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The Neuroethical Role of Narrative Identity in Ethical Decision Making

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Biography

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Abstract

An increasingly blurred understanding of the moral significance of narrative identity for a robust perception of self, other, and community suggests a critical need to explore the inter-relationships shared between autobiographical memory, emotional rationality, and narrative identity, particularly as it bears on decision making. This essay argues that (i) the disintegration of autobiographical memory degenerates emotional rationality; (ii) the degeneration of emotional rationality decays narrative identity; and (iii) the decay of narrative identity disables one to seek, identify, and act on the good. After demonstrating that narrative identity is best understood as the product of autobiographical memory and emotional rationality, which in turn is indispensable to substantive ethical decision making, the essay concludes by suggesting that narrative identity may be successfully employed as a justificatory framework for ethical decision making, providing both education to, and rigor for, substantive moral judgments.

Keywords

Neuroethics, Narrative Identity, Ethical Decision Making

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

It is a marked feature of being human to make meaning out of experiences and events by telling stories. Individuals are born into a web of narratives, and to become a self is, in large part, to locate, verify, and make sense of the stories of which one's web is comprised. Stories most adequately reveal the meaning individuals attach to their experiences, and they shape the meaning those experiences will have as the stories are told, retold, and refined (Mitchell 2014). In this way, narratives do many different kinds of moral work (Lindemann 2014). In addition to recounting phenomena from distinct perspectives, morally charged stories usually hold deep truths not easily expressed and apprehended in other ways. Such truths may include inchoate ideals of self, hidden hopes, deeper tensions, strands of ambivalence, belief in things unseen, and fears rarely stated plainly. These parcels of an individual's narrative identity are, of course, of critical moral significance, but they are rarely captured by standard ethical analyses. Inasmuch as

stories reveal values and reasons otherwise unnoticed in the context of moral reflection, narrative identity is invaluable to ethical decision making. Indeed, one's narrative identity not only provides substance for thoughtful deliberation about the right and the good, but also a way of conveying moral choices for subsequent evaluation and instruction (Mitchell 2014).

Prior to the late 1980s, the significance of narrative identity was dismissed in the medical literature as unimportant and uninteresting (Brody and Clark 2014). By 1987, clinicians and scholars became interested in how the study of narrative could enhance their understanding of health care, and the field of "narrative medicine" was developed. After a flurry of activity at the turn of the twenty-first century, interest in the practical significance of narrative identity seemed to stall. The general interest in narrative medicine continued, but with few ideas about how narrative might be employed toward moral ends. In the last decade, however, forward momentum has returned (Ibid.), but the ontology of narrative identity and its vital role in ethical decision making remains incomplete. For some, the concept of (idiosyncratic) narrative decision making is founded upon inevitably imperfect, even fabricated, recollections of reality (Lindemann 2014), and therefore lacks the objective rigor necessary for practical decision making (Arras 1997). For others, the (irresponsible) flight from narrative decision making forces individuals to deliberate as "unencumbered selves," apart from and devoid of the elements that ground moral values and commitments (Sandel 2006).

A third approach, yet to be explored in the literature, grounds the framework of the arguments posited in this essay. It concerns the individual and collective relationships shared between autobiographical memory, emotional rationality, and narrative identity in the context of ethical decision making. The interconnectedness of these concepts is essential to any productive discussion over the ethics of decision making, yet each respective interconnection remains underdeveloped.

1.2 Analytical Method

An increasingly blurred understanding of the moral significance of narrative identity for a robust perception of self, other, and community suggests a critical need to explore the inter-relationships shared between autobiographical memory, emotional rationality, and narrative identity vis-à-vis ethical decision making. To that end, the essay argues that (i) the disintegration of autobiographical memory degenerates emotional rationality; (ii) the degeneration of emotional rationality decays narrative identity; and (iii) the decay of narrative identity disables one to seek, identify, and act on the good. After demonstrating

that narrative identity is best understood as the product of autobiographical memory and emotional rationality, which in turn is indispensable to substantive ethical decision making, the essay concludes by suggesting that narrative identity may be successfully employed as a justificatory framework for ethical decision making, providing both education to, and rigor for, substantive moral judgments.

To secure the justification of these theses, the essay moves in six parts. First, it addresses the historical emergence in neuroscience of crucial categories for ethical decision making, including a specific analysis of (i) autobiographical memory judgments, (ii) emotional choice and rational choice, and (iii) narrative identity as moral self-conception and commitment. Second, it addresses the category of autobiographical memory and ethical decision making, including a specific analysis of (i) autobiographical memory and rationality, (ii) autobiographical memory and the narrative of human emotion, and (iii) autobiographical memory and the emotional nature of rational ethical decision making. Third, it addresses the category of emotional rationality and ethical decision making, including a specific analysis of (i) emotion and rationality, (ii) emotional rationality and morality, and (iii) emotional rationality and ethical decision making. Fourth, it addresses the category of narrative identity and ethical decision making, including a specific analysis of (i) narrative identity as the product of autobiographical memory and emotional rationality, (ii) the requisite unpredictability of narrative identity, and (iii) narrative neglect as threat to identity, authenticity, and ethical decision making. Finally, it addresses the justification of narrative identity as a comprehensive framework for ethical decision making, including a specific analysis of (i) narrative identity as moral education, moral methodology, and moral discourse, (ii) narrative identity as ground and object of normative ethical principles, and (iii) rigor in narrative judgments and ethical justification.

2. The Historical Emergence in Neuroscience of Crucial Categories for Ethical Decision Making

2.1 Autobiographical Memory Judgments

The study of memory and cognitive learning arose from philosophical questions concerning the way individuals come to know themselves, others, things, and the world around them. Learning is assuredly the primary method by which one acquires knowledge, and remembering is the primary means by which one supports knowledge claims. (This is exemplified, for instance, when a court witness claims to “remember

seeing Jones at the murder scene.”) While the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries were marked by empiricist philosophers such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Brown, and others who speculated about the numerous factors that might affect the degree or strength of particular subjective associations, it was philosophers writing in the twentieth century including Henri Bergson, Bertrand Russell, Endel Tulving, and others who first introduced to psychologists the distinction between episodic and semantic memory. However, it was not until the “everyday movement” of the final two decades of the twentieth century when researchers first argued that attention should focus primarily on the ways in which individuals use autobiographical memory in their daily tasks (Bower 2000).

There are two primary ways to query human memory. In recall tasks, one must generate a representation of a past stimulus, such as a word from memory. In memory-judgment tasks, a synthetic representation of the stimulus is presented by a facilitator, and the subject answers a specific question about it from memory. Characterized this way, the number of possible memory-judgment tasks is essentially limitless. Some judgment tasks are related to specific experiences in one’s past. These include recognition judgments; judgments of membership in experimentally learned categories; judgments of presentation frequency; judgments of list membership; judgments of temporal order or recency; judgments of special order or location; and judgments of source, such as input modality monitoring (Hintzman 2000). Although individuals clearly possess conceptual knowledge relating to significant portions of their past, memories of disparate events are also “cross-indexed” in memory according to life themes, what happened, where it happened, who was involved, and what significance the event had in one’s life. Some of the knowledge manifests through personal episodic memory, which is experienced in recall with imagery and emotion. In addition to these episodic memories, large portions of one’s autobiography are in narrative form. As such, autobiographical memory is intimately bound up with conceptions of the self – of who and what one is. While several studies suggest that memories are often reconsolidated in light of self-serving pursuits, and that individuals often remember their actions, and therefore themselves, in a light more favorable than is deserved, these tendencies suggest that social, motivational, and personality-related factors play a vital role in the way autobiographical memory judgments are developed – and altered – over time (Bower 2000).

2.2 Emotional Choice and Rational Choice

The relationship between emotion and reason has been a major topic in Western philosophy since its genesis. The ancient Greeks had no word equivalent to “emotion,” and the term commonly used in its place, *pathos*, indicated something that “happened” to a person or thing. It came to be commonly applied to affective experiences to which a person is subject, and also lasting states manifested by such affection, or initiated or altered by them. Hence it became the term traditionally applied to emotions, fleeting or dispositional, if also to many other cognitive states (Price 2010). However, the relationship between emotional choice and rational choice is a more recent concern (Elster 2010).¹ Both reason and rationality are primarily normative inasmuch as they inform agents of the options that ideally should be pursued in the effort to secure sought-after ends. Their explanatory use arises when the agent takes the normative suggestion and tests it by confronting the prescribed behavior with its observed counterpart. In economics, for instance, rational-choice explanations, based on the assumption that agents will maximize utility, was the standard understanding of behavior until 1980, when it became subject to criticism from a number of scholars who subsequently developed new models of behavior. Broadly speaking, these alternative, neurocognitively-geared models constitute what has loosely become known as the field of behavioral economics (Ibid.).

Emotions, too, have a role in behavioral economics, but a secondary one. The important work of George Loewenstein on “visceral factors” mentions the emotions, but only those pertaining to pain, thirst, intoxication, and addictive cravings, thus ignoring the neurocognitive precursor of emotions as well as the actions they have historically tended to (Ibid.). Typically, “emotions” have indicated “affect” or “arousal,” thus precluding critical distinctions such as that between guilt and shame. However, a systematic account of emotional impact on cognitive precursors of action can improve the understanding of manifold forms of behavior. Insofar as (i) emotions typically cannot be chosen and (ii) rationality can only be the product of choice, emotions cannot, in the strictest sense, be considered “rational.” Yet they are, by this fact, no less instrumentally useful and biologically adaptive. Indeed, emotions, differing only from rationality in the causal relation that obtains among them, undoubtedly enhance rationality indispensable for robust ethical decision making (Ibid.).

1. This essay will not endeavor to explore the distinction between reason and rationality except to clarify that while the idea of reason is normative in purpose, rationality primarily serves to explain behavior.

2.3 Narrative Identity as Moral Self-Conception and Commitment

The formal concept of narrative identity was first postulated in the twentieth century: Sigmund Freud wrote about dream narratives, Carl Jung explored universal life myths, Alfred Adler examined narrative accounts of earliest memory, and Henry Murray identified recurrent autobiographical themes in the Thematic Apperception Test (McAdams 2008). Still, none of the traditional theories of personality in the first half of the twentieth century imagined human being as storytellers and human experience as a story to be told. The inaugural theories of narrative personality were developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Silvan Tompkins proposed a “script theory” of personality that conceived of the individual as a metaphorical playwright who organizes the emotional experiences of life in terms of salient “scenes” and recurrent “scripts” (Ibid.). In a somewhat similar line of thought, Dan McAdams (2008) formulated a “life-story” model of identity, suggesting that people living in modern society begin, in late adolescence and young adulthood, to understand their lives as ever-evolving stories that integrate the reconstructed past and the projected future in order to imbue life with degrees of unity and purpose. As such, these defining memories become vital components of one’s narrative identity – an identity from which one is able to understand self, others, and community, and so make moral decisions in accord with the values to which one has committed.

In recent years, theories of narrative identity have tried to navigate a middle road between personal and social commitments, viewing narrative identity as both an autobiographical project and a situated performance (McAdams 2008). Neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio (2007) have commented that consciousness begins when an individual brain secures the power of telling a story. Those stories and their storytellers appear in every culture (McAdams 2008). As Paul Ricoeur (1984) comments, stories are the best means known to human beings for communicating how and why a human agent, endowed with consciousness and motivated by intention, enacts desires and strives toward goals over time. Thus understood, narrative is the neurobiological linchpin that draws, holds, and frames together temporal events in a coherent whole. Whether factual or fictional, the narrative structure of one’s conception of self is pivotal to securing meaning and identity in life (Polkinghorne 1991). Moreover, the unfolding of one’s self-told story has immediate cognitive implications for the capacity to make coherent ethical decisions. As William James notes, the (conscious) self encompasses a “storytelling ‘I’” whose stories about lived experience become part and parcel of a “storied ‘me.’” In this way, the narrative decision-maker is both the storyteller and the stories that are told (McAdams 2008).

3. The Category of Autobiographical Memory and Ethical Decision Making

3.1 Autobiographical Memory and Rationality

The rational function of autobiographical memory is derived from its distributive property throughout manifold cortical systems. Each cortical system – from those controlling data acquisition and analysis to semantic, episodic, and working memory – is defined by the functional contribution it makes to the whole (Nyberg and Cabeza 2000). While the understanding of cortical organization endures constant revision, two general observations can be gleaned from contemporary neuroimaging techniques. The first is that prefrontal brain regions are the most acutely involved in examined memory domains, including those immediately related to rational recollection. Some imaging has shown distinct engagement in regions within the prefrontal cortex for memory operation (Ibid.). These findings hint at the heterogeneity of the prefrontal cortex, and thus further exhibit the neurological complexity of rationality. The second involves the interaction between prefrontal and posterior brain regions during the encoding and retrieval of individual memories. This indicates that the posterior regions, which store and maintain information, are refreshed by frontal regions, which consequently mediate rehearsal processes of working memory indispensable to rational cognition (Ibid.).

A cardinal element of the rational function of autobiographical memory is neurocognitive encoding and retrieval processes. Several factors are necessary to productive encoding, including motivation, strategic planning, and past knowledge. Complex networks of neurons “encode” memories of personally-experienced events, accrued knowledge, and acquired skills. These networks are responsible for the rational recollection of various life experiences. Once activated, these particular neural networks, which represent specific life experiences in coded form, permit individuals to recall and reexperience specific events or facts from personal history. On the cognitive level, such activation allows access to memory networks related to time, circumstance, location, and function pertaining to the object or event in consideration. Hence, proportionate memory encoding is causally related to rationality. Equally important is the operation by which memory is retrieved. “Forgetting” is a morally relevant concept to rational memory, and most forgotten things can be partially attributed to failures in retrieval processes. This notion leads to what is known as the principle of encoding specificity, which holds that retrieval cues are effective to the extent that information related to the cue was incorporated in the trace of the original encoding (Brown and Craik 2000). It follows, then, that rationality hinges on the dependent similarities of encoding and

retrieval operations. Indeed, it is precisely this overlap that determines the degree to which memory is able to function well (Ibid.).

Other critical constituents of the rationality of memory are the concepts of remembering and knowing. Remembering and knowing are two rational states of awareness pertaining to autobiographical memory. The concept of remembering refers to the personal experience, often intimate, of past events that recreates the awareness inherent to a thorough perception and understanding of self. The concept of knowing refers to separate experiences of past events, most notably those in which one is more impersonally aware of possessing particular general, familiar, and abstract knowledge. Unlike remembering, knowing allows individuals to be aware of events without reliving them cognitively. Remembering and knowing are thus basal to rationality. The proposal that remembering and knowing are two expressive manifestations of autonoetic and noetic consciousness suggests their dominant relation to neurological encoding and subsequent role in the apprehension of values (Gardiner and Richardson-Klavehn 2000), the driving work of which is performed by the emotions.

3.2 Autobiographical Memory and the Narrative of Human Emotion

The interconnected structures within the limbic system possess a pivotal emotional mechanism immediately related to autobiographical memory. These structures – which include hippocampal formation, fornix, mammillary bodies, the mammillothalamic tract, cingulate gyrus, and cingulum – confirm the existence of a uniform system, known as the “Papez circuit,” whereby information is temporarily circulated and ultimately associated and synchronized with emotional and motivational subjective states prior to being transmitted into long-term storage areas (Markowitsch 2000). Other limbic systems, such as the amygdalar and septal nuclei, have become regarded as still more intimately associated with emotional regulation. Nevertheless, both sets of mechanistic systems temper and tone the emotional consolidation of autobiographical memory through operations of information evaluation. These sets belong to the basolateral limbic circuit, which includes the mediodorsal nucleus. Hence, disorders of memory systems that control emotions render individuals incapable of rationalizing and evaluating information, the consequence of which is significantly reduced memory capacity. This much denotes the important nature of proper emotional embedding within neurocognitive memory circuits (Markowitsch 2000).

Most individuals can, upon request, account for a significant portion of their lives thus far. These accounts are grounded in what these individuals have been told as well

as what they personally recollect from past experience. Such autobiographical memory includes manifold forms of self-related information of idiosyncratic importance. The emotional significance of momentous events, turning points, and nuclear episodes are, in fact, cognitive recollections of the most expressive scenes that comprise an individual life story. Emotions tied to influential life events are central to one's experience of self, others, and community. Indeed, memories that flow forth from emotion explain much of who one is and the values one most deeply holds to. Yet life stories are not merely the sequence of isolated events. Rather, emotional memories comprise larger narratives that attribute meaning to events by identifying them as part of the "master portrait" of one's life (Neisser and Libby 2000). This is presumably what draws Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) to conclude that the first step in seeking the good is to identify the story or stories that comprise one's history.

Since memory is greatly affected by emotions tied to autobiographical events, a clearer look at the breath of and depth to which emotions affect memory may be advantageous. The exploration of negative emotions, such as sadness, shock, or terror, has typically been spliced into three neurocognitive conceptions of recollection: (i) eyewitness memory, (ii) flashbulb memory, and (iii) memory for traumatic experiences (Schooler and Eich 2000). While each conception possesses its own set of paradigmatic blueprints, all three harmonize on the issue of whether emotions enhance or extinguish the strength of a particular memory of an event. While the impact of emotion on memory involves complex interactions among multiple variables, current neurocognitive data suggests that emotions do, for better or worse,² generally enhance the strength of particular memories (Schooler and Eich 2000).

3.3 Autobiographical Memory and the Emotional Nature of Rational Ethical Decision Making

Sound ethical decisions flow forth from both emotional and rational recollections of events in history. As mentioned above, two fundamental methods mark the query of human memory. The first, concerning tasks related to recall, stimulates associations related to regenerations of past memorable events. The second, concerning tasks related to autobiographical memory judgment, stimulates carbon-copy recollections of past events by way of third-party participation (Hintzman 2000), the product of which renders subjects able to answer pointed questions pertaining to a particular memory.

2. Broadly speaking, this suggests only the fact of enhancement, not necessarily the accuracy thereof.

These questions may apply to efforts to grade and categorize events, or to broader efforts to compare events in autobiographical history by dissecting relevant dimensions. Because both methods implicate the frontal lobes and are bound by the hippocampus, it follows that the cognitive work of autobiographical memory-judgment in the rational apprehension of emotive values is critical to substantive ethical decision making (Ibid.).

Moreover, memory retrieval networks possess problem-solving capacities valuable to rational ethical decision making. Even a fleeting examination of everyday episodic memory suggests that there is much more to remembering than plucking data from neurocognitive storage units. Related to decision making, some reports suggest that, in actual life situations, memory retrieval techniques involve complex exchanges between two distinct processing types: (i) a controlled, systematic process that guides retrieval, coordinating operations related to transient memory targets (its rational nature), and (ii) the automatic, involuntary inception and association of ideas into consciousness over the course of the exploration (its emotional nature). This interplay between deductive (rational) and inductive (narrative and emotional) processes hints at the associations and activations inherent to the effort to translate concrete memories into applications to decision making. Put simply, the task is to match deductive to inductive processes. Insofar as the memory of past events can serve to guide an instance of particular moral judgment, the subject is able to both identify the goal and the best method by which to realize it. The rational (deductive) and narrative and emotional (inductive) components of memory retrieval, then, specifically coordinate, store, and orchestrate the process of ethical decision making (Koriat 2000).

A final aptitude of memory – namely, episodic memory and auto-noetic awareness – is worthy of mention insofar as it pertains both intimately and imminently to rational ethical decision making. Episodic memory is the neurocognitive system whereby one is able to experience the world auto-noetically – that is, through the situation of oneself in the past through recollection. This achievement of the human mind is perhaps its most remarkable, and certainly its most important in relation to decision making. It is also the singular dimension that distinguishes it from all other systems of memory (Wheeler, 2000). Episodic and auto-noetic remembering enables individuals to mentally retrace their steps, as it were, gathering together pertinent emotional experiences upon which rational knowledge is based. Thus, these systems share a close relationship with mental achievements such as introspection and anticipation, and, as such, serve well the ability to make robust ethical decisions (Ibid.).

4. The Category of Emotional Rationality and Ethical Decision Making

4.1 Emotion and Rationality

Neurocognitive studies within the last several years suggest that a common moral-psychological problem in contemporary society lies not in knowing, but in feeling, what is moral (Raine and Yang 2006). This feeling, frequently referred to as “moral emotion” (Prinz 2010), located in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, is the springboard from which cognitive recognition that a particular act is immoral is translated into specific behavioral inhibition (Raine and Yang 2006). The complexity of emotion has rendered it neuroethically problematic for several reasons, many of which continue to serve as the impetus for its rejection in the realm of rationality. Hence, emotion is widely conceived as relatively useless – or at least not particularly constructive – to ethical decision making. Emotion has been critically described as overly perceptive, personal, unstable, intense, partial, and fleeting. Interestingly, the perceptivity and personal nature of emotion has been used to critique it on grounds that it is, *ipso facto*, overly subjective. Yet it seems quite contrarily the case that perceptivity and reasonable idiosyncrasy would hinder something more than prove a redeeming virtue – here, integral authenticity. What remains scantily investigated, then, is the more positive – and often overlooked – objectively-beneficial features of emotion – namely, its cognitive complementarity, evaluative faculties, motivating power, strength, and tendency to capture critical, otherwise inexplicit elements of reality (Ben-Ze’ev 2010). These uncharted features hint at the idea that emotion may inherently possess a particular, if peculiar, rationality that, in turn, renders it practically useful.

Emotional, or “axiological” (de Sousa 1987), rationality refers to the affective cognition of particular objects in time and space that activate instinctive routines and motivate specific courses of action (Morton 2010). To “emote” something is to apprehend it – that is, to positively or negatively value, to a greater or lesser extent, the object considered. de Sousa helpfully synthesizes emotion as “determinate patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies” (de Sousa 1980, 137). The rationality derived from emotional intelligence allows insight, for example, into differentiations between good and bad, right and wrong, harmful and helpful, proportionate and disproportionate, and so forth. Whereas strictly intellectual rationality invites examination into the “whatness” of objects, and strictly deductive reasoning invites examination into the solution to logical problems, emotional rationality invites examination into the values of actions, circumstances, relationships, and the like

(Vacek 2001; Lonergan 1972). One need only consider the plagued history of human experimentation to grasp the indispensable rationality inherent to human emotion. As Tom Beauchamp and James Childress (2013) note, it was not the strictly rational scientists who first protested abusive research practices, but rather those who were able to feel compassion, disgust, and outrage.

On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that emotions possess an epistemic quality in relation to rationality. Properly tempered by objective rationality, emotions serve as tools that perceive essential moral data and alert individuals to the presence of significant moral events (Morton 2010). Human beings are often conscious of this experience as an instance of “feeling,” but this neurological process also comprehensively synthesizes causal material essential to thought and action (Ibid.). Hence, only when emotional valuation resonates with objective rationality – herein understood as the successful ability to manipulate concepts productively – can one’s best thinking confidently conclude what should be done in a given instance (Solomon 1980). Central convictions grounded in emotional rationality are therefore strong blends of reasoning, argument, evidence, and valuation bound together in a coherent and comprehensive neurocognitive system. Emotional rationality is thus the preponderance of specific and general objective evidence linked with phenomenological data and accepted from a common normative source. Only after examining, analyzing, and edifying an original emotive response to a given object is it clear that objective rationality has achieved its full potential in the context of morality (Callahan 1991).

4.2 Emotional Rationality and Morality

Emotions play many roles in human life, and none more important than forming the enduring individual and social bonds necessary to secure adequate moral judgment. Although the philosophical critique of emotional rationality is often mistakenly attributed to Immanuel Kant (1996), his claim that consciousness of one’s obligations depends on the capacity to feel them projects the immediate significance of emotions in the moral arena. Here, two points deserve notation. The first is that emotions play a major part in motivating moral behavior. Persons are motivated to provide assistance to others by virtue of their affection, affinity, or compassion.³ Emotions also motivate individuals to pursue justified punishment or revenge, both of which are moralistic behaviors. As Prinz

3. A common contextual critique is that emotions are egotistic and not genuinely altruistic; therefore, they cannot be considered “rational.” The point here is not to prove or disprove this claim, but to contend that, in either case, emotions are important.

clarifies further, the motivation to punish poor behavior, as an essential element of global systems of criminal justice, is often retributive in nature, and, as such, emotional. Second, emotions are, as suggested above, critical to moral epistemology. Moral evaluation is frequently associated with perception, and this capacity is considered to possess an emotional foundation. In other words, something is considered *prima facie* good or bad, right or wrong in light of the emotional response it elicits. Properly tempered by objective rationality, emotions serve as tools that perceive essential moral data and alert individuals to the presence of significant moral events (Prinz 2010).

Much like beliefs, emotions are “directed” toward particular objects – that is, they possess a particular intentionality (Mulligan 2010). This process of sensory decoding is an activation of basic emotional responses by anteromedial temporal, brain stem, and basal forebrain structures, the attribution of moral-emotional significance by orbital and prefrontal structures, and the subsequent command and restriction of actions by the frontal lobes (Moll, Oliveira-Souza, and Eslinger 2003). Insofar as emotions have correctness conditions regulated by the frontal lobes, they may be said to possess constructs of potentially proportionate valuation. It is therefore possible to maintain that neurocognitive emotional regulation allows individuals to be aware of values critical to moral analysis (Tappolet 2000). In this respect, reasons to emote behave similarly to reasons to desire, act, and believe. In its barest form, emotions neither present nor represent a distinctive value. Rather, they are embodied reactions to particular “grasped” values. The formal object of moral emotion, then, is the material object of whatever neurocognitive state offers or signifies that which an individual most affectively responds to (Mulligan 2010).

Both unintentionally and unknowingly, the finest neuro-philosophical account of emotional-moral motivation may belong to John Rawls (1998), who sharply demonstrates how emotions underlie an adequate sense and practice of justice. In essence, Rawls interprets guilt as developing into multiple stages of (eventually) widespread moral emotion through the promotion of increasingly cultivated cognition within conditions of love and trust that subsequently aim to increase self-esteem. Rawls’s account of the development of moral emotions, and thus an appropriate sense of justice, begins from a general assumption of rational, and therefore proportionate, intuitions. Beyond its exhortation to take seriously the principles of justice with which societies must requisitely comply in order to live well, it presupposes communities comprised of supportive families, peers, and other cooperative social groups who first agree to abide by these operative concepts of equality and goodness (Greenspan 2010). Because the breach of normative principles is inevitable even in well-ordered societies, Rawls introduces guilt

as the emotion that ideally serves as the guiding force to rehabilitate behavior to its intended moral state. The role of emotion in securing morality is, then, for Rawls, visibly justificatory, and it provides essential support to the operative principles of normative morality. Hence, Rawls' theory of justice provides necessary insight into the emotional framework of normative morality with the assignment of objective status to affective intuitions, which consequently hints at their evaluative capacities (Ibid.).

4.3 Emotional Rationality and Ethical Decision Making

Because the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VPMC) is essential for decision making, and because both cognitive and emotional systems are active within the VPMC, it follows that decision making is emotionally rational by nature (Glannon 2011). Indeed, this is what leads Damasio (2007) to conclude that patients who suffer damage to and dysfunction in the VPMC are rendered impaired in both cognitive and emotional processes. Hence, emotional impairments are intimately linked with irrational moral choices. Given the scientific evidence that the thalamic-amygdala – a primitively hard-wired neurological system – may potentially function independently of cognition, philosophical arguments such as that posited by David Hume (1978) become more understandable. For Hume, reason is but the slave of emotion; hence, moral decision making is driven primarily by affection (Glannon 2011). Against this idea, Peter Singer (2005) concludes that the only way to avoid moral skepticism in decision making is to detach moral judgments that are owed to cultural history from those that possess a rational basis.

A metaphorical concept helpful in understanding emotional and cognitive systems critical for moral decision making within the VPMC is tutorship. Here, three theses merit brief mention in order to exemplify the decision making process: (i) reason judges and tutors emotion; (ii) emotion tests and tutors reason; and (iii) emotion tutors emotion. Regarding the first, prompting, educating, and regulating emotions is possible – and necessary – through rational tutoring. This is accessible through the neurocognitive exercise of imagining particular images and beliefs that shape feeling. So doing helps rationally control the strictly emotional process that may displace decision making. Regarding the second, emotions of empathy and sympathy are innate in human nature (Preston and de Waal 2002), and these affective responses fuel efforts to reconsider previously held, strictly rational judgments. Righteous anger, for example, motivates individuals to work steadfastly for social justice and necessary change. When Saint Augustine (2008) exhorted his congregation to love and do as they wished, he realized

that emotions focus, expand, and transform rational moral commitments (Callahan 1991).

Finally, regarding the third, it is a psychological fact, important to philosophy, that individuals are able to receive moral assistance from focusing attention on things that are valuable: people of heroic virtue, breathtaking art, perhaps the metaphysics of beauty itself. Human beings are naturally attached to particular persons, things, or concepts, and when an attachment grows sour it is swiftly replaced by another, redeeming emotional attachment. When emotions are tutored by other, positive emotions – say, for instance, love and a proportionate sense of justice – an individual is less subject to deformation of moral judgment, and more inclined to choose rationally. Errors in ethical decision making arise when a regressed and selfish will endures stress or conflict. Conversely, when one cares about moral truth and is committed to actualizing goodness, one is better prepared, through mature emotional rationality, to carefully attend to, clearly see, and fairly stand with moral commitments, and thus to act on them appropriately (Callahan 1991).

5. The Category of Narrative Identity and Ethical Decision Making

5.1 Narrative Identity as the Product of Autobiographical Memory and Emotional Rationality

For better or worse, the convergence of one's autobiographical memory and emotional rationality produces one's narrative identity – one's conception of self. At core, the notion of the "narrative self" centers on the innate effort of human beings to understand and interpret the world through storytelling (Sellnow 2010). Building on Martin Heidegger's (1949) claim that human beings are essentially "embodied conversations" and that the unity of conversation serves to support human existence, Walter Fisher (Technical Logic 1987) remarks that individuals experience and comprehend life as a series of narratives that possess various beginnings, middles, and ends. However, all conversations, and the narratives to which they contribute, are not equally valuable. That is, authentic narratives must be evaluated by applying the standards of "narrative rationality" – a term first employed by Fisher in 1984 – to them. Such rationality is the method by which narratives, autobiographical and emotional at core, are accorded their status as "true" (Sellnow 2010).

According to Fisher (Technical Logic 1987), human communication is tested against principles of coherence (i.e., narrative probability) and fidelity (i.e., truthfulness and reliability). Regarding the former, coherence is the degree to which a story "hangs

together” – that is, how probable or believable the story seems, both to oneself and to others, and whether the characters act in a consistent manner. Thus, coherent narratives do not possess altered facts or neglect pertinent details and have considered possible alternative interpretations to ensure veracity (Sellnow 2010). Just as individuals often arrive at firm conclusions through comparing the coherence of their stories with stories of similar detail, so too the coherence of narrative is tested when the beginnings, middles, and ends of a life story resonate with others that have trod similar ground (Ibid.). Central to the notion of narrative coherence is character. In this context, character is understood as an organized set of “actional tendencies.” If such tendencies contradict one another, change significantly, or alter in ways that do not resonate with lived experience, character is called into question. Coherence, then, requires that characters behave in characteristic ways. Without such fundamental autobiographical and emotional predictability, there can be no trust, community, or rational order (Fisher, Technical Logic 1987).

Regarding the latter, fidelity is the degree to which values expressed in a story ring true with what one regards as truthful and fair. In this sense, narrative strikes a responsive, emotional cord. An autobiographical narrative possesses fidelity when it offers good reasons to accept its underlying moral, which will ultimately serve to guide one’s actions in the future. These “good reasons” spring from the values inherent to the message, the pertinence of those values to the decision being made, the consequences that will foreseeably result from complying with or ignoring those values, and the degree to which those values resonate with the worldview and values of both the individual who shares the narrative and others with whom its message is exchanged. Finally, Fisher (Human Communication 1987) contends that most human beings possess an inner desire to uphold truth, beauty, goodness, wisdom, courage, justice, communion, friendship, and oneness with the cosmos. To this end, narrative fidelity exemplifies the degree to which the good reasons of one’s story resonate with the ideal values by which one ought to live (Sellnow 2010).

5.2 The Requisite Unpredictability of Narrative Identity

Autobiographical and emotional history is, according to MacIntyre (2007), an enacted narrative in which the characters also serve as co-authors. This notion suggests that human beings never start *ab initio*, but rather plunge in *medias res*, the beginnings of their stories already carved out by who and what has gone before. Just as literary characters, human beings neither begin nor go on exactly where or how they please. All individuals, then, predisposed to significant segments of the narratives into which

they come to be, are constrained by the actions of others and by the social settings presupposed in their actions. Understood this way, it becomes clear that the enacted narrative of one's life is not, and cannot be, predictable. This sort of unpredictability is required for the narrative structure of human life, and the empirical data unearthed by social scientists provides an understanding of human life that is compatible with this structure (MacIntyre 2007).

The requisite unpredictability of narrative identity coexists with a second teleological characteristic of all narratives. This characteristic concerns the fact that individuals live out their lives, both individually and socially, in light of particular conceptions of a potentially shared future, a future in which certain possibilities (e.g., joy and pain, tragedy and triumph) call them forward while others repel them, some seemingly foreclosed and others inevitable. Thus understood, there is no present that is not informed by a particular image of a distinctive future. This imagined future always presents itself in the form of ends or goals toward which human beings are either progressing or failing to progress in the present. Hence, the unpredictability of both narrative and teleology coexist in life. Like characters in a fictional novel, individuals do not know what will happen next, but their lives will possess a certain form that projects itself toward the future. Thus, if one's individual and social life is to continue intelligibly, it is always the case both that there are limits on how the story can continue and that within those limits there are innumerable ways in which it can continue (Ibid.).

Here, a central thesis begins to emerge. It concerns the notion that human beings are, in both their actions and their fictions, essentially story-telling creatures. That is, through one's autobiographical and emotional history, one becomes a teller of stories that aspire to truth. This truth is rooted in a fundamental moral normativity by which the significance and meaning of life stories are made interpretable. It thus becomes clear that one can only identify what one is to do – that is, what the right, the good, or perhaps the least worse thing to do in a given instance is – if one first identifies the narrative or narratives of which one finds oneself a part. One enters human society, in other words, with one or more characters imputed – roles into which one has been drafted – and one must learn what they are in order to understand how others are to respond and how one's responses to others are appropriately construed. Hence, there is no way to gain an understanding of society except through the compilation of stories that comprise its initial dramatic resources. To be the subject of an authentic narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death and possesses both autobiographical and emotional integrity is to be accountable for the actions and experiences that compose a "narratable" life (Ibid.). Put simply, it is to be open to give a particular account of what one did, what one

experienced, and what one witnessed at any earlier point in one's life than the time at which the question is posed (Ibid.).

5.3. Narrative Neglect as Threat to Identity, Authenticity, and Ethical Decision Making

Narrative theorists from John Locke (1997) to Charles Taylor (1991) underscore that in the creation of autobiographical structures upon which self-understanding hinges, one is able to participate in the process of selecting particular memories, based on important life incidents and themes, to be stored in neural networks, which consequently produce one's sense of existence in the world (Escobedo and Adolphs 2010). This process marks the means by which individuals interpret, make sense of, and extract meaning from life events. Regaining and reforming a systematized and consistent narrative after a traumatic event remains, then, vital to the larger reconstruction of one's autobiographical narrative of authenticity in the effort to make sense of trauma and identify meaning within it (Bell 2008). In this way, autobiographical memory is equally critical to one's ability persist through time, retain moral agency, and maintain moral responsibility (Glannon 2006). If who one is depends to a greater or lesser extent upon what one does, then what one does depends to a greater or lesser extent upon what one remembers – or, put more precisely, what one remembers in light of one's narrative identity. The conclusion gleaned is that who one is depends to a greater or lesser extent upon what one remembers, and, more immediately, who one remembers oneself to be. Hence, to neglect one's narrative is to sacrifice everything else.

As implied above, the rationality of emotion is largely a sociocultural concept, which implies the idea that rationality is, in large part, embedded in respective cultures. That being said, narrative authenticity must also be partly independent from the recognition of others, since the recognition of others has the potential to be incorrect for a number of reasons. Nevertheless, the emotionally-rational authenticity inherent to autobiographical memory cannot be appropriately assessed by individuals alone. This is due to the fact that, to some extent, each individual is embedded in a sociological culture greater than oneself, and hence is perpetually confronted by the positions of others that serve to evaluate one's emotional life. Since emotion is considered authentic by virtue of its rationality,⁴ neglecting emotional memories irrevocably knit together with the coherence and consistence of an individual's narrative identity will only serve to abruptly tilt an

4. The same can be said reciprocally of rationality – that is, that every reason is considered authentic by virtue of its emotional nature.

individual life toward the inauthentic and the disintegrated. If neglected, new emotions would, at best, appear as doubtful, and so rather than effectively reinstating an individual state of being, they would de facto deconstruct it. For some contemporary philosophers of mind, authenticity is a perceptible state (Kraemer 2011). If this is persuasive, then an adequate ethics of maintaining authenticity leaves no room for narrative neglect (Taylor 1991).

Beyond threatening authentic autobiographical memory, emotional rationality, and narrative identity in less transparent ways, narrative neglect proves more sharply – and visibly – impedimentary to sound ethical decision making. Insofar as one's life story is always embedded in the story of the communities from which one derives one's identity, the attempt to cut oneself off from that past is to deform one's present relationships. This is so because one is never able to seek, identify, and act on the good solely as an individual. Individuals inherit from the past of their families, cities, tribes, and nations a variety of debts, expectations, and moral obligations. These inheritances constitute the given of one's life, one's moral starting point. It is also how life gains its own moral particularity. Ultimately, then, one finds oneself part of a particular history and, regardless of whether one prefers or recognizes it, as the bearer of a narrative greater than one's own (MacIntyre 2007).

6. The Justification of Narrative Identity as a Comprehensive Framework for Ethical Decision Making

6.1 Narrative Identity as Moral Education, Moral Methodology, and Moral Discourse

Even the most ardent devotee of analytical rigor can admit that most individuals, most of the time, learn much of what they know about morality from narratives of one kind or another (Murray 1997). To say that narrative identity contributes to ethical decision making through the providence of a particular form of moral education is hardly a controversial claim, but it is an important one nonetheless. Defenders of an ethics-as-propositions conception of decision making argue that individuals are simply too dense to grasp, remember, or learn, and that because of this society must fall back on narrative identity as a heuristic device. But narratives are not second-best instruments for representing the content of morality in a vivid, memorable way. Rather, they are themselves that content (Murray 1997). If the enterprise of moral education is understood as a pursuit of truth in all its forms, requiring a deep and sympathetic

investigation of all major ethical alternatives and the comparison of each with one's active sense of narrative identity, then it requires narrative identity and the experience of attending to it for its own completion (Nussbaum 1990).

As mentioned above, a method of moral reasoning grounded in narrative identity has experienced a recent resurgence (Murray 1997). Blaise Pascal's brutal yet brilliant assault on its abuses made casuistry a term of dishonor. Nevertheless, as ethicists struggled with actual cases, the case-centered approach inherent to casuistry was often employed on a variety of moral problems. In time, the restoration of a narrative-based casuistry as an intellectually respectable method of moral reasoning would gain credence. This trail was blazed by Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, whose method would gain credence by the late 1980s (Murray 1997). As Jonsen and Toulmin (1988) note, the heart of human experience does not lie in a mastery of rules and theoretical principles, however sound and well-reasoned they might appear. Instead, it is located in the practical wisdom that comes from seeing how the ideas behind rules work out in the course of one's (evolving) narrative identity – in particular, seeing more precisely what is involved in accepting (or rejecting) this or that rule in one or another set of circumstances. Only an adequate recollection of the autobiographical and emotional elements of narrative identity can equip individual agents with the tools necessary to weigh moral considerations of various kinds and resolve conflicts between those considerations.

Moral philosophers rarely behave as geometricians, forwarding axioms, definitions, or theorems in their moral discourse (Murray 1997). Rather, they typically tell stories of at least two genres. The first is the "philosopher's hypothetical," which it meant to make a particular point, usually about the plausibility or implausibility of an assertion about ethics. Judith Jarvis Thomson's (1971) violinist and Bernard Williams's (1973) traveler are well known examples of the genre. These stories function either to reinforce confidence in the proposition being forwarded or to reveal its defect (Murray 1997).⁵ The second, less noted genre of narrative is intended to construct, motivate, and display the necessity of the theorist's approach. This is the method, for instance, of MacIntyre (2007), by which he describes contemporary morality as a collection of incompatible shards of earlier moralities that were more coherent. The success of MacIntyre's project is, in large part, due to its birth in and motivation by narrative identity – that is, by stories about who

5. If it is not obviously wrong for a woman who wakes up and finds herself attached to a violinist to want to disconnect the tubes that are keeping him alive, then neither is it obviously wrong for a woman who finds herself pregnant to want to cease supporting the fetus growing inside of her body – or so Thomson's story is meant to suggest.

individuals are, what they are like, and how they came to be in their current situation. Most, if not all, moral discourse, including moral theory, is embedded in, conditioned by, and conducted through narratives (Murray 1997).

6.2 Narrative Identity as Ground and Object of Normative Ethical Principles

John Arras (1997) contends that narrative is an essential supplement to ethical principles. His argument is twofold: first, that narrative elements are inevitably embedded in all forms of moral reasoning; and second, that individual responses to narrative are the ground out of which principles and theories develop. For the former part of the argument, Arras relies heavily on the work of Rita Charon, who passionately calls for narrative competence in bioethics while maintaining the fundamental structure of principlism within the field. Arras thus interprets the significance of narrative identity as supplementary to principles, viewing narrative as the oil that lubricates the gears of normative principles, thereby enhancing their function. The latter part of his argument appeals to the model of reflective equilibrium, claiming that few principlists would ground their theories in a way that prohibited them from being tested against considered judgments about actual circumstances. On this view, most principlists are moral coherentists in the sense of relying on particular, considered judgments as a necessary means to test general theories. Arras points out that the cases that give rise to these considered judgments are themselves revelatory of some narrative identity: they contain either micro-narratives that describe what it means for a particular person to behave in a particular way, or macro-narratives that describe the history of a particular behavior and its particular social benefits or burdens (Arras 1997). For Arras and others, then, an ethics grounded in narrative identity is not a new approach, but rather a recognition and appreciation of the debt that principle-driven modes of discourse owe to stories (Brody 2003).

However, a much stronger case can be made for the dependence of principles on narratives, grounded in the meaning individuals attribute to the historical development of principles (Ibid.). Against Jonsen and Toulmin (1988), Childress (1997) argues that individuals learn both norms and narratives from their parents, and that without norms, it is impossible to understand and classify the narratives. For Childress, it is a mistake to view the genesis of an individual's moral development as grounded in stories, with the understanding of general norms constituting a later, more sophisticated stage of development. Yet it seems quite plausible that moral development occurs in precisely the opposite way. Consider, for example, how children learn to recognize the distribution of

goods as fair or unfair – an activity that becomes a metaphor for the principle of justice. A child watches his parents dividing goods in a particular way and witnesses the result this behavior has on his three other siblings. On another occasion the child watches his younger sister steal all the goods for herself and similarly witnesses the effect it has on all parties. Finally, the child is given the responsibility to divide and distribute the goods among his siblings and, perhaps with prompting, decides to emulate his parents and not his younger sister. (This can be understood as a new, and perhaps first, instance in which the child invokes moral judgment.) The situation reminds the child of the narratives in which he previously participated and provides criteria to determine whether the new narrative produces a fair distribution (Brody 2003).

Apart from the exercise of principles, there is another area of moral activity that underscores the foundational import of narrative identity: discussions about virtue and character (Ibid.). MacIntyre (2007) has led the way in claiming that the very notion of virtue is unintelligible without a narrative conception of what it means to live one's life. To be virtuous is, for MacIntyre, to attempt to become a particular sort of person – to live one's life in a particular way as it unfolds over time. This means not only that individuals who remain true to their narrative identity behave in certain ways, but also that they do so for certain reasons and with certain motives, and that they learn certain things from their past behavior and apply them to future behavior in certain ways. None of this makes sense in absence of a narrative conception of the self. Even Arras (1997), who is skeptical of MacIntyre's claims (about whether truth can be identified through narrative), agrees that the only way to adequately depict, understand, and assess character is by telling and retelling stories (Brody 2003).

6.3. Rigor in Narrative Judgments and Ethical Justification

A general point of agreement among narrativists is that in order to critique a story, one needs a different story, or counter-story, with which to compare it (Brody 2003). As Margaret Urban Walker (1998) explains, the task of fully normative reflection is intrinsically comparative. In other words, when individuals ask themselves what can be said for some way of life, they are asking whether it is better or worse than some other way they know or imagine. Part of the attractiveness of narrative identity is its intuitive appeal: individuals can judge the coherence of an event within the context of a story. Walker, who views ethics primarily as an exercise in accountability and responsibility, places great stress on the significance of moral reliability. For her, moral responsibility lies at the intersection of the respective narratives of relationships, identity, and values,

and forms the basis for one's identity. On this view, acts are wrong only by a judgment of radical incoherence from the standpoint of the narrator (Walker 1998). This indicates the possibility of employing narrative coherence or incoherence as a guide to moral justification for actions (Brody 2003).

Wide reflective equilibrium, as articulated by Norman Daniels (1979), locates justificatory power in coherence among three elements: particular moral judgments, general ethical principles, and background theories of human nature. One may sometimes alter a long-standing general principle because it fails to resonate with a particular case judgment. At other times one may dismiss a case judgment because it fails to cohere to an attractive general principle or theory. Circumstances determine how the equilibrium works for the best overall "fit" among the elements. Of course, any such fit is temporary, since a new case or background theory may upset the original reasoning (Brody 2003). Nevertheless, Daniels' theory has respectable roots in moral and political philosophy, and it is tempting to adopt for justification in an ethics of narrative identity. One would simply designate the particular case judgments as "narratives." Within this model, one need not reject normative principles, and one can acknowledge that at least some narrative judgments may be persuasive enough to overturn principle-based judgments on occasion. One could then use principles when they are helpful and remain focused on particular narratives as sources of moral justification (Ibid.). However, to maintain rigor, a "narrative equilibrium" must be more complex still.

On a fundamental level, narrative equilibrium is also coherentist. That is, what is ethically justified is what most accurately hangs together with everything else, acknowledging that one can seldom, if ever, provide an algorithm for deciding of what "hanging together" consists (Ibid.). As suggested above, narratives do not stand alone; they depend for their meaning on broader background narratives that are often taken for granted by those who share a common society and culture. At least some of the time, then, moral judgments and moral behavior are partially judged on grounds of coherence within and among one's narratives. On other occasions, when wider reflection is needed, it may be necessary to appeal to background theories of human nature (encompassing psychological, sociological, or anthropological aspects) or to general principles. These elements are viewed as contained within a multilevel cluster of narratives. That is, background theories of human nature, even if apparently derived from the social sciences and quantified in statistical terms, are a sort of sociocultural background narrative, providing the story of how people in a society tend to behave and why. Narrative equilibrium is a product of human activity, and those humans function within a particular sociocultural context during a particular historical movement (Ibid.).

Thus, discerning that something is the case – whether this action is cruel or that ball is red – obviously involves subsuming the case under a concept, but it does not involve reaching a belief by invoking some generalization linking premises to conclusion (Little, 2000). The question is not, therefore, how “subjective” stories can provide rigorous criticism, judgment, and justification in the context of ethical decision making, but how rigorous criticism, judgment, and justification can exist without the stories that frame one’s narrative identity (Brody 2003).

7. Conclusion

This essay examined the respective relationships shared between autobiographical memory, emotional rationality, and narrative identity in support of the argument that narrative identity, as the product of autobiographical memory and emotional rationality, is indispensable to substantive ethical decision making. To secure the justification of these theses, it demonstrated that (i) the disintegration of autobiographical memory degenerates emotional rationality; (ii) the degeneration of emotional rationality decays narrative identity; and (iii) the decay of narrative identity disables one to seek, identify, and act on the good. The essay concluded by suggesting that narrative identity, inextricably rooted in autobiographical memory and emotional rationality, may be successfully employed as a justificatory framework for ethical decision making, providing both education to, and rigor for, substantive moral judgments.

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