ABSTRACT

A Thomist, a Screenwriter, and a Media Psychologist Walk into a Bar:

Cultivating Character through the Attention-Directing Power of Story Structure

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Many scholars and storytellers use narratives to help cultivate character in their audiences. The unique power of narrative *structure,* however, has received less attention. To a virtuous person, the morally relevant features of a situation—the correct goal and the best means of pursuing it—stand out. Thus, cultivating virtue requires that we repeatedly identify and attend to such features. Narrative structure consists of characters selecting and pursuing goals; when we engage in a story, we attend to a goal and a means of pursuing it. Insofar as the goals and means are moral, the story directs our attention virtuously. When a child learns to write, the parent guides her hand; so, too, vicarious attention-direction can cultivate our character. Thus, the attention-directing power of narrative structure is a promising tool for moral growth. It can play a significant role in virtue development research and practice.

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A THOMIST, A SCREENWRITER, AND A MEDIA PSYCHOLOGIST

WALK INTO A BAR:

CULTIVATING CHARACTER THROUGH THE ATTENTION-DIRECTING POWER

OF STORY STRUCTURE

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INTRODUCTION

A Shakespearean Squirrel Introduces Me to Aquinas

It all started with an actor, a dog, and a squirrel.

Midsummer. The park's cottonwoods fought off the dry mountain sunshine, but we were still dripping under our plastic armor, velvet coats, and Elizabethan ruffs.

I was thirteen years old and Cordelia in the Wyoming Shakespeare Festival Company's *King Lear.* College students and veteran actors were my playmates, and I soaked in all the professional acting knowledge I could. We were on tour that day. All the culture-lovers of Casper, Wyoming lounged in the grass on the other side of the set, applauding as my sisters and the scheming courtier Edmund wormed my father out of his power while I languished in France.

My father, the half-crazed King Lear, was now alone onstage chatting with the audience and the pigeons. The actor playing Edmund sat down beside me on a nearby picnic bench, waiting to drag me to my gruesome death. He'd been in this business for twenty years (the acting, not the dragging) and had answered my near-constant theater questions with the greatest patience. Three queries about poetic language were on the tip of my tongue, so I was almost disappointed when he grinned and pointed out… a dog.

Its eyes were fixed on a squirrel that had just flown up the trunk of a tree. The dog's owner hauled on the leash, beckoned with a treat, threw the hallowed squeaky ball—but nothing could keep the hero from its quest.

"That dog" Edmund told me, "is a good actor."

He laughed at my expression.

"Look at it. It's totally focused on the thing it wants. All it's thinking about is the squirrel. And see the things holding it back? The leash, the tree, the distracting ball, it can't get what it wants. But it's still trying."

We watched the dog a little longer. It strained against the leash, barked its frustration, jumped at the tree. Fought to get the squirrel it desired.

"That's what a character does," he said.

That moment initiated two journeys. One was a creative voyage to the land of narrative structure: six years of toiling through scripts line by line to figure out what the character wants and struggling to mirror that skeleton in my attempts at creative writing. The other was a more personal quest.

My dad was a farm boy from the hills of Kentucky, the youngest in a four-hundred-year line of proud tenant tobacco farmers. He broke the mold and struggled through a Masters in philosophy, where he studied the things that got him to that point in the first place: virtues. Perseverance. Temperance. Courage. Honesty. He introduced them to me when I was twelve, the year before my squirrel revelation.

The next seven years were an uphill fight to instill these traits in my own character. Unfortunately, the first seven of the ten were well and truly frustrating. I plugged away under the assumption that because "we are what we repeatedly do," all I had to do to gain virtue was behave in a certain way. Cake addiction? Keep your mouth

shut enough times and all will be well. Monster of a history test? Pencil to the paper, nose to the grindstone, and *march* soldier!

There is much to be said for this approach. If one is to develop virtue, then where the rubber meets the road, enacting the chosen course of behavior is necessary.

But it is not sufficient. And treating it as though it were led to years of discouragement, a dearth of noticeable results, and a corresponding decline in motivation.

Everything changed, however, when I discovered that characters do not chase squirrels in stories only. They also do so in real life.

Six years after *King Lear*, I exited theater and entered academia. Within the first month of freshman year, Aristotle's insistence that "every action and choice seem to aim at some good" (1999: I.1) convinced me that all our activity—not just that of characters in stories—consists of chasing squirrels. Then Augustine drove home that I should pay serious attention to whether I chased squirrels or balls, because when goods are incompatible, it is our moral responsibility to prioritize them correctly (1993: I).

My canine world turned on its head, however, when I met Aquinas. He pointed out that if I wanted to stop barking at a squirrel and start running after a treat, perhaps I should just ignore the squirrel and pay attention to the treat? *Catherine,* he seemed to say, *don't try to will "no barking" without referencing the treat you pursue. Focus instead on the tastiness of the treat, and the behavior will fall into place*. The clouds parted, the sun broke through, and I saw for the first time that virtue isn't just a hell-or-high-water habit of behavior. It is the state in which one's desire itself is free, whole and true. Developing

virtue is about learning to determine whether the treat or the squirrel is more important, and desiring the one we choose.

Thus, dear reader, an actor, a dog, and a squirrel set this thesis in motion. The moment in the park revealed a real and powerful phenomenon: The structure of story mirrors the structure of human life. And as a result, structure is a means by which stories can help us grow.

Extant Literature

My experience is not unique. Individuals throughout time and across cultures have explored the impact of stories on the moral character of audience members. Imagine that there is a roomful of people talking about narrative's effect on character. Generally, the speakers are of three types: scholars studying the effect, creatives making the effect, and audiences receiving the effect. Within these broad types, individuals cluster in small groups around the room: the screenwriters in one corner, the media psychologists in another, the virtue ethicists around the coffee table, and so on.

Among the scholars, the power of story to shape character has been on the table since the golden age of ancient Greece. Plato was so conscious of this power that he banned stories from his ideal city in the *Republic*. Notwithstanding, he promoted the use of story for positive personal and cultural growth through the "Myth of Er" and the "Myth of Atlantis" (Murray, 2008, p. 6). In Book Six of the *Poetics,* Aristotle argued that dramatic narratives could elicit catharsis, a release of emotion that helps viewers maintain virtue. Augustine's advice in *Confessions* (III.2) to avoid dramatic narratives stems from a recognition of their influence on what we attend to and desire. In contemporary virtue

ethics, Martha Nussbaum (1992) and David Carr (2005) have emphasized the role of

great literature in character education. In narratology, the neo-Classical family of

theorists, such as James Phelan (2017) and Wayne Booth (1988), have built a rhetorical

theory of narrative outlining how stories engage readers' ethical judgements. The entire

goal of the discipline of media psychology is to study the effect of media on audiences,

and the sub disciplines include theories of narrative persuasion (e.g. Moyer-Guse, 2008)

and the impact of narratives on moral reasoning and judgement (e.g. Tamborini, 2013;

Cingel & Krcmar, 2020; Zillmann, 2000; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Positive psychology

proper has also recognized the role of narrative in moral development (McAdams, 2006).

In another corner of the field, cognitive psychologists have picked out features of

narrative in the very fabric of the human mind (Scalise-Sugyama, 2016). Uri Hasson has

explored how storytelling affects our brains via neural coupling. Jonathan Gottschall's

book, *The Storytelling Animal* (2012) explores the role of story in the evolution of the

human brain. Even ignoring the related work in linguistics, sociology, economics, literary

criticism, etc., it is clear that the impact of story on character intrigues academics across

disciplines.

Nor have storytellers been silent in the conversation. TEDxTalks have highlighted

creatives' responsibility to use the power of storytelling well (Murray, 2014; 2016)

Hollywood has recognized the effect of media representation on viewers' self-respect and

familiarity with different cultures, and has shifted their casting policies accordingly. The

advertising world has adopted a similar emphasis on representation and positive

messages (Lindsey, 2017). Stephen Spielberg is known for saying that good stories

require a beginning, middle, and end, but today they often have only beginnings and

middles (Miyamoto, 2018). The lack of endings hints that storytellers are not taking character arcs—the story equivalent of human growth or decline—to their full and rightful conclusion. Contemporary oral storytellers such as Jim Brulé have harnessed the neuroscience of learning and techniques from clinical psychology to develop transformational storytelling experiences (personal correspondence). Filmmakers, novelists, and other content creators often use their art for the express purpose of having some moral effect. Just a few examples are the contemporary American filmmaker Ava DuVernay, the Victorian English novelist Elizabeth Gaskell and the medieval French bard Marie de France. DuVernay's *When They See Us* (2019) gave audiences an inside look at the negative consequences of the prison system. Similarly, in her preface to the novel *Mary Barton* (1848), Gaskell articulates her desire to foster empathy between the rich and the poor. Similarly, in the prologue to her 12th century *Lais* (1999), Marie de France asserts that creative writers have a duty to use their skills for the moral edification of others. And what are Aesop's *Fables* (2018) but stories meant to change the way we act? Such examples hardly scratch the surface. Storytellers throughout the world and throughout history have recognized the effect of stories on audiences and have taken steps to ply their craft responsibly.

Story consumers are equally vocal in the conversation. Countless children grew up with the *Children's Book of Virtues,* a collection of short tales designed to illustrate virtues for young people (Bennett, 1995). The *Common Sense Media* website rates films for parents using metrics for content such as "swearing," "drug use," or "positive messages." A web search reveals multiple lists of "inspirational movies" that grown-ups can go to when they feel down. A few parenting blogs offer lists of films that might help

children develop character strengths. Using storytelling as a pedagogical tool is common in primary and secondary education. In deep and soulful conversations, it is not uncommon to hear of a story that "changed how I see the world." Many individuals, whether they are responsible only for themselves or also for young minds,[1] recognize the power of stories to shape how we think, feel, and act.

Such examples show only a fraction of the conversation concerning story and moral character. Story scholars, creators, and consumers throughout time have recognized and explored the connection that I stumbled upon: narratives can influence the character of audience members. They can do so powerfully. And it is thus important to understand how this connection works and how to use it well.

Lacunae

One key process by which stories affect character has not been systematically explored. In the room of story-character scholars, I am like a child wandering around and listening to exchanges. Eventually, I notice that one idea keeps slipping in and out of focus. Each group describes it a different way. Some groups spend hours discussing it. Others mention it only in passing. Some of the grown-ups talk about it explicitly. Others only assume it, sometimes even without realizing. It is rarely the main topic of conversation, and yet it never quite goes away. Indeed, the more you think about it, the more important it appears: something that many other elements in the various

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[1] According to Plato, forming young minds is of particular importance. In Book Six of the *Republic,* the creation of the just society depends on the proper formation of the ruling individuals. That formation depends on the influences to which their caretakers expose them. The responsibility for curating the influences on a young mind is not to be taken lightly. And insofar as stories are influences, the caretaker is responsible for shaping the child's story selection.

conversations depend on, whether the conversants recognize it or not. And it is something that no one group can fully grasp independent of the others. Each discipline holds a piece of the puzzle, and if the process is to be capitalized on for maximum character growth, then each discipline's piece is needed.

That elusive process is the attention-directing power of narrative structure. What is narrative structure? If individual stories are the members of a species, then structure refers to the characteristics of the species itself. To visualize the concept, consider Aristotle's approach in the *Poetics.* In his opening sentence, he proposes:

> To treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry." (1997: I.1)

Aristotle seeks the essence, not of an individual story, but of story itself. My focus is more modest. I use *structure* to delineate "the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem," which consists of three elements: a desire for some perceived good, an obstacle or opportunity in the circumstances, and an action taken to change the circumstances and actualize that good.[2] Following Aristotle and creative writing manuals, structure outlines the normative components whose presence tends to correlate with greater audience resonance and popularity. The characteristic features of story are those that tend to make a "good" story. The attention-directing power stems from the fact that structure is

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[2] I borrow the term *structure* from screenwriting manuals, where it generally refers to the prescriptive features of plot. Scholarly readers should note that the creative realm differs from the academic realm in its use of standardized terminology. In the writings of actors and creative writers, for example, the boundaries between theories are fluid; terms are often loosely defined and vary from writer to writer. This is no weakness, but rather a difference in focus and modus operandi. Because this thesis assumes creative practice to be a valid source of insight and is written for both creative and academic readers, I ask scholars to recognize and accept the unfamiliar approach. Note also that for variety, I will use the terms *story structure* and *narrative structure* interchangeably.

intrinsically selective; to engage in a narrative is to attend to certain perceived goods and to ignore others. Chapter Two defends the normative focus and lays out the three structural components in detail.

Whether they realize it or not, each of the academic and creative disciplines outlined above interact with narrative structure and attention-direction in some way. However, to fully grasp its implications for character development requires cross-disciplinary conversation on a scale that has not yet occurred. This means that there are three areas of untapped potential: topics of interdisciplinary academic study, communication between scholars and creatives, and practical story structure resources for parents and teachers.

First, most of the academic virtue literature has focused on the *content* of individual stories rather than on narrative *structure.* For example, the character psychologist Dan McAdams focuses predominantly on the tragic, redemptive, comic, etc., qualities of a given individual's narrative on their sense of purpose (McAdams, 2015). While his work touches on structure, it has not been the main area of exploration. Similarly, the contemporary virtue ethicist Martha Nussbaum speaks of stories and literature as a whole, touching on structure only tangentially (1992). With a few exceptions noted in the following chapters, academic research on story structure and character has been limited, and has drawn only a little on insights from creative writers.

Perhaps as a result, there is a chasm in communication between scholars and storytellers about the uses and effects of narrative structure. On a practical level, the key question when drawing on research to improve practice is: Which specific components of the text need to change? The dialogue in Scene Three? The subtext in the opening image?

The choice of setting for the climax? The character's response to pressure in the inciting incident? etc. The more scholars can frame their work in a way that corresponds to creatives' actual experience, the more impact their research can have. Several notable attempts in recent years have begun to bridge the gap. The Center for Scholars and Storytellers at UCLA, for example, translates psychological research on various virtues into "actionable insights" for screenwriters and other content creators. Lisa Cron's book *Wired for Story* (2012) makes the neuroscience of narrative applicable to screenwriting. Likewise, Sarah-Jane Murray's TEDx Talks "Write and Wrong" and "Hardwired for Story" have done much to raise awareness of the neurological processes by which stories impact their audiences. Jim Brulé's training workshops provide a similar service to oral storytellers. Nevertheless, few of these current attempts to bridge the research-practice gap relate to the structure of narrative. Narrative structure is a cornerstone of creative practice (Hauge, 2011, p.91), and research on its ethical impact could empower storytellers to own the responsibility for their work. Unfortunately, what little research on structure there is has not been translated into actionable insights.

The third key gap is that story structure—again, as opposed to content—has not yet been operationalized for consumer growth. There are next to no research-based resources for parents, teachers, or growth-conscious individuals. The Character Counts website, for example, reports only content issues (such as portrayal of drugs and alcohol). Plot structure does not appear in any of their metrics. Similarly, the suggestions from the Center for Scholars and Storytellers have emphasized content choices, such as increasing representation. Structural connections have yet to appear in their suggestion lists.

It seems that narrative structure is an underexplored component of a story's effect on audiences. It is not, for all that, absent. The process by which narrative structure affects viewers pervades many extant conversations. It has simply not been brought to light. That is what I seek to do.

<center>*Contribution*</center>

My goal is to integrate each discipline's insights into a systematic account of the attention-directing power of narrative structure. In brief, the account reduces to three claims: because (1) developing habits of moral attention-direction develops virtue and (2) narrative structure can guide our attention morally, (3) we can use the attention-directing power of narrative to help us develop character.[3]

Let us consider the relation between virtue development and narrative structure in greater detail. Virtue ethics and goal psychology provide context: the structure of narrative is also the structure of real-life actions and motives. It forms the basic building block of virtue, and attention direction enables agents to build with those blocks. Medieval descriptions of this process mirror creative's accounts most closely. Here, human action and motivation reduce to a chain of *apparent good*, relevant *circumstantial factor*, and *response.* An agent values some good (e.g. family love, social prestige, squirrels), a factor of the agent's situation impacts one or more of those values (a promotion at work increases social prestige but damages family love, the leash holds us

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[3] Let me make the scope of my claim clear. I am not saying that attention-direction via narrative structure is sufficient for virtue development, nor that it can be used independent of a given story's content. Rather, I am saying that the parallels between narrative structure and virtue can elucidate *how* narrative affects character, thereby empowering storytellers and audience members to use narrative more effectively.

back from the chase), and the agent responds in a way that aligns the situation with one of those goods (the agent rejects the promotion to protect family time, we bark at the squirrel). A situation usually relates to multiple goods. It thus contains the potential for multiple chains of good, relevant circumstantial factor, and response. The good that is most salient is the one on which the agent will act. Consequently, foregrounding or backgrounding goods determines the agent's response. Virtues consist of stable tendencies to identify the proper goods in a given situation and foreground them, so virtue development involves training oneself to evaluate and attend to the proper goods habitually. Screenwriting insights frame narrative structure in this context. Narrative structure also reduces to a chain of good, relevant circumstantial factor, and response. However, the limited nature of narrative means that a given story can only highlight one or two of the potential good/factor/response chains. To engage in a narrative is to vicariously attend to the particular value(s) that the narrative foregrounds. The implications are substantial: because vicariously attending to goods can make those goods chronically salient, engaging in narratives can indirectly habituate virtue.

I contend that such a structure underlies many conversations about the power of storytelling to influence character. The goal of this thesis is to translate that structure into a common tongue so that different groups of conversants can find a common point of reference. My hope is such common ground will elicit a larger interdisciplinary conversation about how the attention-directing power of narrative works and how creatives and consumers can harness it to flourish.

Specifically, I hope to show that certain theories in Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, motivation psychology, Hollywood screenwriting, the cognitive science of narrative, and

positive media psychology each assume or support the attention-directing power of narrative structure.[4] Each of these individual conversations offers something unique to the others.

In Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, Aquinas's *doctrine of free decision* suggests that agents can direct attention to certain goods (i.e., squirrels) over others, thereby determining how the agent feels and acts (Hoffmann & Michon, 2017). The doctrine expands upon Aristotle's action theory, where the inclination toward something perceived as good combines with the agents' circumstances to produce action and feeling. Aquinas further claims that humans have a variety of desires, and thus ways of feeling and acting in response to the circumstances, and that the ability to prioritize desires correctly is the root of moral responsibility. As we will explore in Chapter One, Aquinas further argues that attending to one good more than others increases desire for it and results in prioritizing it. To explore how narrative structure affects moral character, we must have some account of character and its improvement. Aquinas's doctrine of free decision offers such an account.

Theories of value pursuit in contemporary psychology lend credence to Aquinas's claims. Specifically, the *valuation systems* theory of motivation (Uusberg et. al., 2019) conceptualize human action and emotion as responses to the perception that something in the agent's environment affects something about which the agent cares. This corresponds to Aristotle's action theory. And just as Aquinas suggests, because agents hold a variety of values in any given situation, responding requires that agents prioritize some over

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[4] Theories of narration and focalization in Neo-Classical school of narratology (e.g. Booth, 1983; Phelan, 2017) also reveal the attention-directing power of narrative. However, there is not sufficient space in this work to explore them fully.

others. Further, the sub-theory of *repurposing* affirms that attending to certain values over others can shift the prioritization of values (Uusberg et. al., 2019; Marple et. al., under review). By corroborating the Thomistic account of moral action, valuation systems affirm the doctrine of free decision as a basis for building a common account of the attention-directing power of narrative.

Cognitive theories of goal pursuit in narrative demonstrate that narrative operates on the same action structure that Aquinas proposed. They suggest that because the human mind is wired to think in terms of goal pursuit, goal pursuit translates into the skeleton of narrative. In this view, narrative structure consists of an agent pursuing a *goal* in the face of some *obstacle* using some *means* (Scalise-Sugyama, 2016). If human action and narrative structure did have the same DNA, we would expect there to be an empirical explanation for it. Cognitive theories of goal pursuit in narrative provide the needed explanation.

Bridging the gap between research and practice, screenwriting theories of three-act plot structure translate the information from virtue ethics and psychology into the actual experience of watching a movie. The architecture of plot, both in the span of a whole story and in the skeleton of a scene, corresponds to the structure of goal, obstacle, and response. However, it does so in the context of dialogue, image, interaction, and description. Thus, three-act structure frames the account of action from virtue ethics in terms that resonate with content creators.

Finally, the theories of *affective disposition, antihero enjoyment,* and *appreciation* in media psychology flesh out both the processes by which narrative attention-direction occurs and the various effects it has on viewers. Unlike the preceding theories, media

psychology does not seek to describe the structure of action, nor to use that structure to imitate action. Rather, the goal is to outline certain observable effects of narrative on moral reasoning, and to explain how those effects occur. Their descriptions map onto the structure of action and narrative outlined above.

Media psychology theories can offer empirical support for the framework that is beginning to take shape. Specifically, they can compare philosophical and creative hypotheses about how stories affect people with evidence from real life. As we will see in Chapter Three, affective disposition, antihero enjoyment, and appreciation theories offer initial support for the hypothesis that vicarious attention-direction influences real-life attention-direction.

Taken together, these theories compose and refine an account of the attention-directing power of narrative structure. For ease, I will call this account the *Thomisto-Narrative framework.*

Recall the three structure-related gaps in extant conversations. Future interdisciplinary exploration could address these limitations. First, the Thomisto-Narrative framework opens avenues for academic study of narrative structure and character by highlighting areas of overlap between disciplines. Doing so that each can use the others' insights to find innovative approaches to existing problems. Second, the framework fosters plot-based communication among scholars and creatives by highlighting the similarities between research and practice. While scholars and creatives interact with human action and motivation, they often picture the phenomenon in different ways. Framing research in creative terms and drawing on creative insights for research unmasks the apparent dissimilarity. Third, the framework provides a foundation

for developing practical story structure resources for parents and teachers. As such, it can help generate the material that is currently missing.

Bringing the attention-directing power of narrative structure to light can springboard future interdisciplinary research on virtue development through story structure, application of research in story creation, and better information and resources for story consumers. The Thomisto-Narrative framework could have a wide-reaching net impact.

<div align="center">Organization</div>

The foundation of the Thomisto-Narrative framework is that story structure mirrors the action structure of virtue development. Establishing that parallel is the goal of the first two chapters. Chapter One argues that attention-direction is the core activity of virtue development. Here, I outline the Thomist view of virtue as a combination of good/circumstance/response chains and attention-direction. I also support this view with corresponding constructs from psychology. Chapter Two explains how narrative structure directs audience attention to certain good/circumstance/response chains over others. By integrating the cognitive psychology of narrative and screenwriters' accounts of plot, I highlight the similarities between narrative structure and virtue development, particularly as they relate to directing attention to certain goods over others. Together, these two chapters establish the basic tenets of the Thomisto-Narrative framework.

Chapter Three shifts focus to empirical support. With evidence from theories in positive media psychology, I substantiate and refine the claim that narratives can contribute to virtue development via vicarious attention-direction. Specifically, the

theories of affective disposition, antihero enjoyment, and appreciation offer evidence that attention-direction is at play in the real-life interaction between media and viewer. By the end of this chapter, virtue ethicists, contemporary value psychologists, screenwriters, cognitive narrative psychologists, and positive media psychologists will share a common point of reference.

Finally, Chapter Four returns our conversation to the point of departure: How can research in each of these areas use narrative structure to help storytellers and story consumers develop virtue? Here, I sketch examples of what such collaboration might produce for screenwriters, copywriters, parents, teachers, and growth-conscious individuals. Moreover, I offer a set of heuristic tools that scholars and practitioners might develop further.

My own journey toward virtue through story started with an actor, a dog, and a squirrel. Yet it only kicked into gear when I began reading and research for my thesis. I entered college with a firm but vague conviction that stories could help people grow. Like many beginning students, I was also confident that I knew a great deal about the subject, and that my insight was unique. *Laughter.* The inexorable requirement that I write one hundred and forty informed pages forced me to wander around the room of conversation and listen to what others—who had engaged in the idea far more deeply than I—had to say. The content of their discussions offered body and shape to my pursuit of virtue. It helped me shift from a regimen of joyless behavior correction to an integrated reframing of desire. My hope for this work is that it generates more opportunities to for others to embark upon a similar journey.

CHAPTER ONE

Watch Where You Look:

Attention-Direction as the Locus of Virtue Development in Thomistic Action Theory

The day after I turned twelve years old, I went to war with a cookie. Its chocolaty scent sang to me from the counter with greater magnetism than any ancient Greek siren could have managed. Steam escaped from the golden-brown cracks like captives begging me to release them. The ghosts of cookies past played over my tongue, drawing hosts of eager saliva disappointed to find nothing.

That cookie had a hold on me. But by golly, I was fighting back. I had committed to correcting my sugar addiction, and I was going to avoid deserts for a whole week. No puny cookie was going to cow me into submission on my very first day.

Up until writing this thesis, such all-out warfare was my process for developing virtue. Growing up, I thought that moral growth consisted solely of action. It did not matter if I *wanted* that cookie more than anything else in the world. All that mattered was that I did not *act*. As long as no eating occurred, virtue must be one step closer.

This is true, but only in part. The key information I missed as a child is that behavior is only the tip of the iceberg that is virtue. I had no idea that below my simple cookie struggle lay a mountain of desire, cognition, and practical reason. Like a misinformed general, I directed my willpower to the outskirts of the battle when the crux of the fight lay somewhere deeper: in my attention.

My argument is that because (1) developing habits of moral attention-direction develops virtue and (2) narrative structure can guide our attention morally, (3) we can use the attention-directing power of narrative to help us develop character. In this chapter, I draw on Aquinas's *doctrine of free decision* to argue that since attention-direction is a locus of moral responsibility, it is a key process in virtue development.

First, I outline the stages of Aquinas's action theory that correspond to narrative structure.[5] A natural inclination toward things perceived as good (or, *appetite)* moves us to feel and act, and our beliefs direct those appetites toward the particular manifestations of good in a given situation. The *practical syllogism* is a rational reconstruction that charts the relation of a particular good to the ultimate good. Second, I frame moral decision as directing our appetites toward the particular good that captures the ultimate good most accurately. We can picture choice as a crossroad between two or more practical syllogisms. In the ideal person (if not in reality), the appetites follow the particular good that reason prioritizes. Third, virtues are dispositions both to identify and select the most accurate practical syllogism, and for our appetites to pursue the selected good rather than others without struggle. Because few of us are at this level, virtue *development* involves both training our reason to grasp the relation of particular to ultimate goods, and habituating our appetites to incline as reason directs them. Finally,

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[5] Scholars may note that throughout this thesis, I often do not use discipline-standard descriptions to outline theories. The terms and definitions themselves (hopefully) ring true, but the way of presenting them may be unfamiliar. This is intentional. My goal is to help readers from each discipline recognize corresponding ideas in others. Moreover, because this work centers around narrative structure, I take that structure as my "home base." An obstacle to interdisciplinary discussion is that even where there are no substantial differences in definition, mere differences in description can obscure similarities. Portraits by Picasso and DaVinchi will strike the viewer as dissimilar even though both represent a human face. To streamline recognition of similarities, my descriptions of philosophical and psychological theories highlight cross-discipline similarities at the cost of discipline-standard phrasing. I ask readers to judge based on the content of definitions—the subject of the portrait rather than the style of painting.

integrating Aquinas's account of attention direction with psychological research on

valuation systems suggests that the insofar as choosing one practical syllogism over

another involves shifting attention, it can make the prioritized goods more *salient* over

time. The more salient a good, the more it activates the appetites. Thus, developing

patterns of salience can help habituate the appetites to align with the dictates of reason.

Attention-direction, then, is a key means of developing virtue. And if we wish to develop

virtue more effectively, it behooves us to understand how it operates.

The Role of Attention Direction in the Process of Action

The Components of an Act

To understand the importance of attention direction in virtue development, we

must first understand its role in voluntary action.[6] The bird's-eye view is as follows. A

voluntary action results from an interaction between appetite (the innate inclination

toward something perceived as good) and perception of the agent's circumstances. An

agent desires some good, and sees a specific instance of that good in her immediate

environment. She identifies the means available for the pursuit of that specific good. She

chooses a means and pursues the good—she acts. One of the most concrete examples of

this pattern is eating. I love tasting sweet things, and I see a cookie. By means of chewing

it, I will be able to taste it. I chew the cookie. A larger-scale example is *The Lord of the*

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[6] For Aquinas, voluntary actions are those in which (1) the act originates in the agent and is not imposed by the circumstances, (2) the agent recognizes the relation of the means or object to a given end, and (3) the agent understands the end as an end (Aquinas, 2018: II.I.6.1; see also Hoffman and Michon, 2017). This reflects Aristotle's definition of voluntary action in Book Three of the *Nicomachean Ethics:* "the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action" (1999: III.1). The type of action in which attention direction has moral impact, then, is that of which the agent is the source, and in which the agent acts on an understanding of the means and ends at play in the situation.

Rings trilogy (1954; 1955; 1966). In these stories, a hobbit named Frodo sets out to throw a magic ring in Mount Doom so as to save his home, Middle Earth, from the clutches of the evil Sauron. The action that comprises the plot follows the same pattern as eating the cookie. Frodo loves peace in Middle Earth. By means of casting the ring into Mount Doom, he can preserve peace in Middle Earth. He sets out to cast the ring into Mount Doom. In short, only once an agent's *appetite* interacts with a *perceived good* does *action* result.[7] Let's take a closer look at these components.

Appetite is the genesis of an individual action, or, the force that initiates a human response.[8] The eighth question of the Prima Secundae explores this component in depth. Specifically, Aquinas describes appetite as "an inclination of a person desirous of a thing towards that thing" (2018: II.I.8.1). The "thing" toward which it inclines is the *object* of the appetite. The most abstract end of every appetite is what I will call the *ultimate good*. This concept originates with Aristotle. In Book One of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* he argues that "every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good" (1999: I.1; see also III.4). Action follows when we desire some good and see a circumstance-specific way of promoting or protecting it. Aquinas concurs in his commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* (2013: I.1). If action itself is the tip of the iceberg, then appetite is a substantial part of what lies beneath.

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[7] Similarly, emotions follow when we desire some good and perceive that something in our environment promotes or threatens it (Roberts, 2015; Moors et. al., 2013). I love tasting sweet things, and I see a cookie. I perceive that the cookie will satisfy my desire for sweetness. I feel happy. Frodo loves peace in Middle Earth. He perceives that the Dark Lord may destroy Middle Earth. He feels worried. *Appetite + Circumstance = Emotion*.

[8] In contemporary moral philosophy, appetite or desire is often referred to as a *world-to-mind direction of fit*; we have an idea of the good that might be actualized in a situation, we see that the good is not actualized in reality, and the gap creates a sense of dissonance that moves us to respond (Miller, 2014, p. 7).

Means form an intermediate objective en route to the larger goal. They embody the good in increasingly context-specific ways. As Aquinas argues in the second article of question eight, "the means are good and willed, not in themselves, but as referred to the end" (2018: II.I.8.2). Things that promote or protect a desired good are desired insofar as they contribute to that good. For example, Frodo is driven by love of the good, but that good takes the form of hobbits merrily continuing their peaceful farming lives, untouched by the Dark Lord and his orcs. Even more specifically, since the ring threatens the hobbits' happiness, "destroying the ring" is the object which guides Frodo's actions over the course of the trilogy (e.g. running to Rivendell, navigating the dead marshes, or climbing Mt. Doom).[9]

We can thus visualize appetite on a scale of specificity. The most abstract desire for good marks one end of the scale, while means comprise the rest of the scale with a range of increasingly particular manifestations of the good. For example, from particular to abstract, Frodo navigates the dead marshes to reach Mount doom, to destroy the ring, to protect peace in Middle Earth, to obtain good.[10]

Such use of the term "good" may raise some concern. Individuals are often mistaken about how means will relate to ends, or about what aspects of their situation actually manifest the good. My prankster brother might convince me that the circular objects on the plate are cookies, when in fact they are dog biscuits. As a result, I might

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[9] It is also the source of Frodo's feelings; reaching Rivendell promotes the good of destroying the ring, which makes him happy.

[10] The contemporary philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Anscombe argues a similar point in her book *Intention* (1957). In Chapter 26, she describes action as a series of nested intentions, such that each individual action contributes a larger action. For example, moving one's arm up and down contributes to the larger action of pumping water to a house, which—if one knows the water to be poisoned—contributes to the larger action of poisoning the house's inhabitants.

form the belief that eating a dog biscuit (which I have mentally categorized as a cookie, and therefore as something sweet) will satisfy my sweet tooth. Given my appetite for the good of sweetness, then, it is only natural that I would eat the dog biscuit. How does the Thomistic-Aristotelian picture account for the inevitable mistakes that we make in our pursuit of the good?

Aquinas makes it clear that when we speak of context-specific manifestations of good, we are speaking of the agent's *perception* of how the circumstances relate to the ultimate good. To connect circumstances with appetites, the agent needs *beliefs*, or, cognitive conceptions about the outside world (Osborne, 2015).[11] Indeed, Aquinas goes so far as to say that "in order that the will tend to anything, it is requisite, not that this be good in very truth, but that it be apprehended as good" (2018: II.I.8.1). This follows Aristotle's suggestion that "absolutely and in truth the good is the object of [appetite], but for each person the apparent good" (1999: III.4). If we have not noticed something about our circumstances (e.g. I miss the plate of actual cookies on the counter), or if we have mis-categorized the relation of a circumstance to the good (e.g. I believe my brother about the dog biscuits), then our actions, while rational, will not pursue the good accurately. This is equally true in larger-scale actions. Independent of Frodo's knowledge, the ring has the power to destroy Middle Earth. When Gandalf explains the ring's power, however, this external fact makes contact with Frodo's mind. Frodo *believes* that the ring is capable of destroying Middle Earth, and that belief forms the link between his appetite for the good of Middle Earth and his action of destroying the ring.

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[11] Contemporary philosophers often refer to beliefs as *mind-to-world direction of fit*. This type of mental state represents the state of affairs in reality, independent of what we desire (Miller, 2014, p. 7).

Beliefs are necessary for response because they provide an object through which to pursue the good. Imagine a world where Gandalf never explains the ring's power to Frodo. Frodo never begins his quest to Mount doom. His desire to promote the good of the Shire is just as strong, and destroying the ring would still protect that good; nonetheless, this objective fact has no bearing on his actions or emotions. Belief shapes and focuses response. Without a perceived connection between appetite and circumstances, there can be only abstract desire.

The connection between the ultimate good and the particular good that beliefs provide can be rationally reconstructed using the *practical syllogism* (Hoffmann & Michon, 2017). The major term is a claim about some aspect of ultimate goodness. For example, "a friend's welfare is good and should thus be pursued." The minor term is a claim about how the circumstances of the situation in question relate to that aspect of ultimate goodness. Frodo's minor term might be "these hobbits are friends." The conclusion of the practical syllogism is a belief about how a particular object of desire relates to the ultimate object of desire: "These hobbits' welfare is good and should thus be pursued." The practical syllogism offers a way to track our circumstance-specific perception of the good.

While Aristotle and Aquinas claim that the perception of good is the impetus for action rather than the good itself, they do not conflate perception of good with actual goodness. An agent may truly believe that their actions pursue the good and be completely, even tragically, wrong. My belief that the dog biscuit is a cookie will not make it taste any better. Accepting the propaganda that Jews are subhuman does not make the Holocaust any less horrific. Both Aristotle and Aquinas are externalist. For

Aristotle, the goal of human development is to approximate true beliefs and desires as closely as possible; in his discussion of voluntary action and choice, he suggests that "the good man differs from most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being, as it were, the norm and measure of them" (1999: III.4). Aquinas takes a similar approach, based on his belief in universal principles of right. One of the best examples of this can be seen in his approach to the relation between responsibility and ignorance. In his discussion of the causes of vice and sin (2018: II.I.71-89), Question Seventy-Six focuses on the ways in which ignorance does or does not mediate an agent's responsibility for a choice. In the first and third articles specifically, he argues that ignorance, either of a universal principle or of the way in which the situation relates to that principle, makes the action involuntary. Ignorance causes acts "which the contrary knowledge would have prevented; so that this act, if knowledge were to hand, would be contrary to the will, which is the meaning of the word involuntary (2018: II.I.76.3). This view of ignorance assumes that there is some objective universal principle, or relation of situation to principle, with which the agent simply has not made contact. In other words, if there were no objective standard, there would be no need for an account of ignorance in moral responsibility. In both accounts, no one's beliefs can fully capture all of reality, yet reality is still, itself, objective. To function well in life, i.e., to live virtuously, one must develop increasingly accurate perception.

To summarize: We desire the good. Objects in the external world make cognitive contact with our minds, and we categorize those objects in relation to either the good or context-specific manifestations of the good. Recognizing the relation between an object

and a desired good motivates us to act in order to obtain that object. An interaction between appetite and perception of the circumstances precedes any voluntary action.

Action, in other words, is only the outskirts of the battle.

Up until this point, I have discussed only simple chains of response: those where a single good relates to a single object with a single available means resulting in single action. But what if multiple desires or beliefs might be activated? What if a situation offers a variety of response chains from which one must be chosen? It is in this type of action that attention direction comes to the fore.

Alternate Descriptions, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility

The type of action that comprises most of life is more complex than "I want to eat sweet things, this cookie is sweet, and therefore I want to eat this cookie." It is *also* true, for example, that "I want health, this cookie will give me diabetes, and therefore I want not to eat this cookie." The object "cookie" relates to my desire for sweetness and my desire for health very differently.[12] While my desires for sweetness and health are not innately opposed to each other, my desires to eat the cookie and to not eat the cookie certainly are. The same object, viewed in light of different desires, can result in very different responses. A single situation can contain many potential practical syllogisms. To respond is to activate one or more of them. Activation can either happen in two ways. The first is by default, as when a hungry cow sees tasty grass. Aquinas calls this the

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[12] The scholastic definition of "object" is slightly more nuanced. In proper scholastic use, "object" refers to the thing desired (Osbourne, 2015)—in other words, to the stimulus of positively valenced emotions. Under one description, a cookie is an object in that it is the situational manifestation of the good of sweetness. Under an alternate description, however, the cookie is an obstacle to the object of maintaining a diet, which is a means to the good of health.

estimative power (De Haan, 2014; 2019) The second is by rational choice, as when an

FBI agent posing as a model chooses a carrot over a donut. Aquinas calls this the *rational*

appetite (De Haan, 2014; 2019; Hoffmann & Michon, 2017). Our ability to recognize,

evaluate, and select from among the various practical syllogisms that are available to us

is key to both moral responsibility and virtue. Aquinas makes it clear that a voluntary

action requires that the agent be the action's source (2018: II.I.61-2; see also footnote 1;

Hoffman & Michon 2017, p. 5). For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, moral responsibility is

coextensive with freedom. Aristotle opens Book Three of *Nicomachean Ethics* with the

idea that "on voluntary actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are

involuntary pardon and sometimes also pity" (1999: III.1). If an agent is to be morally

responsible for an action, then the action must be voluntary. Aquinas concurs in Question

Three of *De Malo,* suggesting that "since it is part of the account of sin that it be

voluntary, inasmuch as ignorance makes excuse for sin totally or in part, so much it takes

away voluntariness" (2003: III.8; see also Jeffrey, 2015, p. 205). Since we have the

power to choose between things, we are responsible for that choice. Similarly, if we do

not have the power to choose between things, as in the case of ignorance,[13] then we are

not morally responsible.

An unfortunate consequence results: if the response to an object is necessary, then

goodness itself could be considered the source of the action. Aquinas affirms that "if the

will be offered an object which is good universally and from every point of view, the will

tends to it of necessity, if it wills anything at all; since it cannot will the opposite" (2018:

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[13] Aquinas discusses the ways in which ignorance impacts responsibility at length in *ST* II.I.76.

II.I.10.2). If all human action originates in a natural desire for the good, then can any human action truly be called free (2017)?

Fortunately for free will, most situation-specific manifestations of the good are not "good universally and from every point of view." The cookie is good from the point of view of taste. It is not good, however, from the point of view of health. Consider the two practical syllogisms. On the one hand, "Tastiness is good and ought to be pursued, this cookie is tasty, and thus I ought to pursue it." On the other, "Health is good and ought to be pursued, the cookie harms my health, and thus I ought to avoid it." Because our knowledge is limited and we do not see the universal good, we have the freedom to choose which manifestation we will pursue. In Aquinas's words:

> [If] the will is offered an object that is *not* good from every point of view, it will *not* tend to it of necessity [emphasis added].… any other particular goods, in so far as they are lacking in some good, can be regarded as non-goods: and from this point of view, they can be set aside or approved by the will, which can tend to one and the same thing from various points of view (2018: II.I.10.2).[14]

If we focus on the practical syllogism in which the cookie is seen as an obstacle to, or irrelevant to, the good, then it no longer necessitates action.

So, we can voluntarily determine which desires and beliefs we make salient to ourselves, and by extension, which responses we enact. Hoffmann and Michon affirm that by delineating the complete good (happiness) from partial goods, Aquinas defends voluntary action and moral responsibility: "most things can be seen as good from one perspective and as deficient from another perspective, and hence they can be either

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[14] In the same "I answer," Aquinas also asserts that, "no matter what the object be, it is in man's power not to think of it, and consequently not to will it actually." In other words, an agent has at least two ways to direct one's attention in morally relevant ways: to focus on a different description, or to ignore the problematic description completely. Both of these means are relevant to the attention-directing power of film, as we will see in Chapter 2.

desired (or chosen) or not" (2017, p. 6).[15] The ultimate good does not necessitate our

actions. By choosing between practical syllogisms, we can be the action's source. And if

we can be its source, then we can be morally responsible for it.

Here lies the implication for those of us interested in developing virtue. Recall my

strong-arming strategy from the beginning of the chapter. We can now see the issue with

a virtue-development strategy that focuses solely on regulating behavior: behavior is only

the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface lies appetite and a host of possible syllogisms to

direct it. It is natural that we love the good, and if a manifestation of good becomes

salient to us, it is natural that we pursue it.[16] Response itself is no more voluntary than the

slowing of water molecules in response to a temperature drop. To Aquinas, the crux of

free will is our power to choose which manifestation of the good we foreground (Jeffrey,

2015, p. 277-8). Response is the outskirts of the battle. Highlighting one practical

syllogism over another is the thick of the fight.

So if strong-arming behavior is insufficient as a means of developing virtue, what

is more effective? Where should we focus our virtue-developing activities?[17] To answer

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[15] Aquinas refers to the process of identifying and evaluating an object's possible descriptions as practical reason. The specific description under which we view an object determines which chain of practical reasoning—and thus, which action—we follow. Under the desire for sweetness, the cookie is desirable and to be eaten. Under the desire for health, the cookie is dangerous and to be rejected. In practical reasoning, I (1) identify each possible chain of action and (2) attempt to discern which chain of action I have most reason to do. Practical reasoning is the stage in which we sort through all the conflicting "raw data" of our beliefs and desires, assess our options and—most importantly—decide which we deem most important (see *ST* II.I.61.3).

[16] Although, as we will see in the following section, attending to a practical syllogism does not necessitate response on Aquinas's account.

[17] I am not saying regulating behavior is ineffective. It is a necessary part of developing virtue, and is characteristic of the agents at the level of continence (Kristjánsonn, 2007). Rather, I am saying that it is insufficient. Used alone, it fails to take into account that virtue is appetitive as well as rational. The fully virtuous person *desires* in accord with reason. A training regimen that ignores appetite, as mine did, cannot be truly effective.

these questions, let us review Aquinas's account of virtue and moral development. He holds an Aristotelian picture of virtue: as habits of action and emotion that align the agent with the good. In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle defines virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (1999: II.6). Similarly, in his treatise on human virtue, Aquinas defines moral virtue as "good [qualities] of mind whereby we live righteously" (2018: II.I.55.4). On these accounts, virtue consists of the rational and appetitive habits that allow us to (1) easily grasp and evaluate the morally relevant circumstances, (2) determine the best course of action, (3) desire in accord with that rational conclusion, and (4) carry out the chosen response successfully. In the fully virtuous person, all these stages occur in tandem; desire promotes action and emotion, previous action and emotion promote desire, and both reinforce perception (Kristjansson, 2007, p. 21).

Aquinas offers adultery as an example. When faced with the opportunity to sleep with a married man whom she likes, a virtuous agent responds as follows. She identifies the possible descriptions of the action (*a means to be closer to the man I love* versus *a threat to my neighbor's peace of mind*). She automatically evaluates these descriptions and determines which best pursues the good: *my neighbor's peace of mind is more important than my sensory pleasure*. This conclusion is not solely rational. The good of her neighbor is more salient to her than sensory pleasure, and so she desires it more. The natural result is that she refuses to sleep with her neighbor's husband. As a fully virtuous agent, all of these processes are default; she does not need to explicitly identify and evaluate descriptions, or consciously direct her attention to one over another. Her mind

and appetites speed to the most morally accurate beliefs, desires, and responses possible given the information available to her. Virtue, in other words, is morally accurate belief, desire, and response made default.

It is important to note that this picture of virtue is *normative*. Achieving full virtue is difficult and rare. The belief that one object best manifests the ultimate good does not necessarily mean that appetite will pursue that object rather than another. Even if the FBI agent believes the carrot to be the best means of winning the beauty pageant to catch the terrorist to save dozens of lives, her appetites may still incline toward the tastiness of the donut more than the slimming benefits of the carrot. The agent may will herself into eating the carrot anyway (what Aquinas calls *continence*), or she may give in to her desire for sugar and eat the donut (*incontinence* or *akrasia*; De Haan, 2017).[18] There are thus two ways that we can fail to act in the best way possible: our reason can be mistaken in what it deems the best circumstance-specific manifestation of the ultimate good, and our appetites can fail to pursue the chosen manifestation because they incline more towards a lesser manifestation.

Virtue development has two corresponding focuses: the development of *practical wisdom*, and *habituation*. In Chapters Two and Three of his book *Aristotle, Emotions, and Education*, the contemporary moral educator Kristján Kristjánsson elucidates Aristotle's account. Habituation consists of "education through the instillation of habit (in the non-rational part of the soul)" (2007, p. 23). Through various means and methods, we train our appetites to be sensitive to the circumstances that best embody the good. Such

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[18] See also Kristjánsson (2006) for an overview of the levels of moral development in Aristotle's account of virtue development.

responsiveness helps our desires align with the dictates of reason. Practical wisdom provides those dictates. It is "the agent's discernment of the courses of action/reaction that best accord with the specifically human telos of eudaimonia" (Kristjánsson, 2007, p. 37). As we begin to think through possible courses of action, consider likely consequences, reflect on past mistakes, and the like, we develop the power to grasp the relation of descriptions to the good. As we habituate our desires and foster our practical wisdom, it becomes easier for the rational and appetitive parts of our soul to align in adopting the best practical syllogism.

I argue that attention direction can play a powerful role not just in *rationally* choosing the correct syllogism, but also in habituating our appetites. In the following section, I draw on the theory of valuation systems from psychology to show that repeatedly directing attention to a manifestation of good can make those types of manifestations more *salient*—drawing our appetites to those types more strongly than to others.

Attention Direction and its Effects

In our discussion of choosing between practical syllogisms established that *focusing on* one manifestation of good over another constitutes choice. But what, exactly, does "focusing on" entail? As Jeffrey (2015) details:

> When a human person acts, what she does is up to her in the following way: what *description of the action* she *fixates on* and so what she *thinks she ought to do* is a matter of her practical reasoning, which she is able to throw into reverse…. *human reasoning is free in that we can shift our attention to and consider actions under an assortment of descriptions* (p. 227-8; emphasis added).

To choose one practical syllogism over another is to *direct our attention* to one manifestation of good and away from another.

In Aquinas's view, attention direction is a purely rational activity. Practical syllogisms concern belief only. Appetites ideally coincide, but the act of directing attention does not necessarily entail that they will.[19] In other words, selection of practical syllogism is a matter of practical reason, and has no implications for habituation.

I imagine Aquinas would be excited to hear: contemporary psychological research suggests that the effects of attention direction extend not just to practical reason, but also to habituation.

Support for the Habituating Effects of Attention Direction

From a bird's eye perspective, my argument is as follows: The data from the psychological theory of valuation systems (Gross, 2015; Uusberg et. al., 2019) suggests that repeatedly attending to certain types of manifestations of good can make those manifestations of good more salient to us. Manifestations of good that are salient activate our appetites more strongly than those that are less salient.[20] Habituation involves training our appetites to the point where the proper types of manifestations of good are automatically salient. So attention direction contributes to both habituation in addition to practical wisdom.

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[19] I thank Anne Jeffrey for drawing my attention to this aspect of Aquinas's view.

[20] Chappell and Yetter-Chappell argue for a similar premise in their 2016 article "Virtue and Salience."

To rest easy that the research on valuation systems does, in fact, correspond to Aquinas's account, let's survey the similarities between each theory's core components (see Table 1). Valuation systems refer to "any mental system that represents the world and prompts action to help an individual to transition toward more valued states of the world. [...] These systems produce behavior that helps an individual to approach rewarding and to avoid punishing configurations of the internal and external environment" (Uusberg et. al., 2019, p. 163). The agent perceives a potential manifestation of good in the environment (i.e., "a more valued state") and the agent's desire for that state elicits action and emotion (Gross, 2015). Moreover, Gross explicitly specifies that the valued state is perceived; due to the perception problem (Uusberg et. al., 2019, p. 163) there is a gap between the agent's mental model of her situation and the external reality of the situation. The valuation systems theory accounts for the place of means in the spectrum of good from abstract to specific:

> Means and ends [are mentally represented as] future states of the world. Ends such as entering a room are mental models of future states that the individual is inclined to approach or avoid.... Means are mental models of future states that are likely to result from performing some action, such as a door being pushed open (p. 166).

The valuation systems theory confirms the scholastic picture of appetite and belief, including the role of perception and the spectrum of specificity as it relates to means and ends. The theory also confirms that the potential for differences in perception of good can result in conflicting systems of appetite and belief (Uusberg et. al., 2019). In the cookie example, I might register both savoring sweetness and feeling fit as valued states. Such

Table 1

Concept Overlap in Valuation Systems and Aquinas's Theories of Emotion Generation.

Stipulated Term	Aquinas's Term(s)	EPM Term(s)	Description	Examples
Value	Object of Appetite	Goal; target state	Something about which the agent cares	Sleeping well; maintaining scholarships; winning a well-paying job; developing patience
Situational element	Circum-stances	Situational element; stimulus; states of the world	Something in the environment that affects the agents' ability to achieve her values	Loud music
Registering	Cognition	Attention; perceptions of states of the world	Registering aspects of the external world	Recognizing that it is time to sleep; noticing the loud music
Appraisal	Rational cognition; practical reason	Appraisal; valuations of perceptions of states of the world	Evaluating those aspects as beneficial or harmful for value pursuit; locus of agent's ability to prioritize one value over another; can be conscious or unconscious	Recognizing that loud music will inhibit ability to sleep
Experienced emotion/ response	Passion	Response	The physically embodied emotion	Rising wave of panic; knot of anger in stomach

cases require prioritization of certain valued states over others, and in many cases, the locus of such prioritization is the agent's identity (p. 181-2; see also Berkman et al., 2017).

It is here that the data from valuation systems illuminates the habituating power of attention direction. Over time, certain types of goals gain positive or negative associations and become easier or harder to access. In Uusberg and colleagues' terms, they gain "valence tags" and "certainty tags" (2019, p. 182). The more we activate certain goals, the stronger their valence and certainty tags—and the more automatically we incline toward acting in pursuit of that goal type. In other words, repeatedly attending to certain types of manifestations of good can make those manifestations of good more salient to us, and manifestations of good that are salient activate our appetites more strongly than those that are less salient.

Thus, insofar as empirical data supports Gross's theory, it also supports the view that changing the manifestation of good to which we attend (i.e., foregrounding a different practical syllogism) changes how we respond to the situation.

In addition to theory and data, another source suggesting that attention direction, salience, and habituation are connected: character growth in narrative. Let us consider an example from the animated film *Finding Nemo* (2003). Nemo, a young fish, is stolen from his home and trapped in a dentist's office aquarium. While Nemo's father undergoes an epic journey across the ocean to find his son, Nemo attempts to escape from his fish tank. To do so, he must place a rock in a spinning fan. One wrong move, and the spinning fan maims him for life. Nemo tries several times to overcome this obstacle, but fails. Demoralized, he gives up on planting the rock and escaping. Yet just as he gives up,

he hears a story about his risk-averse father braving countless obstacles to rescue him. Inspired, Nemo re-attempts the fan and successfully jams it with the rock.

In this situation, Nemo has two possible practical syllogisms for "placing the rock in the spinning fan." Relative to the desire for safety, it is an obstacle to be avoided. Under the desire for freedom, it is a necessary means to the end of escape. Given his previous painful experiences with the fan, Nemo's default description is to see the spinning fan under the desire for safety. Yet, due to his powers of reason, Nemo has the freedom to redirect his attention from the good of safety to the good of freedom. Hearing the story of his dad's exploits prompts him to attend to the latter. Rationally, he questions the conclusion of nature and instinct and decides which action chain is most conducive to her overarching objectives.

But this is not the only thing to change. Before hearing of his dad's love for him, Nemo's appetite for the good of freedom was not as strong as his appetite for the good of safety. When push came to shove, while he rationally wanted freedom, he could not bring himself to pursue it. He gave up, or, became *incontinent.* That was the state of his appetites prior to hearing the story. If attention direction were solely rational and utterly separate from appetite, then we would expect his incontinence to continue. This is not, however, what happens. Dwelling on his father's commitment to the good of freedom makes the good of freedom "stand out" to Nemo in a way it did not before. The good of freedom becomes more salient than the good of safety. Correspondingly, Nemo's appetite for freedom becomes stronger than his desire for safety. The result is action: he successfully braves the blades and stops the fan.

We might pose two objections. First, this is a one-time occurrence. Nemo's previous fan-related actions suggest that he does not have a disposition for freedom to be more salient than safety. Can we truly attribute this choice to his character? Second, can we really say that Nemo *chose* to attend to the good of freedom? It seems that the good's salience was forced upon him by the story about his father. If his attention was caught against his will, we cannot say that the choice of attention originated in him. If Aristotle is right, this would make the action involuntary.

The answer to the first objection is straightforward. Of course he does not have a virtuous disposition—he is not a virtuous agent. He is a moral learner. We cannot expect those trying to develop virtuous dispositions to *have* virtuous dispositions any more than we can expect a ten-year-old on her first day of swimming lessons to know how to swim. To get from the point where we do not have a disposition to the point where we do have it, there must be a stretch of time where we sometimes act in accordance with it and sometimes do not.

I have two responses to the second objection. First, Aristotle's account of habituation *assumes* that virtuous salience imposed from the outside without the will of the agent can effectively contribute to virtue development (Kristjánsson, 2006). If we accept Aristotle's definition, then the objection has no bearing. Second, practical experience bears out that most will-based decisions to shift attention originate with a discovery located in the outside world. If I am an arrogant person focused on the good of my reputation, then I will not simply wake up one day and decide to direct my attention toward the good of someone else's reputation. Something from the outside world must invade my perception and spark my appetite to the point where I bring myself to take

action. In other words, something outside myself must make the proper good just salient enough so that I can bring my appetites to pursue it. If choice of salience could only ever come from us, then we would be bound forever by our own (unquestionably limited) understanding of the good.

With this picture in mind, let us review the role of attention direction in the process of motivation and action. We naturally desire the ultimate good, which takes particular form when we categorize an object as good. Nonetheless, because no object is completely good, any object can be seen in the context of different practical syllogisms: as helping some goods, and hurting others. We can thus identify these potential syllogisms and choose which most accurately embodies the overarching good. In cases where the best syllogism is not our default, we can voluntarily redirect our attention to the preferred manifestation of good. Ideally, for whichever syllogism we select, our appetites correspond to the belief connecting the situation to the good and result in virtuous response (whether emotion or an action). In cases of continence and incontinence, however, the appetites are activated by a manifestation of good other than the one selected by practical reason.

But not only is attention direction an act of practical reason, it can also contribute to the virtue-developing process of habituation. Repeatedly attending to certain types of manifestations of good can make those manifestations of good more salient to us. Manifestations of good that are salient activate our appetites more strongly than those

that are less salient. Habituation involves training our appetites to the point where the proper types of manifestations of good are automatically salient. So attention direction contributes to both practical wisdom and habituation—and thus, to virtue development.

In the following chapter, we consider how popular films may help us develop greater control over our attention direction.

CHAPTER TWO

Look Where the Camera Points You:

A Thomistic Perspective on the Attention-Directing Power of Narrative Structure

When I first told some teenage friends that I was writing about how stories can help us develop virtue, their reactions told all. A few nods with rapidly glazing eyes, a shift to the slightly more formal tone with which one addresses an exacting grandmother, and a well-meaning attempt to summarize what I had just told them:

"So, if you watch movies about nice people being nice, that'll help you be nicer? Cool."

Subtext: *Movies about nice people being nice? Boriiiiing.*

In most real-world settings that I have experienced, the combination of "movies" with "virtue" conjures images of torturously cheesy films with two-dimensionally "moral" characters and conflict that can't survive for more than five seconds without getting resolved: entertainment that no one in their right mind would go out of their way to see.

Those are not the types of stories I am talking about.

To be clear, exemplars of virtue are not limited to poorly told stories. Indeed, exemplars written well can be powerful influences on the moral development of audience members. However, watching virtuous people be virtuous is not the only means by which story can help us develop virtue. Another source of its power lies in its ability to direct our attention toward certain morally relevant aspects of a situation and away from others.

Because attention direction is a locus of virtue development and stories direct our attention, we can use the attention-directing power of narrative to accustom ourselves to virtuous vision. Drawing on Aquinas's doctrine of free decision, we have defined attention direction as focusing on one *practical syllogism* over another. Since the description determines which value[1] we activate (and, by extension, which response sequence we pursue), attention direction is a key means by which we prioritize one value over another. For Aquinas, value prioritization is the locus of moral responsibility. Attention direction is thus intrinsically moral insofar as it involves value prioritization. Because virtue development involves repeatedly choosing to think, desire, and respond well, and the locus of choosing to think, desire, and respond well is attention direction, attention direction is a locus of virtue development.

In this chapter, I map the structure of popular narrative onto the Thomistic moral foundation.[2] Specifically, I draw on screenwriters' and cognitive psychologists' accounts of story structure to argue that films direct our attention toward some values over others. I first map both creative and cognitive accounts of narrative structure onto Thomistic-Aristotelian action theory, suggesting that the structure of action underlies that of story. I then demonstrate that popular narrative structure requires value prioritization for the sake of logical coherence, suggesting that attention direction is intrinsic to story DNA. The

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[1] From this point forward, I will use the term *value* to refer to a manifestation of the good that is approximately one level more specific than *synderesis* without yet being bound to the circumstances in a given situation. For example, Frodo's desire for the other hobbits' wellbeing and his desire for safety would constitute values in my stipulated definition. Schwartz's *theory of values* (2012) offers a psychological precedent for referring to goods at this level of abstraction.

[2] I use the term *popular* narrative structure to delineate the narrative structure that most closely reflects the goal-orientation of the human mind, thus resonating with audiences across time and culture. The discussion of cognitive narrative science below explains this concept in greater depth. Given my emphasis on screenwriters, I will also use the terms *story, narrative,* and *film* interchangeably.

resulting *Thomisto-Narrative framework* thus outlines how popular narrative structure can acclimate us to virtue development.

Popular Story Structure and the Doctrine of Free Decision

Cognitive psychology and popular screenwriting wisdom suggest that story has the same action structure as Thomistic-Aristotelian action theory. Cognitive psychologists and screenwriting instructors both seek to identify the abstract patterns that remain consistent across a variety of content. For example, while the *content* of a folktale about Anansi the Spider and of *Iron Man* (2008) are substantially different, both are still stories. What common characteristics place the two in the same category?

The fields of cognitive psychology and screenwriting offer closely connected explanations. The cognitive anthropology of narrative suggests that popular narrative structure (i.e., the common features of narratives that connect with large numbers of people from a wide variety of backgrounds over a long period of time) results from a sort of entertainment natural selection (Singh, 2019). Storytellers notice the features of narrative that consistently connect with audiences and carry them through to future telling. Features that do not connect are discarded. This adaptability, or the lack thereof, determines which cavemen are called upon for fireside entertainment, which Tudor playhouse draws enough viewers to stay in business, and which multi-million-dollar studio makes a profit. Because of this principle, a large body of enduring narratives from around the world tend to demonstrate common features (Singh, 2019; Campbell, 1949). Insofar as storytellers seek to succeed in connecting with large numbers of people from a wide variety of backgrounds over a long period of time, then, they have reason to identify

the common features of popular narrative and integrate those features into their own works (Vogler, 2007; Murray, 2018).[3] In this way, the realities that cognitive scientists describe and the ideals that screenwriting instructors prescribe are intrinsically connected.

The first major scholar to posit the connection between narrative structure and the action structure was Aristotle.[4] In Book Four of the *Poetics,* he suggests that human beings have an innate love for imitation, and that narrative is where this instinct for imitation meets the fundamental unit of human life: action. Narrative, according to his account in Book Seven, is:

> Essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity… [narrative] is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself.

Stories, in Aristotle's view, are portrayals of human action. Based on his definition of action in *Nicomachean Ethics* (III.5), then, narrative involves portrayal of (1) things that are desired, (2) circumstances that impinge upon those desires, and (3) means chosen to pursue the desire given the circumstances. These three components further account for the role of emotion in audience members' experiences of narrative. In the latter half of Book Two of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle uses object and circumstance to outline the elicitors of several emotions. The key difference between action and emotion is that in the latter, the

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[3] Some storytellers do not have this goal, or have it only to a limited degree; witness the French New Wave and many arthouse films. The works where goals such as "pushing boundaries" or "free self-expression" take precedence over the desire to connect with a wide range of audiences are precisely those works with which I am not concerned.

[4] Incidentally, Aristotle integrated prescriptive and descriptive study of narrative in a way similar to this chapter's integration of cognitive psychology and screenwriting. The *Poetics* delineates the components of narrative with scientific categorization. However, it focuses specifically on the ideal elements of narrative—those that enduring authors have used to great effect, and that aspiring authors ought to emulate.

recognition of a circumstance's impact on a value is a feeling rather than a means.[5]

Anger, for example, he defines as "an *impulse, accompanied by pain* [feeling], to a

conspicuous revenge *for a conspicuous slight* [impinging circumstance] directed without

justification towards *what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends*

[something valued]" (1997: 1378a5, emphasis added). In these ways, Aristotle records

the first systematic observation of the intrinsic relation between the structures of action,

emotion, and story.

Contemporary cognitive psychologists, independent of Aristotle's analysis, have

reached similar conclusions. The cognitive study of narrative gained momentum in the

1970's and 1980's. Each of the researchers differ slightly in the extent to which they

break down narrative elements, but all involve the categories of *setting, problem,* and

action. For example, Rumelhart (1975) described narrative as a sequence of setting and

an episode, where the episode involves a problem and events leading to the problem's

solution. Mandler and Johnson (1977) take an even broader approach, referring to

sequences as a series of causally connected parts involving the interaction of setting and

event structure. In contrast, Stein and Glenn (1979) adopt a narrower approach by

describing narrative as a setting and an *episode system* involving an *initiating event*,

action, and some direct consequence of that action. Broader definitions are more

inclusive of works that do not fit a specific pattern, while more specific definitions are

more exclusive. Despite these differences in range, the original narrative cognitive

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[5] This structure corresponds to appraisal theories of emotion in contemporary psychology (Moors et. al., 2013; Roseman, 1995). Several neo-Aristotelian philosophers have also developed this structure in their own work, most notably Robert Roberts (2015).

psychologists agree that setting, problem, and action are the defining components of narrative.

Contemporary cognitive psychologists follow a similar pattern, but they emphasize the origins of this pattern in the brain to a greater degree than their earlier counterparts. In brief, they approach narrative as a cognitive structure for processing, storing, and applying information about goal pursuit. A narrative, on this picture, is a representation of goal-directed action (Scalise-Sugiyama, 2016). Humans are hard-wired to think in terms of goal-pursuit (Csibra, 2008). As a result, the structure of desire, problem, and means of overcoming the problem shapes the mental processes of attention and memory (Thorndyke, 1977; Owens, Bower, & Black 1979; Bower, 1982). Similarly, just as incoming information is sorted and stored according to this framework, so recounting information follows this structure as well. Insofar as narrative involves recounting the activity of persons, then, narrative tends to follow this hardwired structure. Specifically, Scalise-Sugiyama argues that narrative structure is "organized around the *actions* taken by a focal agent in pursuit of a specific *goal*, *problems* encountered in the pursuit of that goal (including the opposing goals of other agents), and *solutions* deployed to solve those problems" (2016, p. 2). The origin of narrative in the patterns of the human brain thus reveals something valuable about story structure: insofar as goal pursuit stems from the evolutionary era, and insofar as narrative structure reflects goal pursuit, narrative structure transcends cultural differences.[6]

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[6] Note, I am not saying that goal pursuit necessitate narrative on a cognitive level. Goal pursuit does not require narrative, but narrative requires goal pursuit. I thank Sarah Schnitker for prompting me to develop this point.

Because this structure is baked into our very perception of story, it should come as no surprise that storytellers have long drawn on this structure in composing narratives. Recall that popular story structure develops from a kind of natural selection determined by audience response (Singh, 2019). Insofar as storytellers want their work to succeed with audiences, it behooves them to adopt the structural characteristics that help the fittest survive. Enter: storytelling advice. For as long as young storytellers have struggled to master the art of telling stories, there has been prescriptive guidance about storytelling. That advice may come directly from a more experienced storyteller, as when a seasoned bard tells his apprentice the tricks he has picked up over the years for catching attention in a bustling marketplace.[7] That advice may come through individual study of enduring popular works, as when a renaissance poet draws from ancient Greek epics to construct his own, or when a film student watches every Tarantino film ever made thirty times to craft her dialogue. However it is done, learning to tell stories that succeed in connecting with audiences is often achieved through figuring out what has consistently connected with audiences over time and emulating it.

Popular screenwriting manuals, such as *Basics of Story Design* (Murray, 2018)*, Writer's Journey* (Vogler, 2007)*,* and *Writing Screenplays that Sell* (Hauge, 2011) distil such insights into book form. The authors of these works are professional screenwriters who have analyzed many successful films in depth and identified a set of common characteristics. Not surprisingly, these characteristics mirror the elements of narrative that cognitive psychologists draw from human goal-orientation. Specifically, popular

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[7] A specific example of such advice from early storytellers can be seen in the ancient Roman poet Horace's *Art of Poetry* (2009). In this work, Horace takes the tone of a crusty Hollywood screenwriter at 11:30 p.m. in a Los Angeles bar, sharing his hard-earned trade secrets at a cluster of wide-eyed twenty-somethings who hasten to offer him another drink to keep him talking.

screenwriting manuals emphasize three key elements: *goal*, *obstacle*, and *action*. As in

scholastic action theory, these elements underlie stories on a scale of specificity ranging

from abstract (e.g. saving people in need) to particular (e.g. defeat my uncle in a super-

suit fight).[8] Importantly, plot itself *is* action; it is, inescapably, about some *agent* (be she

human, anthropomorphic fish, or even anthropomorphic rock) *doing* something (Hauge,

2011, p. 19).

While cognitive and creative theories of story structure differ in emphasis, type of

support, and purpose, their definitions are strikingly similar. Each account identifies three

common characteristics of popular narrative: goal, obstacle, and action.

Goal

Scalise-Sugiyama suggests that the character's goal is the overarching feature in

our cognitive structure of narrative; "humans appear to make sense of narrative by

ascertaining the goals of the characters and using them as a schema for interpreting and

organizing the characters' actions and feelings" (2016, p. 2). Human beings are wired to

think of action in terms of the actor's goal. For example, in a 2014 study of infant's

recognition of goals in observed action, Csibra and colleagues suggest that goal-

orientation is hard-wired into the human psyche. The study demonstrated that year-old

infants can register both the goal that underlies an agent's actions and the constraints that

reality poses on possible actions given the goal. Similar studies have found that

individuals both remembered story elements related to a goal better than those not related

to a goal, and labeled the goal as the most important aspect of the story (Thorndyke,

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[8] This intention could be broken down into an even more particular objective (e.g. break his helmet with my fist).

1977; Owens, Bower, & Black 1979; Bower, 1982). These cognitive theories and empirical findings suggest that narrative is a function of the natural human inclination to see agential action in terms of goals.

A variety of cognitive theories support this connection between narrative and the agency system's goal-pursuit schemas. Owens et al. (1979) found that we recall story actions and events better when we connect them with the goals which they advance or impede. Furthermore, both memory and planning involve the goal-directed narrative elements of agents, setting, and actions (Schank,1990; Scalise-Sugiyama, 2016). Both memory and planning take the same form: the mind retrieves experience from memory in the form of events affecting goals, the actions taken to achieve those goals given the constraints of the setting, and the outcome of those actions. Nor is this hard-wired attention to goal limited to Western culture. Mandler et al. (1980) found that both Liberians and Americans default to the schema of goal-explanation. Their findings held true across schooling and literacy differences, as well. Humans are agents, actors in pursuit of a goal. Like scholastic action theory, narrative structure brings this skeleton to the surface.

Screenwriters tend to use the terms *want* or *need* rather than *goal,* buth they agree with cognitive psychologists that such needs are what drive the story (Murray, 2018; Hauge, 2011; Snyder, 2005; Egri, 1960). As Michael Hauge argues, all movies boil down the statement, "It's about a ____ who wants to ____" (2011, p. 19). Consider the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* (2008)*,* in which Walter, a high-school teacher with terminal cancer, cooks and sells meth in order to provide for his family. In Hauge's framework, this story "is about a *high-school chemistry teacher with terminal cancer* who wants to

secure a future for his family before he goes." The agent's need for something valued

drives the story.

These abstract needs take concrete shape as the specific objective that drives the

action that comprises the plot. One name for the plot-level objective is the *McGuffin*

(Murray, 2018), a term introduced by British screenwriter Angus MacPhail, popularized

by Alfred Hitchcock, and championed by such directors as George Lucas and Steven

Spielberg (Windolf, 2008). The McGuffin is the orienting and driving force that

motivates the characters' pursuits. For example, Walter White's McGuffin in the pilot

episode is to get a stack of cash. This is a particular iteration of his more abstract need

(love of family) gained by combining the abstract need with the relevant conditions

established in the setting (e.g. paying his son's medical bills and supporting the coming

baby). Needs appear in an even more specific iteration on the level of scene: for example,

Walter's *scene-need* is to steal chemistry equipment from the high school at which he

works (in order to make meth, in order to make money, in order to pay the children's

bills, in order to provide security for his family, in order to love them). Screenwriting

wisdom agrees with cognitive science: on all levels of a narrative, the character's needs,

in the form of goals, drive the action comprising the plot.

Problem

A problem involves both a desire to remain in or achieve some state, and a

situation which prevents the character from remaining in or achieving that state.[9]

Terminal cancer makes it such that Walter's family will be homeless if he cannot find a

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[9] Importantly, a "problem" is not necessarily negative. It might also be an opportunity that requires certain uncomfortable actions if it is to be realized.

way to make money for them. Anansi desires the state of being full, but there is nothing

to eat. Tony desires the state of helping others with his technology, but cannot do so if his

uncle steals it. In the cognitive narrative literature, Stein and Glenn's *initiating event* falls

into this category; as the name highlights, the problem is often the thing (or, at least, an

immediate result of the thing) that throws the setting's status quo into limbo.

Singh suggests that problems invest us in stories. In her words, "obstacles intrigue

us. We feel suspense when we hear about someone who has difficulty completing a goal

and want to learn more" (2019, p. 9). Obstacles also positively correlate with the

memorability of a narrative (Bower, 1978; Black & Bower, 1980; Brewer & Lichtenstein

1982; Mandler & Johnson, 1977). Human life consists of problem solving as

circumstances inhibit our goals. Watching agents with relatable goals face problems

involves us in the action, because we are neurologically hardwired to pay attention to

things that threaten our goals.

Screenwriters often refer to problems with the terms *obstacle* or *conflict* (Walter,

2010, p. 47; Egri, 1960, p. 128). Obstacles are the antagonistic forces that prevent the

character from achieving her goal, and conflict is the tension that results from these

obstacles. These antagonistic forces may originate in a natural cause (e.g. cancer cells),

other agent (e.g. drug lord), or internal cause (e.g. a tendency to make stupid mistakes),

but they always result in a visible change of circumstance.

Obstacles and conflict are the lifeblood of a popular screenplay. UCLA

screenwriting instructor Richard Walter puts it best when he says:

> Every scene, every moment in every movie thirsts for identifiable conflict. A
> responsible screenwriter should be able to point to any situation of his script and
> answer the question: Where is the conflict? (p. 52)

Screenwriting wisdom acknowledges that the essence of what makes a viewer want to watch a movie is the conflict that results from an obstacle inhibiting a need. It affirms Singh's claim about the importance of problems: on an intuitive level, threats to the things we care about draw our attention and invest us in the action.

Crucially, the time restrictions of a popular screenplay demand that screenwriters highlight only a few lines of conflict. To be successful, screenwriters must provide the information necessary to make the viewer emotionally invest in the character's struggles. However, in a traditional feature-length film, they must do this in only one hundred and twenty minutes.[10] Because developing emotional investment often takes time, popular screenplays usually highlight only one or two lines of conflict. The chosen lines of conflict determine which of the character's circumstances are relevant—and thus, which circumstances screenwriters include, and which they exclude. As we shall see, this limitation explains much of the attention-directing power of narrative.

Action

Early cognitive psychologists use the terms *event, episode system*, and *event structure* to refer to the actions which the character takes to resolve the problem (Meyer & Rice, 1984; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Mandler et al., 1980). As the name "episode system" suggests, this will often involve a variety of tactics which either fail,

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[10] The time constraint is intrinsic to narrative itself, not film alone. Television series such as *Breaking Bad* (2008), for example, have the time to develop more lines of conflict than a feature film. Even so, limitations still hold. It is simply not feasible to portray all possible lines of conflict; the result would make the nine-hour *Lord of the Rings* trilogy look like a ten-second TikTok. Moreover, differences in timespan do not change the fact that relevant, focused action maintains interest while irrelevant actions lose interest. A series that shows all possible lines of conflict would be unlikely to hold the audience's attention. For more on this point, see footnote 11 of this chapter and Aristotle's argument for the importance of relevance on page 60. Whatever the medium and whatever the length, the events of the story must be relevant to a few central lines of conflict if they are to maintain entertainment value.

cause more problems, or contribute incrementally to the overall solution. The problem/action pattern thus repeats in miniature within the larger problem/action framework.

Such a picture of action follows directly from the earlier referenced framework of goal pursuit. Csibra et al.'s (2003) *agency system* identifies action as an attempt to change one's circumstances to align with one's goal. As Scalise-Sugiyama argues, narrative is a function of the natural human inclination to see agential action in terms of goals. Action in narrative is intrinsically bound to the character's goals and her understanding of how her situation relates to those goals.

Screenwriters also view action as the character's choice of tactic aimed at protecting or promoting her value in response to the circumstances. As with value and obstacle, tactic selection takes place on a scale from abstract to specific. The largest-scale tactic selection occurs when the protagonist either commits to the quest, or re-commits after having given up. In the context of traditional three-act structure (e.g. Murray, 2018; Snyder, 2005), these turning points constitute *act breaks*. Between acts one and two, the protagonist commits to the quest (to use Murray's term, *Crossing the Threshold*), and between acts two and three the protagonist re-commits to the quest after seeming defeat by the antagonistic forces (i.e., *Breaking Through the Brick Wall*). On the specific end of the spectrum, this constitutes tactic selection in response to "red lights," or, scene-specific obstacles (Ackerman, 2003; Murray, 2018). In a compelling screenplay, each character enters the scene with an objective. Because obstacles and conflict draw our attention (Scalise-Sugyama, 2016), the character's first attempt at pursuing the objective cannot succeed: the lack of conflict would bore the audience (Walter, 2010, p. 51).

Rather, the character's selected means of approaching the objective must run up against an insurmountable obstacle which forces the character to try a different tactic if he or she is to succeed. For example, in the pivotal scene where Walter commits to making and selling meth, his objective is to convince Jessie Pinkmann, an established drug dealer, to work with him. The first tactic that Walter pursues is *asking* Jessie to join him. This tactic proves ineffective when Jessie mocks the idea and spurns his offer. Because the tactic with which he is comfortable will no longer work, Walter has no choice but to increase the intensity of his tactics if he is to succeed in getting a partner. The tactic to which he resorts is blackmail. This succeeds in overcoming the obstacle of Jessie's disdain, winning Walter a partner in crime—and a shot in succeeding in the business that will allow him to provide for his family. Aristotle was onto something when he said that story imitates action.

Scale of Specificity

As the various levels of action in screenwriting suggest, the goal-obstacle-action structure occurs on a variety of levels. The entirety of *Breaking Bad*'s pilot episode (2008) can be summarized as *a high school chemistry teacher* (agent) *dying of cancer* (obstacle) *tries to secure his family's future* (goal) *by making and selling crystal meth* (action). Similarly, by jerking the minivan steering wheel (action) in the opening car chase sequence, Walter (agent) avoids a pothole (obstacle), which allows him to continue escaping from the police (goal). This goal is, in itself, an action that contributes to the goal of remaining free, which contributes to the larger goal of providing for his family. Singh agrees, stating that:

Storytellers must causally connect the conflicts a protagonist encounters, ideally unifying them under a single goal… They establish an overarching goal (like destroying a ring) and string a series of obstacles leading up to it (like avoiding Orcs and escaping a spider), enabling longer, coherent sympathetic tales" (2019, p. 16; see also Bower, 1982; Trabasso & Sperry, 1985; Trabasso & Van Den Broek, 1985; Zacks et al., 2007).

Just as in Aquinas and Aristotle argued, the goals, obstacles, and actions in a story are nested in a scale of specificity.

Points of Connection

Let us take stock of the points at which narrative structure, as described in cognitive psychology and screenwriting practice, corresponds to Thomistic-Aristotelian action theory. To review, the latter involves four elements: a desire for some good, a perceived context-specific manifestation of that desire (i.e., a belief), practical reasoning about the best means to achieve the desire, and the resulting response. Action is what follows when we desire some good and see a circumstance-specific way of promoting or protecting it. Moreover, human action occurs on a scale of specificity in which more specific goals (such as avoiding the pothole in the road) serve as means to more general ends. Most importantly, every situation can be viewed under a variety of descriptions corresponding to each of the values at play in the situation. The agent is capable of attending to any of these possible descriptions, and is morally responsible for her selection.

Aquinas and the story literature correspond both in the roles of desire, belief, and response, and in the scale of specificity (see Table 2). Both assume that the character desires something. Narrative's problem or obstacle corresponds to the situational factors

Table 2

Corresponding Components: Narrative Structure and Thomistic Action Theory

Phenomenon	Example	Narrative Term	Thomistic Term
An agent values something perceived as good.	Peace in Middle Earth	*Goal*	*Object* (of appetite)
The aspects of the situation that impinge upon the manifested good become salient to the agent.	Frodo learns that the Dark Lord is seeking the ring.	*Obstacle*	*Circumstances*
The agent selects a course of action that he/she believes will change the situation so as to realize the good.	Travel to Mt. Doom to destroy the ring.	*Action*	*Means*

preventing the agent from achieving the desire. The character's action captures both the agent's practical reasoning and her action taken to rectify the situational problem. Furthermore, just as every specific human action contributes to broader action, so every scene-level action contributes to the overall plot. The two frameworks correspond.

Attention Direction in Popular Narrative Structure

Recall that attention direction in the Thomistic framework involved focusing on one description of a situation over another. Descriptions of a situation result from viewing an object in the context of a value. If I prioritize my love of gustatory pleasure, I

focus on the description of the cookie as a tasty treat to be pursued. If I prioritize my love

of health, I focus on the description of the cookie as a mass of empty calories to be

avoided. The choice to direct my attention to one description over another thus

determines both my value prioritization and my actions.

The key difference between a plot and life is that a plot is more limited in the

scope of what it can attend to. In real life, most possible descriptions of a situation are

theoretically available for us to consider. It is this very fact that gives us free will and

moral responsibility; if it were not possible to see a situation under more than one

description, then there would be no reason to praise or blame an agent for acting

according to that description. Nor would there be a means of voluntary growth through

choosing to attend to certain types of descriptions over others.

In popular narratives, however, an exploration of all possible descriptions is less

feasible. Recall that in order for a line of desire and the resulting conflict to grip the

audience, the circumstances that make sense of the conflict must be established. Consider

also that most contemporary films have no more than two hours to convey this

information and the ensuing action.[11] For the sake of clarity and emotional coherence,

popular screenplay plots emphasize a single line of intention and conflict. Screenwriters

include circumstances only insofar as they are *relevant* to the driving need. Characters

have a variety of needs just as real people do. Conceivably, Walter has the needs to

preserve social peace and to enjoy the taste of good food in addition to the need to

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[11] Contemporary serialized television shows, such as *Breaking Bad* (2008) or *The Walking Dead*
(2010), have the potential to offer more variety as they have an entire season to develop differing points of
view. The pilot episode of *Breaking Bad,* for example, exclusively portrays the making and selling of meth
under the description of providing for one's family. As the show progresses, however, the screenwriters
shift focus to include the description of making and selling meth as an obstacle to happiness in other
families' lives.

provide security for his family. An average human life has eight decades to navigate

these desires. A TV episode has one hour. *Breaking Bad*'s screenwriters could have

included a twenty-minute montage of Walter lovingly cooking and savoring a bacon dish.

Had they done so, however, it is highly unlikely that they would have successfully

captured the hearts, attention, and viewing patterns of over 6.7 million viewers

worldwide. That need, the description resulting from it, and the circumstantial

information that would establish and develop that description, are irrelevant to the story.

The nature of the medium, then, requires that it *highlight only a few of the value-action

chains possible*. Of necessity, popular plots are selective reflections of reality.[12]

Independent of moral concerns, Aristotle argued that well-developed stories ought

to highlight relevant action chains to the exclusion of others in Book Eight of the *Poetics*.

For a sample case, he uses the ancient Greek equivalent of a Marvel blockbuster: the

Odyssey (1999). In this story, Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, struggles for ten years to

return home from the Trojan War. Everyone from cyclopses to angry sea gods to love-

struck sorceresses fight to keep him from his home. Time is running out. Penelope, the

intelligent and noble queen of Ithica, struggles to ward off the advances of a hoard of

suitors. These unwelcome guests throw Odysseus' household affairs, his son's

inheritance, and his kingdom into disarray, and they pressure Penelope with ever-

increasing violence to forget her husband. Will Odysseus make it back to Ithica before

his home is ruined for good? With this narrative in mind, Aristotle argues that:

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[12] The disciplines of narratology and narrative rhetoric have explored the innate selectivity of
narrative at length. For example, Kenneth Burke argued that:

> [Agents] seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must
> develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain
> circumferences, function as a *deflection* of reality (1969, p. 59, original emphasis)

All the possible details contained within a real-life situation cannot fully be conveyed in a communication
from one mind to another. For further development of this point see Chatman (1990).

Homer did not make the poem cover all that ever befell his hero—it befell him for instance to get wounded on Parnassus and also to feign madness at the time of the call to arms, but the two incidents had no necessary or probable connection within one another—instead of doing that, he took as the subject of the *Odyssey*, as also of the *Iliad*, an action with a unity of the kind we are describing.... Story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposable or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole.

Aristotle's theory of the unity of action suggests that the most compelling stories are those in which everything that is presented relates directly to the core chain of action and reaction that comprises the plot. The *Odyssey* is about a man's struggle to return to his home. Only the events that contribute to this chain of action are included in the narrative, e.g. the tears Odysseus sheds on Calypso's island that evidence his desire for home, the suitors that embody the obstacle to his familial happiness, or the tactic of manipulating Nausicaa to get a ride to Ithacae. Components that relate to different lines of desire and action, such as feigning madness and getting wounded on Parnassus, are cut. If an event is not related to the protagonist's goal, the obstacles to that goal, or the action taken to overcome the obstacles, then including it only damages the integrity, unity, and entertainment value of the story. Ideal stories (or, by my stipulated definition, popular stories) include certain desires and descriptions at the sacrifice of others.[13]

In this way, the connection between Thomistic-Aristotelian action theory and narrative structure reveals how the medium of plot shapes the availability of information such that certain descriptions are more salient than others. Popular narrative structure focuses viewers on information about the protagonist's plot-relevant overarching desire

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[13] Those interested in the effects of narration should note that the innate selectivity of narrative structure does not mean that a story can only be presented from a limited number of perspectives (i.e., through focalization). A single desire line and the set of associated actions can be told from any number of perspectives, just as a disorganized mess of unrelated facts can be told from only one perspective. Perspective and the selectivity of narrative structure are distinct concepts.

to the exclusion of the other potential desires. It saturates the viewer's mind with information about the good that the protagonist's actions promote. It makes her prioritized value more salient to us than the other values she could have chosen. In other words, plot directs our attention to certain descriptions over others and serves as is the locus of morally balanced action.

The implications of this connection for virtue development are substantial. As we have seen, virtue development involves repeatedly directing one's attention toward the most morally proper description of the situation until that description becomes the default. If popular film narratives draw our attention to certain descriptions over others, then it follows that by nature of their attention-directing power, popular films may help viewers develop virtue.

It is important, of course, to specify what is meant by "helping" a viewer develop virtue. Indeed, one objection to this view is that narrative attention-direction may be of only limited use to virtue development because it does not involve conscious choice. If (1) virtue development necessarily concerns voluntary choice and (2) making a description temporarily salient to a viewer is not the same as the viewer herself voluntarily choosing, then (3) the benefit of attention direction is minimal at best.[14]

Three considerations from virtue ethics may clarify this difficulty. The first is the distinction between motivation and judgement. A morally accurate judgement is not sufficient for virtue. It must be accompanied by a desire to do the thing judged right (Annas, 2011; Hursthouse, 1999). As a result, the goal of virtue development is not only to foster morally accurate reasoning, but also to foster desire to do the thing judged to be

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[14] I thank Anne Jeffrey for pressing me on this point.

right in the situation (Annas, 2011). As established in our discussion of the doctrine of free decision, the more salient a good, the more it motivates us (Jeffrey, 2015; Hoffman & Michon, 2017). As a result, a key means of fostering moral motivation is making certain types of descriptions salient.

Second, the concept of habituation accommodates tools that influence the moral learner "from the outside," rather than channeling their free choice. Indeed, one of the main concerns with the Aristotelian account of habituation is that it seems to leave no room for operation of the moral learner's own agency. Habituation ideally occurs when the learner is too young to exercise practical reason by enacting means for chosen ends, making it the responsibility of parents and teachers rather than routing it through the learner's own will. While the "mechanical" nature of Aristotelian habituation may not be as extreme as is feared (Kristjansson, 2007), it drives home the point that Aristotle believed outside forces can affect moral learners' appetites without engaging the learner's will.

Finally, the difference between habituation in childhood and in adulthood means that the attention-directing power of narrative can engage the moral learner's will indirectly. Ideally, a child's parents, teachers, and community surround the child with things that make morally healthy descriptions more salient than other possible descriptions. Annas (2011) offers a picture of this ideal type of habituation:

> We encounter habituation first through our education, both in school and in the family… Either in real life or in books or movies we experience (really or vicariously) situations where people behave loyally or disloyally, and we are encouraged to find what makes them praiseworthy or blameable… We are trained and formed through being habituated to act in loyal and brave ways and to respond positively to presentations of loyalty and bravery. Small children, for example, are discouraged from cruelty to animals, and read and see stories where cruel children are presented negatively. They are encouraged to share their

possessions, and told stories where generosity is rewarded and selfishness is presented as repellent (pp. 5-6)

This habituation forms the child's motives right from the start, making moral judgments, actions, and feelings the default in the future. Unfortunately, in real life, such is rarely the case. For most people, childhood influences result in a mix of varying degrees of virtue and vice. Agents are then left as adults with a need to develop moral motivation and to change the default salience of descriptions if they are to achieve a greater degree of moral motivation and virtue. The key difference between children and adults, then, is the locus of influence on attention. Children have little control over the influences in their lives. Adults have much control. On the flip side, children have the opportunity to receive more help from the intentional efforts of others who have power over them. An adult's life is less controlled by the power of others, which means that any intentional efforts must be their own.

The most notable component of this difference is the role of salience. An ideally educated child naturally sees certain descriptions as more salient than others, because the child's parents, teachers, and community concertedly made those descriptions salient to the child and minimized the competing descriptions. Such is not the case with an adult. Aside from the features of an adult's environment that are determined by her culture and socio-economic status, almost no one can completely control the descriptions that are most salient to her; it is her choice to which descriptions she will attend.

This does not change the fact that the moral learner's appetites need to be made sensitive to the relevant moral concerns. It simply means that if the adult is to desire certain goods naturally, she will have to habituate herself. As we will explore in Chapter Four, the attention-directing power of narrative may offer a tool to do just that.

Both empirical researchers and creative practitioners affirm that the structure of popular narrative mirrors that of Thomistic action theory. The elements of desire, circumstantial obstacle, and action appear in both, and they do so on a scale of specificity. Films shape our perception of the relative importance of the values in a situation by including or excluding the situational information that casts an event under a given description (i.e., connects it to a given value). Humans are wired to take interest in problem solving and in goal pursuit. If the writer wants the audience to take interest in the actions that the writer chooses for the character, then, the writer must emphasize the goal that drives those actions, the elements of setting that explain this goal, and the obstacles which inhibit that goal. Because of the time limitations, popular screenplays highlight only those descriptions that are relevant to the story they wish to tell. In other words, to succeed in engaging viewers, a screenwriter must direct their attention to certain values at the expense of others. The screenwriter takes the place of the agent in choosing which possible description of the situation to emphasize. Attention direction, and the attendant moral responsibility, are present in both life and film.

In this way, Thomistic attention direction is an intrinsic part of narrative structure. Let us call our account of the attention-directing power of narrative and its moral implications the *Thomisto-Narrative framework.* Chapter Three will provide empirical support for the framework from the discipline of media psychology, and will explore the extent to which narrative attention-direction affects our thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

CHAPTER THREE

Chart Where the Camera Points You:

Empirical Support for the Moral Impact of Narrative Attention-Direction

The discipline of media psychology studies how messages, such as ads and films, affect viewers. While no media psychologists to date have drawn on a Thomistic action framework, a number of theories assume a picture of human action similar to that of Aquinas. If these theories are explainable in terms of the framework outlined in the first two chapters, then they suggest that the framework is empirically adequate.

In this section, I explain three well-established theories from media psychology in terms of the narrative and attention-direction framework established in the previous chapters. We will explore the theories of *affective disposition formation*, *antihero enjoyment*, and *appreciation*, all of which consider the moral dimensions of engaging in a character's struggles. For each theory, I first outline the phenomenon that the theory seeks to explain, and the central tenants of the theory. I then translate those central tenants into the terms of neo-Aristotelian attention direction, referring to the narrative dimension where relevant. Finally, I explore the impact of each theory on understanding the effects that film viewing can have on our habits of attention direction. Taken together,

this translation lends empirical support to the claim that attention direction, and all its moral implications, are intrinsic to narrative.[1]

Affective Disposition Theories

One of the central quests in media psychology research is to understand the process by which viewers emotionally engage in a character's struggles. We are clearly drawn to the experience of film viewing and find the experience in some way enjoyable. What explains the desirability of the experience? How, in other words, do we enjoy stories?

Affective disposition theories (ADT) are one of the best-established explanations of film enjoyment (e.g. Zillmann, 2000; Raney, 2002). The ADT family of theories suggests that enjoyment stems from our innate sense of justice. Viewers continually make moral judgments about characters' actions and motivations, and the result of those judgements determines the extent to which we root for or against the character (Zillmann, 2000). In narratives, as in life, when we see an action with moral valence, we feel an urge for the just deserts of that action to occur. Such anticipation forms the basis of our emotional engagement. It determines: (1) our initial like or dislike for the characters, (2) the extent to which we hope (or fear) for their success and fear (or hope) for their failure,

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[1] To be clear, these are potential connections which need to be backed up in greater depth than the current space allows. For now, my only goal is to demonstrate that a Thomistic action theory reading of film is not at odds with the empirical research—in fact, there is a high likelihood that they correlate.

and (3) our satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the outcome of their actions (success or failure).

In the ADT model, the process of emotional investment follows three stages. First, the viewer makes initial judgments about a character's actions which determine the extent to which the viewer likes or dislikes the character. We like those we judge to be morally correct, and we dislike those we judge to be morally incorrect. Second, the viewer hopes that liked characters will succeed, and hopes that disliked characters will fail. Finally, if a liked character defeats a disliked character, the viewer feels satisfaction. Similarly, if a disliked character defeats a liked character, the viewer feels dissatisfaction. The process reoccurs continually as the narrative progresses. In ADT, moral evaluation of the character's motives and actions is the lifeblood of emotional investment in that characters' struggles.

Justice is key to such moral evaluations. Raney describes moral judgment in terms of expectations (Raney, 2004); when a morally balanced choice is made, our immediate, intrinsic, almost primal reaction is to expect that a certain outcome *ought* to follow it. As Raney suggests:

> We like it when good things happen to our friends (or a liked character in a drama) because we think that those people deserve to receive good things; their benefaction is what is just. Similarly, we dislike it when an enemy (or a disliked character in a drama) prospers because we do not think that they deserve such; in such a case, an injustice occurs. Good people deserve benefaction; bad people deserve misfortune. These justice considerations are accepted as a key mechanism in all disposition-based theories of enjoyment. (2002, p. 310)

Such intrinsic expectations invest our emotions in the character's situation in the three ways outlined above. Disposition theories assume that humans are hard-wired, as it were, to see the world in terms of justice. Whether judgement is conscious or unconscious, morality is baked into our perception of the world.

Note that disposition theories do not assume an objective category of morality. Evaluations are shaped by the subgroups and norms to which an individual viewer belongs. While there are strong commonalities, specific evaluations can vary. Hence, evaluation can be seen as a comparison between the film's claim about just deserts and the viewer's own evaluation. By selecting consequences for actions, narratives can be thought of as making a claim about what is just in that particular situation (Raney, 2004). If that evaluation matches the viewer's evaluation, then the viewer emotionally invests to a greater degree.

It is also important to note that evaluation is not necessarily conscious. Recent work on disposition theories has explored and emphasized the ways that these moral judgments can be automatic. For example, Raney (2011) noted that viewers often "turn off" their moral monitors for the sake of escapism. A common motivation for watching films is to disengage from mental work, and too much conscious evaluation can get in the way. To account for this phenomenon, Raney integrated *schema theory* (Raney, 2011; Mandler, 1984) and the *social intuitionist model* (SIM; Haidt, 2003) into the disposition theory framework. Schema theory suggests that viewers form mental shortcuts, based on previous experience, for evaluating situations. These can relate both to moral judgments

themselves, and to expectations about which *types* of characters ought to be liked (See

also Shafer & Raney, 2012). Similarly, on the social intuitionist model and moral

foundations model (Haidt, 2001), the viewer's anticipation of outcomes are, themselves,

moral evaluations. Anticipation of outcomes corresponds to a sense of just deserts, and a

sense of just deserts corresponds to moral emotions (Raney, 2011).[2]

One other construct is vital to the process outlined in disposition theories:

empathy. The ability to empathize with characters determines the extent to which we care

whether or not they receive their just deserts. For example, Raney and Bryant (2002; see

also Raney, 2002) found that the viewer's level of empathy determines the extent to

which they can invest in the characters' goal and actions. Likewise, Janicke and Raney

(2018) posited that identification with a character allows viewers to temporarily adopt

their goals and emotions, thereby adopting the character's perception of the world.

Because viewers can then see the world from the character's perspective, they can more

easily engage in the character's emotions and goal pursuit (see also Cohen, 2001).

The central tenets of affective disposition theory correspond to neo-Aristotelian

action theory. Specifically, the two agree on (1) the nature of moral judgement, (2) the

ubiquity of moral judgment in human action, (3) the role of empathy on shifting our

moral judgements, and (4) the potential effects of shifting judgment on our long-term

dispositions. Of all connections, the nature of justice is first and most central. Recall that

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[2] Media psychologists have focused on contemporary media such as film. However, the principles
account for earlier media as well, such as Aesop's *Fables* and the fabliaux of the Middle Ages (Murray,
2008).

an innate desire for the good drives humans (i.e., synderesis). Specifically, *our*

understanding of what the good looks like in a given situation drives our feelings and

actions in that situation. Moral judgment occurs when a person prioritizes one perceived

good over another, as revealed through their action or displayed emotion. If the

demonstrated prioritization matches our own perception of how the good is manifested in

the situation, then we judge that response positively. If the prioritizations do not match,

we judge them negatively. The Thomistic account explains the role of moral judgement

in viewing characters' actions according to disposition theories. When a character makes

a choice or displays an emotion, they reveal their innate prioritizations. Just as in real life,

viewers compare those prioritizations to what they believe are the objective priorities in

the situation. If the character's prioritization matches, then the viewer judges the

character positively, which results in liking/disliking and hoping for their success or

failure.

The Thomistic framework accounts for the primal desire for justice that enables

viewers to emotionally invest in the unfolding narrative. For Aquinas, the good forms the

object of appetite: we desire it, we are innately drawn to it, we care about it, we naturally

pursue it and wish to protect it, from it stems the impulses that result in action and

emotion (Osbourne, 2015). Moreover, all action and emotion are motivated not by the

good itself, but by the good as we are able to perceive it (as determined by background,

personality, circumstances, etc.). When we see an apparently lower good subordinated to

an apparently higher good, then the situation seems harmonious. What is natural and

good has actualized, the desire for good is sufficiently met, and we feel satisfied. However, when we see an apparently higher good subordinated to an apparently lower good, then the impulse for good is violated. That which is right, natural, and good is kept from actualizing. Our desire, left unmet, rankles us. We feel the urge for order to be restored, for good to be returned to its rightful place. Consider one of the most-studied genres in disposition theory: crime dramas. Here, an apparently higher good (e.g. the health and psychological well-being of an innocent woman) is subordinated to an apparently lower good (e.g. the sexual desire of a rapist). Insofar as a viewer perceives the former to be of greater value than the latter, the viewer will feel dissonance when watching rape in a crime drama. Such dissonance stems from the perception that the good, as that viewer sees it, has been violated, and all the viewer's primal desire for the good rebels against the violation. The primal reaction takes the shape of a desire for the good to be restored, a reversal of the de-prioritization by punishing the perpetrator and aiding the victim. This impulse results in the emotions that disposition theories identify as the effect of morally judging a character's actions: desire for success in restoring the apparently right prioritization, and fear of the apparently wrong prioritization persisting. Moreover, it results in the satisfaction or dissatisfaction at the end of a justice sequence (Raney, 2011). If the apparently right prioritization is restored, we experience a sense of relief. If the apparently wrong prioritization persists, we experience a sense of disappointment. The impulse for the good drives all our engagement in the world around us, and as a result, it drives our engagement in the actions of a story. In short, justice sequences in narrative media express a judgement about the just deserts for a character's

prioritizations. If that claim matches what we understand the proper consequence of an action to be, then we find that statement satisfying (Raney, 2002). Likewise, if our intuition differs from that of the film, then the sequence leaves us dissatisfied.

Second, the Thomistic framework accounts for why judgement is such an innate part of the human experience (and, by extension, of the viewing experience). It explains why judgment occurs constantly, whether automatic or explicit. Because the desire for good is central to what we are as humans, it is baked into our perception of the world. The ubiquity of moral judgement in the viewing experience corresponds to the view that humans see the world in terms of desire-laden values, that a desire to approximate the good as closely as possible makes us sensitive to the prioritization of those values, and that our own perception of the good (i.e., the apparent good) determines which prioritizations we judge to accurately reflect the good, and which do not. Thus, when an action that we see or do prioritizes situationally manifested goods that action activates a sense of justice.

The parallels with the Thomisto-Narrative framework also offer insight on media psychology's hotly debated question of whether judgement in the viewing experience is automatic or conscious (Zillman, 2000; Raney, 2004; 2011). In the Neo-Aristotelian picture, most of the time we are not aware of our judgments. The virtuous agent naturally sees and desires accurately, and therefore has no need for conscious evaluation. Similarly, the vicious agent naturally sees and desires inaccurately, and has no knowledge of or desire for conscious evaluation. There are only two types of situations in which

explicit judgement comes into play. One involves virtue development. The best way to

approach the state of automatic accurate judgement is to practice judging accurately, and

practice involves conscious awareness of what one is doing. The other involves

extraordinary situations in which prior experience and habits are not enough to make

sense of the situation. In these cases, to orient ourselves and determine how we should

respond, we must stop and reason through the judgements explicitly.

Such a framework fully accounts for both the explicit moral judgements that

Zillmann (2000) posited, and the automatic judgements that Raney posited (2011; Ji &

Raney, 2015). Indeed, it offers a timely development to disposition theories' exploration

of judgment. The extant literature seems to consider automatic and explicit moral

judgments as, to some degree, at odds. The recent literature on automatic judgment has

been framed as "casting doubt on the view of viewers as tireless moral monitors;" indeed,

it has been suggested that Zillmann's original model of explicit judgment may be

obsolete (Raney, 2004). The neo-Aristotelian framework accounts for both types of

judgements without conflict, and even goes so far as to delineate the categories of

situations in which each occurs. Conceptualizing this debate along neo-Aristotelian lines

offers media psychologists a more inclusive picture of the phenomenon.

One possible objection should be considered before asserting that that disposition

theories support the Thomistic-narrative framework. Media psychologists have been

careful to make their discussions of justice explicitly subjective. Because media

psychology is an empirical discipline, it aims to avoid statements that assume particular

worldviews. Disposition theory research has consistently avoided making claims about universal morality. Indeed, claims about morality are often immediately qualified so as to refer only to the morality of the subculture to which the individual viewer belongs (Zillmann, 2000; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Raney, 2004; Ji & Raney, 2015). This position could easily be construed as inconsistent with the neo-Aristotelian idea that there is an objective good that all humans desire. The objection is particularly poignant when one considers that the basis of moral judgment is prioritization of value; in the neo-Aristotelian view (especially the scholastic view from the twelfth and thirteenth century Europe), there is usually an objectively correct or most healthy prioritization. If viewers' judgements of characters' actions truly have no objective basis, as disposition theories assume, then disposition theories cannot be said to support a view that assumes objective justice.

To bridge the apparent divide, the distinction between the good and the apparent good is vital. Recall that Aquinas and Aristotle believe that most things are not wholly good, and can thus be seen under a variety of descriptions. For any individual action, it is not the objective good that motivates it, but rather the apparent good. The fact that humans can only see a part of the good and are sometimes mistaken does not mean that the objective good does not exist.[3] If such were the case, then there would be no basis for

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[3] The longstanding debate between subjective and objective moral values (which traces all the way back to Plato's *Republic*) is too broad to consider in this chapter. It suffices to say, however, that the fact that viewer judgements differ does not make it necessary that all moral judgement is subjective.

calling Hitler unjust in his attempt to murder the Jewish population. Differences in viewer judgement are not sufficient to support the claim that all moral judgement is subjective.

Disposition theories can be explained in terms of a neo-Aristotelian framework of attention direction. And insofar as disposition theories describe something true about the viewing experience, they support the veracity of the Thomisto-Narrative framework.

Antihero Enjoyment and Moral Disengagement

There is a subcategory of enjoyment experiences that affective disposition theories have difficulty accounting for. Disposition theories suggest that, in any case where a viewer enjoys a narrative, that enjoyment stems from moral approval of the central characters. So, we would expect that most viewers would not enjoy stories where the central character displays morally poor behaviors and motivations. The box office, however, suggests otherwise. As of March 2021, for example, *Joker* (2019) was the international top grossing thriller/suspense film (making $1,072,507,517 in worldwide box office). The television series *Breaking Bad* (2008), featuring a drug dealer on a quest to build a crystal meth empire, won 16 Primetime Emmy Awards.[4] *Mad Men* (2007), featuring ruthless advertising executives in competition with one another, won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series four times.[5] Nor is the

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[4]*Breaking Bad—IMDb*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 9, 2021, from
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0903747/awards

[5]*"Mad Men" may tie record as Emmy's drama series champ | Awards Tracker | Los Angeles Times*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 30, 2021, from
https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/awards/2011/08/mad-men-may-tie-record-as-emmys-drama-series-champ.html

fascination with morally questionable characters a modern phenomenon (witness

Macbeth, in which a power-hungry Scottish noble murders his way to the throne).

Traditional hero films still dominate both the historical and contemporary box office; in

2019, for example, *Joker* made less than *Avengers: Endgame* (2019; $2,797,800,564

worldwide box office).[6] Nevertheless, the persistence of *antihero narratives* throws the

central tenet of disposition theories into question: If many (presumably non-

psychopathic) audience members can enjoy morally questionable characters, then can

moral approval really be the central mechanism of enjoyment?

Disposition theory researchers have integrated three theories to account for the

phenomenon of antihero enjoyment. The first is Albert Bandura's (2002; 2016) theory of

moral disengagement. Bandura suggests that when we feel responsible for a morally

questionable action, we find ways of changing our perception of that action and its

circumstances to avoid feeling dissonance. Specifically, Bandura proposes that we have

innate moral standards, and when we violate those standards, we feel cognitive

dissonance. Because we dislike cognitive dissonance, we use a variety of *moral

disengagement strategies* to reframe our view of the situation in order to make our action

appear morally justified, thereby reducing the dissonance. Raney and Shafer (2012; see

also Raney 2006) posited that we can use moral disengagement strategies vicariously on

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[6] *Avengers: Endgame - Financial Information*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 11, 2021, from
https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Avengers-Endgame-(2019)

behalf of the character's actions, thereby reducing the dissonance we feel at their choices and enabling us to emotionally invest in them.

Two other theories interact with moral disengagement to explain the phenomenon of liking immoral characters: *schema theory* and *identification*. Schema theory joined the discussion of moral disengagement and the previously mentioned debate on automatic versus conscious moral judgments at around the same time (Raney, 2004). Disposition theory scholars suggest that there are certain types of narratives in which moral judgements are not meant to apply. Viewers begin to recognize narratives that fall into the "antihero category" over time, and they form a schema whereby they expect antiheros to have morally acceptable motives. More exposure results in a stronger schema, which translates to greater ease in ignoring characters' moral violations. Narratives in the antihero category contain certain textual features, or *moral disengagement cues* that signal to viewers that this is the sort of film in which it is acceptable to disengage moral judgement of the protagonist for the sake of enjoyment. Scholars hypothesize that viewers who watched many films grow habituated to these cues, thereby finding it easier to morally disengage. Long-term viewers form, in short, a schema for antihero narratives that included moral disengagement (Shafer, 2015; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Just as real-life moral disengagement involves reframing a situation such that the action or motive appears justified, moral disengagement in film involves reframing the situation on behalf of the protagonist so as to make the protagonist's motivation appear justified (Janicke & Raney, (2013; 2015; 2018).

The third key theory is *identification* (Cohen, 2001). Janicke and Raney, (2015; 2018) suggested that identification and moral disengagement are processes that feed each other. Identification with characters prompts viewers to morally disengage so that they can enjoy the protagonist's journey. Similarly, moral disengagement allows viewers to identify with characters without feeling the attendant moral dissonance. Importantly, this view conceptualizes identification as an alternative to moral judgement as a starting point for the connection with characters that results in enjoyment.

It is here that the project of translation begins. Each of the three central tenets of antihero enjoyment can be explained in terms of the Thomisto-Narrative framework. Four key components correspond: (1) manipulating the salience of values by manipulating framing, (2) the nature of dissonance, (3) the role of identification in shifting salience, and (4) the nature of moral disengagement cues.

Moral disengagement corresponds to the role of voluntary ignorance in the doctrine of free decision. Aquinas suggests that agents can voluntarily choose to direct their attention to descriptions of a situation that highlight a lower good over a higher good for the sake of gratifying their current desires (Jeffrey, 2015; Hoffman & Michon, 2017). Each of the moral disengagement strategies involve a different means of highlighting lower descriptions. Such parallels suggest that both Aquinas's and Bandura's accounts of the phenomenon of moral disengagement follow the same framework.

The concept of dissonance is particularly relevant in a Thomistic context. Disposition theories' view of the internal moral standard whose violation results in dissonance corresponds to the Thomistic view of the agent's understanding of the good and proper prioritization in a situation. In both cases the agent's judgement can be more or less accurate, depending on the agent's calibration to reality. When the agent chooses to act in a way that violates that perception of good, the resulting dissonance is the natural reaction to having "begrimed" the harmony of justice and the good. The fact that such discomfort with disrupting the harmony of justice is so gut-level a reaction supports the idea that humans are calibrated for justice.

It follows, then, that media psychology's account of antihero enjoyment corresponds to a neo-Aristotelian conception. In Thomistic terms, a viewer who enjoys an antihero film desires to engage with the character, be it through previous experience (as schema theory would suggest), through identification (as later theoretical developments would suggest), or through both. The resulting vicarious connection leads the viewer to feel dissonance at the character's immoral actions; when the character prioritizes lower loves over higher loves, the viewer feels the innate injustice and discomfort. Just as in real life, such dissonance prompts the viewer to redirect their attention to the description of the situation that highlights that lower good. By making the prioritized value appear more important, the prioritization appears less blatant, and thus produces less dissonance. Hence, attention direction accounts for the phenomenon of moral disengagement.

In the Thomisto-Narrative view, moral disengagement cues comprise the filmmaker's means of "helping" the viewer direct his or her attention to the value that the character prioritizes. Specifically, the situational elements that the filmmakers include or exclude shape our perception of the situation. Recall from Chapter Two that the time limits on popular narrative require filmmakers to highlight certain valuation systems over others. Inclusion and exclusion determine which values we dwell upon, and the values we dwell upon determine which values are the most salient to us (Boulding, 1956; Chatman, 1990). In this way, considering the situational elements which filmmakers choose to emphasize or deemphasize reveals the description of the world that they wish us to see. In popular stories, that is the one that makes the protagonist's motive seem the most morally correct, and thus leads to the least dissonance.

Identification involves taking on the values and perspectives of a character (Cohen, 2001). In other words, identification involves seeing the world through the eyes of the character and, thus, directing our attention as the character does. The connection between identification and vicarious attention direction explains, in part, the relation between identification and moral disengagement. When the character acts, he or she views the situation in a way that prioritizes the associated value. If the viewer adopts the character's perspective, then it is only natural that they should perceive that value as the highest, at least for the space of time they are absorbed in the character's identity.

One revealing difference between current antihero enjoyment theories and Aquinas's view is this: Aquinas would call the claim that *a disengaged judgment is not a*

moral judgment misleading. His theory of voluntary ignorance (2018: II.I.76.2) suggests that disengaged judgements *are* moral judgments: just intentionally flawed ones. On his account, agents are morally responsible for voluntarily directing their attention to lower loves for the sake of making a prioritization that they believe to be wrong. Thus, the action of morally disengaging on behalf of a character is a sort of self-violation, as it voluntarily subverts one's view of good.

The role of schemas in habituating viewers to moral disengagement now takes on a sinister twist. In Thomistic terms, developing a schema of moral disengagement may correspond to developing a habit of immoral attention direction, and thus, vice. Viewing antihero enjoyment in Thomistic terms supports and specifies Raney's concerns about the effects of moral disengagement on viewers' wellbeing (Raney, 2004; 2011).

On a more positive note, the mechanisms that underlie antihero enjoyment affirm the potential of film to help viewers reframe situations in positive ways. Films prompt moral disengagement by drawing viewers' attention to the manifestations of certain values over others. The underlying principle, however, is simply that films can draw viewers attention toward certain descriptions and away from others: the definition of choice in Aquinas's doctrine of free decision, and the activity in which developers of virtue must engage. While antihero enjoyment research focuses explicitly on the morally unhealthy side of this power, the power itself is not limited to negative use. Indeed, the mechanism of attention direction that underlies moral disengagement cues is the very mechanism that makes films useful for developing virtue.

Furthermore, it is possible that moral disengagement cues may have even more specific positive effects. Antihero narratives could be used in moral reasoning exercises, allowing viewers to enter into a different moral system or different prioritization of values. Additionally, in many cases, seemingly evil actions are truly done as a reaction to situational and systematic features of the environment. Vicariously experiencing these conflicting forces can contribute to greater empathy for those in challenging conditions. It is also possible that developmental stage may moderate the negative effects of moral disengagement. While repeated exposure may foster chronic disengagement in immature viewers, it may spark change and growth for older viewers with long-established stereotypes.[7] Framing Antihero theories in the context of character development opens many avenues for further research and application.

In short, much like affective disposition theories, the exceptional case of antihero liking can be explained in terms of the Thomisto-Narrative framework. Moral disengagement maps onto voluntary ignorance by means of attention direction, which is morally culpable in the Thomistic view. Similarly, the role of identification in mediating moral disengagement for characters provides insight into how our experience of the character's experience might impact us morally. In the act of morally disengaging through a character, we (to some degree) determine our own moral character.

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[7] I thank Sarah Schnitker for bringing these potential implications to light.

Appreciation and Meaningful Media Experiences

Theories of appreciation arise from questions about viewers' motivation for watching films. It was well established in early media psychology literature that people enjoy watching films for the sake of having a pleasurable experience (Raney & Oliver, 2011). However, they did not account for situations in which viewers sought out media content that elicited sad or bittersweet experiences. The theory of *appreciation* offers an account of such experiences. Oliver and Raney (2011) distinguish between two motivations for film viewing: *Hedonic* and *Eudaimonic.* They drew the distinction from Aristotle's definition of Eudaimonia in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In their view, hedonic motivation includes the desire to experience pleasure and avoid pain. Eudaimonic motivations, on the other hand, focus on the needs for meaning and purpose. Oliver and Bartsch (2010) described this type of experience as: "an experiential state that is characterized by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience" (p. 76).

Eudaimonic media experiences (also known as "appreciation") contain both affective and cognitive components. In terms of affect, meaningful media experiences involve what has been described as poignancy (Ersner-Hershfield et. al, 2008), "bittersweetness," or "tenderness" (Oliver & Bartsch, 2012). They can also involve experiences of elevation (Haidt, 2003) in which viewers feel awe and connectedness to a reality greater than their own selves.

Appreciation scholars seek to identify the types of media portrayals that elicit meaningful media experience. Definition is difficult due to the subjective nature of meaningful experiences, but researchers have found several common themes and are in the process of refining their categories. In the past, scholars have posited that genera might be a determining factor (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010); for instance, that more "serious" genera, such as war films or tragedies, might be elicitors, whereas "empty" genera such as romantic comedies or action adventure movies might not. Yet later studies found substantial crossover between genera. Another distinction suggested was theme. Oliver and Hartmann (2010) studies this possibility by asking college students open ended questions about themes they saw as meaningful. Regrettably, the answers received allowed for only vague dimensions. The strongest elicitor of appreciation was portrayals of virtue (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). Oliver et al., (2018) describe virtue elicitors as: "The witnessing of exceptional acts of moral beauty such as kindness, compassion, generosity, or love." Seeing characters display these qualities inspires viewers to emulate those qualities, and to feel awe at the human potential for moral beauty.

Much recent research in appreciation has focused on self-transcendent media experiences, and the elicitors of those experiences. Self-transcendent media experiences are a subcategory of meaningful media experience that involves not just appreciation, but appreciation that is directed to something beyond the self (Oliver, 2018). Meaningful media experiences are thought to exist on a spectrum from self-oriented meaningfulness

to beyond-the-self-oriented media experiences. Self-transcendent media experiences are characterized by four elements: interconnectedness, human virtue, altruistic motivations, and spirituality (Oliver et. al., 2018, p. 384). For interconnectedness, portrayals of an individual drawing closer to the divine and further from our brute nature inspire feelings of elevation (Haidt, 2003). Similarly, we feel disgust and disappointment when we see humans moving closer to a bestial nature. Specific types of portrayals include particular acts of kindness or sacrifice (see also Janicke & Oliver, 2017). Portrayals of virtue, as described above, have a similar effect. Self-transcendent experiences are often connected with increased altruistic motivation. They are also connected with a sense of spirituality; Oliver et. al. (2018) argued that viewers can use media to understand their own mortality (Klimmt, 2011; Rieger et al., 2015), contemplate spiritual values, and to experience profound emotions such as awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003).

The effects of appreciation may help determine the extent to which vicarious attention direction can actually impact real-life perspectives, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Initial research suggests that engaging in meaningful media experiences can change viewers' ways of seeing the world in a eudaimonically healthy way. Specifically, scholars have suggested that the cognitive challenge involved in meaningful media can contribute to the development of habits of reappraisal due to the need to make sense of dissonance-inducing portrayals:

> Cognitive coping outcomes such as meaning-making and reappraisal, by contrast, can be stored in memory and can be reactivated in times of distress. In other words, after exposure to the entertainment stimulus has ended… eudaimonic appreciation can last as long as individuals' memory of meaning and insights

gained from the entertainment stimulus (Bartsch & Oliver, 2016, p. 88; See also Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Gross, 2002).

Recall from Chapter One that reappraisal maps closely with the Thomistic framework of attention direction. Reappraisal is a sub-theory within valuation systems research that corresponds to Thomistic action theory and accounts for the effects of attention direction. Insofar as cognitive challenge, a defining characteristic of eudaimonic media experiences, affects the process of reappraisal appreciation offers empirical support to attention direction.

More recent studies explored correlations between meaningful media experiences and virtue-specific behaviors. Slater and colleagues (2017) explored the correlation between these experiences and willingness to accept delayed rewards. Specifically, they suggested that media experiences that focus us on the transience of life can make us feel closer to our future selves, which can make long-term values more salient to us.

Eudaimonic media experiences may also affect viewer motivation. Meaningful media experiences have been connected with motivation and desire to "do good deeds or to be more charitable… to embody moral virtues…[and with] prosocial action tendencies such as helping or charitable donation" (p. 87; see also Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). Furthermore, meaningful media experiences focused on connectedness and empathy can reduce negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups (Oliver, Dillard, et al., 2012; Oliver, Hoewe, Kim, Cooke, & Shade, 2013).

The phenomenon of meaningful media experiences provides evidence of (1) a motivation for eudaimonic living, (2) specific types of vicarious experience that can

make us experience some aspect of eudaimonic of living, and (3) effects that this vicarious experience can have on our tendencies to pursue eudaimonia. The theory is concerned with the same phenomena that Aquinas had in mind. It corresponds to the neo-Aristotelian view that human beings are designed for happiness and that the human heart contains a deep longing for that happiness that pervades many of our actions, particularly those that make the overarching aim of life salient to us. To see that longing empirically verified in the context of film viewing supports the idea that films can direct us toward the actions and thoughts that are relevant to happiness.

Not only do the *motivation*s for engaging in meaningful media experiences resonate with the action theory rooted in a notion of universal, necessary desire for happiness, but the cognitive *processes* by which such experiences occur also correspond. The cognitive challenge component of appreciation might correspond to the process of identifying the various descriptions possible in a situation and determining which is correct. An in-depth example comes from Bartsch and Oliver's (2016) discussion relating cognitive challenge to the *process model of emotion regulation* (Gross, 2015). As discussed in Chapter 1, cognitive reappraisal corresponds directly to the process of identifying, selecting, and attending to a description judged to be more accurate (see also Marple et. al., under review). If such is the case, cognitive challenge would likely correspond to the introduction of obstacles in story structure. Obstacles cognitively challenge agents. If they are to achieve their goal, they must seek out previously unknown means of coping and/or try means that are outside their experience (McKee,

1997, p. 147). Both of these activities cognitively challenge agents. Insofar as viewers

identify with the characters and invest in their goals, they experience a similar cognitive

challenge. It also stands to reason that the bigger the obstacle, the less certain the agent is

in her ability to find and/or enact an effective means to the end. Thus, greater levels of

cognitive challenge may correlate with plot-level obstacles, such as those that occur at

major plot points where the character is forced to commit to courses of action that set the

trajectory for the following scenes. It further corresponds to these plot points insofar as

beats involve choices that move the protagonist away from one value and toward another

value (Egri, 2009, p. 75). Insofar as the values correspond to a self-oriented good and a

self-transcendent good, respectively (Vogler, 2007, p. 209), the cognitive change

occurring at these beats corresponds to the development of eudaimonic experiences.

The affective dimension of appreciation can also be understood in terms of

attention direction. Of the three types of eudaimonic affect, I will focus predominantly on

mixed affect in response to portrayals of virtue, specifically in the context of self-

transcendent meaningful experiences. As explained in Chapter One, the neo-Aristotelian

tradition and appraisal theories of emotion consider emotion to be a gut reaction to an

element of the situation that impacts a value; for example, Walter White's cancer affects

his ability to provide for the family he loves, thereby creating feelings of sadness and

fear. The neo-Aristotelian tradition suggests that mixed affect may correspond to this

framework is situations that place two or more equally desired goods in conflict.

Consider the climax of *Wonder Woman* (2017). Diana, an Amazon princess, seeks to free

the humans from WWI by defeating Aries, the god of war. The set up for the climax occurs when Steve Trevor, an American spy and the romantic interest, sacrifices himself and his future with Diana to save the nearby communities from a bomb. The pain and love that his action combines motivates Diana to dig deep inside and find the strength to overcome Aries in their final battle. This example demonstrates the relation of conflicting-value situations to the self-transcendence spectrum of meaningful experiences. Insofar as the two goods in conflict involve a self-enhancing value and a self-transcendent value, choosing to attend to the latter over the former could explain the moral beauty and virtue elicitors (Oliver & Batrch, 2011), particularly those that elicit meaningful experiences that are closer to the self-transcendent end of the spectrum (Oliver et. al., 2018). Indeed, in the *Wonder Woman* example, the choice between one's own good and the greater good relates to the central theme of the film. Diana begins with a simple belief that all situations fit into the description of good v. evil; her experience of human depravity disillusion her. Steve's sacrifice, his love for the rest of his community, and his belief that the good in people is worth fighting for, help Diana discover the messy, painful, and beautiful nature of love in the human experience. Steve's decision to attend to the description highlighting his desire to save thousands of innocent lives rather than his desire to spend the rest of his life with Diana is an attention-direction choice; because we value both, even as we feel happy for the lives saved, we feel sad for the love lost.

Neo-Aristotelian action theory offers potential connections to other types of emotional experiences. The second such type is elevation. Elevation may correspond to attending to preternatural goods. To attend to something is to make its goodness salient to us, which means that we become more "taken with" that thing and more desirous of pursuing it (or simply enjoying its goodness). In this sense, elevation corresponds to seeing the beauty of things that are closer to the divine.

Finally, the poignancy that results from perceiving that something loved is about to end (Hershfield et al, 2008; Slater et. al., 2019) may correspond to the intrinsic wrongness of things ending. The nature of admiring a good is that one wishes the good to continue, to keep existing. If the good is particularly salient (or has become so over the course of the story), the fact of its ending is particularly sad. Such a Thomisto-Narrative explanation corresponds to the evidence that the bitter-sweetness occurs when salience of the good increases due to the knowledge that it is on the verge of ending. In neo-Aristotelian terms, the knowledge that the good will end motivates us to attend to that good more than we normally would thereby making it particularly lovely.

The effects of meaningful media hold important implications for the relation of the attention-direction framework to real-life development of virtuous attention direction through film. Most of the effects noted concern the desire to emulate moral beauty or to connect with others or to live in a way that reflects elevation (e.g. Oliver & Bartsch, 2011). Such an effect is entirely consistent with the attention-direction framework. Meaningful media experiences are a by-product of drawing viewer attention to the innate

goodness and beauty of higher goods, or to conflicts in which those goods play a role. According to the framework, attending to a value increases our desire for that value by increasing its salience (Jeffrey, 2015). If eudaimonic narratives make higher goods salient, it makes sense that they would increase desire to pursue those goods. Given that desire is the root of action, the connection further explains the correlation between appreciation, altruistic action tendencies (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011), and positive attitudes toward stigmatized groups (Oliver et. al., 2012; 2015).

The Thomisto-Narrative framework also accounts for more recent studies connecting meaningful media experiences and willingness to accept delayed gratification. On the Thomisto-Narrative account, meaningful media directs viewer attention to the value of long-term goods by reminding viewers of end-of-life experiences often connected with age and maturity. By putting the viewer in contact with their future self (Slater et. al., 2019), the narratives make the long-term good more salient. Because delayed gratification involves prioritizing a long-term good over a short-term good (even though the short-term good is usually more salient), the added salience of the long-term good makes the decision easier. Attention direction results in greater salience, which results in greater desire, which results in a greater inclination to act, feel, and think in accord with the good prioritized in attention.

Disposition theories of enjoyment, antihero enjoyment, and appreciation theories each correspond to the idea that films can direct our attention in morally balanced ways.

Such parallels do not provide direct evidence for the accuracy of the framework outlined in the preceding chapters. At least it demonstrates that the framework does not differ from empirically tested conceptualizations, and at most it lends empirical support to the Thomisto-Narrative framework.

Given the noticeable similarities, the effects outlined in each of the media psychology theories provide insight into the long-term effects of vicarious attention direction. Two effects are of particular note. First, films can acclimate us to moral disengagement; they can build mental schemas that make it normal to highlight lower values over higher values by focusing on the former and ignoring the latter. Second, films can stoke our motivation to pursue self-transcendent and virtuous thoughts, feelings, and emotions. They do this by directing our attention to the beautiful and meaningful goods at the heart of moral struggles, thereby increasing the salience of these goods. The two effects provide the groundwork for the analyses and heuristics in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Choose Where You Look:

Adapting the Thomisto-Narrative Framework for Analysis and Application

Martin wants his daughter, Anya, to be happy. She is twelve and three-quarters years old, newly discovering everything from the cute boy across the street to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954; 1955; 1956). He knows that the habits she forms now will shape and inform the rest of her life, and that as her father, he is responsible for helping her form those habits. He wants her to feel the satisfaction of chugging through that apocalyptic English paper rather than caving in under stress; the empowerment of getting up, going to sleep, and eating how she wants rather than how her impulses demand; the meaningfulness of reaching out to that ostracized friend in the cafeteria. He hopes she will learn to *intuit* the benefit of the good actions, *want* to do them, and continually *keep* doing them long after he ceases to be a key influence in her life; after she has taken the reigns and truly owns her own responsibility, tears, and laughter.

The question is: How will he help her achieve those kinds of goals?

Vivian wants to be happy. She is 22, in her senior year of college, navigating jobs and applications and the looming realization that adulthood is well and truly upon her. She knows her parents did not provide much training in the way of "how to be a good, fully-functioning person," and that she has to figure it out on her own. She wants to experience the empowerment of regularly eating carrots rather than cupcakes while sitting at her cold cafeteria bench at 12:13 every day; the groundedness of standing up to

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the overbearing team leader rather than silently grinding her teeth in a library meeting room as he insults a hapless teammate; the peace of not weeping on a semi-regular basis during finals week. She wants to be able to do these actions habitually, without thinking about them, through her first, second, and third jobs, wherever she moves, whomever she loves, right up until the day she dies.

How can she get there?

Tenaka wants to help people become happy. By day she writes copy for an independent ad agency and by night she writes screenplays about dragons and fantastical worlds. She has watched a number of TED talks on how the media affects viewers' tendencies to give to those in need, to bully fellow students, or to value relationships with others. She knows the power of movies from personal experience, too. As silly as it sounds when she says it out loud, *Toy Story* (1995) changed the way she saw her friends when she was ten. To this day, she goes out of her way to make time for calls to old friends and offer them places to stay: they are some of the brightest spots in her life. That, she knows, is the power of the stories she crafts day in and day out.

How does she go about applying those skills and actualizing her potential in her half-finished radio spot for Dawn Dish Soap?

Martin, Vivian, and Tenaka each want happiness, whether for themselves or those they care about. Specifically, they want to easily, automatically, habitually *incline toward* doing those things which lead to fulfillment, love, and satisfaction in everyday life. Whether they recognize it as such or not, Martin, Vivian, and Tenaka want virtue. And on a practical level, they recognize that where the rubber meets the road, the *process* of

ingraining these responses is often neither intuitive nor fun. They want to find down-to-Earth tools which will tangibly, effectively, intuitively, and *enjoyably* help them develop such elusive habits of response.

Story structure offers a tool that Martin, Vivian, and Tenaka can use to respond to their unique situations. The previous three chapters explored how and why story structure affects character. Now, my goal is to translate that theoretical understanding into practical tools for parents, teachers, growth-conscious individuals, copywriters, and screenwriters.

As we have seen, attention direction is key to virtue development. Attention makes certain descriptions more salient than the competing descriptions, and correctly prioritizing descriptions is the root of moral free will. Story structure corresponds to Aquinas's concept of description. It prioritizes certain descriptions over others for the sake of logical clarity, vicariously directing viewers' attention. As a result, stories can influence the moral development of viewers by acclimating them to certain patterns of attention direction. Depending on the moral valence of these patterns, the effect can be either virtuous or vicious.

If such theoretical knowledge is to be useful for storytellers and consumers, it must translate into analysis of actual stories. It should empower screenwriters and copywriters to recognize the effect that their creative choices are likely to have, and to pinpoint practical means of improving the moral valence of their narratives. Similarly, it should empower parents, teachers, and individual viewers to detect the type of prioritizations that stories weave and to use that knowledge to avoid negative influence, develop moral reasoning skills, and foster habits of virtuous attention direction. If

adapted into tools of analysis, then, the Thomisto-Narrative framework offers the opportunity to galvanize growth through film viewing.

What do I mean by "tools of analysis?" I use the term to indicate anything that helps users identify (1) the specific components of a narrative that influence which description of a situation is most salient and (2) the valence and degree of the moral impact of those components. Good tools will allow users to get the necessary information directly, without getting bogged down in irrelevant details. They will also offer a systematic approach that clearly operationalizes the theoretical underpinnings. For content creators specifically, good tools will provide means not only of analysis, but also of generation; for example, a list of analytic questions that also function as brainstorming prompts.

In this chapter, then, I consider key analytical questions that serve these purposes. Specifically, they both direct users to the morally relevant components of a given media narrative and prompt content creators to develop and refine the components of their content that most affect the moral valence of descriptions. After listing the questions and describing how each relates to the Thomisto-Narrative framework established in Chapters One and Two, I demonstrate how they can be used by analyzing the pilot episode of the hit television show *Breaking Bad* (2008). Finally, I explore ways that the questions might be used in the contexts of parenting, teaching, individual growth, screenwriting, and copywriting. The questions reveal the moral effect of attention direction in a given story, pinpoint the textual choices that direct attention, and link that attention-direction to the

practical experience of virtue development. Thereby, the Thomisto-Narrative framework

could empower real people like Martin, Vivian, and Tenaka to grow and to help others

grow.

<p style="text-align: center;">*The Questions*</p>

Theoretical Basis

Three types of information are needed to evaluate the pattern of attention

direction in a narrative. First, one must identify the potential values and descriptions in

the situation. Chapter One established that a description, in the Thomistic sense, involves

viewing a situation in the context of one value rather than the other values that are also at

play; the description chosen determines, to a large degree, how the agent will feel and act

in response to that situation. Morality involves identifying the most important description

available and choosing to focus on it. To accurately capture the morally relevant

information contained in a media presentation of a situation, analysts must first identify

the potential descriptions at play in the situation. Doing so provides an objective baseline

from which to evaluate the inclusions, exclusions, emphases, and de-emphases of the

film.

As we explored in Chapter Two, the structure of narrative mirrors that of a

description. Both contain a value, a situation that affects that value, and emotional or

active reactions to the situation in pursuit of the value. Because of the limited nature of

focus in media, including some descriptions requires excluding others. Thus, the second

step in analysis is to determine which of the potential descriptions the story embodies. By

extension, we learn which ones it excludes. Since dwelling on a certain description and the attending values makes that value more salient, and because "practicing" focus on certain descriptions through film makes focusing on those descriptions in real life easier, identifying the embodied descriptions reveals the habit of description salience that viewing the film in question is likely to instill.

The fact that writers include a description of a situation does not imply that they present it in a positive light. Take, for example, the portrayal of the antagonist's perspective in the film *The Return of the Jedi* (1983). Luke Skywalker, the champion of the Rebellion that seeks to overthrow the cruel and unjust rule of Emperor Palpatine, faces off against Palpatine near the climax of the film. Palpatine then explains to Luke his vision for the universe and offers Luke a place in it. In this instance, the filmmakers do embody Palpatine's description of the story situation. The larger context to which the filmmakers have drawn our attention, such as the millions of innocent lives that Palpatine has snuffed out and the cruelty of Palpatine and his henchmen as they pursue their ends, prompts us to adopt the description that the rebellion's quest embodies rather than the description that Palpatine presents. To fully grasp the moral impact of the descriptions present in a narrative, analysts need also to identify the valence with which those descriptions are portrayed.

So moral evaluation of narrative attention direction requires knowledge of the values at play, the values selected and ignored, and the valance of the portrayed values. The Thomisto-Narrative questions direct the analyst to each of these three types of information. The first category of questions prompts the viewer to use their own common sense and knowledge of the world to extrapolate, independent of the story's portrayal,

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which values would be at play if the story situation were real. The second category of questions then directs the analyst to the descriptions that the filmmakers actually include, specifically the elements of plot and setting that embody the components of a description. These questions chart the manifestations of goal, obstacle or opportunity, and action that comprise inclusions, exclusions, emphases, and de-emphases of description. Finally, the third category of questions interrogates the degree of positivity or negativity in the portrayal of the descriptions. The questions in this category highlight the attitude toward each description that the film models for the viewer. Together, the three sets of questions reveal which descriptions the film prompts us to focus on and view favorably, and those which the film prompts us to ignore or view unfavorably. The result is that the analyst walks away with a well-rounded understanding of the type of value prioritizations to which watching the film will habituate viewers.

Narrative structure is key to the second and third categories of analysis. As established in the second chapter, the elements of goal, obstacle, and action pervade narrative on a scale from abstract (plot-level) to specific (scene-level). It is through the manifestation of goals, obstacles, and actions in the circumstances of the story in question that a narrative embodies descriptions and makes some more salient than others. Each question directs viewers to the embodied goals, obstacles, and actions on each level of specificity. Such direction makes analysis concrete and objective, leaving less to subjective interpretation and making the analysis more practical.

The questions I propose are meant as a flexible guide, and not every one applies to every film. Rather, each film will likely use some elements more than others in their

Table 3

Thomisto-Narrative Questions

Category 1. Descriptions at Play in Situation

> Consider the events that the story represents. What are the values, or, that the events stand to injure or aid? *Ignore, for the moment, whether or not the story portrays each of these values.*

Category 2. Descriptions Embodied in Story

   A. Which apparent good does the Protagonist pursue?

   B. Which apparent good does the Antagonist pursue?

   C. Which goods do the main obstacles endanger?

   D. Which goods are highlighted in the Dilemma and Threshold? At the Midpoint? Brick Wall? Climax? Resolution?

   E.

   F. Which goods are at play in the stakes?

   G. How are the larger goals and obstacles embodied in scene-level obstacles?

   H. Are any goods represented by particular things? People? Places? Actions?

   I. How often do the embodiments of the various goods appear?

Category 3. Valence of Embodied Descriptions

   A. Are the people, places, actions, and/or things that embody each good portrayed as likeable or unlikeable? To what extent?

      a.

   B. As beautiful or ugly? To what extent?

   C. As petty and selfish or as noble and altruistic? To what extent?

Category 4. Final Evaluation

   A. Which of the goods at play in the situation get the most screen time? Which are ignored or minimized?

   B. Which are portrayed as desirable? Which are portrayed as undesirable?

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framing. The primary goal is to direct the analyst toward those elements of the plot and setting that are most closely connected to descriptions in the Thomistic sense, and to let those findings serve as a springboard for further exploration. As we shall now see, the questions can be used in different ways by different people, from parents to copywriters.

Questions in Analysis

Let's turn our attention to the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad*. Walter White, the protagonist, is a high-school teacher who discovers that he has terminal cancer and decides to cook and sell meth in order to provide for his family.

Values at Play

The first category of questions draws on the viewer's common sense and understanding of the world. Not only does Walter have terminal cancer, but he also has a pregnant wife and disabled son. He is forced to work degrading side-jobs to make ends meet. He is a genius at chemistry, and the crystal meth trade offers a lucrative means of securing his family's future. The context suggests that the security of Walter's family and the safety of individuals and families threatened by the drug trade are relevant goods in the situation.

Values Included v. Excluded

Of the possible descriptions, the value of the security of Walter's family takes precedence. Three aspects of the plot embody that description: Walter's goals (on all levels of specificity), key obstacles, and scene-level action.

The need to make money drives Walter's actions. Recall the scale of specificity from Chapters One and Two. Situation-specific goals are not only goals in and of themselves, but also means to more abstract goals. The need for money is thus simply a particular iteration of his more abstract need (love of family) combined with the particulars of his situation (e.g. paying his son's medical bills and supporting the coming baby). In an even more specific iteration, Walter's scene-need is to steal chemistry equipment from the high school at which he works: in order to make meth, in order to make money, in order to pay the children's bills, in order to provide security for his family, in order to love them. At each level of detail, then, the value of family centers the pilot's plot.

The overarching obstacle is the terminal cancer, as Walter's family will be homeless if he cannot find a way to make money for them. Concrete examples of the impact that cancer has on Walter's family further focus our attention on the value of family. In the scene after Walter learns he has cancer, his wife, Skylar, unaware of the diagnosis, reminds Walter that spending $15 for printer paper is beyond their means. Including this conflict underscores the extent of the financial difficulty in which Walter's illness will place the family. If $15 breaks the bank, what will be the financial effect of chemotherapy? How will the family function when the primary breadwinner is dead? The tangible obstacles in scene-level action focus us on the importance of Walter's prioritized value.

The opening sequence frames the entire story in the context of family. Walter drives a minivan off the side of the road in a desert. He wears nothing but a gas mask and underwear. He displays signs of distress, swearing and hyperventilating. With police

sirens approaching and all escape options exhausted, he pulls out a video recorder and composes a brief message to his wife and son:

> Skylar, you are the love of my life. I hope you know that. Walter Jr., you are my big man. [He covers the camera with a hand and chokes back tears. He masters himself, then releases the lens.] You're going to hear some things about me. I just want you to know that no matter how it may look… I only had you in my heart.

This set of actions emphasizes Walter's prioritized value in two ways. First, opening with his declaration of motive gives us no chance to consider any other good at stake. Establishing family love as his motive at the beginning sets the focus for the rest of the episode. Second, quite apart from the content of his speech, the fact that his family is the primary thing on his mind, even in such a chaotic situation, tells us something likeable about Walter. He is devoted to his family. And somehow, that tempers the fact that he is now pointing a gun at the approaching police sirens. The screenwriters focus us on the goodness of Walter's value by making the end of his actions explicit from the start, and by impressing us with the depth of his personal commitment to that value.

The plot goal, Skylar's reminder, and the opening sequence offer just a sample of the many plot details that revolve around the value of family. They demonstrate how each action the screenwriters include in the script, even something as small as Walter covering the lens so they won't see him cry, focuses us on the extent to which he loves them. As we watch, the good of family dominates our interpretation of events.

Identifying omitted details is difficult for the obvious reason that they are not present in the story. Even so, there are two means by which we can analyze competing values. First, we can infer other objective facts about the situation that logically would be true were the presented circumstances real. Second, we can interrogate the actual

presentation of competing values: Which aspects did the screenwriters choose to include, and in what way?

In the episode, there is a conspicuous lack of reference to the negative effects of the drug trade. As the 12,961 annual meth-related trips to the ER suggest,[1] the drug trade does major, heartbreaking damage to many families like Walter's. Societal peace is not just an abstract value. In concrete form, it is 12,961 parents, partners, and children untroubled by the damaging effects of drug addiction. This is the good that Walter would promote by following the law… and that he endangers by breaking it.

For some reason, the screenwriters reveal none of the damage that we know exists. They show us only four people connected with the drug trade: Jessie Pinkman (Walter's drug dealing accomplice), Emilio (Pinkman's original accomplice), Krazy-8 (the drug lord), and Hank (the obnoxious police officer brother-in-law). Imagery of actual users,and the resulting damage to them and their families, is absent. Out of sight, out of mind; the perceived importance of the value competing with Walter's family for priority shrinks.

Valence of Portrayed Values

Furthermore, the four characters in the drug business are portrayed in a manner that sets them apart from the "normal world" and makes them unsympathetic. Pinkman, Emlio, and Krazy-8 live in a world of dingy warehouses, strange chemicals, guns, and

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[1] "Meth Facts, History and Statistics | Dangers and Legality." 2015. DrugAbuse.Com. September 2, 2015.; RecoveryConnection. 2019. "How Does Methamphetamine Affect Relationships?" Recovery Connection. July 23, 2019.

specialized lingo. Their world looks and feels entirely different from the normal, lower middle-class existence established in what we have seen of Walter's life. Similarly, the episode includes little to make the four characters likeable. Walter's birthday party scene portrays Hank as a rude and overbearing attention seeker who insults Walter and brags incessantly; any redeeming qualities are absent. In our introduction to Krazy-8, he teaches a dog to attack people and enjoys the destruction. As with Hank, the screenwriters include no redeeming quality by which we can justify liking him. Based on the information we have about these characters, we can best conclude that their value prioritizations are blatantly, even proudly, disordered, with them succumbing to vainglory on the one hand and cruelty on the other. Guiding us to perceive the world of drug dealing as an isolated group of immoral miscreants, keeps us from thinking about the real-life, relatable people whom the drug trade negatively impacts. Such framing serves to further minimize the description of the situation that highlights the good of society.

Effect

Embodying the pursuit of family in the plot's goals, obstacles, and actions habituates viewers to prioritizing similar values at the expense of others. The episode excludes details that would result from Walter's actions, but that contribute to competing goods. Consequently, viewers dwell for sixty minutes on the importance of Walter's family. We bemoan the troubles that befall them, we long for some way to resolve the tension and preserve their health, happiness, and love. We also forget the misery that must result from Walter's pursuit of his chosen good. Familial love may be one of the

highest values in the human repertoire. But it is not, as the episode would seem to suggest, the only value at play. A host of other goods lurk below the surface, some irrelevant or objectively less important, but some close contenders with family love for priority (namely, the welfare of the individuals and their loved ones whose lives the drug trade makes a living hell). Were we to evaluate Walter's choice with unbiased attention to all the morally relevant facts about the situation, our response might be different. However, we do not consider all the morally relevant details because we do not see them. The episode models attention toward the good of family at the expense of the good of others.

Impact of Analysis and Implications for Future Research and Practice

With a more concrete picture of the relation between the questions and actual narratives, let us explore how different types of people might use the questions. In practical application, moral attention direction research will best help content creators, such as screenwriters and copywriters, and viewers, such as parents, teachers, and growth-conscious individuals. The framework can inform both the process of story design and the experience of film viewing. Each set of people need a means of connecting narrative with virtue development in more concrete ways than are currently available. When tools like the questions operationalize the Thomisto-Narrative framework, it can provide just such a bridge.[2] I also explore some forms that applications might take in the future.

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[2] I am not claiming that narrative structure is sufficient for virtue development. Rather, I am claiming it is a highly relevant supplementary tool. One cannot exercise moral knowledge effectively in context of narrative without understanding how narrative relates, and the parallel between narrative structure and virtue structure is key to that relation.

Content Creators: Screenwriters and Copywriters

Let's go back to Tenaka, the copywriter-by-day and screenwriter-by-night to whom I introduced you at the beginning of the chapter. While she might not articulate it as such, she desires to help people develop virtue. She knows that her creations have the power to do so. And yet, two things hold her back. First, she doesn't grasp how, exactly, her stories affect people. Is it simply the types of content portrayed (like how cigarettes on screen normalize smoking)? If so, should she only show people being nice to one another and doing good things? That wouldn't go over well with the producers and creative director, given that conflict is the heart of interest.... Which leads to the second problem: Tenaka doesn't know which *components* of her stories affect virtue. When she sits before the blank page and outlines her plot, or types "FADE IN," or switches two words to improve the rhythm of the dialogue, what specific textual changes will actually affect her viewers? Without a clearer picture of process and practice, Tenaka can only resort to instinct: valuable, but harder to develop and less defensible to bosses.

Thomisto-Narrative analysis can help content creators like Tenaka both to revise existing scripts and to plan future ones. In revision, the questions can both evaluate the impact of the current work and identify practical means of improving the moral effect. In construction, the questions can serve as brainstorming prompts to build virtuous description emphasis into scripts and ads. In each case, content creators need to know *how* to highlight a description in the context of characters, exposition, conflict, and beats. The questions provide specific, concrete, and actionable steps.

An initial analysis takes stock of the story's existing attention direction. The questions in the second category lead writers to the specific components of their

narratives that shape value prioritization. Answering these questions will thus streamline the process of pinning down issues.

After diagnosing the script, writers could use the questions to locate precise changes that would highlight descriptions more virtuously. They could use the first category of questions to uncover the situation's potential descriptions, identify the most virtuous prioritization of descriptions, and use the second and third categories of questions as prompts to brainstorm ways of highlighting the selected description. These three stages would suggest which narrative components need to change and what could replace them. Moreover, in the initial stages of the script, writers could inform their design with the questions. Once the story's basic setting and conflict are established, writers can use the first category of questions to identify the relevant descriptions and select the virtuous prioritization. The second category can then serve as prompts with which to brainstorm ways of embodying, and thus of highlighting, the prioritized description. Because the questions in this category range from the level of plot (e.g. *Which goods are highlighted in the Dilemma and Threshold?*) to the level of scene (*How are the larger goals and obstacles embodied in red lights and green lights?*), the questions can be used at different stages in the process; the writer can brainstorm using the plot-level questions in the earlier stages, and the scene-level questions in the later stages. Finally, writers can use the questions in the third section to brainstorm ways of giving the prioritized description a positive valence. Brainstorming would thus provide a rich store of detail from which to draw.

Future projects could explore ways to make the questions and the framework accessible to screenwriters. For example, professional writers could develop workshops,

provide individual consultations, and design workbooks. Modules could be made for high schools and colleges that would integrate into existing creative writing curricula. Sample analyses could be posted on screenwriting blogs and online magazines. Pursuing these and other outlets could increase awareness of story ethics among screenwriters, leading to more popular narrative content with a positive moral impact.

The Thomisto-Narrative framework offers unique opportunities for copywriters and creative directors. Individuals in these roles must prove that textual choices are likely to have a particular impact (Lindsey, personal correspondence). To enact moral changes in this context, then, the creators need the ability to make specific claims about the probable impact of textual choices. The Thomisto-Narrative framework, as operationalized in the questions, offers the ability to do so. Demonstrating that a radio ad highlights the desire for self-aggrandizement over the love of family, for example, holds more weight than the vague claim that "the ad is likely to have a negative moral impact." The framework and the questions provide greater objectivity and specificity in evaluating the moral content of ads, and greater objectivity and specificity translates to greater persuasive power.

Parents and Teachers

Viewers who are concerned with moral development often fall into two categories: Caretakers of children, such as parents and teachers, and adult individuals, whether alone or with friends. The Thomisto-Narrative framework holds different, but equally valuable, opportunities for both.

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Recall Martin and his daughter Anya. In the context of moral education, the goal of parents such as Martin is to habituate children to virtuous ways of seeing and responding. Aristotle championed such habituation during childhood. In his view, fostering virtuous likes and dislikes at an early stage is the surest means to virtue in adulthood (Aristotle, 1999; Annas, 2001). Because media foster likes and dislikes (whether virtuous or vicious), and because media narratives dominate modern childhood, understanding the associated opportunities and dangers is vital.

Unfortunately, Martin faces two challenges when attempting to harness narrative's potential. The first is identifying films that will help Anya grow. A variety of parenting blogs offer lists of informally chosen films that "promote great themes." There are also more official cites such as Character Counts, which analyze the moral potential along with content-based meters (e.g. sexual content, smoking, cussing, etc.). Apart from these resources, however, Martin has little but intuition, conversations, Sunday school, newspapers, popular parenting psychology articles, etc. to inform which stories he makes available to Anya and which he withholds. Such sources can be accurate and insightful, but grounding his policies in research would make Martin's decisions easier. The second challenge involves finding ways to engage with Anya about the content she views. On Friday night, after the credits roll on the family movie, how does Martin bring up the moral implications of *A Bug's Life* (1998) in a way that will maintain Anya's interest? How can he help her *want* to engage the story on a deeper level? How might he avoid sounding moralistic, cheesy, or heavy-handed?

The Thomisto-Narrative framework could help parents like Martin both to curate the narratives to which children are exposed and to prompt conversations that foster

moral reasoning skills. First, the three categories of questions can help parents and teachers make informed decisions about which films to avoid and which to promote. The prospect of curating media raises thorny issues of censorship, which is a discussion beyond the scope of this chapter. I will focus on the benefits of making films that highlight descriptions virtuously available to children. Parents tend to know which vices (i.e., unhealthy habits of description prioritization) their children face. The questions could identify films that highlight the type of descriptions to which each child needs to attend. Viewing such films can make the description more salient to the child, habituating virtuous attention direction and correcting the vice. Similarly, teachers can use the questions to identify films that fit with the character strengths they seek to foster in their students.

Second, the questions can facilitate conversations that acclimate children to moral reasoning. For example, after watching the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad,* parents and teachers could prompt teenagers to consider the other values at play in the situation, such as the good of the families affected by the drug trade. This might lead to the realization that such a good is not present in the episode, or takes on a negative valence. Such conversations would help children develop practical wisdom, the backbone of the other virtues (Kamtekar, 2004). Business ethics courses have used a similar technique. In O'Boyle and Sandonà's (2014) curriculum, undergraduates analyzed a set of selected films using similar questions. The process acclimated students to evaluating morally murky situations. The questions helped them think through the dilemmas that they lived vicariously, sharpening their practical reasoning skills. In the same vein, conversations based on the Thomisto-Narrative analysis questions could foster children's moral

reasoning skills, preparing them to navigate conflict between moral descriptions in their own lives.

In the future, scholars could explore ways to make Thomisto-Narrative research accessible to parents and teachers. Researchers could develop modules to supplement school curricula, including such activities as telling a story from another person's perspective, playing the antagonist or the innocent bystander, etc. Creative writing or literature analysis curricula could help homeschool families. Furthermore, researchers could compile lists of pre-analyzed films for parents and teachers, including questions for starting conversation.

Individuals

Like Martin and Anya, Vivian the young adult wants to develop virtue. The difference between her and Anya is that Vivian is responsible for her own development. Because Anya is a child, she has less control over the influences to which she is exposed. Her parents, teachers, and community have more power to determine which goods are most present in her environment, and thus where she learns to direct her attention. When Anya reaches Vivian's age, however, the locus of responsibility will have changed. Vivian determines what she watches, who she hangs out with, what she does with her free time. More to the point, any improvements in her character must originate with her. She must desire to make some change. She must figure out what steps to take. She must be the one to take them. The things she needs to develop virtue, then, differ from those of Martin and Anya. She must habituate *herself* to virtuous ways of seeing and responding, and she needs resources that will help her do so. Specifically, Vivian requires a way to

make the proper goods more salient; in Thomistic terms, she needs a means of foregrounding some descriptions and backgrounding others. In short, she needs help developing habits of attention. Enter: stories.

Like Tenaka and Martin, Vivian faces an obstacle: She must be able to identify media that can help her shift her motives in the way she wants. If she wishes to love her parents more, for example, she might watch a film whose structure embodies pursuit of the goodness of parents (e.g. *Onward,* 2020, in which two brothers embark on a quest to bring their father back from the dead for a day). To curate her viewing, she needs a concrete way of determining which values and descriptions a film embodies. Without better resources, she relies on self-help blogs and intuition.

The Thomisto-Narrative questions can help. Specifically, they empower individuals to identify films that will make certain values salient. Vivian could filter plot descriptions with the questions to identify the value underlying the protagonist's goal. When watching the film, she could use them to dwell on the prioritized good. She might choose to watch it again to saturate her mind with that value. However she uses them, the questions can help her surround herself with narratives that emphasize the good that she is trying to make salient, and avoid narratives that make competing goods salient.

In keeping with O'Boyle's and Sandonà's (2014) business ethics curriculum, the Thomisto-Narrative questions could train Vivian to navigate competing descriptions in her own life. This skill, known as *practical wisdom*, is vital for good character in three ways. First, practical wisdom is a necessary step in the other virtues. For example, traits such as courage and temperance allow agents to follow through on actions after the agent chooses them through practical wisdom. Second, in some situations, two nearly equal

goods are mutually incompatible. Here, the ability to identify and compare competing descriptions is invaluable. Finally, developing practical wisdom is necessary to develop other virtues. For example, according to Aristotle, to be courageous is to see a fear-eliciting situation for what it is and to feel and act accordingly (1999: III.8; Sherman, 1991, p. 167). Seeing the situation for what it is, however, requires practical wisdom. Without identifying the various values at play and accurately appraising them, Vivian will never know which description is the best, and will thus never act courageously. Learning how to identify, evaluate, and prioritize descriptions is the fundamental act of developing virtue, and the questions offer a low-stakes practice ground for doing so.

Future scholars could compile lists of films, along with the descriptions they prioritize, for individuals to use. As with parents, teachers, and content creators, workbooks for group or personal use and workshops could prove useful.

The Thomisto-Narrative framework can help storytellers and consumers alike. By operationalizing the framework, the three categories of questions can empower screenwriters, copywriters, parents, teachers, and individuals to capitalize on the attention-directing power of story in order to grow, and to help others grow. Specifically, the questions enable users to both recognize the moral effect of prioritized descriptions, and pinpoint the textual choices that comprise prioritization. Consequently, they make moral growth easier to pursue. There are numerous opportunities to make the Thomisto-Narrative framework accessible for real-life use. Pursuing them could bring many people that much closer to happiness.

CONCLUSION

Exit, Pursued by a Squirrel

It all started with an actor, a dog, and a squirrel.

Aristotle said that humans love imitating, and storytellers imitate action (1997:
IV). The actor who played Edmund understood. On that midsummer day almost ten years
ago, he sliced through all my star-struck questions about iambic pentameter and cut
straight to the heart of acting: Human beings are dogs who chase squirrels. But unlike our
fellow canines, we can choose which squirrels we chase. We can recognize and evaluate
the forces that pull us. We can determine, however indirectly, which goods we desire.
Our dilemmas, conflicts, confusion, heartbreak, and happiness consist of navigating all
the squirrels, trees, leashes, balls, and other dogs that pull us in different directions and
force us to choose.

That is what storytellers imitate. An actor does not go on stage thinking about
iambic pentameter. She goes on stage, as the character, chasing the squirrel. A
screenwriter does not sit down to write snappy dialogue. He sits down to orchestrate
conflict between squirrels, leashes, and other dogs that the poor character must negotiate.
Storytellers imitate human action.

Aristotle's and Edmund's observation is not specific to the content of any one
story. It is a statement about the nature of narrative itself: its DNA, its architecture, its
skeleton. The *structure* of narrative mirrors the evaluation, attention direction, and choice
that comprise the character-forming decisions of all human beings. Through it, we can

experience new ways of evaluating and attending to situations, and we can practice patterns of attention that we want to emulate. If we desire to form character, then we are well-served to explore how narrative structure can help.

This thesis has taken first steps toward doing just that. It highlights the ways that different disciplines assume the attention-directing power of narrative structure, and it translates those insights into a common tongue. The effect, I hope, will be to point scholars, creators, and consumers toward the collaborative goal of harnessing story structure for character development.

Specifically, I have established a common point of reference that can serve as a springboard for future conversation between scholars, creatives, and audiences. This reference point, the Thomisto-Narrative framework, reduces to three claims: (1) Stories direct our attention toward certain aspects of a situation (certain "squirrels") and away from others. (2) Similarly, directing our attention toward certain aspects of a situation and away from others is the heart of virtue development. (3) Thus, habituating audiences to certain patterns of attention direction is one of the main *processes by which* stories influence our character.

The first two chapters established the foundation of the Thomisto-Narrative framework: the parallel between attention direction in virtue development and the attention-directing power of narrative. Chapter One offered Aquinas's account of character and its improvement as a background for exploring how narrative structure affects moral development. The Thomistic view frames attention direction as a core activity of virtue development. Aquinas expands Aristotle's action theory, which argues that the inclination toward something perceived as good combines with the agents'

circumstances to produce action and feeling. Aquinas further claims that humans have a

variety of desires and, thus, ways of feeling and acting in response to the circumstances.

The ability to prioritize desires correctly is the root of morality. Attending to one good

more than others increases desire for it and can help us prioritize it. Therefore, virtue

involves a combination of good/circumstance/response chains and attention direction.

The valuation systems theory of motivation (Uusberg et. al., 2019) lends credence

to Aquinas's claims. Like Aristotle, it conceptualizes human action and emotion as

responses to the perception that something in the agent's environment affects something

about which the agent cares. Because agents hold a variety of values in any given

situation, responding requires that agents prioritize some over others: just as Aquinas

suggests. Further, the sub-theory of *repurposing* affirms that attending to certain values

over others can shift the prioritization of values (Uusberg et. al., 2019; Marple et. al.,

under review). By corroborating the Thomistic account of moral action, valuation

systems affirm the doctrine of free decision as a basis for building a common account of

the attention-directing power of narrative.

Chapter Two drew on three-act structure and cognitive theories of narrative to

frame Aquinas's account of action in terms that resonate with content creators. The two

narrative theories demonstrate that story structure directs audience attention to certain

good/circumstance/response chains over others. Structure guides viewers' attention in

morally valanced ways.

Chapter Three offered empirical data suggesting that such vicarious attention

direction may have long-term effects on moral reasoning and judgement in real life. The

theories of affective disposition, antihero enjoyment, and appreciation elaborate both the

processes by which narrative attention direction occurs and the effects it has on viewers. As such, they offer initial evidence for two ideas: that attention direction is at play in the real-life interaction between media and viewer, and that there are indeed long-term (if indirect) effects on viewer character.

Finally, Chapter Four turned our attention forward to the central goal of this thesis: using the power of narrative attention direction, how can scholars, creators, and audiences work together to develop character more effectively? My hope is that the cross-disciplinary translation and the prototype tools I have offered can springboard three areas of interdisciplinary conversation about narrative structure and character: (1) avenues for academic research, (2) communication between scholars and creatives, and (3) material for practical parent/teacher story structure resources.

Interdisciplinary academic study could follow many routes. One is to verify the Thomisto-Narrative framework with empirical study. Positive psychologists could further explore and test scholastic moral psychology, especially Aquinas's doctrine of free decision (Marple et. al., under review). Moreover, positive media psychologists could isolate and test the effects of attention direction and value salience on viewers. Such study could test for changes in both short-and-long-term salience.

Beyond confirming the framework, the similarities between theories enable each discipline to draw on the strengths of the others. For instance, positive media psychologists struggle to identify the textual elicitors of certain effects through content analysis; examples include moral disengagement cues (Shafer & Raney, 2012) and elicitors of appreciation (Dale et. al., 2017). By integrating a typology of morally relevant information with concrete techniques from screenwriting, the Thomisto-Narrative

framework offers greater precision in identifying textual elicitors (Marple, under review). Specifically, scholars could develop the Thomisto-Narrative questions into a codebook for content analytic studies.

Narratologists have recently developed an interest in the ethical implications of omniscient narration's ability to draw attention to certain story elements over others (Nunning, 2015). By framing the virtue ethics view of attention direction in terms of narrative structure, the Thomisto-Narrative framework could offer an account of the processes and constructs at play in the moral effects of omniscient narration.

Virtue ethicists who specialize in particular virtues, such as honesty (Miller, 2021), hope (Jeffrey, ms), or patience (Schnitker, 2017) could explore how those virtues correspond to specific components or moments in three-act structure. For example, hope might play a key role in act breaks and underlie the structure of the McGuffin. Just as hope is fundamental to the other virtues (Jeffrey, ms), it is also fundamental to each major moment of decision in a story.

And, following the *Breaking Bad* example in Chapter Four, the Thomisto-Narrative questions could ground rhetorical and literary analyses of individual works (e.g. Marple, 2021). The cross-disciplinary similarities and differences that this thesis highlights offer myriad research possibilities.

More importantly, such research on narrative structure could inform resources for content creators, parents, teachers, and individual viewers. For example, scholars could design educational games that draw on the connection between narrative structure and characteristics of virtue. Likewise, scholars could design activities that would supplement

the English language standards for Common Core requirements while emphasizing character. Scholars and game designers could collaborate to work narrative structure into video games and apps.[1] The Center for Scholars and Storytellers might include structure tips in their lists of "Actionable Insights." Oral storytellers might design interactive character-based programs for schools and communities.[2] Following the lead of parenting blogs, scholars could compile lists of films that contribute to different virtue development in different ways, and provide explanations of how the impact occurs and how parents or individuals might best use it. Self-study workbooks could be designed for individuals and accountability groups. The possibilities are extensive.

My journey began with an actor, a dog, and a squirrel. Not only has it led through many lands, cultures, and languages, it has also changed how I view growth in my own life. I began with the idea that growth is a joyless battle of behavior control, destined to be dull and discouraging. I discovered what the medieval scholars knew all along: that growth is about learning to *desire* well. Stories can make the journey not only easier, but also more enjoyable. I hope that this work will help others in a similar way on their own epic quests.

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[1] Several projects through the grant project *Character Strength Interventions in Adolescents: Engaging Scholars and Practitioners to Promote Virtue Development* have begun such work.

[2] Some initial contributors in this area come from the Marple and Hahner URSA grant, with the "Story Detectives" workshop promoting empathy through identifying character motivations.

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