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Narrative Understanding

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Abstract

Much work in history, anthropology, sociology, and political science has a narrative form — the events described are emplotted into *stories*. A number of recent critics of narrative have argued that the story form is a poor vehicle for social scientific explanation, as it often misleads us about the causal structure of the social world. Defenders of narrative typically claim that such criticisms miss the point of narrative. Even if narrative is not the best means for providing us with causal information, it can provide us with information about something else of importance such as the events' "meanings" or others' experiences. I reject such defenses of narrative, but I then offer a novel defense in their place. On the view I defend, narratives increase our understanding of the social world not by giving us some kind of special information about the social world but rather by cuing certain kinds of responses to it. I tie this conception of the epistemic function of narrative to the political role that narrative can play in correcting failures of interpersonal recognition and promoting structural change.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Narratives often provide us with causal information about events. Because knowing causes of events provides us with understanding of those events, narratives often provide us with understanding of those events. However, narratives do not *just* provide information about events and their causes. They select, describe, and organize those events in a particular way: they make events into *stories*. This paper considers the epistemic function of these aspects of narrative structure.

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It is natural to think that these story-elements of narrative are merely ornamental and do not serve any positive epistemic function. After all, the way to select, describe, and organize events into a good story is not the way to select, describe, and organize events so as to provide a good explanation. Good stories are some combination of surprising, poignant, ironic, zany, irreverent, or absurd. They are entertaining and emotionally satisfying. However, all these features seem irrelevant from the point of view of explanation and social-scientific understanding. While accounts of explanation are by no means settled, good explanations are typically thought to appeal to causes (Lewis 1986), "difference-makers" (Strevens 2008), invariant and abstract generalizations (Woodward 2003; Weslake 2010), or widely instantiated argument types (Kitcher 1989). Narratives sometimes provide this kind of information, but they typically do so only incidentally and haphazardly.[1]

The view that narrative structure has no epistemic value might naturally lead one to think it ideally should be banished from domains in which factual understanding is at issue, such as the social sciences, the law, history, and serious journalism.[2] For while narratives may happen to provide us with scientific understanding on occasion, they are often misleading and liable to abuse. For instance, David Velleman (2003) has argued that narratives often lead us to think that we have acquired scientific understanding of the world when we have only acquired a sense of emotional closure:

> The storytelling historian… brings his audience to some emotional closure about a course of events viewed in retrospect. … Having made subjective sense of historical events, by arriving at a stable attitude toward them, the audience is liable to feel that it has made objective sense of them, by understanding how they came about. Having sorted out its feelings toward events, the audience mistakenly feels that it has sorted out the events themselves: it mistakes emotional closure for intellectual closure. (20)

Alexander Rosenberg (2012) is even more blunt: "We are suckers for a good story—a description of events in the form of a plot with characters driven by motives…Unfortunately… [science's] real explanations never come in the form of stories" (18; see also Rosenberg 2018).

Defenders of narrative often claim that such criticisms evince an overly narrow conception of the aims of social inquiry and thereby miss the point of narrative. *Even if* narrative is not the best means for providing us with causal information, it does not follow that narrative should be abandoned in mature social science. Social inquiry may have other "hermeneutical" aims such as providing us with the "meanings" of events (not merely their causes) (Taylor 1971) or helping us understand others' internal perspectives through re-enactive empathy (Stueber 2012). Narrative may be a crucial tool in achieving these aims.

I will argue that neither of these views is correct. Narrative is *not* a good tool for achieving such hermeneutical aims but it nevertheless *is* crucial for providing us with understanding of the social world. The central idea is that narrative facilitates understanding not by being a privileged vehicle for providing us with some kind of *special information*—causal or hermeneutical—about the social world but rather by enabling us to stand in a *certain epistemic-practical relation* to it. In particular, I will argue that narrative increases understanding (i) by facilitating the acquisition of intellectual skills and (ii) by "attuning" us to aspects of our social environment. Put together, these claims illuminate how narrative enables a fuller type of humanistic know-how of the social world.

As we will see, questions about the epistemic function of narrative turn on the relationship between a kind of immersed, imaginative engagement with the social world and a more detached, theoretical perspective on it. Critics of narrative typically see these as in tension, while qualified defenders of narrative—such as myself—think that a more complete understanding of the social world requires their integration.

Here is how we will proceed. I'll begin by providing some examples of narratives in social science (§2). With these examples to guide us, I will then consider causalist objections to narrative and the set of approaches one might take to respond to these objections (§3). The first approach I consider is the plausible but ultimately unsatisfying hermeneuticist view that narratives provide a special kind of (humanistic) understanding because they provide some

kind of metaphysically special information, such as the meaning of events or others' phenomenology (§4). With the failure of classical hermeneutic defenses of narrative as background, I then develop my own view by arguing that narrative may provide us with certain intellectual skills (§5) and facilitate "skilled attunement" to the social world (§6). The conclusion (§7) considers the political significance of this issue.

2 | EXAMPLES OF NARRATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Before considering some of its potential epistemic functions, I should say a bit about the notion of "narrative." Discussions of narrative structure often begin with schematic examples that aim to distinguish narrative from (i) mere temporally-ordered lists of events ("annals") or (ii) such lists concerning a single subject ("chronicles"). For instance, "the king died and then the queen died" is a chronicle, but "the king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a narrative.[3] Starting with such examples, philosophers then try to figure out what distinguishes narrative discourse from these other discourses, and—once they have done that—they consider whether that thing has any epistemic significance.

While working with such schematic examples has advantages, I think a better approach is to start from some actually existing cases of narrative social science.[4] I take this approach because, I believe, some of the epistemic functions of narrative structure only become apparent if we think of more complex, "thicker" cases—cases in which narrative prompts sustained, immersed engagement—and because some of the concerns critics raise about narrative generally can be answered if we consider the way more complex narratives interweave stories. Moreover, the question that ultimately interests me is what potential epistemic functions *sophisticated* narratives of the type that social scientists actually employ, not simply story-emplotting as such.

In this spirit, I'll briefly consider two cases of the kind of work I believe exemplify mature narrative social science: Katheryn Edin and Timothy Nelson's *Doing the Best I Can* (2014) and Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* (2016). These books are instances of the kind of narrative ethnography that one often finds in sociology, anthropology, and political science, and they will help anchor the more abstract theoretical discussions latter in the paper.

Let me start with Edin and Nelson's *Doing the Best I Can*. Edin and Nelson explore why so-called "deadbeat dads" in inner cities decide to have children and then eventually abandon them. The book aims to explain the rise of single-parent households in urban environments, but the way it does that is not by proposing and eliminating various causal hypotheses. Rather, the book is organized around telling you a *set of stories* that *illustrate* the processes by which low-income, inner-city men become fathers and then decide to leave their families.

Of course, these stories provide us with causal information about how and why low-income, inner-city men abandon their children. In particular, there are two crucial factors. First, the relationships themselves are often unstable because what binds the couple together is the pregnancy itself, rather than e.g. shared tastes, interests, and matching personalities. Second, the fathers have high expectations of themselves regarding their role as fathers, which they then cannot meet. Roughly, they want to see themselves as living up to the role of breadwinner and family man and they expect this role will make their lives more meaningful, but they are often unable to meet these expectations due to a combination of mistakes and structural barriers.[5]

The book supports these claims by providing a number of narrative case studies—stories of particular individuals that follow roughly the pattern described above. For instance, we receive vivid descriptions of the life of Armin Jenkins, a Black thirty-one year-old in southern Philadelphia, who is trying to put his life back together after difficulties in school and a stint in prison, and Willy Donnelly, a white sixteen year-old in Northern Philadelphia who drops out of school to support his pregnant girlfriend. The question is what these narrative descriptions do beyond providing us with cases that exemplify a type of causal process.

A similar example is sociologist Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*. Desmond is interested in the causal role of eviction in the maintenance of social stratification. The basic causal story is this: the threat of eviction gives landlords power over tenants, who are afraid to demand that landlords abide by housing regulations and fix problems on the property;

eviction itself triggers processes that reinforce existing disadvantage such as that (i) families lose most of their possessions while paying exorbitant storage costs, (ii) children have their home life and school disrupted, leading to poor learning outcomes, and (iii) families are forced to move to whatever housing is immediately available, which is often expensive accommodation in dangerous neighborhoods. Eviction functions to keep the poor down.

However, like Edin and Nelson's book, *Evicted* is not primarily organized around articulating and defending these claims. Rather, we receive a novel-like treatment of particular landlords and tenants, characterized by local detail about individual situations and employing literary devices like foreshadowing, irony, metaphor, and telling details. These character's stories are interwoven into the book's principal narrative arc: an initial exposition of the landlords' and tenants' situations, rising tension through tenants' struggles to make rent, the climatic trauma of eviction, and a dénouement exploring eviction's aftermath. The book complements Desmond's quantitative research, which gathers eviction rate statistics in different cities to estimate the causal impact of eviction on educational attainment, inequality, and other important variables.

Generalizing from these two examples, we can identify key features of sophisticated social scientific narratives. Such work not only contains well-structured story arcs each with a beginning, middle, and end but also typically features characters, employs narrative interweaving, utilizes thick description and literary devices, and encourages immersion and emotional engagement with the material. The key issue is what understanding of the social world this work provides that goes beyond the understanding provided by the explanatory information that can be abstracted from it.

3 | SKEPTICISM ABOUT NARRATIVE AND THE CAUSAL CONCEPTION OF UNDERSTANDING

While such narratives are sometimes employed in mature social science, there are nevertheless many *skeptics* about the use of narrative in such contexts. This skepticism has two main sources.

First, as mentioned earlier, there is a concern that narrative structure encourages us to believe false causal hypotheses. Roughly, this is because narratives rarely make explicit their explanatory hypotheses, seldom mention alternative hypotheses, and almost never make clear what evidence favors their hypotheses over alternatives. Moreover, narratives tend to elicit forms of affective response that prevent judicious consideration of their implicit explanatory content, often giving you the impression that you've understood things when you have not (Velleman 2003). Narratives therefore typically lead to *false* beliefs about causes, and therefore about explanations, say the critics.

Second, narrative structure prevents you from abstracting to the correct "level of explanation." Narratives tend to focus on the causes and consequences of individuals' intentional actions, but many aspects of the social world might be better understood by abstracting from the level of individual action and focusing on more macro-phenomena such as structural constraints (Tilly 2002; Haslanger 2015). Relatedly, mature psychological and social-scientific theories are often hard to integrate into the story-form (Rosenberg 2018). To use contemporary jargon, narrative may prevent us from achieving explanations at the optimal level of explanatory *depth* (Weslake 2010).[6]

These two criticisms are typically leveled on the basis of an assumption about the nature of scientific understanding: that scientific understanding of an event consists in knowledge of that event's causes.[7] To answer these criticisms, defenders of narrative therefore have two salient options: either (i) defend narrative as a tool for effectively promoting causal knowledge or (ii) deny that social scientific understanding should be analyzed solely in terms of knowledge of causes.

A number of social scientists and philosophers of science have taken the former approach, arguing that narrative is crucial for an exhaustive understanding of causal processes. For instance, narrative process-tracing provides causal information that other quantitative methods are likely to miss.[8]

We will pursue the second option (although, as we will see, with a slight dose of the first). However, when it comes to this second option (disputing the account of understanding), there are a number of routes we could take. We could defend a *vastly* more expansive account of "understanding," identifying understanding not with knowledge of causes but with something like mastery of a body of information *generally* or ability to answer questions about it *in general*. If we have such an expansive conception of understanding, it is much easier for narrative to play some positive understanding-promoting role. After all, narratives clearly give us information that helps us answer questions about things. However, this expansiveness comes at the cost of informativeness. Such an account of understanding does not direct us towards what makes narrative epistemically interesting and distinct.[9] So we need to start with a conception of understanding that is both broader than the narrow "knowledge of causes" view but more restricted than an overly expansive "answering questions about a body of information" view.

Here, I suggest, we should look to discussions of scientific understanding in contemporary philosophy of science where the causal account of understanding is taken seriously but remains controversial. In particular, there are many philosophers of science who see the causal account as a particular instance of a broader *kind* of account of understanding, one that analyzes scientific understanding into two components: (i) a special epistemic relation to a (ii) metaphysically special kind of information. The causal account conforms to this schema by taking *causation* to be the metaphysically special kind of information, and *knowledge* to be the special epistemic relation.[10]

A working hypothesis of the paper will be that this broad schema is roughly correct, but the way that the causal account fills it out is too narrow. Taking this as a working hypothesis, there are then two salient ways to challenge the causal account: either we dispute that understandings requires connecting us to causal information, or we dispute that the relevant connection is knowledge. So-called "non-naturalist" or "hermeneutical" philosophers of social science typically take the first option. As we will see, I think the more promising approach involves taking the second.

4 | "SPECIAL HUMANISTIC INFORMATION" ACCOUNTS OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

If the primary problem with narrative structure is that it is a poor vehicle for providing causal information about the social world, then a natural way of defending narrative structure is to claim that even if narrative structure is not a good vehicle for providing us with *causal* information, it *is* a good vehicle for providing us with some kind of *other* information, information that is also connected to understanding (perhaps of some other kind).

What kind of information might this be? A good place to start is the idea that the kind of understanding achieved through narrative is "humanistic" in some sense; it is tied to the fact that the social sciences study human beings rather than other aspects of nature. When philosophers debate what special metaphysical information we need to grasp in order to possess understanding, they often concentrate on metaphysical information sought in the more fundamental physical sciences—information about causation, laws of nature, the essences of objects, etc. Whatever the merits of these answers for understanding in the natural sciences, the defender of narrative might claim that this list of candidates is too narrow when it comes to the social sciences. Perhaps the key to narrative understanding is recognizing something else that is metaphysically special but more specific to the human or social sciences. There are, after all, a number of plausible candidates for metaphysically special facts in the social world—facts about meaning, mentality, our selves, or our good.

We'll consider three candidates for what this special metaphysical information might be: (i) the "meanings" of events, (ii) certain evaluative or normative facts, and (iii) what an experience is like. I'll argue that none of these accounts succeed in identifying some metaphysically special information that narrative is in a privileged place to provide us with. In each case, the problem is roughly the same: narrative structure is a poor vehicle for providing the relevant kind of information.

The most common thought about the epistemic role of narrative structure is that narrative illuminates the *meanings* of events. For instance, perhaps Desmond's book illuminates the "meaning" of eviction, not merely its causes.

It is hard to evaluate this hypothesis without a clearer understanding of what we mean by "meaning" in this context. Sometimes by the "meaning" of an event, we mean its *causal significance* – e.g. the "meaning" of eviction consists in its effects, such as its important role in the reproduction of poverty and disadvantage as well as its psychological effects. Another use might be a way in which an agent conceives of the event, e.g. the "meaning" of eviction *for* those evicted—what Taylor (1971) calls "subjective" meaning. However, if we assume that an agent's conception of eviction is simply a set of psychological states with eviction-related content, then it is not clear that information about the meaning of eviction is anything more than information about certain matters of psychological fact, the kind that can be provided more effectively by non-narrative means. In both of these cases, we haven't identified a kind of information that narrative is in a privileged position to provide.

Another potential candidate for the "meaning" of an event concerns not its causes or way of being conceived but rather its *symbolic* connections to other events. For instance, perhaps we learn Edin and Nelson's book that low-income fathers leaving their children *symbolizes* humiliating failure (rather than e.g. freedom). The social world is a realm of symbols, not simply a realm of causes. Finally, one might think the "meaning" of an event is its relevance to our existential, moral, and political concerns. For instance, the meaning of eviction might be the way in which it prevents individuals from having a sense of home and undermines their contribution to collective self-determination by preventing them from being an active member of their community.

One might, of course, question whether such symbolic or existential information really is information that gives us *understanding* of anything. We might seem to be in the realm of poetry rather than social science. However, a more fundamental problem is that narrative is not crucial for, nor particularly good at, providing us with this information.

The problem is parallel to the problem of thinking of narrative as a privileged vehicle for providing causal information. Information about meanings—even in these existential and symbolic senses—seems only haphazardly provided by narratives, and there are more straightforward ways of giving the same information. For example, you can just state upfront "the meaning of eviction is X."[11] In fact, analyzing the connection between states of affairs and our existential and political concerns is something philosophers do frequently in moral and political philosophy. Moreover, like in the causal case, explicitly stating hypotheses about such meanings, considering alternative hypotheses, and providing arguments in favor of your hypothesis seems like the most respectable way to come to knowledge of meanings. Should philosophers dealing with such topics stop giving arguments and start writing up stories?

The same broad concern applies to another idea that is sometimes suggested (e.g. Williams 2002, chapter 9), that narratives should help us grasp certain facts about *value*. For example, perhaps the narrative of *Evicted* shows you the injustice of current housing policy in Milwaukee or *Doing the Best I Can* informs our moral judgments about the behavior of inner-city fathers. More broadly, narrative is sometimes thought to serve our moral education by teaching us moral lessons. However, wouldn't just straightforward normative argument do just as well or better? Like in the previous case, it seems that moral claims (and the arguments for or against them) can be communicated directly without narrative trappings.[12] When trying to understand complex moral issues, it seems better to give arguments than stories.

These points might seem simple-minded, but I don't believe they are. For they indicate that if narrative is to provide us with some kind of special metaphysical information, it needs to be information that we cannot communicate just by *stating* it and providing *arguments* for it. Is there information that has this character?

A plausible candidate is information about what certain experiences are *like*. While there might be certain ways to communicate what something is like without giving a narrative (e.g. use analogies), narrative seems like a particular good candidate for communicating such things, as narratives frequently provoke imaginative engagement with the subject matter in a way that arguments do not.

Indeed, one of the most common thoughts about the epistemic role of narrative structure is that narrative structure can facilitate an understanding of others' experiences. This idea is common in popular discourse, and has been

championed by Martha Nussbaum (1997) and, recently, Karsten Stueber (2012).[13] Such views of the epistemic function of narrative structure starts from the platitude that narratives help us understand other perspectives or points of view and then provides a particular construal of this platitude by specifying (i) a particular *notion* of perspective (e.g. qualitative aspect of experience) and (ii) a *role* that this perspective plays in understanding (e.g. as its object).[14]

For instance, perhaps Nelson and Edin's book gives us a sense of "what it is like" to be a low-income, urban father, and Desmond gives us information about what it is like to experience eviction (as a tenant) or to evict someone (as a landlord). Such "phenomenal information" *does* seem like some important information and distinctively connected to humanistic understanding. Moreover, this account connects narrative to the *Verstehen* tradition in which it is assumed that there is a distinct form of humanistic understanding that concerns grasping another's perspective or point of view (Stueber 2012).

However, despite the popularity of this idea, there are many reasons to doubt that narrative structure is a good vehicle for delivering phenomenal information of the relevant kind. First, narratives crucially involve *curating* and *structuring* information in a way different from real life. As Meyer (2009) argues, individuals' lives are much messier and less coherent than narrative retellings may make them seem. It is notable that members of the literary avantgarde who have tried to imitate what consciousness is really like have often moved *away* from narrative.

Second, there is a difference between the perspective of the *reader* of a narrative and the perspective of any *character* within the narrative, and these differences make a difference to the emotional reactions and imaginings of the reader and character.[15] Narrative structure often gives us information that the protagonists don't have, such as information about a protagonist's situation, or about other characters, or about the future. For example, in the case of Edin and Nelson, reading about the joy that the new fathers felt upon learning that their girlfriends are pregnant is, for the reader, inevitably tinged with sadness, given the reader's foreknowledge. One cannot really see things from the perspective of the fathers, as one knows too much.[16] Moreover, these differences between reader and protagonist are not just inevitable and regrettable gaps between self and other that writers of narratives aim to bridge. As I will discuss later, they are a positive resource often employed by writers of narrative to achieve epistemically important effects.

Of course, I do not deny that reading a complex narrative work can give you some insight into another perspective.[17] After all, detailed descriptions of particular scenarios and events can facilitate empathetic imaginings, and one is, at least to some extent, able to bracket certain informational differences in the thinking through particular scenarios.[18] However, the point is that *sophisticated narrative structure* typically inhibits rather than promotes such identification. Rather than sophisticated narrative structure, it is some more general technique of detailed description of particular scenarios and events that is crucial for grasping other's perspectives. In *Evicted*, you achieve an understanding of e.g. landlord's viewpoint *despite* rather than *because of* the sophisticated narratival elements in the work.

5 | MY ACCOUNT 1: INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

If there is not metaphysically special humanistic information that narrative helps us acquire, and narrative is not a good vehicle for providing us with more typical explanatory information, then what might narrative do? I suggest that it relates us *to* information in a "humanistic" way.

This section develops a "cognitivist" version of this idea, according to which narrative may help us develop and exercise certain intellectual skills with respect to explanatory information. The next section will consider ways in which narrative can facilitate non-cognitive response.

The argument I will provide in this section turns on two claims:

1. Certain intellectual skills are required for understanding-why
2. Engaging with narratives facilitates the acquisition and exercise of the relevant skills

Let's start with the first claim. A number of philosophers have argued that understanding why *p* requires more than mere *knowledge* of the explanation of why *p*. This is because your knowledge might be facile—you might know the explanation while only having a shallow grip on the subject matter. For instance, I might know by reading Wikipedia that the French Revolution was caused by failures of the *Ancien Régime* to effectively deal with social and economic inequality. However, I might know little about what the *Ancien Régime* was, nor about what these failures consisted in and how they concretely led to revolution.

This point is often made concerning causal explanation, but it applies equally well to the phenomena of concern to hermeneuticists—for I might have only a facile grasp of why an event has a particular meaning or why a situation is unjust. For instance, I might know by talking to Matthew Desmond that eviction unjustly undermines self-determination but I might have little idea why this is or what "self-determination" in the relevant sense means.

What distinguishes facile knowledge from understanding, according to a number of philosophers, is certain *intellectual skills* or *know-how* in dealing with the explanatory information in your possession. A canonical formulation of this idea is due to Alison Hills (2016), who has argued that understanding-why involves "cognitive control," a kind of intellectual know-how that goes beyond simply knowing an explanation. On her view, the relevant know-how includes abilities like to correctly infer the explanandum from the explanans, to draw inferences about explanatory relations in similar scenarios, to infer what would happen if the explanans were different in the actual scenario, being able to give the explanation in your words, as well as some others. Similar ideas have been proposed by Michael Strevens (2013) and Catherine Elgin (2006). The details do not matter for our purposes. All we need is the broad idea that understanding requires a more intimate relation to explanatory information than mere knowledge:

Cognitive Control: If you understand why *p* (where *q* is the explanation of *p*) then:

i. *Doxastic Response*: you believe that *p*, that *q*, and that *q* is the explanation of *p*
ii. *Doxastic Know-How*: you have a suite of intellectual skills with respect to *p* and *q*, such as the ability to infer the explanandum from the explanans, draw inferences about explanations in similar scenarios, correctly infer what would happen if the explanans were different in the actual scenario, etc.

This connection between understanding and intellectual skills creates an opening for narrative. Narratives *organize* events in a certain way, and differences in the way you organize your information can make a difference for abilities to perform certain cognitive tasks. To take a simple example, consider the difference between a standard phone book (that maps people to phone numbers) and a reverse phone book (that maps phone numbers to people).[19] Both of these books contain the same information, but they are organized differently, and, crucially, this difference in organization matters for the cognitive utility of the different books. You can't use a regular phone book to infer a person's name from a phone number, even if this information is "contained" in the phone book. The information is there, but it was not *accessible*. Reorganization into a reverse phonebook facilitated making those inferences accessible.

The suggestion here is that a narrative is to a causal model what a reverse phone book is to a standard phone book—it is a way of re-organizing our information effectively for certain cognitive tasks. Versions of this idea have recently been suggested both by Michael Strevens (2017, 2019) and by Rachel Fraser (2021, 2024). According to Strevens (2017, 2019), what makes humanistic understanding distinct is its particular *methods* for "grasping" causal difference-making structure (the same kind of structure that interests us in natural scientific understanding).[20] In particular, narratives can "spotlight" difference-makers, make alternatives salient (including moral alternatives), and provide explanatory and moral templates.

A more detailed discussion of how narrative might facilitate acquiring and exercising intellectual skills can be found in Rachel Fraser's recent work. Fraser (2021) argues that one important epistemic feature of narrative structure is that it can help you store information in a particular *representational format*, and storing information in a particular representational format facilitates certain inference tasks. Compare: I may store information about the geographical locations of various landmarks in either a propositional representational format (in which I represent a

set of claims specifying coordinates of each landmark) or in a map-like representational format. If I employ the map-like format, I may be able to perform various inferences more easily than if I employ the propositional format. On this view, narrative cues certain representational formats that help us draw inferences that are less accessible when the same information is stored in an alternative format.

For example, I might store information about the processes by which eviction leads to lower educational attainment in one format when reading *Evicted*, but in a different format were I to engage with a causal model. In particular, I may store information about those processes in terms of a mix of simulation of a spectator's view of the situation, mixed with first-personal simulation of various protagonists, out of which I make predictions about individual's feelings and behavior (rather than, say, trying to make those predictions on the basis of a psychological and sociological theory). If I imagine the scenario in such ways, I might be able to more quickly come to judgments about how and why particular changes in eviction policy would change e.g. children's educational outcomes. Since what I would be imagining would be some of the mechanisms by which these changes occur, I would be able to more quickly infer the probable effects of various alternative policies—exactly the sort of inferences one needs to be able to draw to have “cognitive control” over the explanation.

These points about information organization are not specific to causal explanation and causal models. Differences in organization might make a difference to how easily you can draw inferences about hermeneutical phenomena such as why an action has a particular symbolic significance, or why an individual interpreted an event in a particular manner.

Nevertheless, this emphasis on simulation of an observer or protagonist's perspective might raise doubt whether narratives can cultivate cognitive skills with respect to explanatory factors not grounded in intentional action, such as aspects of the physical environment (Rosenberg 2018), background conditions that structure agent's choices (Haslanger 2015), or comparative facts about agents. This concern parallels the worries we mentioned earlier—that narrative might encourage misrepresenting the causal structure and focus attention on shallow rather than deep explanatory factors.

However, there are responses to these worries. First, it is possible to acquire cognitive control over structural explanations using a rich imaginative representational format via imagined observation of others encountering structural constraints, as well as some imagined first-person interaction with such constraints. Second, focus on individual action can be attenuated by the *interweaving* of stories characteristic of more complex narrative works (such as *Evicted*). Third, even if narrative is not the best format for acquiring cognitive control of certain explanatory factors, that does not show it is not essential for cognitive control of others.

Stepping back, acquiring *cognitive control* of an explanatory factor is importantly different from acquiring *information* about that factor. In the latter case, causal models are, arguably, privileged with respect to the representation of *all* causal claims. After all, they represent those claims directly and with precision. However, the representational format cued by such models may not be privileged when it comes to cognitive control. That depends on e.g. how effective you are at manipulating an abstract model in your mind in comparison to drawing inferences from imaginative engagement with a situation.

The kinds of intellectual skills you can acquire through engaging with narrative is one essential aspect of the view I'm proposing. Nevertheless, this cognitive part of the story is not the whole story. This is because an exclusive focus on intellectual skills seems *overly* cognitive to me, and because it doesn't seem to distinguish narrative from a number of other devices that can improve our cognitive skills such as mnemonics, visual representation, graphs, charts, etc. Narrative seems like more of an *alternative* to typical kinds of social science rather than a merely a device to aid it.

6 | MY ACCOUNT 2: SKILLFUL ATTUNEMENT

What is missing? I think it is that narrative, in some sense, helps us figure out not only what to think about events but also how to feel about them. Narratives help us “make emotional sense” of events. However, we need to take some care in developing this idea.

In a famous paper, David Velleman (2003) argues that narrative structure provides us with "subjective understanding" of events. "Subjective understanding" for Velleman involves subsuming events under patterns, but the relevant patterns are *subjective* (patterns of emotional response) rather than *objective* (patterns in the events themselves). However, at a crucial part of the paper, Velleman switches from claiming that narratives tell us how we *do* feel to claiming that narratives tell us how *to* feel. It is this latter thought that I think is right and that I will explore in this section of the paper. Like the previous intellectual skills accounts, this account concerns our *relation* to information rather than some particular kind of information. However, unlike the intellectual skill account, the kind of relationship is not merely cognitive but also *affective* and *motivational*.[21] The key question will be how affective and motivational response can be relevant to *understanding*.[22]

Velleman offers one answer to this question in his paper: affective response may follow certain patterns, and we achieve understanding through subsuming events under patterns. However, I will offer a different answer. The idea pursued here is that humanistic understanding is not about putting events into an emotional pattern but about robust affective and motivational *fitting response*.[23] I will dub the relevant fitting responses to a part of the social world "attunement" to that part of the social world. Moreover, because it is crucial that our responses not be fitting incidentally but robustly, this attunement needs to be "skillful."

Developing and vindicating this broad idea requires explaining my conception of "skillful attunement" and then defending two claims:

1. Narrative can facilitate "skillful attunement" to the social world
2. Skillful attunement to the social world facilitates *understanding* of the social world

6.1 | The Nature of Skillful Attunement

Let's start with the notion of "attunement." Attunement towards *p* requires having the right kind of affective and motivational responses to *p*. For instance, if I am attuned to the fact that my friend is in pain, then I have feelings of concern and motivations to help. Attunement may make salient but is not mere salience. My mortal's enemy's pain may be salient to me as I twist the knife into his chest, but I am not thereby attuned to his pain.

Attunement typically goes hand with certain cognitive responses. For instance, if I am attuned to a friend's pain, I will typically think certain things such as that it is bad that my friend is in pain, that I have reason to help her, and so on. Similarly, if I have such beliefs, I will typically be attuned to my friend's pain. However, these correlations are not perfect. I may be attuned to a friend's plight without such associated beliefs or even if I believe their negation, as in the case of Huck Finn and Jim. Conversely, I may have all the right beliefs about such matters without having the relevant affective and motivational states. For instance, a philosopher may sincerely hold all the right beliefs about obligations to help the needy without *feeling* anything for the needy.[24] Perhaps this is even the norm for philosophers, not the exception.

Taking what Strawson (1974) called the "reactive stance" involves attunement towards others' actions when particular reactive attitudes are appropriate. For such attitude involves affective and motivational responses towards the pattern of concern that those actions express. What Strawson calls the "objective stance" towards others does not require attunement; it merely requires reflective (cognitive) attitudes towards other's attitudes and actions. More broadly, when we speak of "recognizing" people *as persons*, we often mean being attuned to them. We do not merely mean that that we classify them as persons.[25]

However, attunement goes beyond taking the reactive stance towards persons. For while features of persons and their activities are common objects of attunement, we can also be attuned to more abstract objects like social structures and explanatory claims. For instance, the *feeling* of hopelessness that one feels in grasping the mechanisms by which social inequality reproduces itself is a form of attunement to such structural factors. More sophisticated narratives aim to make us attuned to such things – to grasp them not merely intellectually but also in feeling.

Finally, attunement can be "skillful" or not depending on whether your fitting affective and motivational responses are the result of abilities to correctly respond to situational changes and differences. You might happen to (correctly) respond sympathetically to a particular unhoused person's plight, but this might be due to luck, say because you have just taken ecstasy and the person looks a bit like your father. Your fitting responses are not due to abilities to (affectively and motivationally) track the relevant features of the situation.

These tracking abilities can come in degrees—you may be sensitive to certain relevant features of the situation but not others—so skillful attunement also comes in degrees. Moreover, like in the case of cognitive control, these tracking abilities often come with (and are perhaps manifestations of) other abilities as well—for instance, ability to perceive the evaluatively relevant features of the situation, to not emotionally react too quickly, to realize when one should be suspicious of potentially misleading initial reactions, to articulate the basis of one's affects and motivations, etc. Exactly which of these abilities we should include as constitutive of skillful attunement is something I leave open.

6.2 | Skillful Attunement and Narrative

It is hardly news that narratives provoke emotional and motivational responses better than abstract arguments. After all, when charity organizations solicit donations, they tell stories rather than give statistics. However, it is less obvious *how* narratives provoke these responses and whether social scientists are able to direct them in a way needed for narrative social science to promote skillful attunement.

There are a number of means by which sophisticated narratives elicit affect and motivation. Narrative thick descriptions tend to encourage immersive mental imaginings, and mental imagery tends to elicit responses of these kinds.[26] Narratives may be structured using foreshadowing and irony, as well as employ other literary devices that provoke emotional response. As Velleman (2003) has argued, plot structures can elicit emotion by guiding us through affect programs. For instance, the basic plot-type of *Doing the Best I Can* elicits a common emotional sequence, one we go through in seeing someone barreling towards disaster, partially brought about by their own good intentions. Their disposition to elicit affect and motivation is what unites many of the features that characterize sophisticated social scientific narratives that we discussed in section 2.

Importantly, narratives do not simply provoke emotion at random. Narrative social scientists have a number of means to *control* audience response to help elicit the *right* reactions (attunement). As Wayne Booth (1983) points out, writers of narratives can direct reader's emotions by (i) drawing attention to specific details, (ii) controlling the pacing of the story, and (iii) choosing to portray particular events more or less dramatically. Metaphor and ironic juxtapositions can be used to draw analogies between seemingly different scenarios, encouraging the projection of affects and motivations typical of one scenario onto another. Telling details may provide "interpretive frames" that direct affective and motivational responses (see Camp 2019). Decisions about which plot-structures to employ in organizing the narrative will influence which affects are elicited.

These various techniques are often combined and mutually reinforcing. What is crucial is not to provide an exhaustive list of them but to observe that narrative work can employ them while other kinds of social scientific work cannot. This is what gives narratives a "comparative advantage" over e.g. abstract explanations or direct claims about what emotions one ought to feel.

Nevertheless, despite these means of directing affective and motivational response, a number of philosophers and psychologists have argued that narrative form nonetheless tends to systematically mislead our feelings in a number of ways. In particular, narratives may tend to (i) promote positive feelings towards objectionable characters, (ii) distort impartial moral response, or (iii) encourage us to blame individuals for structural problems (and praise individuals for outcomes outside their control). More broadly, one might worry that even if narratives were to attune us to particular individuals and situations, they are a poor vehicle for cultivating skillful attunement, since narratives do not indicate which features are those in virtue of which affective and motivational responses are merited.

However, while these concerns may apply to particular token narratives, they are not problems for narrative social science *generally*. First, even if these issues pose a *challenge* for narrative social science, they are only a *problem* if there are better means of cultivating skillful attunement than narrative (in the way that e.g. direct communication is better than narrative when it comes to providing special information). However, it is not clear that there are such means—alternative means of provoking affective and motivational response (e.g. photographs, artworks) typically offer less expressive power, less control and reliability, or both. Second, social scientists have ways of addressing the particular challenges mentioned above. I'll discuss each in turn.

When it comes to the promotion of positive feelings towards objectionable characters, this is of course possible. Some particular narratives lead us astray emotionally, just as some causal models lead us astray cognitively. The issue is whether there is some systematic reason that narrative, as a form, might do so. One reason they may be thought to do so is that narratives, by their nature, seem to encourage identification with protagonists. If were right, then it would be difficult to even *thematize* an objectionable character in narrative form without eliciting inapt affective responses. However, this assumption seems to underestimate the potential of complex interweaving narratives and sophisticated narrative description. For example, the landlords Desmond depicts are by no means cartoon villains, but they are also not objects of simple identification.

When it comes to partiality, this is often a problem for a particular *subset* of narratives, those that focus on the perspective of a single protagonist or a set of protagonists in a particular social position. However, many narratives in social science aim to be more comprehensive and are written more from the perspective of an impartial observer. *Evicted* is like this. Desmond is giving a sense of the different perspectives on eviction, which enables you to come to a less partial emotional response. Of course, sometimes a narrative gives us only *one* relevant character's perspective. For instance, *Doing the Best I Can* focuses on the perspectives of fathers, rather than that of mothers and children. Here, we might worry that our emotional responses are not apt, and therefore we are not being correctly attuned to the situation. However, in this case, we need to see individual narratives within a broader practice of narrative-giving in which holistic judgments require engagement with multiple stories. For instance, even if our emotions towards "deadbeat dads" may be distorted by *only* reading *Doing the Best I Can*, this can be attenuated by reading books with narratives from alternative viewpoints, such as those of the single mothers. Kathryn Edin has in fact written exactly such a book (Edin and Kefalas 2011).

Third, one might wonder how narratives might attune us to broader issues such as social structure. Here, there are two things to say. First, as previously mentioned, even when imagining individual scenarios, we may emotionally react to perceived structural constraints. For example, in *Evicted*, we feel the frustration that some of the characters have as they bump up against factors that prevent them from achieving housing stability. Second, this is a case when multiple narratives help. We should not think of multiple case studies contained in social scientific works as merely *further evidence* for the broad social processes that those works seek to illustrate. They can be crucial tools for drawing our emotional attention away from the choices of individuals and towards the choice situation that those individuals face.

Finally, one might worry that while narratives might indeed elicit the right emotion and motivation in particular cases, they do not encourage *skillful* attunement. However, there are a number of means by which sophisticated narratives help cultivate the relevant emotional and motivational skills. While narratives usually don't explicitly thematize the grounds on which particular reactions are appropriate, the techniques discussed above that guard against identification with problematic protagonists and facilitate attunement to social structure are all techniques that facilitate cultivating responses to more abstract characteristics, which can be projected into new situations, helping us develop and deploy the ability to reliably track the features meriting particular emotional and motivational responses. Sophisticated narratives often purposefully raise and subvert emotional expectations, teaching us to be wary of initial emotional reactions and patiently attend to all potentially relevant factors of a situation. They can employ sudden switches of narrative focus, illustrating how those who seem like negligible side characters from one vantage point are actually persons with a history and rich inner life, something that helps us cultivate perception of those who are neglected or marginalized. These are many other such techniques.

Stepping back, these objections to narrative's ability to correctly direct our affective and motivational responses are, I believe, rooted in an impoverished diet of examples and overly simplistic conception of narrative form. Theorists of narrative often focus on simple cases, those that Charles Tilly (2002) describes as "Standard Stories," stories focusing a small set of protagonists whose decisions drive the narrative's key events. However, the narrative form is more flexible than this, and more complex modes of narrative interweaving and emplotting direct our responses in a sensitive way and enable us to respond emotionally and motivationally not only to individual action but also to aspects of social structure.[27] As Tilly himself recommends, social science should not aim to eliminate narrative but rather to construct *better* stories (2002, 37).

Constructing these stories *in the social sciences* is important because it enables humanistic response to the social world to be disciplined by careful empirical methods. In seeking to understand issues of human concern, we turn often turn to fictional narratives, poetry, the visual arts, and other media that do not have structure of abstract science. Only the most scientistically-minded deny that such media can convey understanding of some sort. However, relying on such means to understand the social world can be dangerous and distorting, as they may focus our attention on unrealistic scenarios or sensational rather than representative cases. This is where social science's concern for factual accuracy, causal identification, case selection, and generalizability can help. The distinguishing feature of narrative *social science* is its integration of humanistic techniques with science's more impartial perspective.

6.3 | Skillful Attunement and Understanding

Imagine that narrative does promote skillful attunement. So what? How does this give us an account of narrative *understanding*?

One way skillful attunement might facilitate understanding is by causally facilitating cognitive control. For instance, affective responses might serve as cues to the reasons that might support those responses, and so make accessible inferences and skills concerning those reasons. However, I am disposed to think that there is also a constitutive connection, such that part of understanding *p* is being skillfully attuned to *p*:

Skillful Attunement: If you understand *p*, then

i. *Humanistic Response*: You have the fitting affective and motivational responses towards *p*
ii. *Humanistic Know-How*: you have a suite of skills with respect to *p* such as the ability to have the fitting responses in *p*-like scenarios, perceive the morally relevant features in *p*-like scenarios, etc.

Why believe there is such a constitutive connection? There are a number of reasons.

First, there are connections between affect, motivation, and understanding in everyday language. It is felicitous to say that Robert "fails to understand" Regina's situation if he fails have to have the relevant affective and motivational states towards it, e.g. by failing to feel concern for her pain or motivation to alleviate her distress, even if he mentally classifies that situation correctly. You do not really *fully understand* that someone is homeless or that they have disappointed their family if you fail to have any affective or motivational responses to their plight.[28]

While these linguistic intuitions may be explained in a number of ways, the most straightforward explanation is that affective and motivational states are a component of understanding *p*. Moreover, this explanation is supported by the observation that once we allow that a wider set of mental states than doxastic ones can be assessed for correctness, it is odd for an account of understanding to focus only on a subset of such states. Understanding *p* requires being "in touch" with *p* in some way, but why restrict the relevant way of "being in touch" exclusively to correct doxastic states and the relevant skills to those involving such states? There is no principled reason being in touch with the world need be "cold" or "disengaged" rather than to involve a more complete suite of humane, engaged responses.

Of course, one might hold that these linguistic intuitions are playing on some ambiguity in the word "understanding." However, it is not clear there is any positive reason to think this. There is no need to posit distinct types of understanding simply because most cases of scientific understanding do not elicit or require affective and motivational responses. There are many propositions for which there are no fitting affective and emotional responses, among which are most scientific explanations of the natural world. In such cases, the skillful attunement requirement may be trivially satisfied, not absent. Moreover, even if there were such an ambiguity, it would not pose a problem for our purposes. What matters is only that skillful attunement is a condition of some *type* of understanding, such as some form of "humanistic understanding," not that there is a single form of scientific understanding that requires skillful attunement.

Besides this linguistic evidence, another reason to think that motivational and affective responses are partially constitutive of understanding (of some variety) is that this assumption is plausibly required for the understanding to play the functional role that it is often thought to play in moral and political contexts. A number of philosophers have argued that (i) what distinguishes morally virtuous agents from those that merely reliably do the right thing is that virtuous agents act from moral understanding, and (ii) what makes a particular action morally worthy (as opposed to merely permissible) is that those actions are performed with an understanding of what makes them right (e.g. Hills 2015). However, as Laura Frances Callahan (2018) has recently argued, understanding can seemingly only play these roles if affective and motivational responses are part of it. Mere "cold" cognition of moral reasons, even if very sophisticated, is not sufficient for virtue or morally worthy action – think of an individual that is able to give sophisticated moral explanations but does not *feel* anything. Such an individual is like a reliable but cold cognizer of aesthetic value, someone whose curatorial choices may be unobjectionable but who is not an aesthete. For such a person is not fully sensitive to the evaluative features of the world.

Callahan's argument turns on the claim that the best explanation for why lacking fitting affects and motives (and corresponding skills) is incompatible with virtue is that such sentiments and motives are conditions on understanding. There are other potential explanations—such as that moral understanding is only a necessary condition for virtue, and we need to add motivations and sentiments to it (as well as other things, all of which are not components of understanding) in order to get virtue and morally worthy action.

However, what gives Callahan's preferred explanation an advantage, I believe, is that it provides us with a more satisfying explanation of the value of understanding. In recent epistemology and philosophy of science, it often assumed that an adequate account of core epistemic states like knowledge or understanding should help us understand why such states are valuable, and accounts of such states that provide clearer accounts of their value are to be preferred to those with less clear accounts. Given the connection between affect, motivation, and virtue, building affect and motivation into understanding provides a clearer account of the value of understanding (as a condition of virtue) than an account without them.

Moreover, it provides a clearer account of the *practical* value of understanding. In this way, it is analogous to the causal conception of scientific understanding with which we began. As James Woodward (2003, 2015) has emphasized, an important advantage of causal views is that they provide a clear account of the practical value of scientific understanding—it is crucial for effective manipulative control of our environment. When it comes to whether skillful attunement is a condition on understanding *p*, we can appeal to an analogous thought. One reason to think that at least *some* kind of understanding has affective and motivational components is that, on such a view, understanding has a clear practical function: enabling us to be good agents, and perform good actions, *tout court*.

Here, our "practical interest" in virtue and morally worthy action plays an analogous role to manipulative control on Woodward's picture. It is just that Woodward's focus on manipulative control appeals to an overly narrow conception of practical agency and a narrow conception of our "practical" interests. We have practical reason to care about qualities of our actions beyond effectiveness, and these additional qualities are things that a *comprehensive* account of understanding in the social sciences (one that includes skillful attunement) takes into account.

Together, these considerations make a strong case that skillful attunement towards *p* is a part of understanding *p*. I do not claim that they are decisive. However, note that even if we reject the connection between skillful

attunement and understanding, the connection between skillful attunement and narrative might still vindicate narrative in the social sciences. If skillful attunement is an important aspect of virtuous moral response to the world, well-conducted narrative social science may make us better as persons, whatever its effect on us as social analysts. So even if, as Velleman suggests, narrative may trick us into thinking we have acquired understanding when we have not, this may not be so bad. Tricking us into thinking we've acquired understanding when we've only acquired virtue doesn't seem like a devastating indictment.

7 | CONCLUSION: THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF NARRATIVE

Putting these cognitive and non-cognitive elements together, we get my view of the epistemic function of narrative structure: it facilitates skilled intellectual, affective, and motivational responses to the social world. The integration of these responses provides us with a more full-blooded form of social understanding.

This account of narrative has important implications for how to understand narrative's political function. A number of philosophers, social scientists, and social critics have thought that mainstream methods of causal analysis can sometimes cultivate a problematic perspective on their objects of study. Particularly when it comes to dealing with poor urban communities, there is a tendency to adopt what Tommie Shelby (2016, 2) has called a "medical model" of social inquiry, one in which research is oriented around identifying social problems and searching for interventions that will effectively alleviate them. Such an objectifying stance is, of course, often crucial for effective policy-making and social analysis. However, the worry goes, if taken to be the only way of approaching social inquiry, a mode of description without human perspective can easily turn into a descriptive perspective without humanity. The human person recedes, leaving only "a cipher in a vast statistical operation," to use Norman Mailer's (1957) memorable phrase.

The different hermeneutic accounts of narrative understanding canvassed here can be thought of as providing differing diagnoses of what exactly the problem with this objectifying stance is. For example, the problem might concern "loss of meaning," failure of empathy, or flight from moral thinking, all things that different hermeneutic accounts believe that narrative may correct.

This paper has argued that whatever the force of these problems, narrative cannot effectively address them. However, narrative *can* address the underlying issue, the kind of objectifying and misrecognitional viewpoint embodied in certain forms of inquiry but also often sadly widespread in the population at large. When we are dealing with a population that is often invisible or dehumanized, narrative is a crucial tool for correcting recognitional failure.

Of course, few would object to trying to humanize the dehumanized. Yet, some might wonder whether this means of humanization might require a sentimental celebration of individual agency and thereby come at the expense of a deeper appreciation of the forces that shape individual's lives and decisions. The promise of such deeper analysis is, after all, one of the enticing features of the objectifying view. One of the upshots of this paper is to argue that this ostensible tension is illusory. Narratives can correct recognitional failure while also providing deeper, non-sentimental social analysis.[29]

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ENDNOTES

[1] Carroll (2001) argues that narrative unity is constituted by causal connections among events in a narrative. On this view, it is non-incidental that narratives provide causal information. However, this view faces important objections (see Velleman 2003 for criticism).

[2] Of course, one might think that narrative serves some important function, but that function is not epistemic (or only indirectly so). For instance, perhaps narrative serves to eliciting reader interest and motivate further engagement. Here, narrative structure is like an emotional bribe to continue cognitive engagement.

[3] See e.g. Velleman 2003 pg. 2.

[4] Schematic examples help prevent you from conflating the effects of other features of complex narrative works with effects due to narrative structure. However, it is sometimes better to start from complex exemplars of a type rather than simple ones. For instance, when trying to understand the value of novels, we should start from good novels rather than schematic cases that meet the minimal condition of "novel."

[5] Basically, we have *Knocked Up*, but emplotted as tragedy.

[6] This epistemic criticism is also tied to a political criticism: that narratives encourage us to praise and blame individuals for outcomes that are due more to their situation than to their individual choices.

[7] Grimm (2014) describes this as the "traditional view of understanding," tracing it back to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (1993, 71b9-11). Contemporary defenders of this view include Woodward (2003), Greco (2013), and Strevens (2013). More broadly, any view that analyzes understanding in terms of knowledge of *explanations* will be committed to this view if combined with a causal view of explanatory information (e.g. Lewis 1986).

[8] For instance, it might help us grasp the mechanisms that link causes to effects (when we've identified the relevant cause-effect relations using other methods).

[9] Understanding a body of information is sometimes labeled "holistic" (Hannon 2021) or "objectual" (Kvanvig 2003, 191) understanding and contrasted with propositional or explanatory understanding.

[10] This schema can be filled out in a number of other ways. For instance, rather than thinking that the special epistemic relation is knowledge, perhaps it is something more demanding like "grasping" or something less demanding like true belief. Or maybe it is something else altogether. Perhaps the special metaphysical relation is not causation but laws of nature, the essences of objects, metaphysical grounds, or something else. See Grimm 2006, de Regt 2009, and Khalifa 2013.

[11] There is a complication here: even if claims about the meanings of social practices can be baldly asserted, it does not follow that knowledge of those meanings can be communicated non-narratively. We need to avoid confusing the conditions sufficient for *encoding* content with the conditions sufficient for audience's *competent grasp* of that content. Narrative might be crucial for the *acquisition* and *mastery* of certain concepts, particularly those that have some narrative content. For instance, perhaps to master the concept of "democratic deconsolidation," you need engage with narratives of democratic backsliding. (Thanks to Rachel Fraser for discussion of this point.) I would concede this point but note that the number of concepts with narrative content is limited and most narratives in the mature social science do not aim to give us new concepts.

[12] For instance, Shelby 2016 provides a sophisticated discussion of many of the normative issues raised by Edin and Nelson, as well as some issues raised by Desmond.

[13] See related discussions in Camp 2017 and Currie 1995. Stueber's (2012) view that narratives facilitate reenactive empathy and thereby understanding of rational agency is actually a mix of the view discussed here and the view I will later describing as providing "normative information" about an agent's thoughts and actions.

[14] We should distinguish the role that such knowledge plays (as special object of inquiry) from a distinct role it might play as the basis for a certain set of intellectual skills, which will be discussed shortly.

[15] For consideration of the way first and third person pronouns in narratives can cue different perspectives and degrees of immersion, see Hartung et al (2016).

[16] Similarly, Danto (2007, chapter 13) argues that differences in knowledge and "form of life" make grasping what it is like to to be a person in a different historical period either impossible or deeply self-alienating. Peter Goldie (2012, chapter 2) argues that such perspectival asymmetries affect even *autobiographical* narrative.

[17] A certain amount of simulation of other points of view will actually be required for the account of intellectual skills that I develop in the next section.

[18] The extent to which we can really understand the phenomenology of those in different social positions at all is a live issue in standpoint epistemology (see e.g. Wiltsher 2021 for a recent discussion). Goldie (2011) has argued that we cannot really understand other perspectives at all in the phenomenological sense, and Paul's (2014) work on transformative experience is also skeptical that we can acquire information about what other things are like without ourselves experiencing them.

[19] The example is from Elga and Rayo (2021).

[20] "Grasping" is more intellectually demanding relationship than knowledge, and it requires various kinds of abilities such as abilities to classify, compare scenarios, know what would happen under changes to the scenario in question. It also involves "see[ing] why certain things made a difference and certain others did not" (Strevens 2013).

[21] Note that this does not assume non-cognitivism about the emotions. It only assumes that the emotions have *some* non-cognitive component.

[22] For discussion of some additional connections between emotion and understanding, see Elgin 2008.

[23] For an overview of how claims about the fittingness of attitudes differ from claims about normative reasons for attitudes, the goodness of those attitudes, and the accuracy of the thoughts implicit in those attitudes, see Howard 2018.

[24] If motivational internalism is true, then such a person will have some motivation to help the needy. However, the person may not have *the fitting amount* of motivation. Moreover, even if motives could not pull apart from normative beliefs, feelings presumably could.

[25] Rawls (1958) writes that "[t]o recognize another as a person one must respond to him and act towards him in certain ways; and these ways are intimately connected with the various prima facie duties. Acknowledging these duties in some degree…is not a matter… of intuiting moral qualities, or a matter of the expression of feelings or attitudes…; it is simply the possession of one of the forms of conduct in which the recognition of others as persons is manifested" (183). The idea that seeing others as persons requires certain affective and motivational responses arises in discussions of sexual objectification (e.g. Nussbaum 1995) and racism (e.g. Fanon 2008) and is considered in detail in Tarasenko-Struc 2020.

[26] For evidence that mental imagery tends to serve as an "emotional amplifier" (i.e. elicit strong emotional and motivational responses), see Mathews et al. 2013, Pearson et al. 2015, Wicken et al. 2021.

[27] One might be worried that even if these particular narrative works help inculcate skillful attunement in the way I describe, it is not the *narrative* aspect of those works that is crucial. Rather, it is other features such as vivid description, literary techniques, and simply providing enough local info to build a rich situational model. Moreover, as I reject "what it is like" views on the grounds that features other than narrative—e.g. vivid description—give us this information, it may seem that I am forced between defending my own view and giving up my criticism of the "what it's like" view. However, there is an asymmetry: narrative structure typically thwarts acquiring "what it's like" information while typically facilitates achieving attunement. In good narrative ethnographies, narrative positively interacts with features like vivid description in order to help us build rich situational models and facilitate vivid imaginings of situation-types, whereas narrative structure tends to distort what actual experience is like.

[28] These intuitions are not specific to claims about persons. They also hold in other domains in which our sentiments are at issue, such as the arts. You might have vast amounts of information, organized effectively to support all manner of cognitive skills, about why a particular painting is beautiful or aesthetically striking. But if you don't *feel* anything when viewing the painting, it seems that you do not really understand why the painting is beautiful.

[29] I've received help working through these ideas from many sources. I'd like to give special thanks to Chris Fowles, Michael Hannon, Louise Hanson, Max Hayward, Alison Hills, Rachel Fraser, Maxime LePoutre, Ariane Schneck, Rob Simpson, and Jake Zuehl for comments and discussion. I also greatly benefitted from workshopping these ideas at two Oxford graduate seminars, one on Narrative and the other on Understanding. This research was supported by the Leverhulme Trust and the Michael Zilkha Fund at Lincoln College.

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