

## Stories

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*Stories are those parts of our memories we can afford to reveal.*

—Garrison Keillor, "A Prairie Home Companion"

### I. VIRTUE AND COMMUNITY IN LE NIÈVE

Recently, at a conference in California, Professor Jules Levain (University of Paris) gave an interesting paper on the relationship between virtue and community.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, he wished to distinguish various claims about the relationship between virtue and community and to evaluate some of them. Two particularly salient claims discussed by Levain were that community *sustains* virtue and that community gives *content* to virtue. That is to say, Levain wished (among other things) to evaluate the claims that certain sorts of communities perform crucial and indispensable sustaining and content-providing functions for various virtues.

Whereas it is relatively clear what it means to suggest that a community has the function of sustaining certain virtues, it might be useful to say a few words about the alleged content-providing function of communities. The point here is that forms of communal life "fill in the detailed prescriptions that make abstract principles into a lived morality." As Levain put it,

communities tell us how to gear our general moral principles into a complex world; without them we would not know what our principles bid of us in the particular contexts of social life. . . . For example, we might hold to the general principle of respect for others; but it is only a particular form of communal life which tells us what it is to respect others, how one does this in different contexts, what the different forms of respect are, and the like. It is only by living within a complex form of communal life that we can learn these particularities.

One of the most interesting features of Levain's presentation was his extensive use of facts about a town in France during the Second World War to substantiate the two claims about the relationship between virtue and community. He pointed out that the village of Le Chambon, a French Huguenot enclave which during the Nazi occupation of France sheltered about five thousand refugees (mostly Jewish), is often cited and discussed.<sup>2</sup> But Levain claimed that there was another village in the vicinity of Le Chambon—Le Niève—in which the citizens were also actively involved in sheltering refugees from the Nazis. Recent work by a French historian has brought to light some of this activity, and Levain employed this evidence to good effect.

Levain pointed out that the rescue enterprise in Le Niève had a *collective* nature; the community as a whole had an impact on the decisions of its members to engage in rescue. This influence of the community was felt despite the fact that the efforts were not explicitly organized, and many of the decisions to rescue were made by individuals and families acting outside any organized structure. As Professor Levain put it,

A refugee would show up at someone's door, or someone would be asked if she would put one up, and she would have to decide there and then whether to help out. Sometimes the refugee would be brought by another villager, who either had no room or no more room for refugees, or whom the Nazi or Vichy officials had come too close to discovering. The person asked, or presented with a refugee, would not always have to put the refugee up at her own house. She could search for other shelter for the refugee. Other tasks were also essential—getting false papers, sometimes smuggling persons out of the village into Switzerland. Simply helping to keep up the facade that nothing worthy of the Nazis' attention was going on was a task shared by all. Yet engaging in any of these activities was very risky. It was a punishable offense to shelter Jews or to help to do so and in fact three of the town's leaders were jailed for a time for engaging in these activities.

Levain argued that the virtuous way in which individual citizens of Le Niève made their choices was deeply affected by the community in which they lived. He adduced the recent research of the historian, who did extensive interviews of surviving citizens of Le Niève. These citizens did not see their actions and practices as having been supererogatory. When pressed to say why they tried to help the refugees they said, "It was simply what one had to do," "She was standing at my door; how could I fail to help?" and so forth. Levain analyzed the evidence as follows:

the role of community in sustaining the virtuous activities becomes clearer. For the fact that others were engaging in, helping, and supporting the rescue activities—even though this was seldom directly discussed—is part of what helped everyone to define them as 'everyday' and unremarkable. In a context in which one is doing what one regards as the right thing, yet no others are joining one in this effort, it is much more difficult to sustain a sense that one

is doing precisely what can simply be expected from anyone and is nothing remarkable or noteworthy.

Thus, Levain pointed out that the evidence about the people of Le Niève supported both the claims about the sustaining and also the content-providing role of community.

In the discussion that followed the talk, many of the participants praised Levain's use of a "real-life" example. Indeed, just about everyone appeared to think it extremely important that the evidence came from an actual historical example rather than a mere hypothetical case. Too often, it was noted, philosophers simply make up stories—evidently, "out of thin air"—and precipitously generate conclusions from them. But why have any confidence that these made-up scenarios can reveal anything useful about the real world? Further, there was general consensus that the evidence adduced by Levain did indeed provide considerable support for the pertinent claims about the relationship between virtue and community.

At the end of the discussion period, Levain said, "I thank all of you for this illuminating conversation. I have learned much that will be of benefit to me in my thinking about these issues in the future. I should however mention one final point: as far as I know, there is no village of Le Niève, and no French historian who has unearthed evidence about it. I simply made up the story."

At the reception following the talk, there was much distress and animated conversation. Even the brie and chardonnay could not diminish the anger and mortification of many of those who had attended the talk; they felt duped and cheated. And no doubt they were justified in these feelings. But some at the reception began to wonder: Did it matter at all to the evaluation of the claims about virtue and community that Levain had simply made up the example rather than employing an actual example? (Would it have made any difference to the evaluation of the relevant claims about the relationship between virtue and community if Levain had used true evidence from Le Chambon rather than Le Niève? Would it have made any difference if Levain had used evidence which he falsely—although with justification—believed to be true of Le Chambon?) Doesn't the moral force of an example depend on its "intrinsic" features—its content—rather than on features of its "genesis"? (Would it have made any difference if Levain had begun by stating that the town of Le Niève and its inhabitants are the focus of a recently unearthed novel by a great French novelist?)

Indeed, one of the members of the audience found the professor's duplicity highly enlightening (although no doubt regrettable in certain respects). So enlightening, in fact, that he said to himself that it would be useful to present the story of the professor's talk as if it had actually occurred, even if it had not.<sup>3</sup>

## II. HYPOTHETICAL AND STREAMLINED EXAMPLES

### *Ila. The Criticism*

The story of Professor Levain might prompt one to reflect on certain aspects of the role of hypothetical examples in philosophy. In this essay, I shall be particularly

interested in the role of hypothetical and schematized or abstract examples in ethics. There are of course many ways of thinking about ethical problems and many different approaches to doing ethics. One traditionally powerful (but by no means uncontroversial) approach to ethics rather liberally employs what might be called “streamlined” hypothetical examples. These are schematized hypothetical scenarios in which only a few details are filled in, and all the other details are left out.<sup>4</sup>

Although this methodology has many proponents, it also has its vigorous critics. In various contexts (although not perhaps as explicitly and frequently in print) one encounters criticisms of the use of hypothetical examples in ethics.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the criticism takes the form of mere disdain, but on other occasions it is articulated with a bit more precision. I wish to attempt to understand this kind of criticism and to do some preliminary work toward defending the use of streamlined hypothetical examples in ethics.

It is striking that although many philosophers object—viscerally if not intellectually—to the use of streamlined hypothetical examples in ethics, they rarely offer explicit reasons for their view. The reasons they offer (when they offer reasons at all) are multifarious. Notoriously, Elizabeth Anscombe objects to the use of such examples in her classic essay, “Modern Moral Philosophy.”<sup>6</sup> She criticizes philosophers who employ these examples on the grounds that they help to “corrupt our youth” and make them less likely to accept the absolute moral strictures of religious dogma. According to Anscombe, these hypothetical examples—in which graphic moral conflicts and dilemmas are represented—help to foster the false impression that God would allow such situations to occur frequently and one might have to depart from the clear rules given by the church. In her essay, “Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?” Anscombe says:

A point of method I would recommend to the corrupter of the youth would be this: concentrate on examples which are either banal: you have promised to return a book, but . . . and so on, or fantastic: what you ought to do if you had to move forward, and stepping with your right foot meant killing twenty-five young men, while stepping with your left foot would kill fifty drooling old ones. (Obviously the right thing to do would be to jump and polish off the lot.)<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Peter Geach says:

Spiritual writers warn us that the devil often suggests to us the question of what we ought to do in circumstances that have not arisen and may never arise, and tries to hurry us into a wrong hypothetical decision: he thus may have all the satisfaction of leading us to a morally sinful intention, without any of the trouble of contriving circumstances in which an actual decision would be unavoidable; and we ought to foil his malice and cunning by giving no other answer to the question he presses upon us than “I will do as the Lord wills,” and by trusting in God that in an actual case we shall be given the grace to decide rightly.<sup>8</sup>

Now it would be convenient for my purposes to suppose that all the critiques of streamlined hypothetical examples were as implausible as these, or equally dependent on very special and not widely shared assumptions. But this is clearly not the case, and it is important to attempt to crystallize some more plausible versions of the critical view. It should be evident from Levain's story about *Le Niève* that the criticism of such examples cannot be merely that they are *hypothetical*. The story of Professor Levain helps to show that the force and relevance of hypothetical examples depends on their "intrinsic content" and not on their veracity or their etiology (for instance, whether they are concocted by a philosopher or borrowed, say, from a novel).<sup>9</sup> While holding fixed the intrinsic content of these stories but varying their veracity or etiology one gets *no* changes in the relevance of the stories to the ethical problems under consideration.

But the primary thrust of the skepticism about the use of the typical hypothetical examples in ethics is not based on the fact that these stories are not true. These examples are *both* hypothetical and *streamlined*. It seems to me that the most important basis of criticism is that the examples are streamlined. And I think the brunt of the criticism is based on the idea that schematized and abstract examples—i.e., streamlined examples—are not *realistic*.

But while it is clear to me that this is the kernel of the critique of streamlined hypothetical examples, it is not yet clear exactly what the critique consists in and amounts to. Of course, insofar as a streamlined example lacks robust details, it is to that extent unrealistic. But why exactly does this matter? Why precisely is it important for an example to be in this way realistic? In a number of insightful essays, Martha Nussbaum has developed interesting criticisms of the use of hypothetical examples (of a certain kind) in ethics.<sup>10</sup> Further, she has argued in favor of turning to novels (by certain authors) for ethical insight. In seeking to understand the criticism of streamlined examples, it will be helpful here to lay out some of Nussbaum's main points.<sup>11</sup>

Nussbaum argues in favor of reading not just novels but other works of literature, saying that

many serious dramas will be pertinent as well, and some biographies and histories—so long as these are written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion, and so long as they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling. . . .<sup>12</sup>

She goes on to say:

But the philosopher is likely to be less troubled by these questions of literary genre than by a prior question: namely, why a literary work at all? Why can't we investigate everything we want to investigate by using complex examples of the sort that moral philosophers are very good at inventing? In reply, we must insist that the philosopher who asks this question cannot have been convinced by the argument so far about the intimate connection between literary form and ethical content. Schematic philosophers' examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive

appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction; they lack, too, good fiction's way of making the reader a participant and a friend. . . .

We can add that examples, setting things up schematically, signal to the readers what they should notice and find relevant. They hand them the ethically salient descriptions. This means that much of the ethical work is already done, the result is "cooked." The novels are more open-ended, showing the reader what it is to search for the appropriate description and why that search matters. . . . [B]y showing the mystery and indeterminacy of 'our actual adventure,' they characterize life more richly and truly—indeed, more precisely—than an example lacking those features ever could; and they engender in the reader a type of ethical work more appropriate for life.<sup>13</sup>

### *Iib. Preliminary Points*

Before going on to analyze Nussbaum's main point, I wish to pause to note a few things. First, being realistic implies a certain sort of richness of detail, but of course mere richness of detail does not imply that a scenario is realistic. Thus, there are various different ways of failing to be realistic. An example may not be realistic simply in virtue of not being very detailed; such an example might not be "far-fetched" or "fantastic" (to use Anscombe's term), and thus may be "realistic as far as it goes." Nevertheless, this sort of example would still be unrealistic in the sense of lacking the richness of detail present in reality. Of course, another way of failing to be realistic is to be far-fetched or "fantastic;" and this is quite compatible with richness of detail. Note that Nussbaum does not recommend careful perusal of the works of Robert Heinlein, for example; she prefers Henry James and Marcel Proust!

Second, one might wonder why we should turn to literature for illumination at all; that is, why not simply use real life? Montesquieu and Voltaire held that history is philosophy teaching with examples. Why not simply employ life itself (or full depictions of it) rather than literary works? To this Nussbaum responds:

One obvious answer was suggested already by Aristotle: we have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it. . . . We can clarify and extend this point by emphasizing that novels do not function, inside this account, as pieces of "raw" life: they are a close and careful interpretative description. . . . The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived.<sup>14</sup>

A rather extreme version of this view about the importance of literature—a view not endorsed by Nussbaum—is held by the Hindu sage in the following

very brief story. A great Hindu sage lived in a remote cave and offered advice to people who flocked to him for his wise counsel. When asked how he could give such good advice even though he never leaves his cave, he responded, "Every evening I read the Ramayana, and that is all I need to know." But one need not hold such an extreme position to maintain the basic plausibility of Nussbaum's response.

### *Iic. Reply to the Criticism*

These preliminary points having been made, let us return to the criticism of streamlined examples based on their purportedly unrealistic character. Clearly, ethical reflection and practical reasoning—thinking about morality in general, thinking about particular moral problems, teaching morality, and so forth—is extremely complex and has many different aspects. I cannot here attempt to construct a general account of such reflection and deliberation, but consideration of Nussbaum's remarks can help one to distinguish some of these aspects in a fashion that illuminates the criticism of streamlined examples. I now wish to try to distinguish at least three different facets of ethical reflection.

Undeniably, part of ethical reflection involves enhancing our capacities to see what is morally salient and to respond sensitively and appropriately to it. These aspects of ethical reflection involve seeking to refine and deepen our capacity for moral perception and moral response.

The moral perception aspect of ethical reflection is itself complex and multifarious.<sup>15</sup> But I can say a few words to indicate part of what moral perception involves. We often face highly nuanced, complicated, and ambiguous situations in which we must first identify the ethically relevant features. Before we can properly decide how to respond or what to do, we must—either explicitly or implicitly—see what is morally relevant and important. As we confront the situation, we "frame the moral issues": we give a structure to a moral situation, identifying and making salient (admittedly sometimes in an inchoate fashion) the features that are relevant to a moral assessment and to an appropriate response.<sup>16</sup>

Having identified what is morally relevant, we are in a position to begin to make a suitable response, perhaps (but not exclusively) by applying or relating general principles to the particular elements we have identified as relevant. The second aspect of ethical reflection—the moral response aspect—involves seeking to improve our abilities to make acceptable moral judgments (given our background ethical theories or moral orientations), our propensities to have emotional responses which fit with these judgments, and our capacities to act in accordance with these emotional responses and judgments. Clearly, in this aspect of moral reflection, we seek to educate ourselves and develop our characters and emotions in light of our general ethical theories or orientations.

Another aspect of ethical reflection (not emphasized by Nussbaum, but of course compatible with her discussion) is moral analysis. The moral analysis aspect involves seeking to generate, test, and refine our general principles and theories—or, if one wishes to eschew the "theory approach," one's general moral

orientation. The picture here is that there are times when we step back from our moral lives and engage in critical reflection on it; this reflection attempts to systematize and order the situations as given by our capacity for moral perception. Here the features identified and described by moral perception are evaluated and may be combined into more general principles and theories that give expression to our general moral outlook.

Let me emphasize that these are brief and very incomplete characterizations of these aspects of our moral lives. Further, I again state that these are only *some* of the many components of our ethical reflection and practical reasoning. Further, in practice these aspects do not exist in airtight compartments; there are considerable overlaps and interlacings of the various aspects. But nevertheless the preliminary distinctions I have made can help us to see what is correct in the criticism of streamlined examples, and what is incorrect.

I suggest that reading novels and other works of fiction fits nicely and naturally with the purposes of the first and second aspects of ethical reflection: enhancing the capacities of moral perception and response.<sup>17</sup> Nussbaum is correct to point to the importance of these aspects of morality and to the relevance of fiction (of certain sorts) to them. Further, it seems to me that philosophers' streamlined examples fit most naturally with the purposes of the third aspect: analysis. Here, one primary task is to test the generality and plausibility of principles which "latch onto" or embody features deemed morally relevant. By distinguishing the various aspects of ethical reflection, one can give an appealing account of the role of *different* sources of illumination; one can see how *both* fiction (i.e., rich stories) and philosophers' examples (streamlined stories) can play important roles (although at different points in ethical reflection).

Further, perhaps one can see why *certain* critiques of the use of schematized examples in ethics are unfair (or at least misguided). Of course, if one wishes to enhance and improve one's capacities of moral perception and response, the abstract and schematized examples will by and large be inappropriate.<sup>18</sup> If one is seeking to improve the capacity to pick out and describe the morally relevant features of highly complex situations, a schematized example in which one is "handed the ethically salient description" probably will not be useful. Further, such an example may not be particularly helpful in enhancing one's emotional responsiveness and sensitivity. But to infer from these facts that such examples can play *no* useful role in practical reflection is unfair; it illicitly presupposes that the first two aspects exhaust the domain.<sup>19</sup> My suggestion, then, is that the *complete dismissal* of schematized, hypothetical examples in ethics is too abrupt; it may issue from an exclusive focus on the first two aspects of practical reasoning at the expense of the third.

### *IId. Further Challenges*

I have suggested that the view that streamlined examples are completely inappropriate in ethics is incorrect because it wrongly leaves out an aspect of our moral lives: the aspect of analysis. But I now wish briefly to consider some further challenges to the legitimacy of streamlined examples. Someone might press the

point that precisely because streamlined examples are unrealistic, they are even inappropriate to the aspect of analysis.

*First Version of the Worry.* The following version of this worry is indeed suggested by Nussbaum. Unless our emotions are engaged in a certain way by an example, our moral judgments about it are not to be trusted, and streamlined examples simply do not adequately engage our emotions. If this is true, then even if we set aside the aspects of moral perception and response, there will still be a problem with employing schematized examples for the more narrow task of evaluating a proposed moral principle or analysis.<sup>20</sup>

This view raises deep and difficult questions which are intractable to quick resolution. It is not absolutely clear to me that Nussbaum's thesis about the necessity of emotional engagement for trustworthy judgment is actually true. While it has some plausibility, we sometimes trust our moral judgments only when they are made from a cooler, more detached, less emotionally engaged, perspective. So Nussbaum's thesis here may not be true in its general form. Further, even if it is true, it can be accommodated compatibly with holding that streamlined examples have a legitimate place in moral reflection.

To explain: Nussbaum's critique of the use of hypothetical and streamlined examples in ethics rests not only on the thesis of the necessity of emotional engagement for trustworthy moral judgment, but also on what might be called an "atomistic" picture of emotional engagement. And I believe it is highly implausible to think that, one's emotions having been engaged, they suddenly *disengage* when one's attention is focused on a streamlined example. Imagine that one is in the process of ethical reflection on a given topic. Suppose one fully immerses oneself in relevant fiction (Henry James, Proust, and so forth) which appropriately engages one's emotions. Having identified salient ethical features and generated appropriate principles, one turns to the assessment and testing of those principles—and here one uses certain streamlined examples (as well as other ingredients). Why suppose that in this process somehow the emotions suddenly "turn off" or disengage when considering the streamlined examples; is emotional engagement this atomistic and episodic?

It seems to me that a more holistic and less atomistic conception of emotional engagement is closer to the truth about us. Surely, our emotional investment in and engagement with other persons does not work in a way analogous to the episodic view apparently presupposed by Nussbaum's criticism, it is a sometimes painful feature of our lives that we do not and cannot simply disengage from other persons when they are absent. And it is also perhaps a comforting feature of us that our emotional attachments are not so adventitious. If a less episodic conception of emotional engagement is accurate, one can hold the thesis of the necessity of emotional engagement compatibly with giving a place to streamlined examples in the analysis component of moral reflection.

*Second Version of the Worry.* There is another version of the worry that precisely because streamlined examples are unrealistic, they are inappropriate to the aspect of analysis. The idea is this. A streamlined example presents us with a very

special, artificial, and rarified context. If a conclusion is drawn about this sort of context, it does not necessarily transfer straightforwardly to the real world. As a crude example, suppose you strike a match in a room with no gas in it, and you note that striking a match there does not cause an explosion. You then proceed to strike a match in a different room—one with lots of gas in it. Needless to say, you would have made a rather unfortunate mistake—the mistake of failing to see that striking a match has different consequences depending on the *other factors* that are present in the given context. A given event may have one meaning in one context (and against a given set of background conditions), and quite another meaning in another context (and against another set of background conditions).<sup>21</sup> And so a given moral event or factor may have one moral meaning in a streamlined example, and quite another meaning in reality.

I wish to grant the basic insight behind this criticism, but still maintain that streamlined examples have a place in analysis. The objection shows that one must be very careful to consider the various possibilities of “meaning shift” in doing one’s analysis, but it does not show that streamlined examples are worthless or inappropriate. Streamlined examples, even when they cannot be employed to achieve closure, can be highly *suggestive*; they can establish strong presumptions and can suggest further examples in which the factor in question is tested against various backgrounds, or in which *clusters* of potentially synergistic factors are tested.

I believe that the meaning shift problem is the most significant reason why one might be tempted to say that streamlined examples ought to be avoided precisely because they are unrealistic. But I have suggested—in an admittedly brief and tentative way—that even this possibility leaves room for legitimate use of streamlined examples. And it is very important to keep in mind the potential benefits of employing streamlined examples; these need to be weighed against the risks. A primary goal of abstraction and schematization in moral reflection is to create the analogue of “controlled experiments” in science: one wants to hold all other factors fixed, and test one particular factor for ethical relevance.<sup>22</sup>

The fruits of controlled experimentation in ethics, as in the sciences, can be quite significant. And it must be kept in mind that this procedure does *not* in itself imply that individual morally relevant factors combine “additively” and “non-synergistically” to determine an overall moral assessment of a situation, just as the procedure in the sciences does not imply that striking a match will not have different consequences, depending on the background conditions. The procedure of abstraction and schematization—of “streamlining,” if you will—can assist in determining whether a factor is morally relevant; but *how* this factor combines with others is left open, and it is useful to keep in mind the possibility of significant interactions, synergisms, and “meaning shifts.”

### III. CONCLUSION

My purpose has been to seek to find a place for philosophers’ streamlined examples—hypothetical and schematized—in moral reasoning. I have attempted

to accommodate the insights of such philosophers as Nussbaum about the role of reading fiction and using less schematized (and in this respect more “realistic”) examples. I have most definitely *not* argued that one should *exclusively* employ such examples in ethics; rather, I have emphasized that practical reasoning and ethical reflection has many aspects in which various sorts of examples are appropriate. I have attempted to explain why I believe that there are legitimate and appropriate uses of streamlined examples in ethical reflection.<sup>23</sup> Whereas this may seem to be a fairly weak thesis, it will provide some comfort to those who have been rebuffed by the proponents of the thesis that such examples are *never* appropriate and are to be shunned completely.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. Professor Levain is one of the most distinguished ethicists in France. Although he is well known in France, he is not widely known in the United States. It is ironic that Jacques Derrida has received so much attention here whereas Levain remains obscure, given Levain’s stature in French academic circles.

2. P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. Also, P. Sauvage’s film, “Weapons of the Spirit.”

3. As far as I know, there is no Professor Jules Levain—I simply made him up. The idea for this section was suggested to me by a paper delivered by Lawrence Blum to the Riverside Philosophy Conference, May 1991. The sort of duplicity portrayed in the text did *not* actually occur. The idea for this section was in part suggested by interesting remarks by David Solomon in response to Blum, and I have borrowed from Blum’s nice paper. Blum’s paper, “Virtue and Community,” has subsequently been published in his collection of essays, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York, 1994), 144–69.

4. The “Trolley Problem” cases, and related cases, are frequently discussed examples of this sort, but of course there are many others. For a selection of essays that present and discuss many such hypothetical and streamlined cases, see *Ethics: Problems and Principles*, edited by John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (Fort Worth, Tex., 1992).

5. Recently Jonathan Dancy has argued for “particularism” about moral reasons: *Moral Reasons* (Oxford, 1992). According to particularism, considerations count as moral reasons only given their entire context (pp. 55–57, 89). For a sustained critique of the use of thought experiments primarily in metaphysics, see Kathleen V. Wilkes, *Real People: Personal Identity Without Thought Experiments* (Oxford, 1988).

6. *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19.

7. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?” *The Listener*, February 14, 1957, p. 267. (Subsequent issues of *The Listener* contain what can only be described as vituperative correspondence about the issues raised by this piece.) Taking a similar tack to that of Anscombe, Tom Weller asks, “If A and B were drowning, and you could only save one of them, would you . . . have lunch or go to a movie?” (*The Book of Stupid Questions* [New York, 1988]; as quoted in F. M. Kamm, *Mortality, Mortality Volume I: Death and Whom to Save from It* [New York, 1993], 75).

8. Peter Geach, in *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*, edited by Walter Stern (London, 1981), 91. I am indebted to Gerald Dworkin for bringing this passage to my attention.

9. Note that Levain’s story of Le Niève pertains to moral matters, but more properly to *descriptive* features of practical reflection (rather than normative features, strictly speaking). That is, the story is about how communities function to sustain and give content to virtues, and these are primarily descriptive features of moral matters. I would contend that the point developed in the text about the irrelevance of etiology or veracity also applies to normative features of moral matters.

Given that Levain’s story of Le Niève pertains to descriptive aspects of morality, shouldn’t the falsity of the story be relevant? I do not believe it is. Stories are told, and examples adduced,

for various purposes; if the story is told to bring some general phenomenon to the attention of the relevant audience—some phenomenon which otherwise might escape notice and for which there is considerable independent evidence—it can be perfectly useful and appropriate even if false.

10. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford, 1990).

11. It is helpful to turn to Nussbaum's work to understand the criticism of certain uses of hypothetical examples in ethics. But I wish to emphasize that Nussbaum herself does *not* argue that such examples are *never* appropriately employed in ethics. Thus, Nussbaum might well agree with the overall thesis for which I am arguing in this essay.

12. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 46.

13. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

14. *Ibid.*, 47.

15. For a very useful discussion, see Lawrence Blum, "Moral Perception and Particularity," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 701–25; and various essays in Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity*.

16. Barbara Herman discusses these issues within a Kantian framework in "The Practice of Moral Judgment," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 414–36.

17. For a similar point, see Michael DePaul, "Argument and Perception: The Role of Literature in Moral Inquiry," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 552–65.

18. One might usefully distinguish two sorts of capacities which are relevant here. First, there is the capacity to generate factors which are relevant to moral assessment; to *this* capacity the streamlined stories may indeed be relevant. I owe this point to Michael Otsuka. But given a set of factors which an agent believes may be relevant, there is the capacity to look at a complex and ambiguous situation and apply the possibly relevant factors in order to identify the particular factors relevant to the situation. To *this* capacity the abstract and schematized examples will be largely irrelevant, and this is the sort of capacity on which I focus in the text.

19. I should emphasize that this inference is *not* made by Nussbaum.

20. I am indebted to correspondence with Michael DePaul for this point.

21. For a very illuminating presentation of this sort of problem, see Shelly Kagan, "The Additive Fallacy," *Ethics* 97 (1988): 5–31.

22. In our introductory essay to *Ethics: Problems and Principles*, Mark Ravizza and I pose the question of why it should be thought that ethics is relevantly different from social sciences such as economics or linguistics with regard to the appropriateness of the use of abstraction. We said:

An economist constructs a model which is really a hypothetical "world." This hypothetical world is characterized by the assumptions of the model and is presumably considerably simpler than our world (or even the part of our world pertinent to the model). Having constructed this simpler world, the economist considers its properties and (ideally) generates conclusions. These conclusions may to some extent illuminate features of our world.

Similarly, when we construct thought-experiments in ethics, we are constructing hypothetical worlds (albeit very small ones). These worlds are characterized by the assumptions of the examples, and they are in many ways simpler than real-world situations. We then scrutinize the hypothetical worlds and (ideally) generate conclusions. Again, these conclusions may to some extent illuminate features of our world. In ethics, hypothetical examples are very much like the models of economics.

If the techniques of model-building and abstraction are useful and worthwhile in economics, then why should these techniques not yield similar benefits in ethics? (p. 47)

Although, admittedly, the issues are put rather starkly here, I do think the question deserves serious consideration. For further reflections on these issues, see *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy*, edited by Tamara Horowitz and Gerald J. Massey (Lanham, Md., 1991); and Roy Sorenson, *Thought Experiments* (Oxford, 1992).

23. Of course, the standard “philosophers’ examples” are *not* the only schematized cases that are widely used in thinking about moral matters. Consider, for example, the extensive use of parables and stories in *moral education* and practical reflection quite generally, and, in particular, in the teachings and educational practices of various religions. Immediately, one thinks of the parables and stories of the Old and New Testaments, Hasidic Tales such as the Tales of Rabbi Nachman, and the stories of Chuang Tsu. Consider, just for fun, the following example:

Two monks, having taken a strict vow of chastity, approach a stream in which a woman is drowning. The older monk immediately jumps in, rescues the woman, and carries her to the shore. Then they continue their walk. Some time later, the younger monk questions his elder, wondering whether the action of the older monk violated his sacred vow. The older monk replies, “See, I carried the woman for a few minutes and left her there by the side of the stream, but you have carried her with you all this way. . . .”

Surely, no one would deny the prevalence of such stories in moral education and practical reflection. Nor would anyone insist that their relevance depends in any way upon their veracity or richness of detail. If such stories have a place in practical reflection, why couldn’t philosophers’ streamlined examples also have a place (although a different place)?

I suppose there could be many purposes of telling the story of the monks. One point is that one should not take certain rules or principles narrowly or “literally,” but one should interpret them in light of their purpose. Often such stories are useful insofar as they remind us of some point we are apt to lose track of in ordinary life. They put things in unusual and striking ways and can help us either to see issues in new ways or to remind us of important points. Although these purposes are slightly different from the purposes of introducing streamlined philosophers’ examples, they share certain similarities: they in some sense involve “meta-reflections” on the first-order considerations of morality, and to this extent are similar to the purposes of the streamlined examples.

For the above story of the monks, I am very grateful to Mark Ravizza. Perhaps it has special significance for him, as he told it to me a few days before he entered a Jesuit novitiate!

24. Richard Rorty argues against the use of schematized philosophers’ examples: *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1991). In his essay, “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens” (66–82), Rorty argues that such examples are misleading insofar as they (unlike certain examples from literature) foster the impression that there is an “essence” of morality—a true answer or set of answers to moral questions that can be codified and presented in some sort of theory. Rorty’s “postmodernist” anti-theory position leads to a denial of even the role I have found for schematized abstract philosophers’ examples in ethics; Rorty’s position is considerably stronger than Nussbaum’s in this respect. Also, it should be noted that Rorty’s objection to the use of examples is *driven* by his substantive view about ethics; in this way it is not a “neutral” objection to a particular methodology.

I believe that certain other objections to the use of streamlined hypothetical examples are also driven by particular substantive positions in ethics. For example, a proponent of virtue ethics might object to such examples on the grounds that they inappropriately tend to point us toward thinking of *general rules* as central in ethics. Similarly, a Kantian might object to such examples to the extent that they are not rich enough to help us to crystallize the agent’s motive and thus his or her “*maxim*.” It is important to see that these sorts of objections are “theory-driven” (or perhaps in Rorty’s case “anti-theory-driven”); they issue from a particular substantive view and are to this extent *not* neutral objections to a methodology. How such objections are properly viewed is a dialectically delicate and difficult matter. It must be conceded that it is fair to require that a particular methodology not be significantly “tilted” toward (or against) a particular approach. But as regards this latter point, recall that the methodology I have been defending here does not hold that hypothetical examples should be the only or even the primary considerations in ethical reflection. It would be difficult to argue that a methodology which

simply finds *some room* for such examples is significantly biased against particular approaches (which themselves have some minimal claim to plausibility).

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