting appropriately, in the right way at the right time, etc. Aristotle claims that the virtuous person is a sensitive actor and that moral principles can only be a guide towards virtuous action. The virtuous person requires a kind of moral perception in order to know what the right thing to do in any given situation will be. It can now be seen, however, that part of what the virtuous person requires is an imaginative understanding of circumstances and people and actions, as part of that moral perception.

¹⁷² M. Nussbaum, ‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’; N. Sherman, ‘Empathy and Imagination’, John Deigh, ‘Empathy and Universalizability’; G. Currie & I. Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds*

F) Imaginative Understanding as Knowledge-How

...both the actor's knowledge of fictional roles and our knowledge of actual minds belongs in the category not of speculative knowledge but, rather, of know-how: more specifically, of knowing how to transform ourselves into others.¹⁷³

It is widely agreed that imaginative understanding is a paradigmatic case of knowledge-how. As I have already spent a great deal of time in this thesis detailing the features of knowledge-how, it should already be easy to understand why this is the case. As a consequence, I will not go into an in-depth explanation in order to prove this and will merely highlight the features of knowledge-how present within a process of imaginative understanding¹⁷⁴. I will take simulation as an example of imaginative understanding in order to do so. There are no significant differences between simulation and other types of imaginative understanding, such that there is a reason to think they work very differently, so what I take to be true of simulation I take to be true of all other forms of imaginative understanding.

Simulation represents an attempt to grasp another's psychological states. It is a way of understanding their thoughts, feelings, motivations, goals, etc. These are, of course, objective states of the world and any attempt to grasp them will be better or worse in relation to the accuracy with which it describes the way things are. (A) Simulation admits of degree. It is an act better or worse in proportion to the success it has in achieving the purpose that it is a means to, i.e. an understanding of some aspect of the world.

An example might help to illustrate how an act of simulation might satisfy the other criteria of knowledge-how.¹⁷⁵ Suppose two philosophy students, Carl and James, are both derided for their philosophical views during a seminar. Suppose that Carl is curious about how James, who is a very introverted and nervous individual, is feeling

¹⁷³ R. Gordon, 'Symptathy, Simulation and the Impartial Spectator', p. 736. This is an almost universal stance among simulation theorists. Goldman makes a similarly explicit claim in 'Interpretation Psychologized', as do Jane Heal in 'Replication and Functionalism', and George Currie in *Image and Mind*, Chapter 5.

¹⁷⁴ See Section C of Chapter 1. In the paragraphs that follow I apply the criteria given in that section to the discussion. At the end of Section C I summarized those criteria and labeled them as A-E. I re-insert those labels here in order to aid reference.

¹⁷⁵ To reiterate, these criteria were given in Chapter 1. A summary of them was given at the end of Section C.

about the way the class has greeted his opinions and how he might act as a result. What would be involved if Carl attempted to simulate James's mental state?

(B) Carl must choose a method of simulation. In attempting to gauge James's feelings and possible reaction he is likely to employ transformation, because these concern James's unique subjective experience.

(D) To do so Carl obviously requires perceptual abilities to grasp relevant facts of the situation. Also, in line with what has been said about emotional understanding, Carl's emotions might well influence his perception in a relevant way. Pity for James is more likely to lead Carl to a sympathetic imaginative understanding of James's state than hatred would.

Carl would also need to have propositional knowledge both about James and also about himself. If transformation involves shifting one's egocentric map one must know where one has come from and where one is going to. One requires knowledge both of oneself and of the other and of the relevant differences between each, in order to know what characteristics, or beliefs, need to be transformed. The more Carl knows about James, and himself, the more likely he would be to successfully simulate his feelings.¹⁷⁶

These propositional beliefs should not, alone, be sufficient for understanding James's mental state. If they were, simulation would not need to occur. Knowing what he does about James, Carl still needs to imagine how James is experiencing the situation. He needs to imagine what features will hold his attention, how he will interpret them, what effect they will have on his feeling and emotion, etc.

To do so, he may imagine himself as James, the howls of laughter appearing agonizingly loud, drowning out all other sound except the rapid thuds of his own heart. He may imagine his hands trembling slightly, or his mind stuttering anxiously trying to think of something to say to disown what he had said previously. It is his imaginings that allow Carl to understand what James is going through. His knowledge of James and the situation guide and constrain his imaginings, but in a way that is hugely significant. In order to understand James's response Carl cannot simply imagine how someone who is

¹⁷⁶ This is one reason why people are far more likely to understand how someone they are close to will react than they would a stranger.

insecure, shy, etc, might respond; he needs to imagine how James is responding, then and there.

Finally, Carl needs to know how to put aside his own emotions, perceptions, normative values etc. He needs to be able to leave himself behind if he is to successfully simulate James. He cannot allow his own emotional understanding, for example, to influence what he imagines will stand out in the situation for James. This may have been the kind of thinking that motivated Iris Murdoch to write that ‘...goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self.’¹⁷⁷

Despite being constrained by his beliefs about the situation, there are many different things Carl could imagine about James, many ways he could imagine him being. The vividness, intensity and accuracy of his imaginings will also influence his understanding. How well Carl is ultimately able to imaginatively understand James will depend on how well he is able to integrate the propositional and conceptual information he has at his disposal and on how well he can actually make that transformation into James’s position.

(E) It is also possible for Carl to partially know how to simulate James. If, for example, he could simulate James’s emotions, but not his thoughts, then he could only partially imaginatively understand James’s reaction to the situation.

(C) Carl will also only be justified in believing his imaginative understanding of James is correct if James gives visible confirmation. If he goes on to react as Carl expects him to, or if he visibly expresses the emotions Carl thought he was having, then Carl can be satisfied that he does know how to imaginatively understand James.

Consequently it is clear that imaginative understanding possesses all the features of knowledge-how. The question remains, however, whether narrative fictions may improve how one may imaginatively understand. If narratives offer appropriate ways of imaginatively understanding situations and people, if they can help us to produce more vivid and accurate imaginings than we would otherwise, then they will be an important tool in improving a faculty required for the exercise of virtue.

¹⁷⁷ ‘On God and Good’, p. 64.

G) Narratives and the Acquisition of Emotional and Imaginative Understanding

In this final section I will explain how narratives can contribute to the improvement of a person's knowledge of how to understand the world emotionally and imaginatively. The two types of knowledge are treated together, because the way a narrative may influence each is very similar. So much so that, in discussions on learning from narratives, imagination and emotion are often treated together. They are pictures as complimentary parts of an ability to perceive the world with the type of loving attention that is necessary for moral judgement on some accounts.¹⁷⁸

The basic idea is that narratives are able to educate our emotions and imaginations by prescribing, and attempting to elicit, particular imaginative understandings of, and emotional responses to, the characters and events that they depict. In doing so, they offer their audience ways that they can imaginatively and emotionally understand relevantly similar characters and situations in the actual world. How this basic idea is elaborated depends on the particular philosopher involved and I will summarise a few of these accounts in this section.

To begin with, Jenefer Robinson¹⁷⁹, who adopts the perspectival view of emotions, argues that an attentive reader who has a rich emotional experience when reading a novel, will after completing it, acquire beliefs about the characters and situations in the novel that are a result of their emotional experience of it. She claims that the emotional experience educates by focussing attention on certain aspects of the situations and characters, by offering conceptions or points of view about them, by appealing to the reader's desires and interests and by affecting the reader physiologically.¹⁸⁰

A novel is supposed to be able to do this in two ways:

- 1) Through a careful description of the characters and how they are educated and changed through their emotions. This is achieved by showing: the character's focus of attention; their thoughts about or

¹⁷⁸ See Cora Diamond, *The Realist Spirit* (particularly Chapter 11: 'Anything but Argument'); Jenefer Robinson 'L'Education Sentimentale' & 'Emotion, Judgement and Desire'; Peter Goldie, 'Narrative and Perspective', and Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*.

¹⁷⁹ In 'L'Education Sentimentale'

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 213.

conception of the situation on which they are focussed; how this conception and focus of attention reflects their desires, interests and values; and how their physiological states serve to maintain their focus of attention.

- 2) In engaging with the novel the reader has their own emotions aroused, which also serves to focus their attention on certain situations and see them in certain ways. The reader is also influenced by their own desires, interests and values, as well as by the physiological responses they may have during the course of their reading. Finally a novel also encourages the reader to reflect on their own emotional experience during the novel, which forces the reader to reflect on how that emotional experience focussed their attention at the time.¹⁸¹

On Robinson's view, the series of emotional episodes, which constitute the reader's emotional experience of the novel, are able to change the reader's conceptions and focus of attention and it is in this process that emotional education occurs.¹⁸² We learn to approach situations in new ways, from different points of view. We also learn that certain aspects of situations and characters should be given attention, that they are important to proper understanding. Once this has occurred, the reader is able to approach their own life with increased sensitivity and greater perceptiveness.

For Martha Nussbaum, whose judgement account of the emotions depends on their essentially narrative history, narratives provide information about these 'emotion-histories' that we could not easily obtain in any other way. It is only in a narrative that the interrelated temporal structure of emotional judgements may be fully and accurately shown. Yet narratives are not only important for what they can show about the structure of emotion, they also educate their audience by cultivating the 'inner world' which is responsible for how one perceives and responds to objects and events in the actual one.¹⁸³ This is particularly true of some emotions, like love, which cannot, because of their particularity and complexity, be properly investigated by conventional philosophical texts.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 219.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, p. 226.

¹⁸³ *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 236.

Nussbaum also claims¹⁸⁴ that the creative imagination, exercised in creating and engaging with narrative art, is similar to the moral imagination. Consequently, engaging with narrative art has the effect of stimulating and improving the same faculties and skills required for moral deliberation and moral action. She emphasises that to be effective a moral action must be performed in a way that is sensitive to the people involved and to its intended purpose. Imagination is required both to understand those people and to find an effective way of achieving one's purpose.

The consequence of Nussbaum's view is that narratives are uniquely suited to educating the emotions and imagination. They are the only form able to show how, and why, a particular emotion is appropriate to a situation. Her view also has a parallel consequence for imaginative understanding. A narrative is the only form that is able to show how, and why, a particular imaginative understanding is appropriate, be it how one character imaginatively understands another, or how the reader should imaginatively understand an event or sequence of events.

Turning now to a view that sees emotion and imagination as intimately linked, Cora Diamond¹⁸⁵ argues that literature may educate the emotions through encouraging the reader to exercise their imagination in a certain way, one that prescribes a novel way of conceiving a situation or character. Literature can, as a result, lead a person to a kind of attentive imaginative response to the world. She writes, in dealing with a poem by Wordsworth, that responding properly to the moral ideas in literature:

...cannot be separated from an understanding of oneself, from an acknowledgement of certain capacities of response in oneself as appropriate both to their object and to one's own nature...the appropriateness being something we can come to recognise through the kind of pleasure...a poem gives. The "competence and confidence" with which we are able to judge that truth of the kind Wordsworth thought had been achieved is inseparable...from the strength with which the heart responds to the representation...In a sense, someone who has not learned to respond with the heart in such ways has not learned to think...for thinking well involves thinking charged with appropriate feeling. Poetry then helps develop the heart's capacities that are the basis for the moral life by deepening our emotional life and our understanding of it.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ In: 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible'.

¹⁸⁵ *The Realist Spirit*, (particularly Chapter 11, 'Anything but Argument?').

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 298-299. Although this particular example refers to a poem, which is not a narrative form in the sense I have been concerned with, Diamond applies the same thinking to paradigmatic examples of narratives such as Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

Diamond is pointing to the fact that narratives encourage emotionally charged judgement of circumstances and objects relevantly similar to those we face in the real world. The faculties required for judgement in both cases are the same, and in being exposed to narratives we are encouraged to judge these things in particular ways, ways that are appropriate to their subject. In doing so we learn to judge in the same emotionally charged way in the actual world, which allows for a deeper, more textured, understanding of it.

Gregory Currie has developed a complex account, relying on simulation theory, of how fictional narratives can affect our mental processes and so our ability to imaginatively understand the world¹⁸⁷. He claims that we learn from fictions in a way similar to how we learn from non-fictions, i.e. through the formation of beliefs and desires. The difference is that during the narrative experience our mental processes are engaged off-line. In doing so, we acquire belief-like and desire-like imaginings which, though they run off-line, retain belief and desire-like connections to other mental states and to the body, which can lead to decisions and cause certain kinds of bodily sensations¹⁸⁸.

In engaging with narratives, Currie argues that we are encouraged to simulate the mental states of the characters, as well as to imagine in other ways, in order to understand and appreciate the work. He draws a distinction between two kinds of imagining that occur during narrative engagement. *Primary* imaginings occur when the audience is asked to imagine something directly, as occurs when they are given an explicit description of a character's actions. *Secondary* imaginings are imaginings that the audience makes in order to imagine what is explicitly described. So Currie's example is that if there is a description of a man walking down a dark street, the audience may imagine that he has thoughts, anxieties, visual and auditory experiences and bodily sensations that are not explicitly mentioned, but which are important to making sense of the scene¹⁸⁹. It is the ability to have secondary imaginings that enables us to understand and appreciate a fiction; it enables us to get into the minds of its characters and allows us to be gripped by the unfolding events.

¹⁸⁷ The account is developed in *Image and Mind*.

¹⁸⁸ G. Currie, *Image and Mind*, p. 150.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 152-153.

In engaging with narratives we are forced to utilise the same capacity for imaginative understanding that we use to make sense of the actual world. Our imaginative understandings are also shaped and guided by the narrative, leading to particular desires-like and belief-like imaginings that may have a lasting effect on the way we understand and respond to the actual world.

Mathew Kieran¹⁹⁰ argues that the imaginative content of an artwork is partly determined by the way it is shaped and presented. In prescribing particular imaginings a work promotes a particular imaginative understanding of what it depicts.¹⁹¹ Art may, in this way, help us to become attentive to aspects of the world we might otherwise have missed. It also offers ways that we may imaginatively understand relevantly similar objects and events. Kieran is particularly concerned to show that an imagination of ourselves and others is necessary for the application of moral principles and for moral action generally. In contributing to our ability to imaginatively understand the world, art is consequently crucial to improving our moral understanding.

In Chapter 1, I claimed that narratives offer us partial knowledge of the world in virtue of offering ways that the world can be understood. This constitutes partial knowledge-how because these ways can only be justified through success in practice. If we take the ways we learn from narratives and apply them to the world successfully, if we see that the world can in fact be understood in these ways, then we come to have fuller knowledge of how to understand and respond to it.

In this section we can see how many authors share a similar understanding. They tend to claim that narratives lead us to particular emotional and imaginative understandings of their subjects. These understandings may then be applied to the actual world, which offers us novel and interesting ways of approaching and understanding the objects and events we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

¹⁹⁰ In: 'Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals'.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 338.

Chapter 5: American Beauty

In this final chapter I want to examine a case study in order to show just how we can garner knowledge-how from a fictional narrative. I will use the film *American Beauty*¹⁹² to show how conceptual, emotional and imaginative knowledge-how may be garnered in the course of the narrative experience.

It will be remembered, from Chapter 1, that narratives make claims about how their subjects should be understood that are intended to apply to the actual world as well. These claims may be recognised by the viewer through a process of abductive reasoning. Where the narrative offers evidence for such an inference, the viewer can come to regard those ways of understanding circumstances and objects as good ones and attempt to apply them to their own experiences in the actual world. In doing so they can acquire partial knowledge of how to perceive and understand the actual world.

I will argue that *American Beauty* attempts to promote a particular way of perceiving and understanding the world and of coming to happiness. It also offers ways of understanding what is involved in achieving such a perspective and happiness, through the events it depicts and through the way they are portrayed. These claims are, of course, based on my own abductive interpretation of the film, but I will try to show through my description of events that they are correct.

In Section A I will introduce the film and provide a very brief summary of it, in order to facilitate more specific discussion of the events in later sections.

In Section B, I will argue that a virtue wheel is present in the narrative and will try to show how the virtue wheel provides evidence for taking the film to be prescribing a particular moral approach to the actual world.

In Sections C and D I will examine, in detail, particular scenes from the movie in order to show what emotional and imaginative understandings are conveyed in those scenes and to elaborate on how the virtue wheel helps the audience to come to the understandings prescribed by the fiction.

¹⁹² Sam Mendes, Dreamworks, 1999.

A) The Film

The film details events that occur during the last year of the life of its main character, Lester Burnham. It chronicles Lester's emotional transformation from being a depressed, 'sedated' and unhappy man, afraid to take control of his life, to his becoming a happy, vital person, able to impose himself on the world. At the same time the movie also details the lives of Lester's wife Carolyn and daughter, Jane. Both characters undergo rich emotional journeys of their own. Carolyn is also searching for happiness and meaning in her life mostly through an affair with Buddy Kane, 'the Real Estate King'. Jane is a teenager searching for identity and meaning in her life who ultimately finds happiness and love in a relationship with Ricky Fitts, the boy who has just moved into the house next door. The film ends when Lester is killed by Ricky's father, Colonel Frank Fitts, but by that point, Lester has already become the person he has aspired to be and has found happiness.

The movie is structured in three distinct acts. It is worth noting these acts briefly in order to have reference points for later discussions. The first act proceeds from the beginning of the film until just after a scene where Lester is caught masturbating by Carolyn, 44 minutes in.

The second act opens with Lester going for a run, asking his two neighbours, Jim and Jim, for advice on getting into shape, and ends with a scene between Jane and Ricky where Jane jokingly asks Ricky to kill Lester. The final act, which begins exactly 80 minutes into the film, depicts Lester's final day on earth. It starts with Lester jogging in the morning and ends as the film fades to black and Lester's final narration ends.

B) The Virtue Wheel¹⁹³

Happiness is in a sense, the main theme of the movie, which tries to convey the idea that it is achieved through a certain approach to life. This 'approach' is communicated through a very clear virtue wheel in the narrative, where each character approaches their life from a perspective rooted firmly in the values they hold.

¹⁹³ Refer to Chapter 3 for discussion of how a virtue wheel works.

It will be remembered that a virtue wheel is present where characters are arranged according to their possession of a virtue or package of virtues. This structure is employed in order to encourage understanding of what those virtues require through the comparisons and contrasts that are made between the characters.

The film's ideal is most closely instantiated in Ricky Fitts who possesses all the virtues it advocates. On the other extreme, Ricky's father, the Colonel, is deficient in those virtues to the point of instantiating their corresponding vices. Lester proceeds, in the course of the film, from a deficient state where he is desperately unhappy to one where he has achieved the same virtues that Ricky embodies. Part of the conceptual force of the film comes through showing the changes Lester makes and how they transform him from a pitiful character into an admirable one. The other main characters: Carolyn, Jane, Angela, Buddy and Barbara all fall somewhere within the spectrum of the virtue wheel.

The types of virtues that the film depicts as desirable and essential to happiness are not easily labelled in traditional virtue terms, particularly because the film advocates that happiness is a result of adopting a particular approach to life. It is in seeing the world and oneself in a certain way, as beautiful, that true happiness becomes possible. To do so requires that one adopts and lives by good values, such that one may be proud of oneself. It also requires standing up for one's own beliefs, being open with others about who one is, what one thinks, desires and needs and also, finally, imposing oneself on the world.

To elaborate on the virtues the film concerns itself with and to further detail how the characters fit within the virtue wheel, it will be best to proceed by examining Lester's journey from one extreme to the other.

The film opens with a brief scene in which Jane describes her father as a pathetic, 'horny geek-boy'. She then asks an, as yet unknown, companion to kill him. The audience's first impression of him is, as a result, far from flattering. The film then cuts to an aerial shot of Lester's neighbourhood, which is accompanied by the beginning of Lester's narration. Lester informs the audience that within a year he will be dead, but that he doesn't yet realise that. This statement is meant to influence the audience's thinking in two respects. It is meant to get them wondering whether his daughter does

arrange to have him killed. More importantly, it is also meant to focus the audience's attention on how Lester lives, on what value his life has and on how he will use this last year he has left.

In the first act, however, Lester is extremely unhappy. He tells us that his family views him as a loser and he agrees with their assessment. "I have lost something", he tells us, though he is not sure what. The audience is made to feel that Lester is fairly pathetic. His wife runs all over him, but he is too afraid of her to say a word in his own defence. He cannot initiate a meaningful discussion with his daughter. He is servile at work; his boss clearly has no respect for him and seems to be in the process of manoeuvring to dismiss him. Above all, Lester is conveyed as being lonely, isolated and afraid. He has no control of his life and, as a result, has no self-respect and very little self-esteem.

By the end of the first act, however, Lester begins to be 'awakened'. An attraction to his daughter's friend Angela, smoking marijuana with Ricky and standing up to his wife, restore in him a spark of life and move him to implement changes that ultimately make him happy. So, in the second act, he begins to run and workout, looking to restore his bodily image in order, initially, to be appealing to Angela although later simply for the enjoyment and pride he gets from these activities. He also starts standing up to the people around him, imposing his will on the world. He stops letting his wife and daughter run roughshod over him. He begins to do the things that he wants to do. Where before he entertained thoughts of doing them, but was too afraid to do so, now he actively goes out to achieve his desires. He begins listening to the music he used to love when he was younger, he buys himself the car he always wanted, he quits his job (blackmailing his boss into a large settlement package) and finds one he enjoys more, even though it is far less prestigious than the one he held before. As the act proceeds Lester regains self-respect and begins to value and love himself once more. In taking control of his life, in accepting responsibility for his own happiness Lester regains his self-esteem and becomes happy. By the time the final act comes, Lester has transformed himself into the person he wants to be. He is fit and healthy, confident and happy. He is finally enjoying being alive and he is *alive*, truly alive for the first time since he was young, and the audience finally comes to understand that he became unhappy and

'sedated' through relinquishing control of his life. He became miserable because he allowed his wife to dominate him, because he subordinated his own needs, desires and happiness to her and others. It was the effects of hiding everything he was and liked within him, for the sake of others, that left him feeling "dead already".

The package of virtues that the film deals with, and which the virtue wheel is structured around, concern taking responsibility for one's own happiness and involves having the integrity to be honest about who one is and what one needs and desires. Each character is dealing, to a greater or lesser extent, with these issues and it is their concern to do so that guides their actions. Yet they achieve happiness, or fail to do so, as a result of the values they pursue in order to achieve happiness and how they go about doing so.

Lester's wife, Carolyn, undertakes a similar search for happiness in the course of the film. Yet she does not look towards herself, as Lester does, and so ultimately fails to find what she seeks. Her failure is also rooted in her flawed values, which are centred on appearances. For Carolyn the appearance of success, the appearance of happiness, appearance generally, is taken as being of primary value. The first thing that the audience learns about her is that she has intentionally matched her gardening clogs with the handle of the scissors she uses to cut her flowers. The first words she utters deride her daughter for her dishevelled appearance, and her 'personal philosophy', shared with Buddy, is that "in order to be successful, one must project an image of success at all times."

In pursuing happiness Carolyn actually pursues the appearance of happiness. She sees Buddy as an image of success and looks to him to create her happiness. She begins an affair with Buddy, she takes up his hobbies, she patterns herself after him and, in doing so, does begin to feel a fleeting improvement in her life. Yet this is quickly and easily dashed when Lester discovers their affair. The fact that her happiness is so easily destroyed, when Lester's seems so indestructible is shown to be a result of what each is based on. Lester's happiness was a result of positive changes he made in himself and in his approach to the world. Carolyn's were based on mere appearances and had their cause outside of her, so when that cause disappears her happiness goes with it and she is left more broken than she was before.

Jane Burnham is introduced to the audience as a typical teenager “angry, insecure and confused”. Initially she tries to find an identity and happiness through a friendship with Angela. Jane mimics Angela and tries to be like her. She only begins to find herself and become happy later, when she stands up to Angela, choosing to defy her in order to walk home with Ricky. She had been interested in him since first seeing him, but had previously denied that interest in order to conform with Angela’s perceptions of him. In allowing Angela to determine who she was and how she behaved Jane was neither happy nor confident in herself. It is only later, through her growing love for Ricky and her commitment to it that Jane begins to become secure in who she is and to find her own happiness. In coming to love him and his unique way of looking at things, she adopts similar values and abandons her former need for approval.

Angela, despite seeming initially to be a confident young woman, turns out to be lying about everything she is. Like Carolyn, Angela is seeking comfort and happiness in appearances. She pretends to be worldly and sexually active, taking refuge in the persona of a young model. Nevertheless her own knowledge of her act leaves her insecure and afraid. She knows that she is a fake and fears what seems to her to be the truth, that she is a desperately ordinary person without anything to distinguish her. She lives with this insecurity as a result of her fear of revealing her true self. It is only when she finally admits her innocence to Lester that she begins to seem more happy and comfortable with who she is.

The character furthest from the virtues espoused in the fiction is Colonel Frank Fitts. Frank is presented, initially, as being a very conservative military man. His perspective on life is narrow and bigoted. He is full of anger and appears unhappy and empty. He is a strict disciplinarian, forcing his son to take drug tests and hitting him violently when he finds that his son broke into his cupboard to show Jane one of his plates. In the final act the audience learns that the truth about the Colonel is very different from the façade he presents. The Colonel is, in fact, a closet homosexual who is, as a result of his bigoted values, filled with self-loathing and desperately afraid to show his real self to the world. This self-loathing and repression of self is ultimately the cause of his sadness, and violence. It makes him view the world with distrust. He assumes the people around him are also dishonest about who they are and what they

want. If we take honestly making your needs known in the world as one of the virtues the film seeks to examine, an interesting contrast with Lester is revealed. While Lester is made happier as he comes to pursue his needs and desires and as he imposes himself on the world, the Colonel is a frustrated and bitter man because he has never tried to satisfy his own true needs and desires and because he has chosen to hide them instead. While it might also seem that Frank imposes himself within his own little world he never does so with respect to what he truly is.

Barbara Fitts, the Colonel's wife, is a shattered woman. She seems to be a ghost, lacking any life of her own. It is significant though, that in the course of the movie Barbara never does a single thing for herself. She drifts through the movie in silence. She cooks for her family, she cleans and she stares emptily at the world around her. She never expresses a desire of her own, let alone attempts to satisfy one. The only time she seems even remotely alive is when Ricky leaves her house, never to come back. At that moment the audience sees how much he means to her, but even then she has lost the capacity to express the emotions she has and we can see that she has long ago lost any capacity for happiness she might once have had.

Ricky Fitts is the character closest to the film's ideal. He is supremely confident in who he is and, except around his father, he is completely open about what he does, what he wants, about his past and his thoughts. He also actively pursues the things that make him happy. Crucially, however, his happiness is a result of who he is and from the way he sees the world. The audience often sees him in tears, crying in happiness at the beauty he sees in the world around him.

In the course of the film Ricky is shown to be extremely compassionate and sensitive, yet at the same time the audience learns that he doesn't get scared. He feels no fear at all, not for any reason, not even with his abusive father or in the face of the hostility he encounters at school from people like Angela and others who don't understand him.

It was previously mentioned that Ricky's virtue is put forward in his perspective. Throughout the film, the audience is given insight into that perspective through Ricky's camera. When the director wants the viewer to see as Ricky does, he cuts to Ricky's own footage.

The quintessential example of this is when Ricky shows Jane ‘the most beautiful thing he’s ever filmed.’ This turns out to be a video of a plastic bag. Confronted by the same sight, most people would see only garbage, litter spoiling the street. Yet the point of the shot is that looked at in the right way, as Ricky does, there is beauty to be seen in even the most common and superficially ugly sight. The shot attempts to illustrate the point that being able to find the good in the world depends on how one looks. When the director shows us the video of the bag, the audience is treated to seeing it as Ricky does, as something beautiful.

While the shot is itself a beautiful one, the viewer is helped to this perspective by Ricky’s commentary of the video, which proceeds as follows:

“It was one of those days, where it is a minute away from snowing and there’s this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was just dancing with me, like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes.”

The way Ricky sets the scene is very romantic, it helps the viewer to imagine the sight as he does. His voice, thick with emotion, helps the audience grasp the weight of feeling behind this imaginative understanding of the event. It invites the audience to feel deeply, themselves, at the spectacle.

When the director cuts to Ricky there are tears in his eyes, which are alight in the dark room. Ricky continues:

“That’s the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid; ever. Video is a poor excuse...but it helps me to remember. I need to remember. Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can’t take it and my heart is just going to cave in.”

This speech essentially defines and explains Ricky’s character. The video of the bag is his favourite, the most beautiful thing he has ever shot, not only because of the beauty he saw in that event, but also because it marked a change in him. It was the day when he realised that there was an ‘entire life’, a magnificence, behind everything and he lost any fear at being alive. It is this change that he needs to remember, a change in perspective that enables him to see and understand the good in the things around him.

This is the essence of the film's moral message. It asks us to pay attention to the things around us in such a way that we too can see their beauty. It is having this loving and attentive focus to our lives, as well as being willing to stand up for who we are, that the film tries to say is crucial to a happy life. If you see beauty everywhere you look, how could you not be happy?

The movie ultimately involves Lester's journey to attaining this type of perspective, to attaining this virtue so that by the end, after his murder, Lester is able to echo Ricky's words, saying:

"I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once and it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst and then I remember to relax and stop trying to hold onto it and then it flows through me, like rain, and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life..."

The way the various characters are compared and contrasted and the way they interact with one another helps lead the viewer to understand what is involved in Lester's coming to be happy. It helps show what is required for happiness and how it can be achieved. It leads us to understand why Lester's character and actions at the beginning of the film make it impossible for him to see the world in that way and why the changes he brings about makes it possible in the end.

Abductively one can assume that the filmmakers think that if we were to change our actual lives in ways similar to how Lester does, if we adopted similar values and a similar perspective and approach to the world, then we too would become happy. Indeed we may take the claim as being that this is the way people *should* approach their lives and the world.

The film offers a particular way of approaching and understanding the world. In doing so it offers partial knowledge of how to approach and understand the world. If the viewer goes on to implement that way for himself and finds it successful, then it can become complete knowledge of how to understand and approach the world. It is, however, only in witnessing how the film depicts the characters and events that one can decide whether one should adopt this way. Watching the film is also the only way to gain

insight into how the audience's conceptions and understanding are influenced. This is why in the following two sections I shall give detailed descriptions of two scenes in order to show how the audience's emotional and imaginative understanding may be guided and educated.¹⁹⁴

C) My Personal Hero

Near the end of the first act, Lester attends a business function with his wife. He meets Ricky for the first time there. Ricky is working as a waiter. He recognises Lester, approaches him while he is alone at the bar and asks him "do you get high". Lester is slumped in his chair and at his lowest point in the film when Ricky comes to him, dressed in angelic white, light shining on him from behind, to make this offer and change Lester's life.

In the scene that follows, the audience is asked to view a morally dubious act in a positive light. The act itself is, however, merely a device for triggering a transformation in Lester Burnham. The key aspect of this scene is how Lester comes to see Ricky Fitts as a heroic figure. If the scene is successful it imparts a unique imaginative understanding of both characters and the situation as a whole, as well as provoking the audience to feel positively about the same. I will detail the scene closely in order to show how the film tries to impart that understanding and tries to get the audience to feel positively towards the character.

The scene opens as Lester and Ricky are talking about a film, *Reanimator*. They are standing in the dark, alone against a bluish concrete wall, a few meters away from a door. They are presented in a wide shot, placed on the extreme right of the frame. The effect of the shot is to create a sense of peace and tranquillity. The change in Lester, from previous scenes, is palpable. Where before he was miserable and frustrated, he is

¹⁹⁴ It must be noted that, no matter how detailed, a description of the film cannot replace an experience of the work. While I will try to explain why the narrative may offer ways of understanding that we can learn, and how it might do so, it is only in the experience of the narrative itself that one can be persuaded that these ways are correct. The way the subject is presented by the narrative must be experienced in order to judge its appropriateness. This means however, that properly understanding how the narrative might persuade its audience to adopt a particular way of looking at things cannot be garnered solely through reading a description, or explanation, of the events. Such a full understanding can only be acquired through actually watching the film.

now relaxed and having fun. Until now the audience has only seen Lester suffer. Watching his life, to this point, typically leaves the viewer feeling nothing but sadness and pity. This is the first time he is shown laughing, or even smiling. Getting to watch him enjoy himself for the first time, leads the audience to some approval of what he is doing, as they get some vicarious pleasure from watching him. Having been led to a positive emotion the audience is helped to imagine the scene sympathetically. To understand it not as two people engaged in a crime, but as two people relaxing, bonding and having fun. To put this point more strongly, following the understanding of emotion given in the previous chapter, the positive emotion the audience experiences while watching Lester is a positive judgement of the situation, a judgement that the film has led the viewer to make.

For the duration of the first act almost all the warm colours have been bled from the film in order to highlight the loneliness, the coldness and sterility of the characters' world. The only warm colours in the first act were intentionally inserted in order to highlight particular aspects of some scenes, like the Burnham's red front door, or the roses and rose-petals that are present in several scenes. As Ricky and Lester are talking about *Reanimator* the door opens and Ricky's employer stands silhouetted against a bright orange light. The re-insertion of a warm colour here, immediately directs the audience's attention to the figure standing within it and to the black 'bars' behind him. The audience is given the impression that this man is guarding a prison. He appears as a jailor. The effect is to make the viewers adopt Lester's own imaginative understanding of the party and its inhabitants as forming part of a prison-like world: a place where he is not free to be who he is, a place filled with sadness and suffering, a place where he is told how to behave and how to be. In viewing the film, the audience is forced to share this perspective, for this is what they are shown. It is a point of view they are forced to look through. All the techniques the film employs are designed to manipulate them into seeing and understanding the scene in this way. The jail look is not only how Lester sees the party, it is how it is depicted as being in fact. Consequently, the audience not only adopts Lester's understanding but may also be let to abductively adopt it as a correct understanding of relevantly similar circumstances in the actual world. It should be noted that jail imagery is employed throughout the film. Characters are constantly shot behind

bars, and in cell-like cubicles and spaces. Continually representing them in this way is meant to give the audience the impression that the characters are prisoners in their own world, and highlights their isolation and inability to reach one another.

Whether or not the audience consciously picks up on the director's use of the technique, their imaginative understandings of the events are constrained by the way they are depicted. Using the 'jail technique' encourages the audience to imaginatively understand the characters as isolated and suffering, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. Awareness of the technique results only in awareness that this is indeed the way the director wants the viewer to understand what he is depicting.

When Ricky's employer opens the door he appears as a jailer trying to bring Ricky back into the world Lester hates and fears so much: the world he has temporarily escaped. The 'jailer' tells Ricky "I'm not paying you to do whatever it is you're doing out here". The director cuts to a mid-shot¹⁹⁵ of Ricky and Lester, as Ricky says "fine so don't pay me." In this moment Ricky and Lester have very different responses to the 'jailer's' intrusion: responses that are telling. Ricky, though the subject of his ire, is steady and cool. He is completely unruffled; he stares directly at his employer while holding the joint openly in front of him. Lester, behind Ricky, is anxious and afraid. His eyes dart from side to side, he doesn't look directly at Ricky's employer.

As the employer stands in the door, the audience probably expects a certain reaction from Ricky, one more like Lester's. He has, after all, just been caught by his employer taking illegal drugs while working. This is a serious breach of social conduct and some nervousness on his part, some apprehension, would be warranted. His absolute confidence, his coolness in the face of being caught, suggests a particular imaginative understanding of the character as confident and powerful and, perhaps, wise in some yet to be revealed way. The viewer's curiosity is aroused for an explanation of his 'strange' behaviour.

The film cuts back to a mid-shot of the employer, side-on now, the bars have disappeared from view. Ricky's response takes the employer aback and he utters "excuse me." Though the tone with which these words are spoken suggests anger at Ricky's

¹⁹⁵ A mid-shot frames a character from the waist up.

response, the words themselves suggest that the employer is apologising for intruding on Ricky's world.

The camera cuts back to the mid-shot of Ricky and Lester, as Ricky says "I quit; so you don't have to pay me". At this Lester looks directly at the 'Jailor' for the first time, looking for his reaction, as Ricky concludes "now leave me alone." Lester now looks at Ricky with surprise, even shock. He can't believe what has just occurred.

Lester's reaction to Ricky's words has a two-fold effect. It guides the audience's emotional and imaginative understanding in two ways. On the one hand, Lester's surprise reinforces our understanding of Ricky's coolness and strength. On the other, it leads the viewer to try and imaginatively understand Lester's reaction, by simulation, in order to understand how Lester is interpreting the events going on around him.

This is what Currie calls secondary imagining¹⁹⁶, in which the audience is forced to imagine such things as mental states, which aren't explicitly shown, in order to understand what is explicitly depicted. In order to understand Lester's reaction the audience must imagine the feelings and thoughts that would lead to it.

The employer leaves, closing the door behind him and Lester and Ricky are alone once more. Lester is now looking at Ricky with awe, as Ricky leans back against the wall and takes another drag, super-cool, oblivious to the incident that has just passed. Lester turns to Ricky and says to him "I think you just became my personal hero."

This is the most significance line of the scene. It reveals Ricky as the film's ideal, by forcing the audience to compare the characters and ask what it is about Ricky that Lester views as heroic. This is the virtue wheel in action. A concept 'hero' is introduced and applied to an incident that very few people would apply it to, prior to seeing the film. Whether we would agree with that classification depends on how apt we think it is.¹⁹⁷ This might depend on whether, through our familiarity with Lester and association with his point of view, we can see the virtues that Ricky's actions involve, which Lester lacks, but views with envy.

The comparison between the characters and the labelling the one a 'hero', in virtue of his possessing characteristics the other lacks, not only guides a conceptual

¹⁹⁶ See Section H of the previous chapter.

¹⁹⁷ Though its aptness need not be judged with respect only to this particular moment, we might accept its appropriateness only as the narrative unfolds and we get to know more about Ricky.

analysis of the virtues involved, it also helps the narrative to prescribe certain emotional and imaginative understandings of the characters and events.

A hero is, in a very real sense, an ideal. A hero has certain qualities that make him exceptional, something beyond the ordinary person. For Lester, it is Ricky's refusal to be dragged into the prison-like world that makes him seem heroic, as well as the strength of character that makes it possible. From earlier scenes the audience already knows how fearful Lester is of his own employer, how subservient he acts in his presence¹⁹⁸. Through this incident, Lester is able to see how, in placing his own needs above those of his employer, Ricky displays a peculiar dignity and purpose: the result of holding to his own personal values, even in the face of powerful social expectations. Lester longs to be able to do the same thing, which he in fact does do later in the movie.

In addition, the use of the word 'hero' also constrains how the audience imagines Ricky's actions in this scene. They are asked to see his actions as heroic. His simple action of defiance is depicted as bearing properties of greatness. In time, the film will try to show that there is indeed something very unique, something great, about Ricky. The way he sees and interacts with the world is something special. Lester sees and admires this during this incident. A desire to emulate it is born.

Lester, not yet able to believe what he has just witnessed, questions Ricky, asking "doesn't it make you nervous, just quitting your job like that?" Ricky just shakes his head in response, looking slightly bemused by the question. Lester continues "Well, I guess when you're all of, what sixteen?" Ricky interjects and explains "18, I just do these gigs as cover, I have other sources of income [he holds up the joint], but my dad interferes less in my life when I pretend to be an upstanding young citizen with a respectable job." While the information is imparted that Ricky is not only a drug user, but a drug dealer, the frankness and openness with which he reveals this to Lester helps lead the audience to accept this fact without condemning Ricky for it.

The audience is also given a hint that Colonel Fitts is more comfortable with the illusion his son creates for his benefit than with his son, just as he is more comfortable

¹⁹⁸ Note that it is the comparison between the two characters that helps us to pick out what Lester sees as being heroic in Ricky. This is how a virtue wheel works.

with his own deceptions than he is with himself. Later the audience also comes to see that the Colonel is somewhat complicit in maintaining his son's pretence.

At this point the director cuts to another mid shot of the duo, but this time from just behind Lester's head, so that the camera faces the door side-on as it opens once more. Carolyn's hand snakes out, as she calls for Lester in a shrill voice. Lester is now faced with a very similar situation to the one Ricky has just dealt with. A figure of 'authority'¹⁹⁹ has just discovered him taking illegal drugs. The contrast in the way Lester responds further guides the viewers' comparison of the two characters and constrains how they imaginatively understand them. As he hears her voice, Lester quickly hides the joint behind his back and tries to assume a straight face. He has attempted to hide what he was doing. The warm glow from the party is evident once more, as Carolyn walks out and says accusingly to Lester "What are you doing?"

Lester points at Ricky and begins laughing uncontrollably as he says "Honey this Ricky Fitts." Ricky, still relaxed, smiles gently at Lester as he tries again "This is Ricky Fi", but fails to get out the proper introduction before helpless laughter prevents him from trying again. While the effect of the marijuana certainly explains his excessive laughter, it is only at this exact point that he does so, which requires explanation. This being that while Lester has attempted to hide what he was doing, he realises the futility of trying and is amused by his failure. We see him, here, beginning to move away from Carolyn's control. He is beginning to be comfortable with what he is doing and so is beginning to be comfortable with her knowing what he is doing and, more importantly, with whom he really is and with what he is really thinking and feeling.

Carolyn moves closer to the pair to try and see just what is going on here, a look of concern and disgust on her face. Ricky just smiles and, perfectly composed, says "I'm Ricky Fitts. I just moved into the house next to you, I go to school with your daughter." At that Lester stops laughing, he turns and looks at Ricky and says "with Jane?" Ricky turns back to Lester and says "Yeah." Lester says "really?" Ricky who has just learned Jane's name for the first time repeats it to himself "Jane." This quick interaction provides the audience with insight into Lester's concern and love for his daughter. The fact that he

¹⁹⁹ Given the type of relationship Lester has with his wife, at this point, this is not an inappropriate description. He tends to do whatever she wants him to and is both afraid and unable to question or defy her.

immediately stops laughing when Ricky mentions he is at school with her, suggests a particular attention and awareness of the importance of that information. This helps steer the audience to a similar attentive awareness of it, so that when Ricky repeats Jane's name we come to see how important discovering it is to him. As a consequence, we begin to suspect his feelings for her. More, because of the seriousness and importance Ricky places on that word, 'Jane', and because of the vicarious pleasure gained from watching him in this scene, the audience is led to feel that it would be a good thing for those feelings to be satisfied. They are led to feel that it would be a good thing if Ricky were to have a relationship with Jane.

At this point the camera cuts back to a close up of Carolyn, who has been ignored during the brief exchange between Lester and Ricky. She looks bemused and is momentarily speechless, shocked, as she looks at Ricky. She then utters an off-balance "Hi" to Ricky before turning her gaze to Lester. She regains her composure, her expression becomes haughty, and she commands him "I'm ready to go, I'll meet you out front." She walks off towards the door, with one final puzzled backwards glance at the pair, before disappearing inside.

Carolyn's response gives the audience a great deal of insight into her character. If the viewer is a good simulator and attempts to understand why she reacts as she does they are liable to see that her husband's uncharacteristic behaviour has unsettled her greatly. Her condemnatory looks and peremptory order are attempts to bring him back under her control. At the same time she doesn't know what to make of Ricky. The fact that he acts so politely, under the circumstances, confuses her. She expects him to apologise for what he is doing, to be ashamed of it, and she doesn't know how to deal with his failure to be embarrassed. At the very least, the audience realises that Carolyn disapproves of her husband's action, but in the context of having enjoyed watching Lester and Ricky having fun, the audience is led to disapprove of Carolyn's attitude and see Lester with some sympathy. This is the result of having enjoyed seeing him happy for the first time in the film. Up to this point the audience's vicarious experience of Lester and his life is sad, lonely and depressing. Vicariously sharing in a first warm, joyful, experience inclines the audience to view what Lester is doing positively and to resent Carolyn's disapproval and her attempt to ruin his fun.

The film cuts back to the mid-shot of Lester and Ricky. Lester cracks up laughing once more and bows his head, resigned to his fate, and says "Oh I'm in trouble". Ricky laughs as Lester hands him back the joint. Lester says "Nice meeting you Ricky Fitts, thanks for the *thing*." As Lester says this he points repeatedly at Ricky himself. Ricky responds "Any time."

The way Lester words his thanks is very interesting. While the simple interpretation is that Lester is thanking Ricky for the joint, it is deliberately left ambiguous as to what he is thanking him for. If the viewer is watching attentively she might well come to the conclusion that Lester is thanking Ricky for his example, for the act of defiance that he admired so much, for being himself. This imaginative understanding of the situation is promoted not only by the words Lester uses, but by his continual pointing at Ricky, rather than at the joint which is significantly below the line his pointing aims at.

The director cuts back to the same wide-shot that he established the scene with. Lester has paused in front of the open door; he is silhouetted against the black bars and hot orange glow of the 'prison', as Ricky says "If you want any more, you know where I live." Lester just laughs, points at Ricky once more, and closes the door behind him. Ricky is left, standing, smoking alone in the cool darkness.

Having gestured already at how the audience's imaginative and emotional understanding is guided by the way this scene is represented, it remains to say what lingering effect it might have on a viewer. Simply put, however, by prescribing ways of understanding its subject, the narrative is likely to encourage the sympathetic viewer to apply those same ways to understanding relevantly similar events in the actual world.

It must initially be noted that while the scene does try to prescribe particular understandings of the events and characters, whether it will be successful or not depends, in part, on the viewer. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the conceptual leap involved in seeing the scene in the way the director asks might just be too great.

The viewer is asked to adopt an emotional and imaginative understanding of the scene that might be very different from the one they would have if someone simply described these same events in strictly factual terms. Consider that in the scene, an 18 year old boy gets stoned while working and quits his job when his employer discovers

what he is doing. His accomplice, a married man accompanying his wife to a business function that is important to her, leaves his wife to take drugs with said 18 year old boy and then tries to hide that fact from her. To see these events as the film asks us to, not as the immoral actions of two irresponsible individuals, but as admirable actions worth aspiring to, requires that the viewer be able to imagine the events in a particular way, within the narrative context, and to recognise the features that make their actions admirable.

This requires sensitivity to Lester's sadness and to the fact that this is the first time he seems happy and free. To see taking a drug as an act of defiance, to see it as liberating, requires that the audience be willing to adopt a particular imaginative understanding of its use²⁰⁰. If they are able to do so, they may be willing to adopt a similar imaginative understanding in relevantly similar situations in the actual world. They can no longer categorically view such an act as negative, but must factor in the motivations and circumstances surrounding it before judging. This affects their knowledge of how to understand such things as drug use, or defiance, or freedom.

The same type of point may be made with respect to Ricky's attitude. It requires an imaginative stretch to view quitting a job not as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of strength, but once made it may be applied to relevantly similar circumstances in the actual world.

If the scene also succeeds in its aim of making the audience feel positively towards Lester and Ricky and negatively towards Carolyn and the employer, in similar circumstances in the actual world the viewer might well become likely to make similar emotional judgements.

Finally, a viewer may acquire conceptual knowledge through her exposure to the scene. If the film is successful in communicating Lester's admiration of Ricky's defiance as a proper response, the viewer may have her thick concept of 'hero' altered. She may see that being a hero involves being honest about who you are and sticking to your convictions even if they invoke social disapproval. The attentive viewer might also come

²⁰⁰ One must not forget though that the film is trying to manipulate its viewer into adopting this understanding. The point of describing the scene was to show how it tries to do so.

to include taking drugs as an action that might, in certain conditions, fall properly under the heading of the thin concept of 'good'.

D) It's Just a Couch

In this section I will examine a scene that involves a direct comparison of Lester and Carolyn's value systems. It also offers the differences between them as reason for their estrangement, as well as for Lester having attained happiness and Carolyn failing to. I will forgo a detailed examination of most of the scene in order to focus on its most important aspects.

The scene begins after Carolyn returns home from the firing range (shooting is one of Buddy's hobbies that she has taken up) to find a new car in the driveway. It opens with Lester sitting in the living room. He's playing with a remote controlled car and has a beer on the table in front of him. Carolyn stands in the room's doorway. She's obviously agitated; she's breathing deeply and stares intently at the back of his head. During the brief dialogue that follows Carolyn remains upset. She tries to reassert control of Lester, who remains perfectly calm and somewhat amused. He is now clearly beyond her control and she is evidently unsettled by this fact. By this point in the film he has largely become the person he wants to be. He is happy and confident. He has become proud of who he is and is completely open in his thoughts, speech and action. The initial dialogue proceeds as follows:

Lester: "What"

Carolyn: "Whose car is that out front?"

Lester: "Mine. 1970 Pontiac Firebird. The Car I've always wanted and now I have it. I Rule!"

Carolyn: "Aha, Where's the Camry?"

Lester: "I traded it in."

Carolyn: "Shouldn't you have consulted me first?"

Lester: "Hmm, let me think, no. You never drove it."

At this point the scene turns intimate. For the first time in the film the audience is given a glimpse of the relationship that the Burnhams used to have, a glimpse of passion and love. Lester says "Have you done something different? You look great." Carolyn is thrown off-balance by that comment and becomes self-conscious. She touches her hair and sits down. She inquires "Where's Jane?" Lester responds "Jane not home". He gets up from where he's sitting, grabs the beer from the table, and sits on the sofa next to Carolyn. He says slowly, emphasising the importance of the information "We have, the whole house, to ourselves." Lester then stares intently at Carolyn and asks her "Christ Carolyn, When did you become so...joyless?"

That Lester asks her this now is worth noting for, at this point in the film, Carolyn is at her highest point. She seems happier, more alive and more attractive than at any other time. This is primarily the effect of the affair that she has been having with Buddy. Nevertheless, Lester's question does not refer to her current energy but targets her character. He sees her as empty, even now. His observation invites the audience to look at Carolyn in the same way. It directs how the viewer watches and interprets the rest of the scene, as the narrative tries to show that Carolyn has indeed become empty, though she was not always that way and tries to offer an explanation for why she changed.

Carolyn looks confused by Lester's remark. She responds "Joyless? I am not joyless. There happens to be a lot about me that you don't know Mr. Smartyman. There is plenty of joy in my life." Referencing her affair, Carolyn refers now to a transitory state of affairs. One that will soon pass and leave her more broken than before, suggesting that real joy needs to come from within.

Lester clarifies his question by asking what happened to the joyful person she used to be. He leans over her as he says "Whatever happened to that girl who used to fake seizures at frat parties when she got bored? Who used to run up to the roof of our first apartment building to flash traffic helicopters? Have you totally forgotten about her? Because I haven't." Lester's questions draw a comparison between the Carolyn he remembers and the Carolyn that the audience has come to know. In doing so the audience is asked to question which one is the more joyful, happier and the more worthy of Lester's love. There seems little doubt that most viewers would find the description of the young Carolyn to be more appealing and so we wonder along with Lester what did

happen to her. This sympathy for the young Carolyn can probably be explained through simulation. In making the comparison the audience is being led to simulate the different psychological states of Carolyn at two points in her life, based on the description and depiction of her actions. That simulation is constrained by what we already know of Carolyn's life generally and by Lester's reaction in this particular scene and will tend to lead to an understanding of a young Carolyn who is full of energy, mischief and life. This is a much more pleasant understanding for the simulator to be a part of than the sad, bitter woman they have spent most of the movie with. This leaves the viewer wondering with Lester where she went wrong, wondering how she did wind up so joyless. The audience is not left to wonder for long for Carolyn provides the answer in the very next dialogue.

As he's been talking Lester has been kissing Carolyn's neck, but the beer in Lester's hand made its way closer to the couch, so Carolyn breaks the moment by saying "Lester you're going to spill beer on the couch." With these words Carolyn reveals her values. The first intimate moment she has had with her husband in a long time is ruined by her concern for her couch. It is these warped priorities that accounts for her joylessness and for the deterioration of her relationship with Lester.

This is emphasised by Lester's response. He immediately stops kissing her. He gets up from the couch, beer still in hand, and looks down at her. He raises his hands in puzzlement and says "So what? it's just a couch" The audience is now given an illustration of the different values Lester and Carolyn have. Each views the couch, a thing, in very different ways.

Carolyn immediately gets defensive at what Lester says. She is also confused. She can't believe that she needs to explain her reaction to Lester. It all seems obvious to her. She responds "This is a \$4000 sofa, upholstered in Italian silk. It's not just a couch!" At this Lester gets angry. He grabs a cushion off the couch and bashes it against the sofa a couple times as he hollers "IT'S JUST A COUCH!"

He gestures around at the room and the things in it and says accusingly, "This isn't life. This is just stuff, and it's become more important to you than living. Well honey, that's just nuts." At this Carolyn gets visibly upset and storms out of the room. As she leaves Lester calls out after her "I'm only trying to help you."

At this point the narrative has offered two possible ways of imaginatively understanding not just an attitude to a couch, but an attitude to material things generally: a view of where they should fit into a proper assessment of the way the world is and of what's important in it.

On Carolyn's understanding, material objects are of great importance. She seems to invest in objects a power to make her happy. They are, to her, an essential component in a good life. This approach is an extension of her concern with appearances. The couch is not 'just a couch' because people can see it and see, as a result, that she is materially successful. As she repeatedly tells the audience, the appearance of success is success. She cares about objects in the way she does, because they create the appearances she is so concerned with.

Even though the scene began with Lester's acquisition of a thing, his Firebird, Lester's approach to the object is very different to Carolyn's. Notice that he explains his purchase by saying that it's the car he's always wanted. Later in the film the viewer also learns that one of his most enduring memories is the thrill he got when he first saw his cousin's brand new Firebird. The object has importance solely in virtue of the pleasure it brings him. Carolyn, on the other hand, cites the price of the couch and the fact that it is Italian silk as the factors that transcend it into something beyond a mere object. For Lester, objects have importance only in so far as they please oneself. For Carolyn, they have importance in projecting an appearance to others. They are status symbols, the stuff that allows one to see that another is successful.

What is at issue here is question of the role material objects should play in a good life. Interestingly, this is the sort of point that Aristotle considers central to ethics. One important part of practical wisdom is the determination of what role competing, incommensurable, goods should play in the virtuous life. This is precisely what Carolyn and Lester argue about here and adopting one conception of that role over another can influence the audience to adopt that same conception in their own life. There is also a mark here with respect to proper feeling towards material objects and the type of emotional judgement that Lester makes of Carolyn's values can influence the audience to adopt a similar judgement in relevantly similar circumstances. Similarly, how relevant material objects are and how they should be weighted in determining judgement is

explicitly dealt with in this scene. Seeing how each character regards these objects and the effects that approach has on their character, priorities and thinking can influence the audience to weigh them in much the same way depending on how they view the results of the character's attitude.

Though both imaginative understandings are presented in the course of the film, it is Lester's that the audience is asked to adopt. The narrative makes this prescription through bringing us to care for and approve of Lester himself, through leading us to see that he is truly happy and that he has become happy not through the acquisition of things but by making positive changes in himself. It is because we enjoy his transformation and come to approve of the values and behaviour he adopts that we are inclined to adopt his imaginative understanding over Carolyn's.

The presence of the virtue wheel is also an aid to preferring one character and their approach to life over the other. If Lester is viewed as truly happy, it is partly because his happiness is shown against the background of the other characters who seem deficient by comparison.

Throughout the film, the way the scenes are constructed and the way the narrative unfolds helps guide the audience to the understanding of happiness and value that Lester adopts. This is accomplished through the use of such devices as the virtue wheel, through the way the scenes are represented and through the use of cinematic techniques designed to elicit this understanding in the audience. In this scene, for example, the fact that Lester is portrayed as confident and sure of his values encourages the audience to believe in his being correct²⁰¹. On the other hand, the fact that Carolyn becomes distraught and defensive when her own values are revealed suggests that she realises there is something wrong with them. The character's emotional responses help guide viewers to a similar emotional understanding of their respective states.

If the audience realises that what is at stake is the character's values and simulates each one in order to understand how those values affect the character's mindset, they will also come to understand that the importance Carolyn places on appearances prevents her from achieving a real, substantial happiness. The viewer is inclined to feel negatively

²⁰¹ This is of course not to suggest that confidence in one's beliefs entail that they are correct, only that people are more likely to accept the view of someone who is confident about what he defends than someone who is not.

towards her and to see her own deep sadness as appropriate to her values and to her character. In contrast, seeing Lester's growing happiness and self-esteem as he strives to take control of his life and pursue his own happiness, the audience is led to imaginatively understand his values and actions as being positive and correct, in virtue of the positive change they induce.

Conclusion

Knowing how to successfully engage with the actual world depends on being able to understand the situations, people and events that one encounters in it. Doing so depends on the knowledge-how involved in conceptual, emotional and imaginative understanding. It has been argued that these can be improved through exposure to narratives and, in doing so, narratives improve a large body of knowledge that is crucial to our ability to deal with the actual world. I have tried to argue that, at the least, the type of moral thinking involved in practical wisdom and the exercise of the virtues depends on these kinds of knowledge-how. One could not become virtuous without knowing how to conceptually, emotionally and imaginatively understand the things one encounters.

Ultimately narratives, such as *American Beauty*, can provide us with partial knowledge of how to understand and act in the world, through prescribing ways of understanding particular situations, characters, and events that are relevantly similar to those we encounter in the actual world. In applying those ways to our experience of the world, either past or future, we can come to see that things can in fact be understood in those ways. Justification for them is provided in their successful application and so proper knowledge-how of the actual world can be acquired through engagement with fictions.

It has not been suggested that narratives can alone provide all the knowledge required for successful engagement with the world. As Aristotle repeatedly proclaims, one cannot acquire virtue without being habituated to it. This is particularly true of the virtues of character, which cannot be acquired without virtuous activity. One cannot become temperate merely by spending time in the company of great narrative art. Nevertheless fictions do improve the faculties required for virtuous activity and can

provide ways of understanding the world that could prove invaluable to the moral learner. They offer an aid to his moral training through guiding his understanding of people, and events. They can help him reach 'the that' and in doing so provide him with some understanding of 'the because'. It remains for him to put theory into practice, but armed with the insights provided by great art, he has a better chance of coming to a correct understanding of his values, his world and himself.

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