

Ethics and the Turn to Narrative

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In recent years dissatisfaction with the barren formalism of ethics has led moral philosophers to revitalize their discipline. In the wake of the critique of academic moral philosophy, terms such as “experience” and “narrative” have become pervasive. The emphasis has shifted from analysis to stories, the stories of individuals and communities, even stories of the history of moral philosophy.¹ The impetus behind the turn to narrative has had much to do with a reaction against Kantian ethics. In place of formalism, universality, necessity, and deductive clarity, narratives highlight contingency, particularity, and moral conflict. Often the turn to narrative has coincided with a return to pre-modern moral philosophy and to the literary genre of tragedy. But just how compatible is the turn to narrative with pre-modern ethics, especially Thomistic ethics? There are, I think, many features of narrative ethics that a Thomist can find congenial. The emphasis upon insoluble contract and upon tragedy as the dominant narrative of human life is problematic, however. In what follows I want to sketch the virtues and vices of narrative ethics. As a corrective to certain tendentious features in narrative ethics, I will provide a reading of the narrative structure of Thomas’s own writing.

¹Three of the most popular recent books in ethics—Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, Martha Nussbaum’s *The Fragility of Goodness*, and Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*—are works of retrieval and works that focus upon the importance of narrative.

As I noted above, the resurgence of interest in narrative parallels and intersects with a return to experience in ethics.² Like “experience,” “narrative” is invoked in such a variety of contexts and is used in so loose a manner as to render it devoid of meaning. Given the connection between these terms, Thomas’s discussion of experience may prove helpful. The Latin nouns *experientia* and *experimentum* are allied to the deponent verb *experior*, which is passive in form but active in meaning. The verb means “to try, prove, test, or ensure.” *Expertus*, the past participle of *experior*, means “tried, proven, or known by experience.” That the verb as a deponent is instructive, since the Latin deponent is akin to the Greek middle voice, in which the subject both effects the action and is affected by it. The role of “experience” in the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of human knowing preserves two important features of the etymology of *experior*: first, the characterization of knowing as an undergoing or suffering, as involving both passivity and activity, and, secondly, the claim that knowledge arises from experience as from a dialectical testing or trial of sensible particulars. A return to the Thomistic understanding of *experientia* would help to combat what Charles Taylor has identified as two dominant features of the modern conception of the person: disengaged reason and the punctual self.³

Following Aristotle Thomas holds that experience is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of knowledge. Experience results from memory which in turn arises from the perception of sensible particulars. Experience notes similarities and regularities among a related set of singulars; it collates particulars and thus makes them amenable to intellectual insight. Experience remains at the level of particulars; only reason, which grasps the “why,” can supply insight into a related set of particulars, an insight that issues in a universal. The route from *senus* through *memoria* and *experimentum* to *ratio* involves what Thomas calls the abstraction of the universal from sensible particulars. It is important to note, however, that the intellect primarily grasps not an abstract universal but the nature of sensible

²A Previous draft of the section on experience was presented at a session of the Catholic Theological Society of America, June 1992 in Pittsburg.

³*Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 143–76.

particulars.⁴ More generally, Thomas argues that the intellect is a potency made actual through interaction with the sensible world.

Since the embodiment of the soul is natural and perfective, the intellect of rational animals is inoperable apart from sense experience and imagination. Moral knowledge does not, of course, rest in the universal. Its term is a particular; thus it is involved more intimately with experience, as is evident from Aristotle's exclusion of inexperienced youth from the study of moral philosophy.

Experience, then, is the ineliminable starting point of human thinking, and yet Aristotle and Aquinas underscore its limits as well. The insufficiency of experience as a guide in ethics seems to become more pronounced in the move from Aristotle's theory of the virtues to Aquinas's theory of natural law. Does not the universality and necessity of the natural law lie beyond the purview of narrative? This is precisely the objection some Thomists have leveled against MacIntyre's narrative rendering of Aquinas.⁵ Concerning the first principles of the natural law, Thomas holds that the most common precepts are grasped by all. But commentators have noticed a gap in Aquinas's account of the natural law, namely, the lack of a discussion of the precepts that would mediate between the most common principles and particular circumstances. There is certainly room for development of the intermediate precepts. Still, the variability and contingency of particular circumstances make application of both primary and intermediate principles difficult. The "more there is descent to proper or particular matters, the more defect is found."⁶ Even if the gap in the account of moral precepts can be partly filled by further casuistry, such reasoning must ultimately be put at the service of prudence, which is said to command (*praecipere*) particular actions. By enriching and refining our appreciation of the human condition, narratives can provide

⁴*ST.*, I, 84, 7, where Thomas argues that every act of knowing requires conversion to a phantasm. This is necessary not only because of the poverty of the intellect, which needs the assistance of images, but also because the intelligible species is not "truly and completely known unless it is known as existing in the particular" (*cognosci non potest complete et vere, nisi secundum quod cognoscitur ut in particulari existens*). Thomas proceeds to argue that the intelligible species is not the *quid* but the *quo* of knowledge. The intellect primarily and directly knows the nature of the thing (*ST.*, I, 85, 1).

⁵See Robert P. George, "Moral Particularism, Thomism and Tradition," *The Review of Metaphysics* 42 (1989), pp. 593–605.

⁶"Quanto magis ad propria descenditur, tanto magis invenitur defectus," *ST.*, I-II, 94, 4.

a vicarious education in prudence, which is “perfected through memory and through experience to a prompt judgement of particulars.”⁷

The connection between reason, experience, and sensible particulars can be assisted or obstructed and is always mediated by passions, habits, customs, and so forth. While Thomas argues that the basic precepts of the natural law are *per se nota* or self-evident, he adds that their evidence presupposes an apprehension of the meaning of the terms. The latter can be grasped only through experience (*ST.* I-II, 94, 2). The ground of the natural law, moreover, is not an abstract set of propositions, but the order of natural inclinations.⁸

The importance of experience and rightly ordered inclination in the account of the natural law points the way to a role for narrative in moral education. Because narratives engage us concretely as whole human beings, not just as intellects, they operate at the level of “sympathy or connaturality,” the importance of which needs no defense among those familiar with Maritain. By informing the imagination and addressing the passions, they can help to provide the sort of education that Aristotle describes as the necessary starting point of the good life. “Moral virtue has to do with pleasure and pain. For through pleasure we do base things and through pain we flee noble deeds. Thus it is necessary to have been well brought up from youth . . . so as to delight in and be grieved at the things we ought. For this is the right education.”⁹ Aristotle returns to this topic in the final book of the *Politics*, where he discusses education in the *polis* and argues that music and poetry have the “power to form character.”¹⁰

The distinction between the *ordo inveniendi*, the order of discovery, and the *ordo demonstrandi*, the order of proof, is germane. Since narratives operate at the level of experience and appeal to our passions, they may well serve to aid us in discovering the precepts as natural inclinations; they may initiate a process of recognizing, re-collecting, and reordering our natural inclinations. In Aristotle and Aquinas the appeal to experience is often dialectical in character; it

⁷“Perficitur per memoriam, et per experimentum ad prompte iudicandum de particularibus expertis,” *ST.*, II-II, 47, 3, ad 3.

⁸Even fundamental precepts, for instance, the one against theft, can be abolished from the human heart “on account of depraved customs and corrupt habits” (*propter pravas consuetudines et habitus corruptos*), *ST.*, I-II, 94, 6.

⁹*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b11–13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 1340b13.

seeks to return us to certain features of the phenonema that have been overlooked or remain in need of explanation. Stories may not provide demonstrations, but they can be of assistance as dialectical starting points for moral reflection. If narratives are to be tools of criticism and appraisal, they must be open to dialectical engagement. The most illuminating narratives provoke inquiry.

While the turn to narrative has often been motivated by a repudiation of rational discourse, it has also been motivated by the desire to find more adequate philosophic means of understanding moral knowledge and action. In their introduction to an anthology entitled *Why Narrative?*, Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones trace the turn to narrative to a “recognition that rationality, methods of argument, and historical explanation have, at least to some extent, a fundamentally narrative form.”¹¹ From a Thomistic perspective the turn offers a welcome corrective to certain tendencies in modern ethics. Narrative accounts of human action underscore the complexity of human action and link the intelligibility of particular actions not just to intentions or consequences, but also to the habits, characters, and histories of individuals and communities. As Martha Nussbaum puts it,

A whole tragic drama, unlike a schematic philosophical example . . . , is capable of tracing the history of a complex pattern of deliberation, showing its roots in a way of life and looking forward to its consequences in that life. As it does all of this, it lays open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation.¹²

There is yet another reason to think that the turn to narrative might be auspicious for Aquinas’s ethics. It is well known that modern moral and political thought involves a decisive rejection of classical philosophy; what is less appreciated is the simultaneous subordination of poetry to so-called historical fact. Machiavelli accentuates the gap between “how one lives and how one ought to live” and repudiates “imagined republics” in favor of the “effectual truth” of history.¹³ Hobbes ties political philosophy to history, which he calls “knowledge

¹¹*Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 4.

¹²Martha Nussbaum, *Fragility*, p. 14.

¹³*The Prince*, trans. De Alvarez (Irving, Texas: University of Dallas Press, 1980), p. 93.

of fact.”¹⁴ But what is the significance of the preference for history? An initial answer can be had from Aristotle’s remark in the *Poetics* that, while the historian describes what “has come to be,” the poet describes “the sort of thing that might come to be.” He continues, “Thus poetry is more philosophic and of graver import than history.” For its statements are “more of the nature of universals,” while those of history are “according to particulars.” The tradition of viewing poetry in this way stretches from Aristotle to Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy*. In the latter work, poetry is said to have as its goal “to lead us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls can be capable of.” The poet does this by describing nature not just as it is but as it might be if it were to achieve the excellences of which it is capable. Poetry has the ability to mediate between the universal and the particular; as Sidney puts it, the poet “couples the general notion with the particular example.”¹⁵

Two characteristics of poetry—as having to do with universals and as serving the attainment of human perfection—run counter to the dominant early modern views of knowledge and of human nature. Poetry is open to the dimension of depth in the human person, to the often unrealized but latent capacities for moral excellence.¹⁶ Thus, a return to narrative, as understood in Aristotle and Sidney, is an implicit return to a teleological understanding of human nature.¹⁷ As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it: “In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is the good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common.”¹⁸

¹⁴*Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (New York: MacMillan Press, 1962), p. 69.

¹⁵*Sir Phillip Sidney: Selected Prose and Poetry*, ed. R. Kimbrough (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

¹⁶The problem of whether “ought” can be derived from “is” pre-dates Hume; it can be traced to the early modern preference for historical fact. Admittedly, the turn to narrative will not resolve all the questions concerning the debate. But it does return us to an often forgotten fact, namely, that the descriptive and evaluative are inextricably bound in our ordinary language.

¹⁷I am grateful to Deal Hudson for pointing out this connection to me.

¹⁸Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 203. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre develops an account of social teleology as a substitute for what he oddly calls the “metaphysical biology” of Aristotle. In this work MacIntyre does not see that his persistent use of teleological language and of the language of potency and act needs some sort of natural teleology. In *Three Rival Versions of*

Is it mere coincidence that the quest for human excellence survives in literature long after it has been ostracized by the philosophers? Sidney describes poetry as “a speaking picture, with this end,—to teach and delight.” But one might object that this view of the poet’s goal is misleading, that it reduces the poet to the moralist. As Maritain rightly insisted, *poesis* and *praxis* should not be conflated. “Art operates for the good of work done, *ad bonum operis*.”¹⁹ Art is not *recta ratio agibilium*, but *recta ratio factibilium*. The danger of Sidney’s description, however, is not that it would collapse ethics and poetry, but poetry and rhetoric. Some clarification can be found in C.S. Lewis’s contrast between rhetoric and poetry, a contrast that brings out the indirect way in which poetry promotes the good.

The differentia of rhetoric is that it wishes to produce in our minds some practical resolve . . . and it does this by calling passions to the aid of reason. Poetry aims at producing something more like vision than it is like action. But vision, in this sense, includes passions. Certain things, if not seen as lovely or detestable, are not being accurately seen at all. . . . In rhetoric imagination is present for the sake of passion, while in poetry passion is present for the sake of imagination, and, therefore, in the long run, for the sake of wisdom or spiritual health—the rightness and richness of a man’s total response to the world.²⁰

Lewis goes on to note that the rectitude inspired by poetry contributes “indirectly to right action.” Thomas himself states that poetry leads to “virtue by a pleasing image.”²¹

The most troublesome features of the turn to narrative lie not in the risk of confusing poetry and rhetoric, but elsewhere. One of the welcome motives behind the turn to narrative is the attempt to counter reductionistic notions of autonomy and atomism; yet narrative ethics often embodies a reductionism of a different sort. It risks abandoning

Moral Enquiry (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), however, he seems less reticent to adopt traditional accounts of teleology. He writes, “Evaluative judgements are a species of factual judgement concerning the final and formal causes of activity of members of a particular species” (p. 134). He also insists that the practical portion of the *ST*. can be understood only by reference to the preceding theoretical sections (p. 135).

¹⁹Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlon (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), p. 12.

²⁰*A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 53–54.

²¹Prologue to the commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*.

moral inquiry to a set of utterly incommensurable stories.²² Although Aristotle understands ethics as a science only in a diminished and analogous sense, he nonetheless resists the temptation to conflate ethics and literature. When it jettisons altogether the dialectical or scientific character of ethics, narrative ethics replaces the autonomy of the Kantian agent with the autonomy of the story. Understood thus, narrative ethics would mark not so much a return or an advance, as a capitulation to the modern way of framing the moral question. Either there is Kantian autonomy and universality or there is the relativity of stories.

The autonomy of stories and their inevitable and irreconcilable conflicts are prominent in even the most philosophically trained advocates of narrative. For example, Hauerwas, Nussbaum, and MacIntyre accentuate the role of moral dilemmas in the moral life and fittingly see the genre of tragedy as best capturing the narrative structure of human life.²³ Hauerwas sees a truthful narrative as one that “gives us the means to accept the tragic without succumbing to self-deceiving explanations.” The Christian narrative gives us the “skills to live joyously in the face of the tragic.”²⁴ In *After Virtue*, a seminal text in the turn to narrative, MacIntyre advocates a combination of Aristotle’s ethics with the Sophoclean insight concerning tragic conflict. Unlike Nussbaum, MacIntyre at least admits that he is imparting the Sophoclean emphasis into his reading of Aristotle. For Nussbaum tragedies capture the vulnerability and fragility of the human condition, features of our condition that Platonic, Kantian, and Christian moral thought overlook. She writes, “They offer no solution in bewildering tragic situations—except the solution that consists in being faithful to or harmonious with one’s sense of worth by acknowledging the tension and disharmony.”²⁵

²²The emphasis upon incommensurability follows upon the purported centrality of moral dilemmas. See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge: 1980).

²³Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). These views should not be collapsed. Hauerwas speaks of the Gospel as urging truthfulness and charity in the face of tragic situations, while MacIntyre speaks of the tragic confrontation of “good with good.” Nussbaum’s position is, I think, the most contrary to that of Aquinas.

²⁴Martha Nussbaum, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, p. 12.

²⁵Martha Nussbaum, *Fragility*, p. 81.

As MacIntyre would later note, there is no place in Aquinas's ethics for tragic dilemmas *simpliciter*, that is, for dilemmas that are not rooted in some prior sin or error.²⁶ Indeed, the closest analogue in Thomas to the moral dilemma is what he calls *perplexus*, the state of moral conflict resulting from an antecedent sin.²⁷ Thomas's account of the origin of moral perplexity indicates that more is at stake in the debate over moral dilemmas than the opposition of a calculative and abstract conception of moral reasoning to a personalist narrative embracing the concrete and contingent. Indeed, Thomas's simultaneous emphasis upon the centrality of prudence and his repudiation of moral dilemmas reveals this opposition to be a false one. Instead, the fundamental opposition is a metaphysical one. On the one hand, there is the position, intimated in Plato and Aristotle, made explicit in the Christian tradition, that grounds all things in a transcendent source and paradigm of the Good, and that sees evil as dependent and parasitic upon the good, as impotent non-being. On the other hand, there is some version of the Manichean view of the inseparability of good and evil. John Milbank argues that tragic narrative affirms an "ontological violence" at the roots of the natural and moral cosmos.²⁸ The Platonic critique of tragic poetry can be understood in this light. Socrates castigates the poets for presenting divine beings in states of conflict and for presenting noble souls as ending in destruction. Both René Girard and Paul Ricoeur see tragedy as an expression of "primordial incoherence."²⁹ Such an ontology partly explains the preference for

²⁶Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 183–188.

²⁷*ST.*, I-II, 6, ad 3.

²⁸Nussbaum's position, which speaks of the harmony of conflicting values and forces, is not far from the Nietzschean affirmation of difference. The aesthetic distance requisite for such an affirmation involves either ignorance or celebration of the real violence ensuing from the conflicts. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

²⁹Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper, 1967), p. 219. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Girard sees Aristotle's account of tragedy as continuous with the origins of tragedy in religious rituals. He writes, "Katharsis refers primarily to the mysterious benefits that accrue to the community upon the death of a human katharma or pharmakos. The process is generally seen as a religious purification and takes the form of cleansing or draining away of impurities" (p. 287). More pointedly, "On closer inspection, Aristotle's text is something of a manual of sacrificial practices, for the qualities that make a good 'tragic' hero are precisely those required of the sacrificial victim" (p. 291). A more traditional reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* can be had

tragedy in postmodern thought from Nietzsche to Heidegger and into certain strains of deconstruction.

Another danger in the turn to poetry has to do with the temptations of *technē*, the temptation to construct a whole which claims reality but in fact is merely a substitute for it. The philosophic objections to these poetic tendencies can be found in Plato's *Ion* and *Republic*. According to the divided line, the first step in the ascent to the Good involves grasping an image as an image. In the Allegory of the Cave, the citizens see images as things, images that are presented by the poets. Thus, the poets inhibit the ascent to the Good by presenting images as realities. That Thomas shares this concern is evident from his attempt to rebut the objection that the use of images in scripture obscures the truth. He counters that scripture does not allow its audience "to rest in likenesses but raises them to the knowledge of intelligible things." Moreover, "those things taught metaphorically in one part of scripture are taught more openly in other parts. The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds."³⁰

Maritain was acutely aware of this danger. He writes, "Poetry (like metaphysics) is spiritual nourishment, but the savour of it is created and insufficient."³¹ Indeed, part of the project of *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* is to salvage modern notions of creativity by returning and subordinating them to God's creativity. The artist, Maritain writes,

in Amelie Rorty's "The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Richard Rorty (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 1–22. Rorty argues that Aristotle's understanding of tragedy involves thoroughgoing transformation of the received view, which had been vitiated by the Platonic critique. Thus, Aristotle underscores the "representational truthfulness" of tragedy, and does not see it as a vehicle for reconciling the audience to unintelligible forces, forces which engender religious ecstasy and which inspire horror rather than pity and fear (p. 4). Rorty rightly insists upon Aristotle's variance from the tradition, yet her own emphasis upon the way in which fundamentally virtuous persons can unintentionally engender their own destruction brings to the fore the inseparability of order and disorder. She writes, "The plot unfolds from the protagonist's *hamartia*, a waywardness whose consequences reverses the *eudaimonia* that normally attends virtue" (p. 10). The protagonist's reversal (*peripeteia*), furthermore, "coincides with insightful recognition (*anagnorisis*)" and "fulfills the ancient command to know oneself" (p. 12). The fulfillment of the imperative of Greek ethics is precisely what leads to the destruction of the protagonist.

³⁰*ST.*, I, 1, 9, ad 2. "Non permittat in similitudinibus permanere, sed elevant eas ad cognitionem intelligibilem. . . . ea quae in uno loco scripturae traduntur sub metaphoris, in aliis locis expressius exponuntur. Et ipsa etiam occultatio figurarum utilis est ad exercitum studiosorum et contra irrisiones infidelium."

³¹Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 78.

is “an associate of God in the making of works of beauty; by developing the faculties with which the Creator has endowed him . . . and by making use at created matter, he creates in the second degree.”³² Maritain finds the basis for this understanding of the artist in Thomas’s statement that the “operation of art is founded upon the operation of nature, and this upon creation.”³³

An acceptable alliance between narrative and Thomistic ethics requires that narratives meet certain criteria: they would have to avoid presenting violence or strife as primordial; they would have to undermine the autonomous creativity of the poet; they would have to provoke inquiry; and they would have to eclipse the tragic view of human life. Such strategies, I would argue, are operative in Aquinas’s own texts and in the tradition of Christian poetry. The Christian tradition, of course, has not ignored the importance of tragedy for understanding the human condition. But it has never seen tragedy as the whole story or even as the fundamental story. The greatest Christian poems, those of Chaucer and Dante, for example, are comedies.³⁴

But what does comedy have to do with Aquinas? It seems clear enough that Aquinas would object to making tragic conflict or moral dilemmas the focus of ethics. It also seems indisputable that Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* exercised some influence on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. But does Thomas himself countenance a narrative conception of the good life? A critic might argue that Thomas did not write narratives and that, as an ethicist, he does not look to stories for assistance, but to moral philosophy and the edicts of scripture. Clearly, Thomas’s writings cannot be reduced to narratives. There are, however, in his texts a number of the themes characteristic of narrative ethics. First, Thomas’s account of the virtues lends itself to narrative description. Secondly, Thomas links the intelligibility and force of law to the common good; thus the natural law presupposes participation in social practices. Thirdly, Thomas sees philosophy not as a set of abstract propositions, but as a way of life, having its own *telos*, an end that is enacted in the speculative virtues of human beings. Finally, Thomas regularly adverts to scripture, not just to specific propositions

³²*Ibid.*, p. 49.

³³“Operatio artis fundatur super operationem naturae, et haec super creationem” (*ST.*, I, 45, 8).

³⁴MacIntyre appears to be moving in this direction; in *Three Rival Versions*, he focuses on the parallels between Aquinas’s ethics and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (p. 142–48).

or doctrines, but also to its narrative structure and peculiar mode of teaching. In what follows I will focus on the last two.

Before turning to the role of narrative in Aquinas, it is important to note that the claim concerning the narrative structure of the philosophic life in no way entails the reduction of philosophy to literature. Thomas does not rebut the claim that poetry is the “weakest teaching” (*infima doctrina*).³⁵ He sees the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle as superseding the materialist assumptions of the earliest philosophers, who supposed that all things were material, including the human mind.³⁶ Indeed, the philosophers attempt to supplant the tragic vision of the poets with the speculative pursuit of truth about nature, man, and the divine. Nonetheless, the origin, structure, and culmination of *theoria* can be described in narrative terms.

Thomas describes the narrative structure of the philosophic life in the opening chapters of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in the famous discussion of the twofold mode of truth. Thomas distinguishes between the portion of truth that “exceeds every capacity of human reason,” and the portion “to which even natural reason is able to attain.”³⁷ In ascending from sensible things to the divine, philosophers have attained some knowledge of God. What the philosophers have demonstrated about God overlaps with a segment of what scripture reveals; in this Thomas finds an initial confirmation of the compatibility of reason and faith. The goal of the natural aspiration to know is an understanding of the highest things, which is a cause of vehement joy (*vehemens . . . gaudium*). While Thomas is impressed by the achievements of philosophy, he notes that its success has been rare and imperfect. The philosopher grasps only that God is, not what He is. The desire to know, then, remains unsated, and philosophy, inconclusive. Apart from revelation, the human race would remain “in the blackest shadows of ignorance.”³⁸

In spite of the philosopher’s success in overcoming the tragic vision of the poets, tragedy itself is not fully eradicated. Maritain grasps

³⁵ST., I, 9, obj. 1 and ad 1.

³⁶ST., I, 84, 1.

³⁷SCG., I, 3. “Quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis excedunt . . . ad quae etiam ration naturalis pertingere potest.”

³⁸SCG., I, 5. “Remaneret igitur humanum genus, si sola rationis via ad Deum cognoscendum pateret, in maximis ignorantiae tenebris.”

the tragic character of the life of the philosopher. In the opening chapter of *The Degrees of Knowledge*, entitled “Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics,” the author eloquently captures the glory and fragility of the philosophic life: “Its majesty; that it is wisdom. Its poverty: that it is human science.” He expatiates, “That, then is the poverty of metaphysics (and yet its majesty, too). It awakens a desire for supreme union, for spiritual possession completed in the order of reality itself and not only in the concept. It cannot satisfy that desire.”³⁹ The potential sources of tragedy in Aristotle’s philosophy are numerous: a) the philosopher aspires to a vision of that which escapes his natural capacity, b) the natural end is understood in terms of what happens always or for the most part, yet only the few attain contemplation, and even the active virtues are beset by the afflictions of fortune, c) the philosopher’s grasp of the good places him in tragic isolation from the rest of mankind,⁴⁰ and d) since the intellect has a *per se* operation it is subsistent and separable from the body, yet, given the need for phantasms, the vexed question remains of how such a separated intellect could operate and how it could survive separate from the whole of which it is naturally a part.

The depiction of the philosophic life in terms of a tragic narrative is instructive. In her preference for tragic narrative over speculative philosophy, Martha Nussbaum overlooks Maritain’s insight concerning the tragic character of speculative philosophy. Two features of Nussbaum’s account are objectionable. First, she underestimates Aristotle’s emphasis upon self-sufficiency and immunity to conflict in the account of the good life. Secondly, Nussbaum’s description of the theoretical life as an attempt to escape from the limitations and fragility of human existence misses the mark.⁴¹ For both Plato and Aristotle the life of contemplation is more fragile and more vulnerable than is the active life. Its grandeur and pedagogical utility consist in its pointing to and partially realizing the *summum bonum*. Its inability to achieve the highest good is, as Maritain notes, the source of its

³⁹Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1959), p. 7.

⁴⁰One pre-eminent in “virtue and political capacity” may “truly be deemed a God among men.” *Politics*, III, 13 (1284a10–15). Compare the better known statement, “He who is unable to live in society . . . must be either a beast or a god.” I, 2 (1253a28–30).

⁴¹For a more sustained response to Nussbaum, see my “Transcending Humanity in Aquinas,” forthcoming in the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*.

poverty or misery. Yet this is not the pre-philosophic and apparently necessary misery of the tragic hero; nor is it the misery of modern nihilism. What distinguishes the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is its incompleteness, which is occasionally expressed as hopefulness. The persistent possibility of (in Socrates's case, faith in?) immortality is thus crucial to philosophy's circumvention of an all-encompassing tragic vision.

For Thomas philosophy is one of two means of access to the highest things. Thomas discusses the other way in the final book of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* where he distinguishes the way of ascent from the way of descent. The only efficacious means to the end sought in the way of ascent is the way of descent, the way of incarnation, which bridges the "unmeasured distance between the natures" of God and man. Given the limits to human reason, the adverse consequences of sin, and the natural desire to know the highest things, God's act of revelation (*revelare*) is an act of mercy (*clementia*). As Maritain puts it: "Exceeding human effort, gift of a deifying grace and the free largesse of uncreated Wisdom, there is at its source that Wisdom's foolish love. . . . Only Jesus crucified, the Mediator lifted up between heaven and earth, gives access to it."⁴²

In Thomas's discussion of the Incarnation, dialectical arguments precede the arguments from fittingness. Thus, reason prepares the way for, and removes impediments to, the reception of the Christian narrative. On behalf of the fittingness of Christ's assuming human nature, Thomas returns to the dominant image of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the notion of man as a microcosm, existing on the horizon of the worlds of spirit and matter: "Man, since he is the term of creatures, presupposing all other creatures in the order of generation, is suitably united to the first principle of things to finish a kind of cycle in the perfection of things."⁴³

The reference to the "completion of the cycle" indicates that creation has a beginning, middle, and end, that the narrative of scripture manifests rather than obscures the order of nature. Later on in the fourth book Thomas argues that the supposition of an infinity of souls

⁴²Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 7.

⁴³SCG., IV, 55. "Homo etiam, quum sit creaturarum terminus, quasi omnes alias creaturas naturali generationis ordine praesupponens, convenienter primo rerum principio unitur, etiam ut quadam circulatione perfectio rerum concludatur."

is contrary to the notion of an end. When coupled with the dialectical arguments against the eternity of the world, the argument against an infinity of souls underscores the limits to philosophy and paves the way for the Christian narrative. Thomas also argues that the best, probable argument against the eternity of the world can be taken from “the end of the divine will,” which is to “manifest His goodness in His effects.” That God is the absolute source of all goodness and power is most evident from the temporal beginning of the world.⁴⁴ Thus, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* precludes the possibility that in the roots of things there is conflict and violence. Instead, infinite goodness is the source of all things.⁴⁵ He concludes: “The preceding considerations enable us to avoid various errors made by pagan philosophers: the assertion of the world’s eternity; the assertion of the eternity of the world’s matter, out of which at a certain time the world began to be formed, either by chance, or by some intellect, or even by love or strife.”⁴⁶

In the discussion of creation, Thomas compares God to an artist whose wisdom and goodness are manifest in creation. He begins by reworking the language of physical *productio* or *poesis*, which involves the inducing of form within pre-existing matter. God’s artistry presupposes nothing and is not limited to a particular species or genus. God acts, moreover, not through some power inherent in him, but through his whole being. In creation there is neither motion nor change. Instead, creation is understood as a unilateral relation of dependency of the creature upon God (*ipsa dependentia esse creati ad principium*).⁴⁷ According to Thomas, the productive *technē* of

⁴⁴SCG., II, 38. “Finis enim divinae voluntatis in rerum productione est eius bonitas, in quantum per causata manifestatur: potissime autem manifestatur divina virtus et bonitas per hoc quod res aliae praeter ipsum ab ipso esse habent, quia non semper fuerunt. Ostenditur etiam quod non agit per necessitatem naturae, et quod virtus sua est infinita in agendo. Hoc enim convenientissimum fuit divinae bonitati, ut rebus creatis principium durationis daret.”

⁴⁵As Ricoeur notes, pagan myths envision creation as the introduction of order into a pre-existing state of chaos (p. 172). The image persists in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In Aristotle, the topic is not directly addressed, yet, as Aquinas implies, the supposition of the eternity of the world obscures the absolute dependence of all things upon God.

⁴⁶SCG., II, 38. “Ex his autem quae praedicta sunt, vitare possumus diversos errores gentilium philosophorum quorum quidam posuerunt numdum aeternum, quidam materiam mundi aeternam, ex qua ex aliquo tempore mundus coepit generari, vel a casu, vel ab aliquo intellectu, aut etiam amore, atque lite.”

⁴⁷SCG., II, 18.

any creature is but a diminished participation in divine creativity. As Maritain puts it, “only on the high summits of divinity, does the idea as artisan-form obtain the complete fullness required of it by its notion.”⁴⁸

Thomas underscores the pedagogical role of creatures in manifesting God to man. But creation is only one made of divine self-manifestation. As Thomas puts it, “All creatures are related to God as art products to an artist. . . . Consequently, the whole of nature is like an artifact of the divine artistic mind. But it is not contrary to the essential character of an artist if he should work in a different way on his product even after he has given it its first form.”⁴⁹

In the Christian narrative the first manifestation of God in creation is ordered to the revelation of God in scripture and in the person of the Son. The theological account of the human condition has the intelligibility and unity of a dramatic narrative. It locates man within the context of salvation history and its narrative moments, before the law, under the law, and under grace. While Thomas holds that revealed truths are doctrines, amenable to articulation in propositions, the intelligibility and practical import of the propositions supposes a larger context and requires a precedent grasp of a particular narrative account of human life. The incarnation, for example, fittingly occurs after the human person has been left alone “to discover that he was not equal to his own salvation: not equal by natural knowledge for before the time of the written law man transgressed the law of nature; nor equal by his own virtue, for, when he was given knowledge of sin through the law, he still sinned out of weakness.”⁵⁰

The emphases upon human sin as the origin of evil and upon the teleologically ordered nature of time are crucial elements in comic

⁴⁸Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 70.

⁴⁹SCG., III, 100. “Omnes creaturae comparantur ad Deum sicut artificata ad artificem . . . unde tota natura est sicut quoddam artificiatum divinae artis. Non est autem contra rationem artificii, si artifex aliter aliquid operetur in suo officio, etiam postquam ei primam formam dedit. Neque ergo est contra naturam, si Deus in rebus naturalibus aliquid operetur aliter quam consuetus cursus naturae habet.”

⁵⁰SCG., IV, 55. “Relinquendus igitur aliquando fuit sibi, ut experiretur quod ipse sibi non sufficeret ad salutem, neque per scientiam naturalem, quia ante tempus legis scriptae homo legem naturae transgressus est, neque per virtutem propriam, quia, data sibi cognitione peccati per legem, adhuc ex infirmitate peccavit.”

narratives. As Ricoeur notes, the shift from tragic to comic necessitates that “guilt must . . . be distinguished from finiteness.”⁵¹ Concerning time Frye states, “In comedy time plays a redeeming role: it uncovers and brings to light what is essential to the happy ending.”⁵²

It is important to see that the recovery of the comic provides us with a viable alternative to Kantian ethics, that is, that the comic does not involve Stoic indifference to contingency and suffering. The Christian narrative overcomes tragedy, not by ignoring or escaping from the tragic character of human life, but by embracing it. As Hauerwas puts it, “We believe, on the basis of the cross, that our lives are sustained by a God who has taken the tragic into his own life . . . we are freed from the obsession of securing our significance against death. We are thus given the time and space that provides the condition for faithfulness.”⁵³

Thomas underscores the role of redemptive suffering in the life of Christ, who for the love of men bore “not just any sort of death, but a death abject in the extreme.” By “bearing in themselves the marks of the passion of Christ,” believers expose themselves to dangers.⁵⁴

With its doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, original sin, and redemptive suffering, the comic vision of Christianity eclipses the tragic narrative of pagan philosophy. Comic reversal is evident in the themes of communion, restoration, and elevation. What might appear to be a primal loss is but one act within a larger story. The divine artist inscribes tragedy within comedy, as the narrative of revelation eclipses the narrative of pagan philosophy.⁵⁵

Much more could and should be said on behalf of comic narrative. Without its recovery we are left with the alternative of Kantian systematics or tragic narrative. As we have seen, this way of framing the issue obscures important features of both ancient and Christian moral thought. Appraising the ethics of narrative, especially of tragic narrative, from a Thomistic vantage point helps to clarify what is at stake in the contemporary turn to narrative. It should also help to open

⁵¹Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 222.

⁵²Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 213.

⁵³Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, p. 12.

⁵⁴SCG., III, 55.

⁵⁵Again, Maritain, “to establish fully the dignity and nobility of art, we have found it necessary to go back as far as the mystery of the Trinity.” *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 97.

new avenues of exploration concerning the link between the moral life and narrative. Finally, the inquiry brings to the fore a neglected feature of Thomas's own writings, namely, their literary character. While Thomas's thought cannot be reduced to narrative, the intimate connection in his texts between form and content buttresses the claim that for Thomas the dominant narrative conception of human life is comic, not tragic.⁵⁶

⁵⁶I am indebted to Patrick Downey for his suggestions about comic narrative and for pointing me to Frye, Girard, and Ricoeur.