Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 2

Allen Speight *Editor*

Narrative, Philosophy and Life

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Volume 2

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Series Editor

Allen Speight

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Editor
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Narrative, Philosophy and Life



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1. Introduction

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Keywords Narrative – Philosophy – Self – Selfhood – Agency – Temporality

1.1 Philosophy, Narrative and Life

What is narrative and (why) does it matter philosophically? Over the last few years this question has been taken up in a number of new ways by a wide range of philosophers and theorists—a conversation that has, by turns, provoked reactions both skeptical and affirmative. The result has been something of a generational shift in how narrative is philosophically appropriated.

Thirty years ago, the topic of narrative had been a focus for a number of philosophical figures. An unusual constellation of work beginning in the early and mid-1980s, including, among others, MacIntyre (1981), Taylor (1989), Ricoeur (1984) and Nussbaum (1990), represented something of a high point in the assertion of narrative's importance for a range of philosophical questions—most intensely, perhaps, those concerning personal identity, moral psychology and normative ethics, as well as topics in aesthetics, literary theory and the philosophy of history.

The tone of the more recent philosophical discussion of narrative is more chary and rigorous, suggesting that the constructive ambition of the earlier discussion has moved into a more analytic and skeptical phase. Well-known skeptical attacks by G Strawson (2004, 2007) and Lamarque (2004, 2007) have

challenged leading premises of the earlier discussion of narrative, with Strawson (2004) in particular taken to undermine both empirical and normative conceptions of the "narrative self" that had been drawn on in earlier work.

Meanwhile attempts to give an adequate *definition* of narrative have brought out inherent difficulties in the concept. "Narrative structure" has been characterized both in terms of a certain causal relationship, as famously argued by Carroll (2001), and in terms of some form of "emotional closure" or catharsis as Velleman (2003, 2009) has claimed. More recently Goldie (2012) has suggested a post-Strawsonian notion of narrative and narrative thought that hinges especially on the coherence and meaning provided by the (often ironic) perspective of a narrator at a particular point in time, and Currie (2010), with an eye on the difficulties that have emerged in attempts to define narrative, has proposed instead a "gradational" or spectrum approach to characterizing it.

At the same time, there has been a remarkable shift in literary theory that might also be called generational—away from the (even longer-ago) heyday of narratology and formalist criticism to contemporary interest in the possible connections between narrative and contemporary research in the fields of evolutionary biology and psychology (Boyd 2009; Flesch 2009).

This volume is especially concerned with what narrative and philosophy have to say about *life*. Often this is a relationship couched in terms of familiar binaries or "gaps," the most pressing of which is the one that Alsadair MacIntyre and others have formulated around the famous question of Sartre's character Roquentin in the novel *Nausea*, who was dismissive of the ways in which agents led lives falsified by stories of great adventures: "you have to choose: live or tell." Or, reformulated in the words of Louis Mink: "stories are not lived but told."

Can life *be* a narrative? Even MacIntyre, who wants to see life as already somehow having a narrative shape, is nonetheless careful to notice that there must be a distinction between literary narrative and biography ("Stories are lived before they are told—except in fiction"; MacIntyre 1981, 212).

The question of narrative and life has been pursued in terms reminiscent of the Aristotelian distinction between *zoē* and *bios*: organic life and life that has a biography and is centered on a character. Zahavi (2007, 2008, 2011) and Schechtman (this volume) consider the difficulties of selfhood and whether the narrative abilities that characterize adults with high cognitive abilities are indeed required for selfhood or whether a more minimal sense of self runs through a range of not otherwise narrative agents (non-human animals, human infants and those suffering dementia).

The question of biographical narrative provokes also questions about gaps

within our temporal perspective on life. How, for example, do the prospective and planning features of our narrative persona (with the forking paths of potential decisions that interest Goldie 2012) go together with the more retrospective view that narrative can offer for the work of biography or autobiography? Kierkegaard's famous remark that life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards is reflective of this narrative/life gap.

And there are similar difficulties in considering the narrative relation between what one does and what one must undergo in life. Arendt quotes as the epigraph of her narrative-rich discussion of "Action" in *The Human Condition* Isak Dinesen's remark that "All sufferings can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (Arendt 1958, 175), yet she also provides her own commentary for that remark in her sketch of the life of Dinesen that appeared in *Men in Dark Times*: that it is a crucial mistake to try to live one's life *according to* some preconceived narrative plan (Arendt 1968).

Amidst all of these questions about the potential "gaps" between life and story, lower and higher self, prospective and retrospective views of narrative, and agency and suffering, another set of questions arises concerning the importance that narrative may or may not have for *philosophical* lives, especially. All philosophers are presumed to *have* biographies, of course, but the question of what import biographical study of (or autobiographical claims about) the lives of those philosophers may hold for the understanding of their philosophical *writings* is one that is open to dispute. Considered as a sub-question of the larger concern with narrative and life, one important difference is worth noting: as Steven Nadler points out in his essay in this volume, there have been over the years far more numerous explorations of the connection between life and writing for certain literary artists—think, for example, of the amount of biographical attention given Virginia Woolf—than even of such fundamental figures as Spinoza and Socrates.

But since, as Nadler points out, the last few years have seen an explosion of new philosophical biographies, especially in the rich territory of early modern philosophy, one of the aims of this volume is to draw together the thoughts of a number of leading practitioners of the craft of philosophical biography. Along with Nadler's account of Spinoza, we have included reflections by leading biographers and scholars of the work of Descartes, Hume, Kant and Fichte, among others.

The origin of the collection lies in a year-long lecture series and conference hosted by the Institute for Philosophy and Religion at Boston University in 2009–2010. The broad topic of the year as a whole was "Narrative Wisdom—Narrative Meaning," and this was taken up in a wide-ranging series of

interdisciplinary talks, as well as in a focal conference on the issues concerning philosophical biography and autobiography.

1.2 Scope and Aims of the Volume

As suggested, the volume's interest in the intersections among narrative, philosophy and life has two primary points of focus: one broadly theoretical, concerned with philosophical attempts to understand the function and place of narrative; one both practical and historical, concerned with how the biographical and autobiographical may matter in our specific assessments of philosophers' thought and writings. Part I takes up several key philosophical questions and concerns about narrative—from how we should locate its relation to philosophy in the broadest sense to the more specific philosophical concerns that narrative often raises for notions of selfhood, personal identity, temporality, agency and moral responsibility, among others.

Since many of the essays here and in contemporary accounts of narrative have responded in one way or another to Strawson (2004), we begin the volume with a republication of this essay. Strawson's critique correctly begins to try to sort out what is at stake in some of the quite different claims made on behalf of narrative: for example, the difference between the *empirical* claim that we happen to be creatures who understand ourselves through stories and the essentially *normative* claim made, for example, by Taylor, that it is a "basic condition of making sense of ourselves… that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*." Strawson argues that the boldest earlier claims for narrative failed to take into account the sort of distinction he draws between the perspectives of *narrativists* and *episodists*—the former tending to construe a temporal integrity through numerous life events and the latter inevitably unable to see life as more than a series of disconnected episodes.

In "The Size of the Self: Minimalist Selves and Narrative Self-Constitution," Marya Schechtman responds to the skeptical queries that Strawson has directed against narrative by examining two views of the self in contemporary philosophical literature which she thinks can be traced back to two differing interpretations of Locke's account of the relation between persons and selves. On the first (or "narrative self-constitution") view, she argues, a persisting subject exists only by its (essentially, even if only implicitly, narrative) *appropriation* of different experiences over time. On the other ("minimalist") view, as articulated by Dan Zahavi and others, selfhood is not something actively accomplished, but rather a (pre-reflective, pre-linguistic, pre-narrative) given of some sort, one that is shared not merely by self-conscious adult human beings but also by animals,

children and the cognitively impaired; on this view, *selfhood* in this more restricted sense is a necessary precursor of, but not coextensive with, *personhood*, which requires in addition some form of higher-order cognition or reflection.

In "The Narrative Shape of Agency: Three Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives," I look at two contemporary (affirmative) responses to Strawson's critique of narrative in the work of David Velleman and the late Peter Goldie with an eye to the connection between narrative and agency. I argue for the reverse of Gregory Currie's recent claim that "narrative is the product of agency": if we examine agency instead as the product of *narrative*, it's possible to trace through the use of narrative examples a critique of many assumptions in what Velleman calls the "standard account of agency."

Responding (like Schechtman) to Strawson's skepticism about narrative "selves" and also to Nussbaum's claims that literary form may be inseparable from philosophical content, David Eckel considers the role of selfhood in the context of the set of narrative cultural traditions which arguably have pursued the notion of "no-self" to its greatest extent: the various forms of Buddhist narrative. Eckel begins with a peculiar (and to contemporary ears, somewhat difficult-to-appropriate) scene from Asvaghosa's *Life of the Buddha* which, he argues, gives insight into how Buddhism's famous "middle way" avoids claims both of permanence of self that would allow no change and annihilation of the self that would allow no responsibility. Picking up on a term of Steve Collins, Eckel suggests that a Buddhist response to Strawson can be seen in the notion of "selfless persons," a notion which he thinks requires a narrative perspective to understand fully: while a Buddhist can formulate a claim such as "neither self nor no-self," an understanding of the life that lies behind such formulations can be impossible to glimpse without an appeal to narrative forms.

In his essay "How Sartre, Philosopher, Misreads Sartre, Novelist: *Nausea* and the Adventures of the Narrative Self," Ben Roth responds to the famous choice between "live or tell" posed by Sartre's character Roquentin. On the basis of this remark, Sartre is often taken to hold a view that narrative is always a falsification of life, but Roth holds that a more careful and holistic reading of *Nausea* shows that Roquentin's position is not so easily attributable to Sartre himself—and that in fact Sartre's novel (as well as Roquentin's own novelistic aspirations) in fact mean that there is a greater Sartrean affirmation of narrativity than is often thought.

The beginnings of philosophical reflection on narrative lie of course in a set of debates that go back to Plato and Aristotle. Central for many later philosophical accounts of narrative in particular is Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is

concerned above all with the connection between our experience of mimetic works (narrative here in the broadest sense, including epic as well as dramatic forms) and the activity of *learning*. In her essay, "Aristotle on Narrative Intelligence," Silvia Carli suggests that we can understand narrative intelligence as a mode of knowing different from both practical and theoretical wisdom but nonetheless connected to both: its concern, she argues, is with *objects* of the sort that are the focus of practical intelligence, but its *mode of understanding* those objects has important analogies to theoretical learning. Carli thus explores, on the one hand, possible lines of affiliation between Aristotle's ethics and poetics, with fiction presenting, as James Redfield has claimed, an "unreal world" which nonetheless is *about* the "real world" of ethical actions and emotions. On the other hand—as Aristotle's famous comment about poetry being more 'philosophical' than history—she sees important similarities between our engagement with poetic works and the activity of philosophy.

A central concern of narrative, from Aristotle forward, has been the question of temporality: how time is experienced in narrative and whether narrative offers a structure for construing temporal experience. In "Dostoevsky and the Literature of Process: What Open Time Looks Like," Gary Saul Morson contrasts two ways of viewing time that can be reflected in literature. On the first ("closed") view of time, loose ends are tied up in such a way that the work comes appropriately to an end and no continuation is imaginable: such a view of time may characterize certain literary works but in life, he claims, "there is never such a moment" of closure. On the second ("open") view, which he finds in Dostoevsky, outcomes are not presented as necessary but the reader is given a sense that more than one event could have taken place.

In "Narrative and the Literary Imagination," John Gibson takes up two philosophical ways of viewing the imagination, which he broadly characterizes as *fiction-making* and *culture-making*: on the first, the power of imagination helps us (as Sartre once suggested) to "hold the real at a distance, to free oneself from it, in a word to *deny* it," while on the second, we are drawn to "*see the world*, whether absent or present, *as significant*." Gibson argues that narrative can at least sometimes bring these two activities together, suggesting by way of example the provocative thought experiment of whether *Paradise Lost* would be regarded as a more imaginative work if Milton had not relied in its construction on certain existing cultural norms in the world of Western Christianity (heaven, hell, sin, etc.) and instead created a more thoroughgoing fictional world. Crucial to seeing the commonality of the two tasks of the imagination, Gibson claims, is its essentially narrative role in meaning-bestowal—how literary artists like Dante, Shakespeare and Milton can ground a way of taking ourselves to be and

hence reorder or reorganize the cultural space in which the imagination is operative.

The question of narrative imagination and its surrounding culture is also of particular concern for Anne E. Monius, who explores the cultural aspects of narrative reception in South Asian literature. Taking her title ("And We Shall Compose a Poem to Establish These Truths") from a fourth century Tamil poetic narrative, she examines the role that narrative texts can play not only in conveying specific ethical teachings about *dharma*, but also—at least for one class of reader—"establishing" a kind of aesthetic stance or relishment that contributes to its proper philosophical appropriation.

In Part II, the attention turns from the philosophical question of how narrative and life intersect to the more specific focus on the relation between *philosophers' lives* and their work. The essays in this second section are all written by prominent philosophical biographers or philosophers who have wrestled with questions raised by the practice of life-writing. To what extent must we engage the biographies of famous philosophers in order to understand their writings? What are the particular challenges of attempting to understand the life and writings of philosopher such as Descartes, Spinoza and Hume?

In "Descartes' Biography as a Guide to his *Meditations*," Desmond Clarke argues for the importance of historical and biographical insight into the origins of classical philosophical texts such as the *Meditations*. Specifically, Clarke claims that a sufficiently careful historical perspective on the text that is now the *Meditations* should offer a helpful corrective to familiar but misleading interpretations of Descartes, for example, as a substance dualist.

Steven Nadler, in "Writing the Lives of Philosophers: Reflections on Spinoza and Others," notes the explosion of recent biographies of philosophers, especially of those in the early modern period, and contrasts the earlier dearth of such biographies with the huge number of biographical treatments of literary figures. In his essay, Nadler discusses the particular challenge facing a biographer of Spinoza: the lack of documents that go beyond his own philosophical writing and the few, philosophically-specific, letters of his that are extant. Nadler's suggestion is that in such cases the philosophical biographer must resort to capturing his subject "in silhouette," as it were by "filling in the space around him" from other historical and cultural sources.

In his essay "Hume's Own History," Aaron Garrett explores the motivations that may lie behind Hume's autobiographical essay "My Own Life," written just months before his death in 1776. Garrett compares Hume's end-of-life assessment—what Garrett calls "an extraordinary literary disappearing act"—with earlier autobiographical remarks and places the essay in the larger context

of Hume's account of the task of history-writing in general, showing how he wrestled with the problem of the inherent interestedness involved in the judging of one's own life.

Finally, Manfred Kuehn, in "The (Ir)relevance of Biography: The Case of Fichte," takes up the challenge to philosophical biography thrown down by Collingwood, Rorty and others that biography is useful only for its "gossip value" and not for an understanding of a philosopher's thought. Kuehn, a well-known biographer of both Kant and Fichte, focuses in this essay on the case of the latter, considering how Fichte's biography may offer some perspective on his famous claim that "what kind of philosophy someone chooses depends on the kind of person he is."

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Part I
Narrative, Philosophy and Life: Theoretical Questions About Narrative

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2. Against Narrativity

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From Galen Strawson, *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008) [first published in *Ratio*, 2004].

2.1

Talk of narrative is intensely fashionable in a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, theology, anthropology, sociology, political theory, literary studies, religious studies, psychotherapy, medicine, and law. There is widespread agreement that human beings typically experience their lives as a narrative or story, or at least as some sort of collection of stories. I am going to call this the *psychological Narrativity thesis*, using the word 'Narrative' with a capital letter to denote a specifically psychological property or outlook: if one is Narrative then (as a first approximation)

> [**N**] one sees or lives or experiences one's life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories.

As it stands the psychological Narrativity thesis is a straightforwardly descriptive, empirical psychological thesis about the way ordinary, normal human beings experience their lives. This is how we are, it says, this is our

nature. But it is often coupled with a normative thesis, which I will call the *ethical Narrativity thesis*, according to which a richly Narrative outlook on one's life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood.

The descriptive thesis and the normative thesis have four main combinations. One may, to begin, think the descriptive thesis true and the normative one false. One may think that we are indeed deeply Narrative in our thinking and that it's not a good thing. The protagonist of Sartre's novel *La Nausée* holds something like this view.[1] It is also attributed to the Stoics, especially Marcus Aurelius.

Second, and contrariwise, one may think the descriptive thesis false and the normative one true. One may grant that we are not all naturally Narrative in our thinking but insist that we should be, and need to be, in order to live a good life. There are versions of this view in Plutarch[2] and a host of present-day writings.

Third, one may think both theses are true: one may think that all normal non-pathological human beings are naturally Narrative and also that Narrativity is crucial to a good life. This is the dominant view in the academy today, followed by the second view. It does not entail that everything is as it should be; it leaves plenty of room for the idea that many of us would profit from being more Narrative than we are, and the idea that we can get our self-narratives wrong in one way or another.

Finally, one may think that both theses are false. This is my view. I think the current widespread acceptance of the third view is regrettable. It's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non- Narrative. I think the second and third views hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.

2.2

The first thing I want to put in place is a distinction between one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole, and one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or 'self' of some sort—I'll call this one's self-experience. When Henry James says, of one of his early books, 'I think of … the masterpiece in question … as the work of quite another person than myself … a rich … relation, say, who … suffers me still to claim a shy fourth cousinship',[3] he has no doubt that he is the same human being as the author of that book, but he does not feel he is the same self or person as the author of that

book. It is this phenomenon of experiencing oneself as a self that concerns me here. One of the most important ways in which people tend to think of themselves (quite independently of religious belief) is as things whose persistence conditions are not obviously or automatically the same as the persistence conditions of a human being considered as a whole. Petrarch, Proust, Parfit, and thousands of others have given this idea vivid expression. I'm going to take its viability for granted and set up another distinction—between 'Episodic' and 'Diachronic' self-experience—in terms of it.

2.3

The basic form of Diachronic self-experience is that

> [**D**] one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future

something that has relatively long-term diachronic continuity, something that persists over a long stretch of time, perhaps for life. I take it that many people are naturally Diachronic, and that many who are Diachronic are also Narrative in their outlook on life.

If one is Episodic, by contrast,

> [**E**] one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.

One has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being. Episodics are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms.[4]

The Episodic and Diachronic styles of temporal being are radically opposed, but they are not absolute or exceptionless. Predominantly Episodic individuals may sometimes connect to charged events in their pasts in such a way that they feel that those events happened to them—embarrassing memories are a good example—and anticipate events in their futures in such a way that they think that those events are going to happen to them—thoughts of future death can be a good example. So too predominantly Diachronic individuals may sometimes experience an Episodic lack of linkage with well-remembered parts of their past. It may be that the basic Episodic disposition is less common in human beings than the basic Diachronic disposition. I suspect that the fundamentals of temporal temperament are genetically determined, and that we have here to do with a deep 'individual difference variable'—to put it in the language of

experimental psychology. If this is right individual variation in time-style, Episodic or Diachronic, Narrative or non-Narrative, will be found across all cultures, so that the same general spread will be found in a so-called 'revenge culture', with its essentially Diachronic emphasis, as in a more happy-go-lucky culture.[5] Compatibly with that, one's exact position in the Episodic/Diachronic/Narrative/non-Narrative state-space may vary significantly over time according to what one is doing or thinking about, one's state of health, and so on; and it may change markedly with increasing age.

Certainly poor memory has nothing to do with Episodicity. In his autobiography John Updike—a man with a powerful memory and a highly consistent character—says of himself 'I have the persistent sensation, in my life and art, that I am just beginning.'[6] I have the same sensation, and I think Updike accurately describes how things are for many people when it comes to their experience of being in time and, in particular, their sense of themselves as selves. But he shows by his own memorious case that this experience of always beginning has nothing essentially to do with having a poor autobiographical memory, let alone one that almost never impinges spontaneously on one's current life.[7]

In one respect, I think that the sense of being always just beginning is nothing more than an accurate reflection or surfacing in consciousness of the actual nature of all conscious being in time, at least in the human case. I think it may also be an ever-present feature of ordinary everyday experience that is accessible to everyone but rarely attended to.[8] But this view may simply reflect my own experience. And if there is any respect in which the experience of being always just beginning is universal, then this, at least, cannot be part of what distinguishes Episodics from Diachronics.

It may be said that the sense of perpetual beginning is simply more salient or vivid for Episodics; but it need not be. An Episodic considering the character of her present experience may feel that consciousness is a flowing stream, and have no particular positive experience of perpetual rebeginning, while lacking any significant sense that she was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future. A Diachronic may experience consciousness as something that is always re-engaging or always setting out without feeling that this undercuts his sense that he was there in the past and will be there in the (further) future. Episodics may well have a general tendency to experience things more in one way than the other, and so too Diachronics, but there are perhaps no necessary linkages between the Diachronic and Episodic dispositions and these sorts of phenomenological particularities. The key—defining—difference is simply as

stated: it is the difference between those who do and those who do not naturally figure or experience themselves, considered as selves or subjects, as things that were there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.[9]

Diachronics and Episodics are likely to misunderstand one another badly. Diachronics may feel that there is something chilling, empty, and deficient about the Episodic life. They may fear it, although it is no less full or emotionally articulated than the Diachronic life, no less thoughtful or sensitive, no less open to friendship, love, and loyalty. Certainly the two forms of life differ significantly in their ethical and emotional form. But it would be a great mistake to think that the Episodic life is bound to be less vital or in some way less engaged, or less humane, or less humanly fulfilled. If Heideggerians think that Episodics are necessarily 'inauthentic' in their experience of being in time, so much the worse for their notion of authenticity.[10] If Episodics are moved to respond by casting aspersions on the Diachronic life—finding it somehow macerated or clogged, say, or excessively self-concerned, inauthentically second-order—they too will be mistaken if they think it an essentially inferior form of human life.

There is one sense in which Episodics are by definition more located in the present than Diachronics, so far as their self-experience is concerned. But it does not follow, and is not true, that Diachronics are less present in the present moment than Episodics, any more than it follows, or is true, that the present is somehow less informed by or responsible to the past in the Episodic life than it is in the Diachronic life. What is true is that the informing and the responsiveness have different characteristics and different experiential consequences in the two cases. Faced with sceptical Diachronics, who insist that Episodics are (essentially) dysfunctional in the way they relate to their own past, Episodics will reply that the past can be present or alive in the present without being present or alive *as* the past. The past can be alive— arguably more genuinely alive—in the present simply in so far as it has helped to shape the way one is in the present, just as musicians' playing can incorporate and body forth their past practice without being mediated by any explicit memory of it. What goes for musical development goes equally for ethical development, and Rilke's remarks on poetry and memory, which have a natural application to the ethical case, suggest one way in which the Episodic attitude to the past may have an advantage over the Diachronic: 'For the sake of a single poem', he writes, 'you must have … many … memories …. And yet it is not enough to have memories .... For the memories themselves are not important.' They give rise to a good poem 'only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and

gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves'.[11]

Among those whose writings show them to be markedly Episodic I propose Michel de Montaigne, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Laurence Sterne, Coleridge, Stendhal, Hazlitt, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, Jorge-Luis Borges, Fernando Pessoa, Iris Murdoch (a strongly Episodic person who is a natural story teller), Freddie Ayer, Bob Dylan. Proust is another candidate, for all his remembrance (which may be inspired by his Episodicity); also Emily Dickinson. Diachronicity stands out less clearly, because it is I take it the norm (the 'unmarked position'), but one may begin with Plato, St Augustine, Heidegger, Wordsworth, Dostoievski, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and all the champions of Narrativity in the current ethico-psychological debate. I find it easy to classify my friends, many of whom are intensely Diachronic, unlike my parents, who are on the Episodic side.[12]

2.4

How do Episodicity and Diachronicity relate to Narrativity? Suppose that being Diachronic is at least necessary for being Narrative. Since it's true by definition that if you're Diachronic you're not Episodic and conversely, it follows that if you're Episodic you're not Narrative. But I think that the strongly Episodic life is one normal, non-pathological form of life for human beings, and indeed one good form of life for human beings, one way to flourish. So if Diachronicity is necessary for Narrativity (see Sect. 2.8 below) then I reject both the psychological Narrativity thesis and the normative, ethical Narrativity thesis.

I need to say more about the Episodic life, and since I find myself to be relatively Episodic, I'll use myself as an example. I have a past, like any human being, and I know perfectly well that I have a past. I have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about it, and I also remember some of my past experiences 'from the inside', as philosophers say. And yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.

That's one way to put it—to speak in terms of limited interest. Another way is to say that it seems clear to me, when I am experiencing or apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future in question is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS the human being. This is more dramatic, but I think it is equally correct, when I am figuring myself as a self. I have no significant sense that *I*—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past. And it seems clear to me that this is not a failure of feeling. It is, rather, a registration of a fact about what I am—about what the

thing that is currently considering this problem is.

I will use 'I*' to represent that which I now experience myself to be when I'm apprehending myself specifically as an inner mental presence or self. 'I*' comes with a large family of cognate forms—'me*', 'my*', 'you*' 'oneself*', 'themselves*', and so on. The metaphysical presumption built into these terms is that they succeed in making genuine reference to an inner mental something that is reasonably called a 'self'. But it doesn't matter whether or not the presumption is correct.[13]

So, it's clear to me that events in my remoter past didn't happen to me*. But what does this amount to? It certainly doesn't mean that I don't have any autobiographical memories of these past experiences. I do. Nor does it mean that my autobiographical memories don't have what philosophers call a 'from-the-inside' character. Some of them do. And they are certainly the experiences of the human being that I am. It does not, however, follow from this that I experience them as having happened to me*, or indeed that they did happen to me*. They certainly do not present as things that happened to me*, and I think I'm strictly, literally correct in thinking that they did not happen to me*.

> — That can't be right. If one of my remembered experiences has a from-the-inside character it must—by definition—be experienced as something that happened to me*.

This may seem plausible at first, but it's a mistake: the from-the-inside character of a memory can detach completely from any sense that one is the subject of the remembered experience. My memory of falling out of a boat has an essentially from-the-inside character, visually (the water rushing up to meet me), kinaesthetically, proprioceptively, and so on.[14] It certainly does not follow that it carries any feeling or belief that what is remembered happened to me*, to that which I now apprehend myself to be when I am apprehending myself specifically as a self.

This doesn't follow even when emotion figures in the from-the-inside character of the autobiographical memory. The inference from (1) The memory has a from-the-inside character in emotional respects to (2) The memory is experienced as something that happened to me* is simply not valid, although for many people (1) and (2) are often or usually true together.

For me this is a plain fact of experience. I'm well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there's a sense in which it has special relevance to me* now, including special emotional and moral

relevance. At the same time I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact. As for my practical concern for my future, which I believe to be within the normal human range (low end), it is biologically—viscerally—grounded and autonomous in such a way that I can experience it as something immediately felt even though I have no significant sense that I* will be there in the future.

2.5

So much, briefly, for the Episodic life. What about the Narrative life? And what might it mean to say that human life is 'narrative' in nature? And must you be Diachronic to be Narrative? There are many questions.

One clear statement of the psychological Narrativity thesis is given by Roquentin in Sartre's novel *La Nausée*:

> a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him *in terms of* these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.[15]

Sartre sees the narrative, story-telling impulse as a defect, regrettable. He accepts the psychological Narrativity thesis while rejecting the ethical Narrativity thesis. He thinks human Narrativity is essentially a matter of bad faith, of radical (and typically irremediable) inauthenticity, rather than as something essential for authenticity.

The pro-Narrative majority may concede to Sartre that Narrativity can go wrong while insisting that it's not all bad and that it is necessary for a good life. I'm with Sartre on the ethical issue, but I want now to consider some statements of the psychological Narrativity thesis.

It is as I've said widely believed. Oliver Sacks, for example, holds that 'each of us constructs and lives a "narrative"'. He says that 'this narrative *is* us, our identities'. The distinguished psychologist Jerry Bruner writes similarly of 'the stories we tell about our lives'. He claims that 'self is a perpetually rewritten story', and that 'in the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives'.[16] Dan Dennett claims that

> we are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behaviour, and we always try to put the best 'faces' on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the centre of that

> autobiography is one's self.[17]

Marya Schechtman goes further, twisting the ethical and the psychological Narrativity theses tightly together in a valuably forthright manner. A person, she says, 'creates his identity [only] by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life'. One must be in possession of a full and 'explicit narrative [of one's life] to develop fully as a person'.[18]

Charles Taylor presents it this way: a 'basic condition of making sense of ourselves', he says, 'is that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*' and have an understanding of our lives 'as an unfolding story'. This is not, he thinks, 'an optional extra'; our lives exist 'in a space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer'.[19] He is backed up by Claire in Doug Copeland's novel *Generation X*: 'Claire … breaks the silence by saying that it's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. "Either our lives become stories, or there's no way to get through them"'; but Taylor builds a lot more ethical weight into what's involved in getting through life.

It is

> because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and hence determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, [that] we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest' [and] must see our lives in story.[20]

This, he says, is an 'inescapable structural requirement of human agency',[21] and Paul Ricoeur appears to concur:

> How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?[22]

Here my main puzzlement is about what it might be to 'give an ethical character to [one's] own life taken as a whole' in some explicit way, and about why on earth, in the middle of the beauty of being, it should be thought to be important to do this. I think that those who think in this way are motivated by a sense of their own importance or significance that is absent in other human beings. Many of them, connectedly, have religious commitments. They are wrapped up in forms of religious belief that are—like almost all religious belief—really all about self.[23]

Alasdair MacIntyre is perhaps the founding figure in the modern Narrativity camp, and his view is similar to Taylor's. 'The unity of an individual life', he says, 'is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask "What is the good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion…' The unity of a human life, he continues,

> is the unity of a narrative quest … [and] the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria for success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest …. A quest for what? … a quest for the good … the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man.[24]

MacIntyre's claim seems at first non-psychological: a good life is one that has narrative unity. But a good life is one spent seeking the good life, and there is a strong suggestion that seeking the good life requires taking up a Narrative perspective; in which case narrative unity requires Narrativity.

Is any of this true? I don't think so. It seems to me that MacIntyre, Taylor and all other supporters of the ethical Narrativity thesis are really just talking about themselves. It may be that what they are saying is true for them, both psychologically and ethically. This may be the best ethical project that people like themselves can hope to engage in.[25] But even if it is true for them it is not true for other types of ethical personality, and many are likely to be thrown right off their own truth by being led to believe that Narrativity is necessary for a good life. My own conviction is that the best lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling, and that we have here yet another deep divider of the human race.

When a Narrative like John Campbell claims that 'identity [through time] is central to what we care about in our lives: one thing I care about is what I have made of my life'[26] I'm as bewildered as Goronwy Rees when he writes

> For as long as I can remember it has always surprised and slightly bewildered me that other people should take it so much for granted that they each possess what is usually called 'a character'; that is to say, a personality [or personality-possessing self] with its own continuous history …. I have never been able to find anything of that sort in myself …. How much I admire those writers who are actually able to record the growth of what they call their personality, describe the conditions which determined its birth, lovingly trace the curve of its development …. For myself it would be quite impossible to tell such a story, because at no time in my life have I had that enviable sensation of constituting a continuous personality …. As a

> child this did not worry me, and if indeed I had known at that time of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*The Man without Qualities*, a novel by Robert Musil], the man without qualities, I would have greeted him as my blood brother and rejoiced because I was not alone in the world; as it was, I was content with a private fantasy of my own in which I figured as Mr. Nobody.[27]

Unlike Rees, I have a perfectly good grasp of myself as having a certain personality, but I'm completely uninterested in the answer to the question 'What has GS made of his life?', or 'What have I made of my life?'. I'm living it, and this sort of thinking about it is no part of it. This does not mean that I am in any way irresponsible. It is just that what I care about, in so far as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now. The way I am now is profoundly shaped by my past, but it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as such. I agree with the Earl of Shaftesbury:

> The metaphysicians … affirm that if memory be taken away, the self is lost. [But] what matter for memory? What have I to do with that part? If, *whilst I am*, I am as I should be, what do I care more? And thus let me lose *self* every hour, and be twenty successive selfs, or new selfs, 'tis all one to me: so [long as] I lose not my opinion [i.e. my overall outlook, my character, my moral identity]. If I carry that with me'tis I; all is well. … —The *now*; the *now*. Mind this: in this is all.[28]

I think, then, that the ethical Narrativity thesis is false, and that the psychological Narrativity thesis is also false in any non-trivial version. What do I mean by non-trivial? Well, if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial.[29]

Is there some burden on me to explain the popularity of the two theses, given that I think that they're false? Hardly. Theorizing human beings tend to favour false views in matters of this kind. I do, though, think that intellectual fashion is part of the explanation. I also suspect that those who are drawn to write on the subject of 'narrativity' tend to have strongly Diachronic and Narrative outlooks or personalities, and generalize from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else.[30]

2.6

> — All very interesting, but what exactly is (upper-case) Narrativity? You still haven't addressed the question directly, and you're running out of space.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that being Diachronic doesn't already entail being Narrative. There must be something more to experiencing one's life as a narrative than simply being Diachronic. For one can be Diachronic, naturally experiencing oneself(*) as something existing in the past and future, without any particular sense of one's life as constituting a narrative.

> — Fine, but you haven't told me what a (lower-case) narrative is either.

Well, the paradigm of a narrative is a conventional story told in words. I take the term to attribute—at the very least—a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied—lives, parts of lives, pieces of writing. So it doesn't apply to random or radically unconnected sequences of events even when they are sequentially and indeed contiguously temporally ordered, or to purely picaresque or randomly 'cut-up' pieces of writing.[31]

> — 'This doesn't take us very far, because we still need to know what makes developmental unity or coherence in a life specifically *narrative* in nature. After all, there's a clear sense in which every human life is a developmental unity—a historical-characteral developmental unity as well as a biological one—just in being the life of a single human being. Putting aside cases of extreme insanity, any human life, even a highly disordered one, can be the subject of an outstanding biography that possesses all the narrative-unity-related virtues of that literary form. But if this sort of developmental unity is sufficient for narrative structure then it's trivially true that all human lives have narrative structure. Actually, even dogs and horses can be the subject of excellent biographies.'

True. And this, I think, is why the distinctive claim of the defenders of the psychological Narrativity thesis is that for a life to be a narrative in the required sense it must be lived Narratively. The person whose life it is must see or feel it as a narrative, construe it as a narrative, live it as a narrative. One could put this roughly by saying that lower-case or 'objective' narrativity requires upper-case or 'subjective' Narrativity.[32]

> — Now you're using the notion of upper-case psychological Narrativity to

> characterize the notion of lower-case ‘objective’ narrativity, and I still don’t have a clear sense of what upper-case Narrativity is.

Well, it’s not easy, but perhaps one can start from the idea of a *construction* in the sense of a construal. The Narrative outlook clearly involves putting some sort of construction—a unifying or form-finding construction—on the events of one’s life, or parts of one’s life. I don’t think this construction need involve any clearly intentional activity, nor any departure from or addition to the facts. But the Narrative attitude must (as we have already agreed) amount to something more than a disposition to grasp one’s life as a unity simply in so far as it is the life of a biologically single human being. Nor can it consist just in the ability to give a sequential record of the actual course of one’s life—the actual history of one’s life—even if one’s life does in fact exemplify a classical pattern of narrative development independently of any construction or interpretation. One must in addition engage—to repeat—in some sort of construal of one’s life. One must have some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally

[**F**] *form-finding* tendency

when it comes to one’s apprehension of one’s life, or relatively large-scale parts of one’s life.[33]

> — But this doesn’t even distinguish Narrativity from Diachronicity, for to be Diachronic is already to put a certain construction on one’s life—on the life of the human being that one is: it is to apprehend that life through the life-unifying sense that one (*) was there in the past and will be there in the future. And yet you say being Diachronic is not enough for being Narrative.

I’m prepared to allow that to be Diachronic is already to put a certain construction on one’s life in the sense you specify, but it’s a very weak sense. One can be Diachronic without actively conceiving of one’s life, consciously or unconsciously, as some sort of ethical-historical-characterological developmental unity, or in terms of a story, a *Bildung* or ‘quest’. One can be Diachronic without one’s sense of who or what one is having any significant sort of *narrative* structure. And one can be Diachronic without one’s apprehension of oneself as something that persists in time having any great importance for one.[34]

> — You’ve already said that, and the question remains unanswered: what sort of construal is required for Narrativity? When does one cross the line

from mere Diachronicity to Narrativity? This is still luminously unclear.

I agree that the proposal that form-finding is a necessary condition of Narrativity is very unspecific, but its lack of specificity may be part of its value, and it seems clear that Diachronicity (D) and form-finding (F) are independent of each other. In practice, no doubt, they often come together, but one can imagine [−D +F] an Episodic person in whom a form-finding tendency is stimulated precisely by lack of a Diachronic outlook, and, conversely, [+D −F] a Diachronic person who lives, by force of circumstance, an intensely picaresque and disjointed life, while having absolutely no tendency to seek unity or narrative-developmental pattern in it. Other Diachronics in similar circumstances may move from [+D −F] to [+D +F], acquiring a form-finding tendency precisely because they become distressed by the 'one damned thing after another'[35] character of their lives. The great and radically non-Narrative Stendhal might be judged to be an example of this, in the light of all his chaotic autobiographical projects, although I would be more inclined to classify him as [−D +F].[36] Either way, the fact remains that one can be Diachronic while being very unreflective about oneself. One can be inclined to think, of any event in one's past of which one is reminded, that it happened to oneself*, without positively grasping one's life as a unity in any further—say specifically narrative—sense.

I think that the notion of form-finding captures something that is essential to being Narrative and that goes essentially beyond being Diachronic, and one view might be that form-finding is not only necessary for Narrativity, but also minimally sufficient. Against that, it may be said that if one is genuinely Narrative one must also (and of course) have some sort of distinctive

[**S**] *story-telling* tendency

when it comes to one's apprehension of one's life—where story-telling is understood in such a way that it does not imply any tendency to fabrication, conscious or otherwise, although it does not exclude it either. On this view, one must be disposed to apprehend or think of oneself and one's life as fitting the form of some recognized narrative genre.

Story-telling is a species of form-finding, and the basic model for it, perhaps, is the way in which gifted and impartial journalists or historians report a sequence of events. Obviously they select among the facts, but they do not, we suppose, distort or falsify them, and they do more than merely list them in the correct temporal order, for they also place them in a connected account. In its non-falsifying mode story-telling involves the ability to detect—not invent—

developmental coherencies in the manifold of one's life. It is one way in which one may be able to apprehend the deep personal constancies that do in fact exist in the life of every human being—although I believe this can also be done by form-finding without story-telling.

So story-telling entails form-finding, and story-telling in addition to form-finding is surely—trivially—sufficient for Narrativity.

2.7

A third and more troubling suggestion is that if one is Narrative one will also have a tendency to engage unconsciously in invention, fiction of some sort—falsification, confabulation, revisionism—when it comes to one's apprehension of one's own life. I will call this

[**R**] revision.

According to *the revision thesis* Narrativity always carries with it some sort of tendency to revision, where revision essentially involves more merely than changing one's view of the facts of one's life. (One can change one's view of the facts of one's life without any falsification, simply by coming to see things more clearly.)

Revision in the present sense is by definition non-conscious. It may sometimes begin consciously, with deliberate lies told to others, for example, and it may have semi-conscious instars, but it is not genuine revision in the present sense unless or until its products are felt to be true in a way that excludes awareness of falsification.[37] The conscious/non-conscious border is both murky and porous, but I think the notion of revision is robust for all that. The paradigm cases are clear, and extremely common.

If the revision thesis were true, it would be bad news for the ethical Narrativity thesis, whose supporters cannot want ethical success to depend essentially on some sort of falsification. I have no doubt that almost all human Narrativity is compromised by revision, but I don't think it must be. It is in any case a vast and complex phenomenon, and I will make just a very few remarks.

It is often said that autobiographical memory is an essentially *constructive* and *reconstructive* phenomenon (in the terms of experimental psychology) rather than a merely *reproductive* one, and there is a clear sense in which this is true.[38] Memory deletes, abridges, edits, reorders, italicizes. But even if construction and reconstruction are universal in autobiographical memory, they needn't involve revision as currently defined, for they may be fabrication-free story-telling or form-finding. Many have proposed that we are all without exception incorrigible self-fabulists, 'unreliable narrators' of our own lives,[39] and some who hold this

view claim greater honesty of outlook for themselves, and see pride, self-blindness, and so on in those who deny it. But other research makes it pretty clear that this is not true. It's not true of everyone. We have here another deep dimension of human psychological difference. Some people are fabulists all the way down. In others, autobiographical memory is fundamentally non-distorting, whatever automatic processes of remoulding and recasting it may invariably involve.[40]

Some think that revision is always *charged*, as I will say — always motivated by an interconnected core group of moral emotions including pride, self-love, conceit, shame, regret, remorse, and guilt. Some go further, claiming with Nietzsche that we always revise in our own favour: '"I have done that", says my memory. "I cannot have done that", says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields.'[41]

It seems, however, that neither of these claims is true. The first, that all revision is charged, is significantly improved by the inclusion of things like modesty or low self-esteem, gratitude or forgiveness, in the core group of motivating moods and emotions; some people are just as likely to revise to their own detriment and to others' advantage as the other way round. But the claim that revision is always charged remains false even so. Revision may occur simply because one is a natural form-finder but a very forgetful one and instinctively seeks to make a coherent story out of limited materials.[42] Frustrated story-tellers may fall into revision simply because they can't find satisfying form in their lives and without being in any way motivated by a wish to preserve or restore self-respect. John Dean's recall of his conversations with Nixon at the Watergate hearings is another much discussed case of uncharged revision. When the missing tapes were found, his testimony was revealed to be impressively 'accurate about the individuals' basic positions' although it was 'inaccurate with respect to exactly what was said during a given conversation'. His recall of events involved revision in addition to routine forgetting and morally neutral reconstruction, in so far as it contained positive mistakes, but there is no reason to think that it was significantly charged.[43] 'Flashbulb' memories (such as the memory of what was one doing when one heard about the shooting of President Kennedy, or about 9/11) can be surprisingly inaccurate—astonishingly so given our certainty that we remember accurately—but once again there seems no reason to think that the revision that they involve must be charged.[44]

Even when revision is charged, the common view that we always revise in our own favour must yield to a mass of everyday evidence that some people are as likely to revise to their own detriment—or simply forget the good things they

have done.[45] When La Rochefoucauld says that self-love is subtler than the subtlest man in the world, there is truth in what he says. And revising to one's own detriment may be no more attractive than revising to one's advantage. But La Rochefoucauld is sometimes too clever, or rather ignorant, in his cynicism.[46]

Is a tendency to revise a necessary part of being Narrative? No. In our own frail case, substantial Narrativity may rarely if ever occur without revision, but story-telling is sufficient for Narrativity, and one can be story-telling without being revisionary. So the ethical Narrativity thesis survives the threat posed by the revision thesis. When Bernard Malamud claims that 'all biography is ultimately fiction', simply on the grounds that 'there is no life that can be captured wholly, as it was', there is no implication that it must also be ultimately untrue.[47]

2.8

I've made a number of distinctions, but none of them cut very sharply, and if one asks how Diachronics [D], form-finders [F], story-tellers [S], and revisers [R] relate to each other, the answer, as far as I can see, is that almost anything goes. Story-telling entails form-finding because it is simply one kind of form-finding, but I see no other necessary connections between the four properties. Some think that all normal human beings have all four of these properties. I think that some normal human beings have none of them. Some think that Narrativity necessarily involves all four. I think (as just remarked) that the limiting case of Narrativity involves nothing more than form-finding story-telling (it does not even require one to be Diachronic). If, finally, 'Narrativity' is taken simply as a name for *whatever kind of reflective attitude to oneself and one's life is rightly considered valuable* then I think the limiting case of 'Narrativity' involves nothing more than form-finding, and does not involve anything distinctively Narrative at all.

How do the authors I've quoted classify under this scheme? Well, Dennett is someone who endorses a full blown [+D +F +S +R] view of what it is to be Narrative, and he seems to place considerable emphasis on revision:

> our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams [like spiders and beavers], but telling stories, and more particularly *concocting* and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are.[48]

Bruner, I think, concurs with this emphasis. I take it that Sartre endorses [+F +S+R], and is not particularly concerned with [D] in so far as he is mainly interested in short-term, in-the-present story-telling. Schechtman's account of

Narrativity is [+D +F +S ±R]. It assumes that we are all Diachronic and requires that we be form-finding and story-telling and explicitly so

> constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and the logic of a story—more specifically, the story of a person's life—where 'story' is understood as a conventional, linear narrative [49]

but it is important, on her view, that there be no significant revision, that one's self-narrative be essentially accurate.

I take myself to be [−D −F −S −R]. The claim that I don't revise much is the most vulnerable one, because it is in the nature of the case that one has no sense that one revises when one does. So I may be wrong, but (of course) I don't think so.

On the strong form of Schechtman's view, I am not really a person. Some sentient creatures, she says, 'weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which *makes* them persons'; to have an 'identity' as a person is 'to have a narrative self-conception … to experience the events in one's life as interpreted through one's sense of one's own life story'. This is in fact a common type of claim, and Schechtman goes further, claiming at one point that 'elements of a person's narrative' that figure only in his 'implicit self-narrative', and that 'he cannot articulate … are only partially his—attributable to him to a lesser degree than those aspects of the narrative he can articulate'.[50]

This seems to me to express an ideal of control and self-awareness in human life that is mistaken and potentially pernicious. The aspiration to explicit Narrative self- articulation is natural for some—for some, perhaps, it may even be helpful—but in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous. My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good—that the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature. It's well known that telling and retelling one's past leads to changes, smoothings, enhancements, shifts away from the facts, and recent research has shown that this is not just a human psychological foible. It turns out to be an inevitable consequence of the mechanics of the neurophysiological process of laying down memories that every studied conscious recall of past events brings an alteration.[51] The implication is plain: the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you are likely to move away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being. Some are constantly telling their daily experiences to others in a storying way and with great gusto. They are

drifting ever further off the truth. Others never do this, and when they are obliged to convey facts about their lives they do it clumsily, stumblingly, and uncomfortably, and in a way that is somehow essentially and powerfully narrative-resistant. There are, among the non-Narratives, anti-Narratives, those for whom any storying of their life—suppose someone is recounting an incident in your life to a group of friends in your presence—seems to be missing the point, missing the truth, even if all the facts are right.

Certainly Narrativity is not a necessary part of the 'examined life' (nor is Diachronicity), and it is in any case most unclear that the examined life, thought by Socrates to be essential to human existence, is always a good thing. People can develop and deepen in valuable ways without any sort of explicit, specifically Narrative reflection, just as musicians can improve by practice sessions without recalling those sessions. The business of living well is, for many, a completely non-Narrative project. Granted that certain sorts of self-understanding are necessary for a good human life, they need involve nothing more than form-finding, which can exist in the absence of Narrativity; and they may be osmotic, systemic, not staged in consciousness. It may be said that the acquisition of self-understanding in psychotherapy, at least, is an essentially Narrative project, and it's true that therapy standardly involves identifying key causal connections between features of one's early life and the way one is at present. But even though the thing one learns is of the form 'It is because X and Y happened to this child that I am now Z', there need not be anything distinctively or even remotely Narrative in one's psychological attitude to the acknowledged causal connections, any more than there need be when one discovers as an adult that a (physical) scar was caused by one's falling out of a pram. This is not a condition of effective therapy—and one certainly doesn't have to have any Diachronic sense that the child encountered in therapy was oneself *. Even more certainly, one does not have to have a satisfying narrative 'forged' for one by the therapist, or in the process of therapy, in order to live well. Heaven forbid.

2.9

> — I'm sorry, but you really have no idea of the force and reach of the psychological Narrativity thesis. You're as Narrative as anyone else, and your narratives about yourself determine how you think of yourself even though they are not conscious.

Well, here we have a stand off. I think it's just not so, and I take it that the disagreement is not just terminological. Self-understanding does not have to take

a narrative form, even implicitly. I'm a product of my past, including my very early past, in many profoundly important respects, but it simply does not follow that self-understanding, or the best kind of self-understanding, must take a narrative form, or indeed a historical form. If I am charged to make my self-understanding explicit, I may illustrate my view of myself by reference to things I (GS) have done, but it certainly will not follow that I have a Diachronic outlook, still less a Narrative one.

At this point Heidegger informs us, in a variation on Socrates, that a human being's existence—'Dasein's' existence—is constituted by the fact that its being is an issue for it. Fine, but it's not at all clear that being a thing whose being is an issue for it need involve any sort of Narrative outlook. Heidegger takes it that one's 'self-understanding is constitutive of [one's] … being what or who [one] is', and that this self-understanding consists largely in one's 'determining oneself as someone by pressing ahead into a possible way to be'.[52] And here he seems (but I do not understand his notion of temporality) to be insisting on the importance of being Diachronic and indeed Narrative. But if this is his claim then—once again—it seems to me false: false as a universal claim about human life, false as a claim about what it is for human beings to be what or who they are, false as a normative claim about what good or authentic human life must be like, false about what any self-understanding must involve, and false about what self-understanding is at its best. Perhaps Heideggerian authenticity is compatible with the seemingly rival ideal of living in the moment—'Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof'[53]—but this will not win me over.

2.10

There is much more to say. Some may still think that the Episodic life must be deprived in some way. But truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound.[54] Some think that an Episodic cannot really know true friendship, or even be loyal. They are refuted by Michel de Montaigne, a great Episodic, famous for his friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, who judged that he was 'better at friendship than at anything else' although

> there is nobody less suited than I am to start talking about memory. I can find hardly a trace of it in myself; I doubt if there is any other memory in the world as grotesquely faulty as mine is![55]

Montaigne finds that he is often misjudged and misunderstood, for when he

admits he has a very poor memory people assume that he must suffer from ingratitude: ‘they judge my affection by my memory’, he comments, and are of course quite wrong to do so.[56] A gift for friendship doesn’t require any ability to recall past shared experiences in detail, nor any tendency to value them. It is shown in how one is in the present.

But can Episodics be properly moral beings? The question troubles many. Kathy Wilkes thinks not.[57] So also, perhaps, do Plutarch and many others. But Diachronicity is not a necessary condition of a properly moral existence, nor of a proper sense of responsibility. As for Narrativity, it is in the sphere of ethics more of an affliction or a bad habit than a prerequisite of a good life. It risks a strange commodification of life and time—of soul, understood in a strictly secular sense. It misses the point. ‘We live’, as the great short story writer V. S. Pritchett observes, ‘beyond any tale that we happen to enact.’[58]

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Footnotes

1 Sartre 1938.

2 See e.g. 100 CE: 214–17 (473B–474B).

3 1915: 562–3.

4 The Episodic/Diachronic distinction is not the same thing as the Narrative/non-Narrative distinction, as will emerge; but there are marked correlations between them.

5 Although a culture could in theory exert significant selective pressure on a psychological trait. For descriptions of revenge cultures see Blumenfeld 2003.

6 1989: 239. See also the remarkable Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) an extreme Episodic: ‘I always feel as if I’ve just been born/Into an endlessly new world’ (1914: 48).

7 The sense of perpetual beginning is not at all a sense of perpetual inchoateness. That which is always launching out may be well or strongly formed and may be felt to be. Updike also talks in a Narrative fashion of our 'religious … persistence, against all the powerful post-Copernican, post-Darwinian evidence that we are insignificant accidents within a vast uncaused churning, in feeling that our life is a story, with a pattern and a moral and an inevitability' (1989: 216); and although this has no resonance for some, it fulfils a powerful psychological need in many and is common.

8 I hope to discuss this in *Life in Time*. For a sketch, see Strawson 1997: §9.

9 As noted, this difference tends to run alongside the difference between Narratives and non-Narratives, but is certainly not coextensive with it.

10 Cf. e.g. Heidegger 1927.

11 1910: 91.

12 In an earlier published version of this paper I classified Joseph Conrad as Narrative, and this was cogently questioned by John Attridge in the Letters column of the *Times Literary Supplement* (10 December 2004). In his 'personal remembrance' of Conrad, Ford Madox Ford observes that 'Conrad had very strongly the idea of the Career. A career was for him something a little sacred: any career .... A frame of mind, a conception of life, according to which a man did not take stock of the results of his actions upon himself, as it were at long range, was something that he had never contemplated' (1924: 130–5). It seems, though, that this was an effort that Conrad made, something that did not flow from any natural Narrativity, something learnt, like the neatness of sailors, to which Ford compares it. Attridge notes Conrad's 'youthful indifference to the overall plot of his existence', and quotes Conrad's judgement of his youthful self as 'not having any notion of life as an enterprise that could be mismanaged'.

13 The term 'I*' and its cognates can function in phenomenological contexts to convey the content of a form of experience that incorporates the presumption whether or not the presumption is actually correct. I'll omit the '*' when it's not necessary.

14 It does not have any sort of 'from-the-outside' character (that would be a bit like my seeing a film of myself falling taken by a third party).

15 1938: 64. Sartre is as much concerned with relatively short-term passages of life as with life as a whole.

16 Sacks 1985: 110; Bruner 1987: 11, 15, 12; 1994: 53.

17 Dennett (1988), *Times Literary Supplement*, 16–22 September.

18 Schechtman 1996: 93, 119.

19 1989: 47, 52.

20 1989: 51–2. I reject the ‘because’ and the second ‘hence’.

21 1989: 52.

22 1990: 158.

23 Excessive self-concern is much more likely to be the cause of religious belief in someone who has come to religion than in someone who has been born into it. That does not change the fact that religious belief in general, ostensibly self-denying, is one of the fundamental vehicles of human narcissism.

24 1981: 203–4.

25 One problem with it, and it is a deep problem, is that one is almost certain to get one’s ‘story’ wrong, in some more or less sentimental way—unless, perhaps, one has the help of a truly gifted therapist.

26 1994: 190.

27 1960: 9–10. Pessoa also experiences himself as not really having or being a specific self at all, and this feature, valued in many religious traditions, may well be positively correlated with Episodicity when it occurs naturally. Pessoa, however, experiences himself as multiply personalitied, and this is quite another matter.

28 Shaftesbury 1698–1712: 136–7; Epictetus is an important influence.

29 Taylor is explicit that it is when I am not 'dealing with such trivial questions as where I shall go in the next five minutes but with the issue of my place relative to the good', that 'making sense of my present action … requires a narrative understanding of my life' (1989: 48).

30 I think this may be the greatest single source of unhappiness in human intercourse.

31 There are, however, many interesting complications. See *Life in Time*.

32 MacIntyre does not in the passages I have quoted explicitly say that the narrativity of a life requires Narrativity. In *After Virtue* he is particularly concerned with the idea that 'to think of a human life as a narrative unity is to think in a way alien to the dominant individualist and bureaucratic modes of modern culture' (1981: 211), and this remark was principally a criticism—an excellent one—of the social sciences of the time.

33 From now on I will omit the qualification about 'parts of one's life' and take it as read.

34 'Discern', 'apprehend', 'find', 'detect' all have non-factive readings.

35 Hubbard 1909: 32.

36 I judge Stendhal to be strongly Episodic but subject to Diachronic flashes. Jack Kerouac is I think a clear case of an Episodic looking for larger form. There are also clear elements of this in Malcolm Lowry. Laurence Sterne makes comedy out of Episodicity. Jerry Fodor cites Anthony Powell, whom I have not read, as a fine example of an Episodic aspiring to Narrativity.

37 It's well known that fully conscious lies can forget their origins and come to be fully believed by their perpetrators.

38 For good discussions, see e.g. Brewer 1988; McCauley 1988.

39 Cf. e.g. Bruner 1987, 1990, 1994. The notion of an 'unreliable narrator' derives from literary criticism. In *The Mind's Past* (1998a) Gazzaniga seems to support a strongly reconstructive view of human memory, but he later says only that personal memory tends to be 'a bit fictional' (1998b: 713).

40 Brewer (1988) argues that the evidence that supports 'the reconstructive view of personal memory … does not seem very compelling'. See also Wagenaar 1994; Baddeley 1994: 239; Swann 1990. Ross (1989) argues that revision that seems to serve self-esteem may be motivated by nothing more than a concern for consistency.

41 1886: §68.

42 Perhaps 'confabulation' in patients with Korsakov's syndrome is an extreme and pathological example of revision. See e.g. Sacks 1985; Gazzaniga 1998a.

43 Brewer 1988: 27. Cf. Neisser 1981.

44 See e.g. Pillemer 1998: ch. 2.

45 For more formal evidence, cf. e.g. Wagenaar 1994, 'Is memory self-serving?'.

46 Even if we did all tend to see our lives in a favourable light, it would not follow that we were all revisers: some will have self-favouring, self-respect-preserving justifications of their actions already in place at the time of action, and so have no need for subsequent revision.

47 Malamud 1979.

48 1991: 418; my emphasis. Dennett takes the story to be primarily about *who* we are, and to that extent it seems that the word ‘account’ would do as well as ‘story’, even though it will refer to particular events in one’s life.

49 Schechtman 1996: 96. This is a strong expression of her view, which has usefully weaker forms (cf. e.g. pp. 117, 159).

50 1996: 117.

51 See McCrone 2003; Debiec et al. 2002.

52 Blattner 1999: 32, 41; I substitute ‘one’ for ‘Dasein’. Cf. Heidegger (1927: 344): ‘In the light of the “for-the-sake-of-which” of one’s self-chosen ability-to-be, resolute Dasein frees itself for its world.’

53 *Matthew* vi. 34. This way of being in the present has nothing to do with the ‘aesthetic’ way of being in the present described and condemned by Kierkegaard.

54 Note, though, how Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings* can produce a certain anxiety.

55 1563–1592: 32.

56 Op. cit. p. 33. ‘A second advantage’ of poor memory, he goes on to note, ‘is that … I remember less any insults received’.

57 Wilkes 1998.

58 Pritchett 1979: 47. I am grateful to audiences in Oxford (1999), Rutgers (2000), and Reading (2003) for their comments and to Alan Jenkins at the *Times Literary Supplement*.

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3. “The Size of the Self”: Minimalist Selves and Narrative Self-Constitution

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In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* John Locke asserts an intimate connection between persons and selves: “Where-ever a Man finds, what he calls *himself*,” Locke says, “there I think another may say is the same *Person.*” (Locke, 346) There are, however, two different ways of interpreting this assertion within the context of Locke’s broader view. On one interpretation persons (as Locke understands them) and selves are essentially equivalent, the third-personal and first-personal sides of a single coin. On the other, being a self is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being a person – where there is a person, its limits must coincide with the limits of a pre-existing self, but selfhood is more fundamental than personhood. These two different views of the self and its relation to personhood have reemerged in present-day philosophical discussion of the self represented, respectively, in narrative and minimalist views. In this essay I will suggest that looking at the current dispute between narrative and minimalist theorists through the framework provided by Locke will yield new insights that allow for a kind of compromise position.

I begin with an overview of Locke's discussion of the relation between self and person and the two readings it allows. Next I briefly describe the narrative and minimalist positions on *self* and the debate between them. Locke's discussion of these issues contains a feature that the present-day debate does not – a conceptual connection between consciousness and egoistic concern. I argue that bringing a somewhat modified understanding of this connection to bear on the current debate can be illuminating, especially if we also employ some recent work by Jeff McMahan which, although not directly about selves, reflects on the kind of egoistic concern that is connected with consciousness and plays a role in constituting personal identity. After describing the relevant features of McMahan's view I show how applying the insights gleaned from Locke and McMahan allows us to think about the relation between persons and selves in a way that captures the key insights of both narrative and minimalist views, although not without demanding some concessions from each.

3.1 Locke on Person and Self

John Locke's account of personal identity is extremely famous. Less sustained attention has been given to his understanding of *self* and its relation to personhood, but he has some interesting, if not totally determinate, things to say on this topic. To get a sense of what he says here it will be useful to begin by reminding ourselves of Locke's definitions of each of the key terms. First *self*: He tells us that "Self is that conscious thinking thing …which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness of Misery, and so is concern'd for it *self*, as far as that consciousness extends." (Locke, 341), and that:

> This every intelligent Being, sensible of Happiness or Misery, must grant, that there is something that is *himself*, that he is concerned for, and would have happy; that this self has existed in a continued Duration more than one instant, and therefore 'tis possible may exist, as it has done, Months and Years to come, without any certain bounds to be set to its duration; and may be the same self, by the same consciousness, continued on for the future. And thus, by this consciousness, [a man] finds himself to be the *same self* which did such or such an Action some Years since, by which he comes to be happy or miserable now. (Locke, 345–6)

The self, for Locke, is the experiencing subject, the conscious being that has qualitative experience. Experience by its nature has a quality and a valence, and

so a self is a being who necessarily experiences pleasure and pain, and is of necessity concerned for that which it experiences.

When it comes to the meaning of *person* Locke tells us (among other things) that *person* "is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law and Happiness and Misery." (Locke, 346) To be a person is to be a unit of normative judgment. Locke focuses primarily (as has most of the discussion since) on judgments of moral responsibility and practical rationality. A person, it is assumed, is rightly blamed or praised only for an action that she, the very same person, has taken, and there is a special kind of concern that is appropriate only for experiences that will be her own. She may prefer that she, rather than her best friend, experience some future pain, or that her friend, rather than she, receive some wonderful benefit. Nonetheless, a person's future pains and pleasures impact her in a direct and immediate way that the pains and pleasures of others do not.

Keeping these definitions of *self* and *person* in mind we are in a position to see why Locke says that wherever someone finds the same self another should find the same person. The relation between persons and selves becomes evident when we ask ourselves what attributes a being requires to be the kind of "forensic being" or unit of responsibility and prudential reasoning that is, on Locke's view, a person. Locke holds that in order to be a forensic unit, one must be able to experience pleasure and pain and to care about which one does, in fact, experience. He makes this argument most explicitly in analyzing what personal identity must consist in for persons to be the subjects of moral judgment.

To be a subject of moral judgments is to be a legitimate target of praise and blame, and, according to Locke, the practice of assessing legitimate praise and blame presupposes that the target of these judgments is rightly subjected to a law. This, in turn, requires that she be susceptible (at least in principle) to punishment and reward. For this susceptibility to hold, the target of moral judgment must possess subjectivity and care about its quality. Those who cannot experience pleasure and pain or do not care which they experience cannot be rewarded or punished, and so cannot be subject to law in the appropriate way. These are the minimal requirements for being the *kind* of entity that can be punished or rewarded. There is, moreover, an additional requirement which must be met for a specific moral assessment to be legitimately applied to a particular person. If punishing or rewarding a particular person for a specific action is to be just, the very experiencing subject who enjoys the pleasures of bad behavior or the pains of restraint must be the one to experience the corresponding pain of punishment or pleasure of reward. There must, in other words, be a single

consciousness that includes both the action taken and its consequence.

Without this kind of unity between the actor and the recipient of judgment, Locke makes it clear, there can be no justice. He explains,

> ..whatever past Actions [a self] cannot reconcile or appropriate to that present *self* by consciousness, it can be no more concerned in, than if they had never been done: And to receive Pleasure or Pain; i.e. Reward or Punishment, on the account of any such Action, is all one, as to be made happy or miserable in its first being, without any demerit at all. For supposing a Man Punish'd now, for what he did in another Life, whereof he could be made to have no consciousness at all, what difference is there between that Punishment, and being created miserable?(Locke, 346–7)

For Locke it is essential to being a forensic entity that one understand oneself as a persisting being whose present state depends upon past actions; otherwise one is not a fit recipient of normative judgments. It is this requirement that underlies another of Locke's famous definitions of a person as "a thinking, intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking…"; since "consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes every one to be, what he calls *self*…" (Locke, 335).

The need for an intimate connection between persons and selves in Locke's system should be fairly evident, and Locke makes it explicit when he tells us:

> This personality extends it *self* beyond present Existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to it *self* past Actions, just upon the same ground, and for the same reason, that it does the present. All which is founded in a concern for Happiness the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness, that which is conscious of Pleasure and Pain, desiring, that that *self*, that is conscious, should be happy. (Locke, 346)

To be a forensic unit, or person, one must be an experiencing subject, capable of pleasure and pain and concerned about which one experiences; that is, one must be a self. It seems on the surface, moreover, that sameness of self is necessary for sameness of person. What is less clear is whether to be a self one must also be a person.

There is an ambiguity in Locke's view that may not be immediately evident

but comes to the fore when we consider what role (if any) "reason and reflection" play in constituting not the person but the self. On one reading what unifies disparate moments of consciousness at different times into a single unified subject is an act of *appropriation* through which they are all taken to be one's own. On this view, the unity of the self and of the person are constituted simultaneously by higher-order cognitive activity that recognizes and hence experiences different moments of consciousness as belonging to a single subject. On this reading, it is by appropriating these different experiences that one actually forges a phenomenological connection with them and so constitutes a persisting subject of experience. There is, however, another way of understanding the Lockean picture which makes selfhood prior to, and foundational for, personhood. On this reading, the unification of consciousness into a single subject (and so into a self) is not something we need actively to accomplish, but is rather a given. Being a person, on this view, requires that *in addition* to being a self one must have the cognitive wherewithal to reflect upon the fact of one's selfhood and thus to articulate a concern for the quality of past and future experiences and consciously recognize that the present is conditioned by the past and has implications for the future. On this understanding of Locke's view one can be a perfectly good self without the capacity for reason and reflection, but one cannot yet be a person.

I am not certain Locke's text allows for a conclusive judgment as to which of these readings he intended, but they do represent quite different understandings of what it is to be a self. The conflict between these two understandings has recently reemerged in the dispute between narrative and minimalist conceptions of self, to which I now turn.

3.2 The Narrative Self and the Minimal Self

There are several different versions of both the narrative and minimalist views of self, and focus on different versions of the respective views will raise different kinds of issues. Here I will look at only one version of each view. While I believe that the conclusions drawn ultimately apply to all (or at least most) versions of these approaches, showing this would take more detailed argumentation than I can offer here. As a representative of the narrative approach I will use my own narrative self-constitution view (developed in Schechtman 1996), and for the minimalist view I will concentrate on the picture developed in many venues by Daniel Zahavi (see, e.g., 2007, 2008, 2011).

The narrative view I have defended is, in the first instance, a narrative account of personal identity and does not directly address questions of selfhood.

It does, however, build on the first reading of Locke described above, seeing the unity of consciousness that constitutes a persisting subject of experience (or person) as something that is constituted by self-narration of a form I will describe in a moment. Although this narration is not exactly *reflection* it does involve higher-order cognitive capacities, and to this extent the view sees these capacities as essential to our selfhood as well as to our personhood, ultimately making selfhood and personhood coextensive.

Very roughly, what it is to be a person (and so a self) on this view, is to experience one's life through the lens of a background autobiographical narrative. The narrative is not something that must be articulated on a regular basis, and will almost certainly never be completely articulated. The idea is that we *implicitly* keep track of the stories of our lives, and that this implicit narrative shapes the quality as well as the content of our experience. As persons we experience the present not as an isolated moment, but as part of an ongoing life story. Events that are happening now take their significance from their narrative context in a way that alters their very character, making the overall nature of the experience had by persons markedly different from that of non-self-narrators. In this way, I argue, the experience of past and future are brought into that of the present, creating a unified subject.

The basic idea is fairly straightforward. The graduate student struggling in her garret while she aims toward the immense personal and financial rewards of a career in philosophy will, for instance, experience her privation differently than will the unemployed, unskilled mother of three who sees only ever-increasing pain in her future as the global economy falls apart. The pleasures and pains of the future are, through narrative, brought into the experience of the present, forging the phenomenal connections that make for a single experiencing subject of the kind that is fit to be a forensic entity. While the narrative is woven implicitly and spontaneously, it is part of this view that a person must be able to articulate her self-narrative locally where appropriate, and the cognitive skills required for creating and understanding narratives must be in place for someone to constitute herself as a unified person. The narrative view thus expresses the first reading of Locke's picture of the relation between persons and selves described earlier, because it sees the subjectively unified self as constituted by higher-order psychological activity.

Narrative approaches to the self have come under sustained criticism from a variety of different quarters. One important type of objection comes from those who argue that the self does not require the kinds of sophisticated psychological capacities and connections involved in narrative, urging a more basic conception of *self*. Zahavi's view is an excellent example of this sort of objection.[1] He

argues that there is a self that is pre-reflective, pre-linguistic and, therefore, pre-narrative. This self, which he calls the *minimal*, *core*, or *experiential* self, is given as part of the structure of conscious experience, well before any narration or self-conscious appropriation takes place. It is the "*ubiquitous* dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experience," the primitive sense of "mineness" that pervades all of my experiences, the "abiding *dative of manifestation"* that can be found beneath the changing contents of my stream of consciousness (Zahavi 2011, 327). The existence of such a self is, he says, uncovered by the work of phenomenologists whose analysis reveals the necessity of a minimal sense of self as a key part of any experience. Its existence is further supported, he argues, by empirical findings. Neurologist Antonio Damasio, for instance, has provided an analysis of consciousness that involves both a core and a narrative self as distinct neurological processes.

Zahavi allows that the selves we encounter and study – *our*selves – are in fact highly complex, and that "we – with the possible exception of certain severe pathologies … will never encounter the experiential core self in its purity. It will always already be embedded in an environmental and temporal horizon. It will be intertwined with, shaped, and contextualized by memories, expressive behavior, and social interaction, by passively acquired habits, inclinations, associations, etc." (Zahavi 2011, 332–3) He allows that because of this "a narrow focus on the experiential core self might … be said to involve a certain amount of abstraction," but insists that "there is no reason to question its reality, it is not a *mere* abstraction" (Zahavi 2007, 194). Zahavi tells us that one could describe this situation by saying there are two kinds of selves (core selves and narrative selves) or, as he seems to prefer, "when dealing with the experiential self, one might retain the term 'self' since we are dealing precisely with a primitive form of self-givenness and self-referentiality. By contrast, it may be helpful to speak not of the self, but of the *person* as a narrative construction…." (Zahavi 2007, 193).

Zahavi's picture of the self and its relation to the person thus expresses the second reading of Locke's view in which selfhood is a necessary precursor of personhood, but does not itself require any kind of reflection or higher-order cognition. Those who would be explicitly excluded from Lockean personhood – infants, dogs, the demented – are nevertheless selves. To use an admittedly imperfect analogy, the core self is like a room, constituted by the walls that enclose it. A room might be left empty, or it might have a few items in it, or it might be filled with furniture, textiles, art, books, and musical instruments. What you can do in a room depends upon what is in it as well as on the kind of space it is, but the room itself remains substantially the same no matter what its contents,

and the contents can come and go without the actual space being altered. Similarly, the self is constituted by the limits of brute subjectivity, and although the core selves of infants, adults, dogs and dementia patients may have different contents, their core selfhood is the same.

There is a good deal that is compelling in Zahavi's analysis, and it raises important challenges for the narrative approach to self. In particular, Zahavi's claim that it is questionable to deny that infants, dogs and the demented are selves, even if we want to say that they are not persons, is powerful. It seems obvious that there is "something it is like" to be an infant, dog, or dementia patient even if all of these individuals fail to meet the criteria of forensic personhood. If we accept this, and I think we have good reason to, it will require some modification of the narrative view of self as originally presented. It may not, however, require as much modification as it initially seems.

The question we are considering was originally posed as a question of whether persons and selves are necessarily constituted together, and are hence always coextensive, or whether selves are prior, with persons being constituted within the limits of an already-existing self through reflection upon, and conscious recognition of, those limits. My suggestion is that there is a third alternative. Perhaps there are different kinds of selves and some are necessarily also persons while others are not. According to this picture, for selves who in fact are persons, personhood and selfhood are indeed coextensive, but there are also selves who are not persons, and they experience a different kind of selfhood. The content of this suggestion requires some clarification, which the remainder of this essay will provide.

3.3 Self-Awareness, Self-Concern, and Time-Relative Interests

A feature of Zahavi's idea of the minimal self which was not heavily emphasized in the previous section is that it necessarily includes an experience of self *as* self. Any conscious experience, no matter how basic, yields a self on Zahavi's view. This is because the sense of oneself as the subject of an ongoing stream of consciousness is something that is given in every experience and represents a fundamental condition of the possibility of conscious experience. Locke, as we saw earlier, also says that consciousness includes recognition of self as the subject of experience. We should not assume that Zahavi and Locke are pointing to the same phenomenon. When Locke tells us that it is through consciousness that each of us is "self to self" he seems to have in mind a kind of explicitly

articulated recognition of oneself as a self which is available only to beings with reflective self-consciousness. Zahavi, on the other hand, insists that there is a pre-linguistic, pre-reflective awareness of self that is given in experience as a condition of its very possibility. Despite these differences, I think that focus on the nature of self-awareness is the key to a reconciliation of sorts between narrative and minimalist views of self.

To see how this is so we need first to say something more about what self-awareness entails. This is not an easy matter, but Locke's view gives us a vocabulary for making progress here. We have seen that a central part of the Lockean picture, and one which is crucial to understanding the connection between personhood and selfhood, is the critical role given to egoistic concern. For Locke consciousness automatically brings with it the experience of pain and pleasure and its "unavoidable concomitant," a concern for happiness. My suggestion is that we can see this essential concern as the *form* that awareness of self takes. I am not certain that this is Locke's own view, although there is certainly a great deal in what he says to support this reading. For present purposes however, it is not important whether this understanding is accurate to Locke's intentions. The relevant question is how it can help us to think about the relation between persons and selves, and hence between narrative and minimalist accounts of the self.

As we have seen, Locke's notion of self-concern seems to involve higher-order cognitive capacities and reflective self-consciousness. For him, the self-concern required for personhood is, at any rate, a concern that one can articulate to oneself. Arguably, however, there are also more primitive forms of self-concern that could in principle be connected to more basic forms of self-awareness. Understanding these different forms of self-concern can help us to understand better the notions of selfhood that can be associated with them, and gaining insight into the relation between different forms of self-concern could further illuminate the relation between these different notions of self. It is here that Jeff McMahan's work becomes especially useful. McMahan's focus is on questions of personal identity. He says very little directly about the nature of the *self*, and, as we will see, he also uses the term "person" differently than we have been using it so far. He does, however, have a great deal to say about the relation between personal identity and egoistic concern and about different kinds and levels of this self-concern. I will thus begin by looking at McMahan's account in its own terms before applying what he says to our questions about the nature of self.

McMahan takes it as a methodological principle that an adequate account of personal identity will make identity correspond as closely as possible to the

limits of egoistic concern. Commonsense, he says, tells us that there is a special kind of concern that we have for all and only our own experiences and that the relation that defines identity should be more or less coextensive with the relation that justifies or supports this concern. He then goes on to show how various popular accounts of personal identity fail to meet this requirement. Although he does not address the narrative view directly, he does offer pointed objections to neo-Lockean psychological continuity theories (which say, roughly, that a person at one time is identical to a person at some other time just in case there is an overlapping chain of sufficient numbers of psychological connections between them).[2] It should be obvious as I proceed that these objections apply equally to the narrative approach.

McMahan says that psychological continuity theories violate his methodological principle from two directions. On the one side we can have egoistic concern for a future even if we bear to it none of the sophisticated higher-order psychological connections required by psychological continuity theorists. He gives Alzheimer's-related dementia as an example of this phenomenon (MacMahan, 47). On the other side there are cases in which we have the relevant sophisticated connections but no grounds for egoistic concern. As an example of this phenomenon he uses science fictional cases of replication of the sort found in the personal identity literature, where a psychologically identical replica of a human person is built out of new matter and the original body destroyed. In such a case the higher-order psychological connections called for by the psychological continuity theory would be in place, he says, but the original person would not have an egoistic interest in the wellbeing of the replica (McMahan, 47).

Using his methodological principle McMahan arrives at the "Embodied Mind" account which he offers as an alternative to existing theories of personal identity. Our intuitions about egoistic concern, he says, show us that "what matters, or what provides the basis for egoistic concern about the future, is continuity or sameness of consciousness" (MacMahan, 67), but he rejects the Lockean idea that continuity of consciousness necessarily involves higher-order connections between the contents of consciousness from moment to moment. The cases of Alzheimer's disease and replication show, respectively, that such connections are neither necessary nor sufficient for egoistic concern, he says. The notion of "same consciousness" McMahan suggests, "is equivalent to the notion of the same mind," and a single mind continues to exist "only if enough of the brain in which it is realized continues to exist in a functional or potentially functional state." (MacMahan 67) He thus says that the basis for rational egoistic concern "is the physical and functional continuity of enough of those areas in the

individual's brain in which consciousness is realized to preserve the capacity to support consciousness or mental activity" (McMahan 67–8).

McMahan thus criticizes neo-Lockean views – and by extension my narrative view – for many of the same reasons Zahavi does. He, too, thinks that there are subjects wherever there is basic consciousness, and that sophisticated cognitive capacities are not required. There are, of course, important and interesting differences between Zahavi and McMahan. McMahan insists on the continuity of a physical realizer of consciousness, while there is nothing like this in Zahavi's view, and rather than drawing a distinction between persons and selves as Zahavi does, McMahan argues for a more minimalist understanding of persons as well. There are many interesting questions suggested by these differences, but I will not pursue them here. Instead I will focus on another difference, namely the central role given to egoistic concern in McMahan's view but not Zahavi's.

I invoke McMahan here not only because he assumes the fundamental importance of this concern in the constitution of selfhood (and personhood) but also because he offers a subtle and insightful discussion about the relation between simpler and more complex forms this relation can take. Like Zahavi, McMahan also acknowledges that typical human person/selves are highly complex and contain a great deal more than is required to meet the minimal threshold for selfhood. Since McMahan's ultimate aims are ethical, this is an important feature of his view, and he describes it in some detail in his innovative theory of Time-Relative Interests (TRI). The basic idea behind TRI is that egoistic concern can be a matter of degree, and that psychological unity of the sort psychological continuity theorists (and narrative theorists) use to define identity can provide the basis for a higher degree of concern than is strictly necessary for personal continuation. McMahan thus argues that "the rational degree of egoistic concern about one's own future varies with the degree of *psychological unity* between oneself now and oneself in the future," (MacMahan, 74) where psychological unity is understood as "a complex notion, encompassing both psychological connectedness and continuity." (MacMahan, 74) The degree of psychological unity within a life, according to McMahan, is "a function of the richness, complexity, and coherence of the psychological architecture that is carried forward through time" (MacMahan, 75).

The kind of psychological unity found in the lives of typical adult human beings grounds the strong egoistic interest we have in our own continuation which is greater and deeper than that experienced by more primitive minds. Consider, he says, a sentient animal with a very simple psychological life and contents of consciousness limited to the specious present – one with no "memory

or foresight" and "no psychological architecture to carry forward: no structure of beliefs, desires, attitudes, dispositions, or traits of character." (MacMahan, 75) All such a creature has is its experiences. Since those experiences might be pleasant or unpleasant, the animal has grounds for some egoistic concern for the future, "but," McMahan adds "our intuitive sense is that the reason to care *for its sake* is absolutely minimal." (MacMahan 75–6) The difference between that creature continuing and its being replaced by another with a similarly pleasant life becomes very thin. This reflection leads to the insight that "psychological unity within the lives of persons such as ourselves gives our lives as wholes a moral and prudential significance that the mere sum of our experience lacks – or to put it differently, that makes our lives as wholes significant *units* for moral and prudential evaluation" (MacMahan 76).

McMahan's picture thus includes different kinds or levels or dimensions of egoistic concern just as Zahavi's includes different kinds or levels or dimensions of selfhood. On the one hand there is the primitive concern that is found in dogs and infants and dementia patients, and on the other there is the deep and sophisticated form of concern found in typical adult humans (and presumably a spectrum in between). If we combine this nuanced picture of egoistic concern with the idea that egoistic concern is the form that self-awareness takes and the assumption that self-awareness is an essential feature of selfhood, we can find a new way of thinking about the differences between minimalist and narrative conceptions of *self.*

3.4 A Kind of Compromise

To see how TRI can help to find a middle ground between narrativists and minimalists, we need first to see that McMahan's theory of time-relative interests can, like Locke's view of the relation between personhood and selfhood, be read in two different ways. On one reading it is the view that basic consciousness, with the kind of interest in future wellbeing it entails, is the *threshold* for personhood as MacMahan defines it (selfhood in our terminology), and that once this is in place sophisticated psychological capacities can add bells and whistles that give additional reasons for caring about the future in a way that leaves the basic level of concern substantially untouched. This is basically the "room with furnishings" picture of selfhood discussed in the last section but described here in terms of egoistic concern.

There is another possibility, however, and that is that the addition of sophisticated capacities does not merely add on to basic concern, but transforms it into something else, sophisticated concern, and this is where things get

interesting. As with the two readings of Locke, I am not certain which of these readings is more faithful to MacMahan's own view. In fact I suspect it may be the first. His analysis does, however, also point to the possibility of the second reading, and it is this interpretation of time-relative interests that I wish to develop into a kind of synthesis of narrative and minimalist views of self. To see how this works we first need a clearer understanding of what it means to say that sophisticated psychological capacities *transform* rather than merely add on to the egoistic concern experienced as part of even the most minimal consciousness.

We can get a sense of what this means by way of an analogy. Mozart's *Ah Je Vous Dirai Maman*, starts with the simple folk theme known, among other things, as *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, and goes on to present twelve variations, some of which are quite complicated. Although each variation is a *version* of the simple theme, none is generated by the simple addition of other notes, and there is no note-for-note reproduction of the original in the sophisticated variations. The musical sophistication of the variations is not achieved by placing something else on top of the original melody, but rather by transforming and complexifying it. On the first understanding of McMahan's account of TRI, adding sophisticated psychological capacities is like plunking out the simple theme with the right hand and then adding some sophisticated left hand pyrotechnics on top of it. On the understanding I wish to develop it is more like replacing the simple plunking with one of the variations.

It is far more plausible to think about human psychological development as analogous to turning a simple theme into a complex variation than as simply adding new capacities that leave everything else about our consciousness just exactly as it was. If we operate with this understanding, however, and if we also take egoistic concern to be the form our fundamental sense of self as self takes, there are important implications for both narrative and minimalist views. To see this, we need to understand the deepening and broadening of egoistic concern that McMahan describes as a change to subjectivity itself and not just as an alteration of reasons to judge from the outside that a particular being has an interest in the nature of its future. The idea is that the very nature and quality of the concern that a sophisticated self-narrator has for her future is different from that which an infant, dog, or dementia patient has toward hers, and this is because the very nature and quality of subjective experience is different for the self-narrator. In particular, the phenomenal connections the self-narrator has to her future experience are stronger and deeper than those an infant, dog, or dementia patient has to hers.

This picture should sound familiar, because it is just what the narrative view suggests. When we are able to experience our lives as ongoing narratives, it

claims, we are able to bring the remembered past and anticipated future into our experiential present in a way that those who do not self-narrate cannot, and this makes the subjective wholeness of our lives of a deeply different sort than that of non-self-narrators – different enough to make "our lives as wholes significant *units* for moral and prudential evaluation."

This approach makes room for the key insights of both narrative and minimalist views, but also requires important concessions from each. The minimalist view must give up on the claim that there is a kind of self-experience that is found in all conscious beings, a fundamental core self which is the same in infants and dogs, and full-blown Lockean persons. At the risk of mixing metaphors (or at least analogies) this reading necessitates giving up on the picture of consciousness as a room which remains the same throughout the waxing and waning of our psychological capacities, only becoming more lavishly furnished as we become more sophisticated. Instead, the development of the capacities involved in self-narration must be seen as more like a gut rehab that involves knocking down walls, altering weight bearing structures, and building additions. Put less metaphorically, there is no core self that is the same in infants, dogs, dementia patients and forensic persons. This means that what is in common among all of these conscious beings is, as Zahavi denies, an abstraction (although I would not want to call it a mere abstraction, since "mere" is a treacherous word and I have no wish to deny that abstractions can be extremely useful and illuminating.)

This reading of TRI also requires concessions from the narrative view which, in its original form, does imply that there is no experience of unity and hence no meaningful selfhood, without narration. Narrativists should, I think, acknowledge that there are many forms or levels that recognition of self as self can take, and that there are indeed selves who are not Lockean persons. Focus on Locke's forensic picture of personhood does a good job of highlighting what is different in self-reflective beings, but sometimes does so at the cost of obscuring continuities and similarities with other conscious entities. There is no reason to deny these continuities by linking selfhood only to the form of egoistic concern found in persons, and much to be lost, potentially, by doing so. The narrativist insight that remains in this new view is that the selfhood of those who *are* self-narrators cannot be prised apart, in any meaningful way from the conditions of their forensic personhood. These are selves that are by their very nature forensic beings, and their form of selfhood is also personhood.

If we understand egoistic concern as a form that recognition of self as self takes, and if we recognize that this kind of concern comes in different levels of complexity, each with its distinct subjective quality and feeling of "mineness".

We can allow that there are genuine core selves, as minimalists insist, while still holding that for selves who are Lockean persons "person" and "self" are indeed just third- and first-personal sides of a single coin.

3.5 Conclusions and Concerns

What I have described is, so far, more of a strategy for bringing together key intuitions from the narrative and minimalist views of self than a full-blown account of selfhood. There are obvious challenges that need to be met to show that this suggestion is viable. While I will not be able to address these challenges here, I can at least acknowledge them and point to the direction a response might take.

First, the transformation of egoistic concern that I claim attends psychological development cannot be nearly as smooth or complete as I have suggested. Both empirical work in the neurosciences and introspection suggest that primitive pathways for pain, pleasure, and other basic forms of self-concern continue to exist even as more sophisticated capacities and forms of concern evolve. It is not as if all rudimentary experiences of self-concern simply vanish from our repertoire when we become self-narrators or self-reflectors, and commonalities with other kinds of animals in our reactions to dangers and pleasures – both physiological and psychological – are easy to find. This is an important insight, but I do not think it is terribly difficult for my approach to accommodate. What is crucial from the point of view of the model I am proposing is that when instances of visceral and primitive self-concern occur in sophisticated self-narrators they are surrounded by an overlay of other forms of concern and put into a context that alters their phenomenal character. We can see that this does happen in the ways we are able to talk ourselves down or psych ourselves up or put things into perspective.

The persistence of primitive pathways does, however, raise a general question about how to think about the duration of a self. We probably *can* experience very simple forms of self-concern for relatively extended periods of time if the circumstances are right. Someone undergoing torture or extreme pain or a horrible ordeal, might be exercising very few of the more sophisticated capacities characteristic of Lockean persons and therefore experiencing self-concern in much the same way a conscious being without self-narration does. It might be argued that this is an expression of the core self which reveals that it is there all along and can be seen in pure form in the proper circumstances. This last bit does not follow, however. In ordinary circumstances where we experience intense and very visceral pleasure or pain or fear this experience is

almost immediately bound up with and altered by the narrative context. However primitive the fear experienced during a bumpy flight or a terrifying roller coaster ride may be, understanding that one is in an airplane or on a roller coaster together with the capacity to say to oneself: “It’s just wind” or “I’m going to get an ‘I survived’ tee shirt as soon as I get off this roller coaster and they will never call me a coward again” profoundly alters the experience even as we are having it. What a person with self-reflective capacities experiences is not the same fear that a dog or infant might experience in the same situation.

Cases of torture or extended ordeal (or intense reward, as with cocaine addiction) may show that there are circumstances which, if one is in them for a sufficiently long period of time, will undo the ability to employ sophisticated self-narrating capacities. In such a case life may indeed shrink to the present and the experience of self may thus be vastly different from that of ordinary adult humans; this is why we tend to talk of someone being “broken” in such circumstances. This does show that someone who has developed a narrative self may revert to a minimal self, something that we knew already from circumstances like dementia. It does not necessarily imply, however, that *while* someone is a self-narrator there is within her the first-person subjectivity of a minimal self plus some other experiences, only that first-person experience can change drastically over time.

This analysis raises another worry. If we think that there is a single self that is present throughout a person’s life the model I am recommending will have to explain how the infant, which is, on this view, a core or minimal self is the same self as the adult human who is supposed to be a wholly different kind of self (and later, perhaps, the same self as the dementia patient, who is once again a core self). If I wish to allow that the infant adult and dementia patient can be a single self (and I do) I will need to say something about how this is possible. The strategy for doing so is to understand the self in developmental and temporally-extended terms rather than as something that can be understood at a moment. My self is not a momentary being, on the view I am proposing, but something that starts our relatively primitive and becomes more complicated. As it develops it alters in a way analogous to the way a biological entity alters as it develops to maturity.[3]

To return to our analogy, the self is like a house that goes through extensive revisions over its long history; it is sometimes a one-story house, sometimes a two-story. Over hundreds of years a house can have different square footage, numbers of rooms, and foundational footprint. Some parts may remain untouched throughout – the façade may be kept but become an interior wall, the original foundation may remain unperturbed as it is expanded to allow for

additions. It would be a mistake, however, to say that the parts that remain are the *true* house, essential in a way the others are not.

In some ways this analysis may seem to say nothing more than what the minimalist has already said, adding some kind of insistence on the fundamental role of non-core elements of the self. Zahavi says many times in many places that human selves are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, and that there are many levels and aspects of the self. His claim, it might be argued, is only that subjectivity must always be present or there is no self. So perhaps this "reconciliation" is just the minimalist view after all. As I understand the minimalist approach, however, its claim that subjectivity is common to all selves is meant as the claim that there is some one thing that is subjectivity, which can be dressed up or down but is always the same wherever it appears. If this is so I think the compromise position I have outlined really is different. Here is a way of thinking about what is at issue. While Zahavi's minimalism allows that the self can have many different levels or aspects I am not sure how to picture this while holding also that the core self is most fundamental *and* avoiding reification of the self. If we think of the self (or consciousness) on the model of a substance, then of course it can have attributes that are inessential to it. But if the self is not an object, if it is subjectivity, then it is hard to see how it could have several facets, some of which are essential and others of which are not. The picture I have developed here is trying – albeit in a preliminary and largely undeveloped way – to speak to the question of how we can think about the complex unity of the self if we do not think of a self on the model of a substance. There is obviously much work to be done to clarify, let alone defend, this picture but it promises to make room for subjectivity in all of its forms.

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Footnotes

1 Galen Srawson (e.g. 2004, 2009, 2011), offers another famous example of a similar complaint. I believe that the analysis I am offering her can be modified to address Strawson's objections as well, but doing so would require additional analysis since there are important differences between Strawson and Zahavi, especially concerning the duration of the self.

2 Often there are additional requirements about the cause of the continuity and the uniqueness of the relation. For a discussion of these views with an example of a fully–developed psychological continuity theory see Parfit (1984).

3 This is not an uncontroversial claim of course, and Strawson (see note 1), has argued extensively against it. Obviously developing this strategy to answer challenges to the account of self described here requires more extensive description of and argument for the diachronic view of self than I am able to give here.

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4. The Narrative Shape of Agency: Three Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives

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The philosophical connection between narrative and agency is of course not new—as Silvia Carli argues elsewhere in this volume, it goes back at least to Aristotle, and it has been a topic for numerous philosophers in the meantime (see, among others, the recent papers in Atkins 2008). In this paper, I want to explore some of the recent ways in which this connection matters to contemporary philosophers interrogating the concept of narrative, as opposed to the earlier generation of philosophical work on narrative, in the heyday of Arendt, MacIntyre and Taylor.

The outlines of this generational shift are not all easy to ascertain, but agency is a concern that runs through a number of recent accounts of narrative. Gregory Currie's *Narratives and Narrators*: *A Philosophy of Stories*, for example, begins with the sentence "Narratives are the product of agency…" My thesis is actually the reverse of Currie's: it is that "*agency is a product of narratives*." In fact, I will argue that it is precisely attention to narrative's relationship to agency that opens up important philosophical grounds from which conventional notions of action might be criticized.

Following Galen Strawson, I will not be making grand claims of the sort that we can find in Daniel Dennett and others (for example, in Dennett's claim that "we are all virtuoso novelists"). I have a more modest ambition, which is to uncover ways in which the construal of agency might make use of narrative modes of discourse. In what follows, I will use the term "narrative" in what Currie calls a "gradational" (as opposed to a "categorical") sense, as embracing a very wide range of things that we tend to call narrative, from the least complex to the most exemplary forms in which narrativity is embodied. Narrative is indeed a polyvalent not to say elastic term, especially these days—in fact, one large difficulty facing philosophers of literature is how the multidisciplinary appeal of the term can be sorted out through the different usages in which it is employed (to distinguish long form journalism, certain kinds of historical writing, a therapeutic form of medical treatment and even a particular sort of theological approach).

In this paper, I will focus on a somewhat narrower range of what I hope will be relatively identifiable senses of the term as I take up three contemporary accounts of narrative: Strawson's critique of narrativity and two contemporary philosophical engagements with narrative that acknowledge but attempt to move beyond Strawson's critique—those of Peter Goldie and David Velleman. After looking at the relation between narrativity and agency in the context of these philosophers, I conclude with an examination of some areas where narrative can open up concerns under-explored by conventional accounts of agency, ending with a brief look at two famous but under-analyzed encounters with narrative that are particularly concerned with developing a notion of narrative *rhythm*: Frank Kermode's account of narrative closure and Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller."

4.1 Agency and Minimal Narrative: Strawson's Challenge

As with many topics in philosophy, the construal of narrative is one which is necessarily framed in terms of questions posed by a skeptic. And in this case, the skeptic about narrative, Galen Strawson, has pointed his attack at some of the more over-reaching claims made about narrative (both among the older and some among the contemporary generation): here he includes Dennett's claim that we are all virtuoso novelists along with those, for example, of Oliver Sacks (who has claimed that the 'the narrative we construct of our lives *is* us') and Jerome Bruner (who said that 'we *become* our autobiographical narrative' over the

course of our lives).

Strawson argues that philosophical appeals to narrative have assumed in many cases a narrative structure that is not essential for identity or agency. Strawson's critique begins to try to sort out what is at stake in some of the quite different claims made on behalf of narrative: for example, the difference between the *empirical* claim that we happen to be creatures who understand ourselves through stories and the essentially *normative* claim made, for example, by Taylor, that it is a "basic condition of making sense of ourselves… that we [*ought to*] grasp our lives in a *narrative*." Strawson argues that the boldest earlier claims for narrative failed to take into account the sort of distinction he draws between the perspectives of *narrativists* and *episodists*—the former tending to construe a temporal integrity through numerous life events and the latter inevitably unable to see life as more than a series of disconnected episodes. Strawson doesn't think that *either* normative or empirical claims for narrative stand up in the end, and he claims to be something of a happy episodist himself, one whose feeling of friendship with someone is based on a connection with that person now and not on some remembered status dating back to earlier times.

Strawson's critique does require of us more care in terms of what we can assert about the importance of narrative, but there are some lines of criticism that can be applied to his approach. We might ask, for example, whether the very notion of 'episodic' doesn't borrow something from narrative (aren't episodes, even sketchy and stochastic ones, nonetheless related in some even minimally emplotted way?) Strawson, when pressed on this, says straightforwardly that he uses 'episodic' in a rather more narrow sense—specifically, in the sense in which we can differentiate events that may be in my autobiographical memory but that I do not regard as having happened to me*, where me* means "what I now experience myself to be when I'm apprehending myself specifically as an inner mental presence or self." We'll of course grant Strawson this distinction, yet there appear to remain some important elements of the appeal to narrative that those who have argued in response to Strawson's skeptical objections can reasonably make a case for.

For one thing, human beings do in fact employ some structures which can be said to have an identifiably narrative character (in comparison with other, non-narrative or less-than-narrative structures) and it remains philosophically relevant to try to say what such narrative structures have in common, even to try to ascertain whether there are norms within some disciplines and genres to the correct application of narrative structure. Secondly, with respect to the question of agency, even if we grant that there is a problem of episodicity such that not all persons are capable or desirous of construing actions in their lives in terms of the

larger integrity or unity of "life as a whole," there are still ordinary actions from moment to moment which may be viewed from an agent's narrative stance or perspective, and such a perspective may indeed, on at least some views of normativity, be a phenomenon which philosophers of action have to examine and explain.

So while Strawson attacks what he describes as Narrativity, with a capital N, defined as a particular psychological property or outlook of a narrative sort, it's important to notice that, as distinguished from such capitalized sense of the term, Strawson seems to acknowledge that there are many local (little-"n") narratives in our lives—the sort, for example, that may attend our making breakfast in the morning—I'm going to make oatmeal and then toast, followed by coffee with cream and sugar—but he takes these to be trivial and uninteresting. (And, interestingly, he points out that Charles Taylor, the defender of narrative in the larger sense, also thinks such narratives are trivial.)

But I think it might be useful to approach this more minimal or quotidian sense of narrative a little more charitably, since it may provide one place where a common conversation about the question of narrative and our lives may begin. Boring some of these everyday narratives may be, but the planning and control capacities involved in such a series of narratively-presented moves would not seem to be a trivial empirical fact about the sort of reasoning animals that we are.

This is an element that has been present in philosophy of action since at least Michael Bratman's treatment of agency in light of the notion of *planning* theory, and it suggests one way in which a narrative conception might enter underneath Strawson's skeptical radar with a more minimal claim. My constant involvement in selecting and suppressing options that fit with a plan to do something is a part of our agency that both seems hard to contest and clearly to involve a narrative dimension, even if not a capital-N explicitly narrative outlook. So while I might be willing to grant Strawson's notion that there are episodic as opposed to narrative conceptions of self, and acknowledge ways in which some of the broader claims for normative narrativity might need correction, I want to suggest that we begin our account with a notion of narrative as possibly relevant for what we do as planning, active beings. And that is an important element of each of the next two philosophical approaches to narrative that I will consider, those of Peter Goldie and David Velleman, both of whom accept key parts of Strawson's critique but nonetheless attempt to give a crucial philosophical role to narrative agency.

4.2 Narrative Thinking and the Role of Irony: Goldie

The late Peter Goldie made a number of important contributions to the contemporary discussion of narrative, in particular by linking new research on memory and the emotions to an account of what narrative is. Taking a post-Strawsonian "minimalist" approach to narrative, Goldie defended a "narrative sense of self"—as opposed to the metaphysical commitments involved in a "sense of narrative self" (Goldie 2012, x). In this context, he suggested two notions which I want to emphasize in connection with the question about narrative and agency. The first is his development of the concept of *narrative thinking*: on his view, narrative is "something that can be, *but need not be*, told or narrated to others" (Goldie 2012, 4). Narrative is not simply a *product* but also a *process*—one that characterizes us as agents seeking the distinctively narrative context of coherence, meaningfulness and evaluative or emotional import in our actions (Goldie 2012, 2). Secondly, Goldie stressed that narrative always involved the representation of events *from a certain perspective or perspectives*. When we narrate a past event, for example, we are able to take a stance on that event that is external to the perspective we had at the time: "someone who is internal to a narrative, having a role as a 'character' in the narrative, can also be external to it, having also the role of external narrator" (Goldie 2012, 26). Goldie includes a number of examples involving either dramatic irony or the literary technique known as free indirect style, where an ironic gap is expressed in a way that fuses both a character's perspective and that of the author's. (Goldie includes James Wood's example— "Ted watched the orchestra through stupid tears"—where the word "stupid" is in a sense "owned" both by character and narrator.)

This stress on narrative irony is a particularly helpful tool in many of the retrospective narrative tasks involved in our agency—particularly in the often difficult realm of autobiography. An account such as Goldie's has to take on, of course, a set of significant questions about memory revision, including the possibility of false or deceptive memories. Goldie acknowledges various "fictionalizing tendencies" in narrative but holds that these do not compromise the possibility of objectivity in narrative. "Narratives, including autobiographical narratives, do not and should not aspire to be like causal or scientific explanations, dispassionate and non-perspectival" (Goldie 2012, 155). But there is, on his view, some requirement to appeal to the (essentially ethical) category of *narrative appropriateness*: citing the example of C. S. Lewis' narrative of loss in *A Grief Observed*, Goldie suggests that such a narrative "considered as a

whole, reveals and expresses his grief, which emotion is, of course appropriate" (Goldie 2012, 155). Narrative appropriateness thus "goes beyond the truth or otherwise of its constituent propositions," even if disagreement between narrator and audience is still possible.

There also remains an interesting asymmetry in Goldie's account where retrospective and prospective narrative views differ. His account of the future planning aspect of narrative stresses the "structural similarities" between my stance on what will happen and my stance on what did. In both cases, narrative thinking is done from the present—the "external perspective" of Strawson's "me-now" (Goldie 2012, 97). But however frequently irony may be a part of how we view our own actions in the past, and however we may extend forward a certain possible ironic perspective on what we aim to do in the future, it is certainly not the only narrative perspective or trope which might be relevant for coordinating ourselves in terms of past and future.

4.3 Improvisation and Narrative Practical Reasoning: Velleman

Like Goldie, Velleman acknowledges the strength of Strawson's critique about episodicity: different people may have different stances toward narrative, and some of us just are more episodically oriented than others. As Velleman puts it: "Some people prefer lives that are uniformly desirable and narratively flat, like the weather in southern California; others prefer lives that are like the weather in New England, where the story of death and rebirth is retold on a regular basis" (Velleman 2009, 204).

But Velleman gives a key role to narrative in his argument that the self-understanding we employ in practical reasoning involves two ("asymmetrically dependent") modes: psychological/causal explanation on the one hand and narrative explanation on the other. Velleman's notion of what the narrative mode of explanation provides—a sense of what he calls "emotional cadence"—is contrasted with a *causalist* narrative view held by Noel Carroll and others. In Carroll's view, one has not yet constructed a narrative if all that one claims is that event x preceded event y; for there to be a *narrative* (as opposed to an *annal* or a *chronicle*) there must be, on his view, a *causal* relation that narrative essentially represents—and more specifically a causal connection on which earlier events in a sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events, or are contributors thereto. For example: "The Allies and the Central Powers had fought themselves to a standstill, but then the North

Americans entered the war and, as a result, Germany was defeated."

On Velleman's view, Carroll's causal account rules out some legitimate narratives and fails to account for the distinctive force that narratives have on us. Carroll had argued, for example, that because it does not evince the proper kind of causality an account such as "Aristarchus hypothesized the heliocentric system and then centuries later Copernicus discovered it again" could never be a story. Yet Velleman claims that one might be able to construct a genuine narrative involving these two events without inventing a non-existent or improbable causal connection, and he adduces Aristotle's famous example about the statue of Mitys, which "killed the author of Mitys' death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle." Such a causally unrelated pair of events nonetheless has an emotional power over us: in Aristotle's view, it is a story that may arouse our fear and pity (i.e., a story that has some tragic power); on Velleman's view, the "emotional cadence" or "emotional resolution" provided by such a story (or many other such examples, such as the story of the different lives of twins separated at birth) is essential to the distinctive power of narrative structure.

Velleman's account goes a ways toward showing how a generally narrative structure of events can constitute an agentive perspective. For Velleman, narrative helps us assimilate events not to a pattern of how things happen but to a pattern of how things *feel* or what they *mean*—an emotional cadence that, on his view, connects with the biological organism's desire for tension and release. Velleman draws in this connection on Frank Kermode's example of our invariably listening to the undifferentiated rhythm of a clock's pendulum as 'tick-tock,' a tension and a release.

What this means for an agent's perspective on her own action is that, in Velleman's view, there is a sort of "fragmentation of practical reasoning" between instrumental rationality on the one hand and narrative perspective on the other: we "aim to do things for which we have both an explanation, revealing why we came to do them, and a narrative that helps to clarify how we feel about them or what they mean to us."

It is possible to see both a negative and a positive side to Velleman's engagement with narrative. The former is visible in his earlier writings (especially Velleman 1989, 2000), where it has not often been discussed how strategically, even ingeniously, Velleman employs narrative examples for the criticism he levels at what he calls the "standard view" of agency.

On the "standard view," which is also often called the "desire/belief" model, intention is considered to be a separable item from the action that results from it and I can understand any intention as a combination of a desire and a belief,

which together result in, jointly cause, that action. Thus in a simple case of action: my desire to slake my thirst combines with the belief that this glass of water is the best means for alleviating thirst, and I reach out to pick up the glass of water.

Velleman is drawn to cases where this standard desire/belief model of action appears to be inadequate. I'll give three short examples of his that are illustrative.

The first is a case of what we might call "reflective puzzlement":

> You are walking up Fifth Avenue. All of a sudden you realize that you don't know what you're doing. You can see that you're walking up Fifth Avenue, of course: the surroundings are quite familiar. But the reason why you're walking up Fifth Avenue escapes you, and so you still don't know what you're doing. Are you walking home from work? Trying to catch a downtown bus? Just taking a stroll? You stop to think.

The second is an example of what I will call "attitudinal latency":

> Suppose that I have a long-anticipated meeting with an old friend for the purpose of resolving some minor difference; but that as we talk, his offhand comments provoke me to raise my voice in progressively sharper replies, until we part in anger. Later reflection leads me to realize that accumulated grievances had crystallized in my mind, during the weeks before our meeting, into a resolution to sever our friendship over the matter at hand, and that this resolution is what gave the hurtful edge to my remarks. In short, I may conclude that desires of mine caused a decision, which in turn caused the corresponding behavior; and I may acknowledge that these mental states were thereby exerting their normal motivational force, unabetted by any strange perturbation or compulsion. But do I necessarily think that I made the decision or that I executed it? Surely, I can believe that the decision, though genuinely motivated by my desires, was thereby induced in me but not formed by me…

The third example (used by Velleman, but originally supplied by Freud in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) is what we might call a "motivated parapraxis": Freud has an inkpot on his desk, which his sister tells him he should get rid of, and when he comes back to his office after being out with her he finds himself clumsily knocking said inkpot on the floor.

> Did I perhaps conclude from my sister's remark that she intended to make me a present of a nicer inkstand on the next festive occasion, and did I

> smash the unlovely old one so as to force her to carry out the intention she had hinted at? If that is so, my sweeping movement was only apparently clumsy; in reality it was exceedingly adroit and well-directed, and understood how to avoid damaging any of the more precious objects that stood around.

For Velleman, the goal of recounting each of these cases is somewhat different, but they all raise important questions that he thinks present genuine problems for the standard model of agency—and, I think, it can't have escaped your attention that all involve a fairly carefully crafted piece of narrative.

In the case of "reflective puzzlement," where an addressed second-person figure not otherwise described ("you") is walking up Fifth Avenue and suddenly stops, Velleman is interested in motivating a broader look at how intention in its relation to action involves a kind of "fit" between interpretation and behavior. It is one of a number of what are called in the psychological literature "double-capture" cases—where first an agent's *attention* and then his *control* of action are, as it were, captured away from him. On Velleman's view, the important thing to notice in this case is that we are not just concerned here with the familiar direction of a "fit" in the direction of intention-to-agency but also with a backward-facing loop in which we make sense of agency in an ongoing way: so not just *intention* but *revision* is involved in the "fit" that makes for intentional agency. We want both to *understand what we do* and to *do what we understand*, and the best way to understand the relevant fit between these two sides of intention and action is in terms not just of a forward-looking intention-to-action relationship but in terms of a *reciprocal* relationship between intention and action. It's precisely this reciprocal relation that falls apart when we "lose" an intention as in such a case of reflective puzzlement. And the peculiarity of our situation is such that when we do lose an intention in such cases we frequently *stop*. Velleman's explanation of this involves two intriguing claims: (1) that ultimately practical reason should be understood as a form of prediction about what we will be doing, and (2) that our action involves what he calls a sub-agential aim of a quasi-Aristotelian nature to be comprehensible to ourselves in what we do.

The "attitudinal latency" and "motivated parapraxis" cases add to this picture by raising questions about the relation of intention and "prior deliberation" on the one hand and about the ability of the standard account to pick out actions (which are intentional and for which we are responsible) from activities (which are more automatic) on the other. The standard account can't mark off action in terms of a prior deliberate intention (if it makes sense at least for everyday

agents if not all philosophers of action to think about an action whose intention only "crystallizes" in the course of the action itself) or in terms of motivated behavior involving a belief (since brushing the inkpot off the desk is by most philosophers not considered an action but it is certainly an activity in which the agent is both *motivated* to do what he *knows* will destroy the inkpot).

While Velleman uses these examples in his earlier essays (Velleman 1989, 2000) in primarily negative ways to critique elements of the "standard account" of agency, the larger and more positive stakes for his use of narrative visible in his later work (Velleman 2003 and especially 2009) concern the use of narrative to shape a broader account of practical reasoning. In Velleman 2009, he makes a narrative appeal to the notion of an improvisational actor as a way of situating his conception of an agent's practical reasoning. Velleman asks the reader to "imagine away" the differences between an improvisational actor and the character he portrays: an actor who "plays himself" will have two levels of motivation in his action, first-order dispositions that belong to his character and a higher-order motivation to "make sense by enacting them." When an agent does something, on Velleman's view, he considers it in light of his particular agentive self-conception or character. An agent who cries can be doing so involuntarily (someone who is responding with emotional immediacy to a situation with uncontrolled weeping), deliberately (as in the case of a child who is attempting to get his parents' sympathy) or something in between (as when an adult lets himself have a "good cry"). In all such cases, Velleman argues, the agent constantly monitors his actions from the perspective of the second motivation of making sense of himself, asking, in other words, whether his tears are something which are consistent with his character or self-conception. And, as with the example of reflective puzzlement above, in cases where an agent can't make sense of it in terms of his character, he stops the action in question. Making sense of our action is thus something which we are constantly doing—like an improv actor testing out his actions in front of an audience—by essentially narrative means.

4.4 Assessing Narrative Agency: Questions for Further Philosophical Engagement

What can we make of the three contemporary philosophical engagements with narrative that we've considered? How should the connection between narrative and agency in these case be assessed with an eye to further philosophical work on the topic of narrative?

As a way of beginning a sketch of such an assessment, it's striking to notice that each of the three contemporary accounts make use of narrative to criticize conventional views of agency. While the most skeptical of the three views, Strawson's, underscores doubts about there being some kind of *authorial* agency, he is not above using narrative means (as a number of his readers have noticed) to make his argument. Strawson, one of the most literate philosophers currently practicing in the anglo/analytic tradition, is indeed a very capable narrativist himself. (Who, after all, is that "I' who so insistently demands in "Against Narrativity" that we not ignore his self-experience as an episodist? Presumably someone with a claim on us that may not be capital-N narrative but is at least engaged with us in a recognizably narrative way in giving us an account of his character as this rather than that. Or so one might argue.)

Like Strawson, Goldie wants to avoid traditional assumptions about a "narrative self" and looks to narrative instead for the ways in which our *perspective* on both our past and future actions requires an external point of view (me-now) different from the internal point of view at the time (me-then). Velleman's image of the improvisational actor suggests that we are constantly attempting to narratively "fit" together what we do and the self-conception on which we act. Our ongoing need as agents to "fit" interpretation to behavior may not be experienced by us as consciously narrative, but interruptions or surprises within our experience of that "fit" are large sources of our agentive need for narrative. If this is the case, then our concern as agents with narrative first *enters* the picture not in terms of the broad question about the relation between life and (auto)biography that has launched Strawson and other narrative skeptics into an attack on narrativity. (This is the debate framed around Alasdair MacIntyre's infamous remark that "stories are lived before they are told" and by the contrasting claim of Sartre that any life-story-telling must involve false construction on my part.) On Goldie's and Velleman's view, it is not that one's life *is* a narrative but rather that one's ongoing endeavor to live one's life with sense depends on a "fit" that narrative is frequently called in to help maintain. This would give us an agentive beginning for understanding the functioning of narrative dependent not on the broadest of claims about potentially false patterns of biographical construal but in the activity of the subject or self to maintain a sense of coherence and in that agent's ongoing efforts at revising his account of what he is doing.

While Goldie and Velleman may have succeeded in shifting the conversation in ways that give narrative a legitimate post-Strawsonian practical philosophical function, there remain a number of questions about their attempts to give a narrative account of agency that are worth examining. As a way of thinking

about further philosophical engagement with the topic of narrative agency, I will outline three such questions, concerning the *scope* of narrative consideration, the problem of *theatricality* and the element of *suffering* or passivity that narrative agents may encounter.

First, it can be asked about both Goldie's and Velleman's accounts whether they draw on relatively narrow views of narrative. Each of them depends, in fact, on a somewhat restricted genre notion of narrative: Goldie on the ironic forms of drama and free indirect style, Velleman on improvisational acting. While this selective appropriation of narrative is helpful for specific philosophical purposes —giving us a way to articulate a notion of ourselves as practical reasoners—we still seem to lack a wider account of what narrative is and how we may draw on it in practical contexts. As we have seen, Velleman draws on Kermode's notion of the allegedly most primitive form of narrative—the "tick-tock" of the pendulum—to suggest that at the root of our narrative sense is some (originally muscularly-experienced) desire for tension and release that may have gained particular importance for us within the development of our evolutionary biology (Velleman 2009, 195). But must the narratives we make use of in our lives as practical agents always involve just such emotional closure? Literary examples of narratives without such closure abound, of course, and, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, presumably there is more that may be uncovered in the investigation of the evolutionary grounds or conditions for the development of human narrative faculties (as Boyd 2009 and others have argued).

Second, both Goldie and Velleman run up against what has been called the problematic of "theatricality" in action: the split between the perspective an agent takes on himself both as subject and as object-observed-by-others. This is territory familiar to a wide range of thinkers, from Diderot on the "paradox of the actor" to Sartre's description of the waiter who acts with "bad faith" to Goffman's account of the modern agent internalizing the perspective of his audience. One way of getting around the problems associated with theatricality involves a more recognitive account of narrative agency as a social phenomenon (one outlined in many ways by Hegel, for example) than is on offer in Goldie's ironic agent and Velleman's improv actor, but this would again require going beyond the narrower frame of narrative employed in both accounts.

Third and finally, the agentive model employed in both cases is one which still privileges an *authorial* view of agency that does not take fully enough into account the passive sides of our narrative experience of ourselves. While Velleman gives us a spectrum of ways in which a cry may be considered to be more and less voluntary, this example still gives us a case in which what is at issue is something the agent can identify with (even if only retrospectively) as

something that she *does*: even if I am not sure why I am crying, I can understand it as an action that is *mine*. There is a wider range of interruptions and obstacles confronted by agents—from physical and mental illness to various forms of trauma—which are usually construed by us as something *undergone* or *suffered* but which remain important for an agent's narrative sense of herself, even if all narrative modes (especially in cases of acute trauma) can only regard them *as* interruptions or obstacles.

I will end by suggesting one line of thought about narrative that might be of use in a further philosophical consideration that may offer a broader, more recognitive picture of agency that also takes into account narrative construals of suffering—Walter Benjamin's brief and provocative essay, "The Storyteller" (which Velleman 2003 mentions briefly). Benjamin's essay opens up a wide range of possible concerns with narrative that deserve fuller treatment—the relation between "story" and novel in the conditions of modernity, the relation between narrative and temporality, the storyteller's death as possessing "authority," etc.—but I would like to focus especially on Benjamin's primal scene of narrative (one which is interesting to compare in many ways to the notion of *rhythm* developed in Kermode) as it places the narrativist within a distinctively social context where what is suffered (in arduous or repetitive work) and a certain kind of self-forgetting are important:

> [S]torytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship. (Benjamin 1968, 91)

Benjamin describes in this scene a relation between narrative and agency with several new and distinct elements. The social context of storytelling is primary here: a story is *told* and *listened* to; the story serves as an accompaniment to the social activity of *work*, and it involves a distinct social *rhythm* that impresses itself best upon the listener when she or he is in some sense *self-forgetful*. Narrative's origin, on this view, is to be found not in *my* attempt at "authoring" my "life-*as*-a-narrative" but rather in an almost musical

social interaction where the active role of the agent lies now in what are, by comparison, seemingly passive engagements—in picking up a rhythm, in taking on a memory that may put other elements of self-awareness out of the picture, etc. These engagements are also part of our living a life that we experience with some coherence or interpretive "fit," but they are perhaps less easily placed into the conversation.

How to describe this set of engagements adequately would take us much further afield—both into Benjamin's own distinctive projects regarding storytelling, art and history, and into a longer tradition of accounts of the function of narrative storytelling. But what might be called the *acoustical* and *social* aspects of engaging narrative at its most primally rhythmic are, to put it mildly, under-represented in contemporary philosophical discussions of the relation between narrative and agency. And I've appealed to Benjamin's scene in order to attempt to re-insert into the contemporary philosophical conversation something of this missing side. It is to be found at least in some respect in elements of the discussion of narrative a generation ago that have not been much in focus recently—in, for example, the Aristotelian elements common to both MacIntyre and Ricoeur's accounts of the cultural role of narrative in shaping meaning.

If one side of narrative agency is that of the primarily individualistic meaning-shaping that Goldie and Velleman describe, there is another side of narrative agency that involves a set of acoustic and absorptive appropriations. Here the question is one not so much of how an individual agent constructs a narrative that makes sense of his or her own life but rather one of how (and whether) individual agents connectively (or collectively) appeal in their narrativizing to larger narrative wholes. This is a primary concern of MacIntyre's appeal to narrative in *After Virtue* and part of what Ricoeur tries to explicate in the third of his three senses of mimesis in *Time and Narrative* as the way in which narrative patterns—drawn initially from an encounter with everyday life—return to the broader world in great and lesser works of cultural significance that have an influence on the thought and actions of individual agents. The question is how these more appropriative and acoustical elements involved in the social world can be factored into a discussion of narrative agency—bluntly put, how the essentially ironizing and highly self-conscious activity of Goldie's narrative agent can go together with the listening and self-forgetting in which Benjamin's story-hearers engage. There are some images from the earlier philosophical conversation about narrative that may be of help here—for example, Ricoeur's account of the agent's experience of the three modes of temporality (the past that is present, the present that is present and the future that

is present) as the reader reciting a psalm, always aware of her temporal “place” in syllable and line. If we place Ricoeur’s image of the reciter of the poem next to Benjamin’s image of the listener at her work, we can notice several things that affirm elements of the contemporary conversation about narrative but that may push it further: if there is a Strawsonian suspicion in both cases about whether there is indeed any such a thing as an “authorial” self, the question of how the agent relates to narrative is not so much one of how her life *is* (or is not) a narrative but rather one of how in social space rhythms that accommodate the active and passive sides of our lives are sustained.

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5. A Story of No Self: Literary and Philosophical Observations on Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of the Buddha*

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In the introduction to *Love's Knowledge*, her widely-quoted and much-respected volume of essays on philosophy and literature, Martha Nussbaum says: "Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content —an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth."[1] Martha Nussbaum's point has two implications for the way we read Buddhist philosophy. First of all, it expands the canon of works that can plausibly be considered "philosophical." In her case, the canon expanded to include not just the works of Kant or the nineteenth-century Utilitarian thinkers, but the novels of Austen, James, and Proust. In our case, a comparable shift would be to move from the works of classic Madhyamaka or Yogācāra philosophers, like Candrakīrti or Vasubandhu, to the vast corpus of Buddhist narrative literature. Nussbaum's claim also involves a shift not just in what we read, but how we read it. For her the starting point was the simple question: "How does one live." With this question came the observation that life is framed in many more ways

than in a series of philosophical propositions. If I wanted, and if you would let me, I could spend the rest of my time just musing on Nussbaum's use of the words "live" and "life." She often talks about a novel's ability to convey a "sense of life." Her words carry an echo of the concept of a *Lebensanschauung*, a "life-view" that accompanies and is dictated by a *Weltanschauung* or "world-view." I think we can also hear echoes of the phrase "form of life" that Wittgenstein used to describe the setting in which words acquire their meaning. In Wittgenstein's case, the word was used deliberately to avoid technical language, but as soon as he used it, it was invested with precisely the technical aura that he was trying to avoid. Nussbaum's "sense of life" turns down the technical volume in the same way and adds the further association of "sense" as "meaning." For the essays in this volume, the key question is similar to Nussbaum's question, but it expresses a more Buddhist preoccupation: not how should one live (in some cases "living" is precisely what one should aspire not to do) but who is it who lives? I would like to investigate this question in a way that balances, as Nussbaum did, on the line that separates technical from non-technical language and on the line that distinguishes literature from philosophy.

The text I have in mind to focus this question is the *Buddhacarita* (*Life of the Buddha*) by the second-century Buddhist poet AśvaghoṢa.[2] I have chosen this text not only because it offers the first full-scale narrative of the Buddha's life, written some six or seven centuries after the life of the historical Buddha, but because it shows how intricately a Buddhist narrative can be woven together with a form of argument that we can legitimately call philosophy. It also contains a rich, complex, and in some ways ambiguous meditation on what it means to develop a Buddhist self.

Let me begin with five verses that are particularly controversial for contemporary readers of the text. They come from one of the key moments in the early career of Siddhārtha, the young prince who would become the "awakened one" or Buddha. By this time, as AśvaghoṢa tells the story, Siddhārtha has married and had a child. On a series of trips outside his palace, he has seen "four sights": a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. The first three sights impressed him with the reality of death, and the figure of the ascetic suggested a way in which death might possibly be overcome. In response to these sights, Siddhārtha has decided to leave the palace and take up the life of an ascetic. To speed Siddhārtha on his way, a group of deities have cast a veil of sleep over the residents of palace, including a group of women who tried to shake his resolution by offering the enticements of love. To Siddhārtha the sleeping women present a singularly unappealing sight.

When he saw those girls sleeping in such poses,
their bodies distorted (*vikṛta*), movements unrestrained,
the king's son gave vent to his utter contempt—
though their bodies were exquisite,
and the way they spoke was so sweet:

"Dirty (*aśuci*) and distorted (*vikṛta*) lies here exposed
the true nature of women in this world;
Deluded by their nice clothes and jewelry,
men (*puruṢa*) become infatuated with them.

If men (*manuṢya*) reflect on women's true nature (*prakṛti*)
and this mutation (*vikāra*) brought about by sleep,
Surely their passion for them would not wax;
yet, struck by the thought of their elegance,
they become infatuated with them."

When he understood thus their difference,
the urge to depart surged in him that night;
when the gods discerned his intention, then,
they opened the door of his residence.

Then, he came down from the palace roof-top,
in utter contempt of those sleeping girls;
having come down, then, resolute,
he went out to the first courtyard.[3]

The first of these verses sets the scene, the next two describe Siddhārtha's reaction, and the last two show how he puts his resolution into action. What is troubling about this passage for us is not the actions themselves. We know that Siddhārtha is about to leave the palace; all that has been missing is the right occasion. What seems strange to modern eyes is the harsh image of misogyny. When I discuss this passage with students, most just want to turn the page. But the language of the passage is worth a second look. For a careful reader, it goes beyond a judgment about men and women to a larger question about the nature of the self.[4]

Aśvaghoṣa's description of Siddhārtha's reaction starts with two words, *aśuci* and *vikṛta*. In Olivelle's translation, these appear as "dirty and distorted"; a simpler translation might be "impure" and "changed," with a suggestion in the word *vikṛta* that this change is not for the better. Judging from the classic account of the Buddha's life in the *Lalitavistara,* both words seem to have traditional sources. In the parallel passage in the *Lalitavistara,* gods show the women as "changed and fallen down" (*vikṛta-vigalita*). Siddhārtha is terrified by the sight, as if he were living in a cremation ground, and he turns his vision of the women into a meditation on the impurity of his own body. In other words, the impurity is not associated solely with the bodies of women, but with bodies in general, including his own. Aśvaghoṣa does not follow this precise model, especially in the second verse, where Siddhārtha reflects on "women's true nature and the mutation brought about by sleep." Here the word "true nature" is the highly charged term *prakṛti,* and the "mutation brought about by sleep" (or, more simply, "change due to sleep") is *svapna-vikāra*. By introducing the terms *prakṛti* and *vikāra,* Aśvaghoṣa crosses the line from the language of scripture to the technical language of Sāṃkhya philosophy. Siddhārtha is not just a young man recoiling at the sight of sleeping women; he has stepped into a Sāṃkhya allegory and begun to enact the stages of recognition in which the soul (here represented by the word *puruṣa* in one verse and by the word *manuṣya* or "man") separates itself from the entanglements of *prakṛti* and escapes the cycle of rebirth.

The significance of these verbal changes becomes clear if we compare this passage to Chapter 12, where Siddhārtha meets the sage Arāḍa. Siddhārtha has visited a number of brahmanical ascetics, each of whom has a particular dharma to recommend as a way to deal with the sufferings of life. He also has had to respond to a series of emissaries and well-meaning advisors who try to persuade him to give up his quest and return to the conventional vision of dharma associated with a householder and a king. Finally he asks whether there is a sage who can tell him how to escape the cycle of rebirth altogether. He is directed to Arāḍa, who gives him one of the most extensive early accounts of Sāṃkhya philosophy. While it may be "early" and may eventually have been superseded by the formal statements of texts such as the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*s, it contains all the key elements, including *prakṛti*, the soul, and a category known as *vikāra* or "transformation":

> Primal nature (*prakṛti*) and Transformation (*vikāra*),
> birth, death, and old age—

All that is called Being, please understand,
you whose being is firm.
Because it cognizes this field,
what is conscious is called
the Knower of the field (*kṢetrajña*);
But those who contemplate the self,
call the self (*ātman*) "Knower of the field."[5]

These two verses show how much intellectual weight is invested in the term *svapna-vikāra* in Siddhārtha's vision of the sleeping women. Wendy Doniger has described the *Mahābhārata* as a long philosophical reflection punctuated by moments when the reflection crystallizes into narrative.[6] The same has happened here. Sāṃkhya reflection about the nature of the soul has crystallized into the narrative image of Siddhārtha's disgust as he gazes at a group of sleeping women.

This is not the time or place to discuss the relationship between the proto-Sāṃkhya of AśvasghoṢa's *Life of the Buddha* and the classical formulation of the Sāṃkhya position in ĪśvarakṛṢṇa's *Sāṃkhyakārikā*s (fifth century) and elsewhere. The complexity of this problem has been amply discussed by E. H. Johnston, Gerald James Larson, and others.[7] Categories that are distinctive to Sāṃkhya appear not only in the well-known confrontation between Siddhārtha and Arāḍa in canto 12, before Siddhārtha takes leave from his teachers and sets out to find his own understanding of the truth, but also in the conversation between the Buddha and Anāthapiṇḍada in Chapter 18 and the Buddha's teaching to Subhadra on the eve of the *parinirvāṇa* in canto 26. It is enough simply to observe that AśvaghoṢa's text shares the same dualistic vision of reality that was given more precise and careful elaboration in later texts. According to the teaching attributed to Arāḍa, and to the teaching of later Sāṃkhya sources, reality is divided into two fundamental categories: the soul (*puruṢa*) and *prakṛti* (material nature). While *prakṛti* in the primordial sense (*mūla-prakṛti*) is a single principle, it can be distinguished further into two different modes of manifestation: *prakṛti* ("creative") and *vikṛti* ("*created*"), hence the distinction between *prakṛti* and *vikāra* in *Buddhacarita* 12.17.[8] As the creative aspect of *prakṛti* suggests, *prakṛti* is active, while *puruṢa* is inactive. *PuruṢa*, on the other hand is conscious, while *prakṛti* is not. The distinction between *prakṛti* and *puruṢa* also is gendered: the term *prakṛti* is grammatically feminine, while *puruṢa* (or "man") is masculine.

All of these features of *prakṛti* and *puruṢa* contribute to a series of remarkable verses in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*s where ĪśvarakṛṢṇa tells a vivid but highly condensed story of liberation:

> Like a dancer who stops dancing when she is seen by the audience, *prakṛti* stops when she shows herself to the *puruṢa*. … I think that there is nothing more delicate than *prakṛti*: when she knows she is seen, she does not show herself again to *puruṢa*. … At the time of death, when *prakṛti* has achieved her purpose and withdrawn, [*puruṢa*] attains definitive and final isolation (*kaivalya*).[9]

Here *puruṢa* is pictured as a spectator and *prakṛti* as a dancer. When *prakṛti* becomes aware that she has been seen by *puruṢa*, she stops her performance, in part out of delicacy or shyness, but also because she has achieved her purpose (*artha*) in liberating the *puruṢa*.[10] Simply put, her purpose is to reveal herself to *puruṢa* and then to "stop" (*ni-vṛt*), and the role of the *puruṢa* is simply to sit as a spectator and to recognize *prakṛti* for what she is. This recognition leads to a state that the text calls "definitive and final isolation (*kaivalya*)." In the dualistic system of the Sāṃkhya, it is not a bad thing to distinguish and to separate. The goal is not to merge into a state of oneness, as it might be in some UpaniṢadic texts, but to realize the difference between the soul and material nature and allow the soul to become free. The parallel between this story and AśvaghoṢa's account of Siddhārtha's vision of the sleeping women is hard to miss. It is as if AśvaghoṢa were writing Siddhārtha's story as a Sāṃkhya allegory.

This is very strange. Why would AśvaghoṢa choose to accommodate Siddhārtha's journey to a rival philosophical system? Three reasons suggest themselves; perhaps there are more. First, in the controversial environment of the first few centuries C.E., Sāṃkhya was a key Brahmanical opponent. In conjunction with the Yoga tradition, Sāṃkhya offered a forceful challenge to Buddhist claims about the way to liberation. This challenge continued for several centuries after the time of AśvaghoṢa. We read in Parmārtha's "Life of Vasubandhu," for example, that a Sāṃkhya teacher named Vindhyavāsin defeated Vasubandhu's teacher in debate during the reign of Candragupta II (ca. fourth century).[11] Sāṃkhya is treated as a formal opponent in the works of Dignāga and Bhāviveka (sixth century), among others, and it provokes a strong critique in the biography of the Chinese traveller Xuanzang.[12] Sāṃkhya may eventually have been superseded by Vedānta as a school that tied liberation to a certain view of an eternal self, but in their day the Sāṃkhyas were an active and

threatening alternative to the point of the view of the Buddhists. Some have suggested that Sāṃkhya is the oldest technical school of Indian philosophy and may have provided the background not only for the development of formal Buddhist philosophy but also of comparable Jain and Brahmanical schools.[13] Whether this is true or not, the Sāṃkhya certainly posed a significant challenge, especially when it came to defining a distinctively Buddhist approach to liberation.

A second reason for the prominence of Sāṃkhya in AśvaghoṢa's text has to do with the relationship between AśvaghoṢa and the *Mahābhārata*. As Patrick Olivelle and Alf Hiltebeitel have shown, AśvaghoṢa has a deep controversial relationship with the *Mahābhārata* in general and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in particular.[14] As in the *Gītā*, the essential struggle takes place on the field of dharma, where Siddhārtha attempts to define and defend his own dharma (*svadharma*) in relation to the traditional claims of his family and friends, and he does this in a way that radically differentiates him from the point of view of the *Gītā*. There is no more striking expression of this contrast than AśvaghoṢa's echo of Krishna's first words to Arjuna in the first chapter of the text. When Arjuna sees the battlefield crowded with family and friends, ready to fight, he slumps down in his chariot and refuses to go on. Krishna's response starts with an insult to his manhood.

> Why this cowardice in time of crisis, Arjuna?
>
> The coward is ignoble, shameful, foreign to the ways of heaven.
>
> Don't yield to impotence! It is unnatural in you!
>
> Banish this petty weakness from your heart. Rise to the fight (*uttiṢṭha*), Arjuna!
>
> Look to your own duty (*svadharma*); do not tremble before it;
>
> nothing is better for a warrior than a battle of sacred duty.[15]

The key elements in these lines are the concept of *svadharma* ("own duty") and the simple injunction "stand up" (*uttiṢṭha*). Krishna argues, in effect, that Arjuna has to do what is right for himself, not what is expected by his duties to family and caste. And he has to get up and enter the battle. It takes more than a few chapters for Krishna's words to work their effect, but they are echoed back to him in Arjuna's final words: "I am standing up (*sthito 'smi*). I will act according to your words." AśvaghoṢa mocks this passage by putting Krishna's words in the mouth of Māra, the resentful and deluded god of love and death, on

the eve of Siddhārtha's awakening:

> Stand up (*uttiṢṭha*), O Warrior, afraid of death! Follow the dharma that's your own (*svadharma*), abandon the dharma of release (*mokṢa-dharma*); by subduing the world with arrows and rites, from this world you will attain Indra's realm.[16]

Māra is still stuck in the world of the warrior, where Siddhārtha's *svadharma* would be to fight. But Siddhārtha has already made it clear to a series of other emissaries from his father's world that his own *dharma* is precisely the *mokṢa-dharma* that Māra fears, the dharma of liberation. And his response to the demand that he "stand up" is not *sthito 'smi*, but a perfect anticipation of the well-known aphorism: "Don't just do something; sit there!"

Once we have learned to look for them, contrasts between *The Life of the Buddha* and the *Gītā* seem thick on the ground. Compare, for example, the description of Siddhārtha's reaction to the sight of farmers plowing a field with Arjuna's sight of his kinsmen on the eve of the battle.

> Clumps of grass dug up by the plow littered the earth,
> covered with tiny dead creatures, insects and worms;
> as he beheld the earth with all these strewn about,
> he grieved greatly, as if a kinsman had been killed.
>
> Seeing the men plowing the fields, their bodies discolored
> by the wind, the dust, and the scorching rays of the sun,
> oxen wearied by the toil of pulling the plows,
> great compassion (*kṛpā*) overwhelmed the great noble man.[17]
>
> ---
>
> Saying this on the battlefield, Arjuna slumped down in the chariot
> and threw away his bow and arrows, his mind shaken by grief (*śoka*).
>
> As he sat dejected, his eyes filled with pity (*kṛpā*)
> and blurred by tears, Krishna spoke to him.[18]

Both passages ring changes on the experience of vision and both involve a feeling of pity (*kṛpā*), but they evaluate the sense of pity differently. For Siddhārtha, the feeling of pity for the tiny creatures who have been wounded by

the plow is the beginning of an aspiration to relieve not only his own suffering, but the suffering of others. (The word *kṛpā* often appears in this text as a synonym of *karuṇā* or compassion, as it does also in later Mahāyāna accounts of the bodhisattva path.) For Krishna the feeling of pity is a shameful weakness that blights Arjuna's vision and blinds him to his duty.

A third and perhaps more important reason for AśvaghoṢa's appropriation of the Sāṃkhya narrative of liberation is suggested by the verse that follows this account of Siddhārtha and the plowmen.

> Getting rid of the friends that accompanied him,
> wishing to reach some clarity (*viviktatā*) in his own mind,
> he reached the foot of a rose apple tree in a
> lonely spot with charming leaves rustling all around.[19]

Siddhārtha's first impulse is to seek "clarity" (*viviktatā*),[20] where he can contemplate the significance of what he's seen. This is his first experience of *dhyāna* or meditation. His desire for solitude is confirmed when he sees a man approaching him dressed in the garb of a mendicant. He says to the man, "Tell me, who are you?" The man says that he has gone forth as a mendicant to seek liberation (*śramaṇaḤ pravrajito 'smi mokṢahetoḤ*). He wanders without possessions or desires in search of what he calls the supreme goal (*paramārtha*). With this vision of solitude in mind, Siddhārtha goes back to the palace to prepare for his own "going forth." "Solitude," "separation," "aloneness" could all be translations of the Sāṃkhya terms for the state of the soul when it has achieved its final separation from material nature (*prakṛti*). It is no accident that AśvaghoṢa finds the Sāṃkhya vocabulary congenial. It identifies precisely the issues that Siddhārtha faces as he tries to cut his ties to the world he has left. It also is no accident that Siddhārtha has to visit a Sāṃkhya sage, listen to his teaching, and leave even him behind before he can go on to his own, solitary awakening.

What should we make of this for our own investigation of stories of the self? First of all, it shows how deeply narrative can be intertwined with philosophical reflection. Wendy Doniger once remarked that the story of the *Mahābhārata* carried its philosophy around with it the way a turtle carries its shell. In *The Life of the Buddha*, the connection, if possible, is even closer. You could say that philosophy is not just the shell of the turtle; it animates the turtle's body and flows in its blood. Not only does it shape and interpret the events of the story; it is woven into the texture of the language itself. I take this to be what Martha

Nussbaum had in mind when she said: “Certain thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life, reach toward expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms.”[21] Nussbaum goes on from here to make an even stronger claim about the power of narrative. She says that “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and form characteristic of the narrative artist.” I wonder, then, whether there is anything in *The Life of the Buddha* that expands, deepens, or enriches the expression of selfhood we would glean from texts that are more properly and exclusively “philosophical”? Three things come to mind.

First, AśvaghoṢa’s account of Siddhārtha’s journey speaks vividly of the need to establish independence, to go his own way, even at the cost of losing people who were important to him, from his father to his wife, his charioteer, his groom—the list goes on. And these separations are not without cost. When Siddhārtha’s family and friends appeal to his loyalty or express grief at their loss, they touch the heart, sometimes even in the simplest moments. Who can say how much emotion is distilled into Siddhārtha’s gestures to his horse and his groom after he has escaped from the palace and arrived at the gate of the first forest hermitage? AśvaghoṢa tells us that Siddhārtha got down from his horse, touched it, and said, in Olivelle’s translation, “you have fulfilled your task (*nistīrṇa*).” It is plausible to read this as suggesting that Siddhārtha also has fulfilled his task, or, as the word *nistīrṇa* suggests, made his escape. His horse has made it possible for him to “cross over” and be free. For anyone who has visited the ancient site at Angkor Wat, it is hard not to be reminded of the image of Avalokiteśvara at Neak Pean, where this great bodhisattva of compassion manifests himself as the horse Balaha to carry the merchant Sīhala and his companions to safety over “the ocean of existence.”[22] Siddhārtha’s words to his horse end with the image of Siddhārtha not just gazing at the groom Chandaka but “bathing him with his eyes.” The sense of affection is palpable. Even though Siddhārtha is isolated, he is still capable of feeling deep affection. But it is the thrill of isolation that dominates the scene. Hermann Hesse was not just engaging in a modernist trope at the end of Part One of the novel *Siddhartha* when he depicted Siddhartha’s feeling of isolation as a moment of awakening and rebirth:

> At that moment, when the world around him melted away, when he stood alone like a star in the heavens, he was overwhelmed by a feeling of icy despair, but he was more firmly himself than ever. This was the last shudder of his awakening, the last pains of birth.[23]

But like Hesse's Siddhartha, the Siddhārtha of AśvaghoṢa's story still needs to live out his sense of independence. He has to deal with a stream of emissaries from his former world—all presenting their own moral and emotional claims—and he has to test himself against the ascetics who embody the renunciation he saw in the figure of the mendicant when he was sitting under the Rose Apple tree. When he questioned these ascetics, Siddhārtha realized that they did not offer the liberation he was seeking. For liberation, they directed him to Arāḍa, the Sāṃkhya sage. In AśvaghoṢa's account, Siddhārtha approached Arāḍa with high expectations, about "philosophy" (*darśana*) and about liberation:

> As a light for a man longing to see, as a guide for a man longing to trek,
>
> as a boat for a man longing to cross, so do I regard your philosophy (*darśana*).
>
> So deign to explain it to me, if you think it's right to explain,
>
> so that I may become free, from old age, death, and disease.[24]

He heard enough obscure Sāṃkhya categories to puzzle a long string of modern interpreters, but they still left him unsatisfied. The reasons are worth paying attention to.

> I have listened to this subtle knowledge
>
> that grows progressively more pure;
>
> But since the field-knower (*kṢetrajña*) is not forsaken,
>
> I think it is short of the absolute (*anaiṢṭhika*).
>
> For, although the field-knower is freed (*mukta*)
>
> from Primal Nature (*prakṛti*) and Transformations (*vikāra*),
>
> Yet I think it still has the quality
>
> of giving birth (*prasava*) and serving as a seed.[25]
>
> This abandonment of ego
>
> that you imagine to take place—
>
> When there's a soul (*ātman*), the abandonment
>
> of the ego cannot take place.
>
> Progressively greater abandonment,

tradition says, is more perfect;
therefore, I think that abandoning all
leads to the full attainment of the goal.[26]

It is not enough to renounce *prakṛti*, he says. As long as there is a "self" (*ātman*), there still is a seed of rebirth. To remove this seed, the "self" also has to be given up. This "progressively greater abandonment" (*parataḤ paratas tyāgaḤ*) is what Siddhārtha refers to in the first of these verses as final or "absolute" (*naiṢṭhika*). The reference to an "absolute" renunciation recalls the words of Asita the brahmanical sage in the first chapter, when Asita saw Siddhārtha as a baby and began to weep: "Do not grieve for me; grieve for those who through delusion or love of pleasures will not hear his absolute (*naiṢṭhika*) dharma" (*Buddhacarita* 1.76). Why does absoluteness (or finality) require complete renunciation? Why is it not enough to find a stable place in the midst of desire, illusion, or change where you can put your feet down on something—perhaps an eternal self—that does not change? An answer this question would help identify some of the critical energy that drove progressively more radical formulations of the no-self doctrine in different traditions of Buddhist thought. The question applies not just in the ascetical path but to the vision of reality and the self.

Siddhārtha's initial instinct to reject the self is sharpened and elaborated as the story unfolds. At the moment of his awakening, for example, in the third watch of the night, he meditates (Tib. *bsgom*) on the real nature of the world and attempts to unravel the question that set him on his journey: What is the source of old age and death? The answer is that they come from birth: if no one were born, there would be no one to grow old and die. And where does birth come from? Siddhārtha understands that it comes from karma, the actions that fuel the cycle of death and rebirth: "With his divine sight, he realized that [birth] comes from karma; it does not come from God, from Nature (*prakṛti*), from the self, or without any cause."[27] Sāṃkhya categories again play a crucial role. AśvaghoṢa then gives a traditional explanation of the twelve-fold chain of conditioned co-arising—the standard Buddhist account of the causes of rebirth—and finishes his account of the Buddha's awakening with two key verses:

> The great sage realized that the cessation of causal factors comes from the complete absence of ignorance; with this he understood perfectly what needed to be understood, and he was established in the world as "Buddha." With the eightfold path of supreme vision …, the best of men saw no self,

> all the way down from the top of existence, and he attained peace, like a fire that has consumed all its fuel.[28]

At the moment of his Buddhahood, Siddhārtha surveys the universe (or the realms of rebirth) from top to bottom and sees no self.

The concept of no-self appears again at another key moment in the narrative, when the Buddha is lying down to prepare for death. A wandering ascetic named Subhadra heard that the Buddha was about to achieve nirvana and asked to meet with him. At first the Buddha's disciples tried to send him away. They thought that he was interested only in a doctrinal dispute. But the Buddha asked them to let him in and taught him the eightfold path. Unsurprisingly, Subhadra interprets this new teaching as a repudiation of the Sāṃkhya ideas that had organized his own quest for liberation. Previously he thought that the self was different from the body and did not change. Now he realized that there was no permanent self and nothing could be the result of the self. Armed with this new realization, he paid homage to the Buddha, sat down in a yogic posture, and passed into nirvana "like a cloud scattered by the wind."[29] Aśvaghosa treats doctrinal issues with a light hand in this short passage, but it is possible to discern at least some of the key elements of the Buddhist approach to the self. For Subhadra to say that there is no self is not to deny that there is a changeable stream of causes and conditions that give the personality a sense of continuity and responsibility. Subhadra is enough of a "self" to listen to the Buddha's teaching, experience a change in understanding, and prepare for nirvana. But he is not a permanent self in the sense that was attributed to the Sāṃkhya *puruṢa*. In fact, it is precisely this lack of permanence that makes possible his awakening. Subhadra is not anything by nature, and therefore can change into something new, or, to be more true to the story, can cease to be anything at all. We can see here why Siddhārtha was concerned about the finality of renunciation in his encounter with Arāḍa: it was only this complete renunciation of a permanent self that would make possible Siddhārtha's complete liberation, with the understanding that the terms "Siddhārtha" and "Subhadra" in this sentence does not refer to a permanent entity, but to the thoughts, feelings, modes of awareness, and bodily states that are referred to conventionally as a "self."

Formal definitions of selfhood in Buddhist tradition tread a delicate path between two extremes: an extreme of annihilation and an extreme of permanence. Aśvaghosa includes this two-part formula in his account of Subhadra's breakthrough: "He understood that living beings arise, and so rejected the view of annihilation; he understood that living beings cease, and

firmly rejected the view of permanence."[30] To say that a person is permanent, or continues from one moment to the next, undermines the possibility of change; and to say that a person is annihilated, or ceases at every moment, undermines responsibility. The middle way between extremes has to allow both possibilities —change and responsibility—without opting for either extreme to the exclusion of the other. As Steven Collins points out in his masterful study of "selfless persons," the balance between these extremes mirrors the Buddha's account of the "middle way" in his first sermon: it avoids "the extremes of sensual indulgence and ascetic self-torture."[31] Another way to put this is to say that the Buddha teaches a middle way between extreme self-affirmation and extreme self-denial. The formal aspects of this teaching echo throughout Buddhist discussions of the self, as in Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way*: "Buddhas used the word 'self'; they taught 'no-self'; and they also taught 'neither self nor no-self'" (MMK 18.6).[32] Formulas like this have a certain abstract clarity and simplicity, but it is difficult to sense the life that lies behind them without placing them in a narrative setting. AśvaghoṢa's story of the Buddha's conversation with Subhadra is hardly a technical piece of Buddhist philosophy, but it helps convey the sense of life in these formulaic phrases. Here I am referring to Nussbaum's "sense of life." AśvaghoṢa balances on the edge of technical discourse, while he also makes room for the painful and ambiguous drama of a life-narrative.

A few years ago the Dalai Lama was invited to give a lecture at Harvard on the Buddhist idea of self. He started with a puzzling statement. He said that people who wanted to know their true selves should have compassion for their neighbors. As you would expect, he then went on to give an account of the no-self doctrine in its most rigorous form, as the doctrine of emptiness, but why did he begin by linking his view of the self to the idea of compassion? This question brings us back to an aspect of Martha Nussbaum's book that so far, at least, I have not mentioned: the idea of love. AśvaghoṢa's retelling of the story of the Buddha is about many things. It is an exploration of vision, dharma, individual responsibility, renunciation, and liberation, but it would be untrue to the text not to acknowledge that it also is about love. This is partly a function of its use of the conventions of courtly Sanskrit poetry, where the modalities of erotic longing dictate much of the drama. It also is related to the discourse about *varṇāśrama-dharma* (the responsibilities appropriate to different castes and stages of life) in which a young man like Siddhārtha has a right, even a duty, to enjoy the pleasures of love. AśvaghoṢa evokes these pleasures with a lushness that seems strange to modern eyes, especially to eyes that are accustomed to Buddhist texts

that denounce the pleasures of the body. But they are not so strange if we follow the Dalai Lama's suggestion and look at the way love is woven together with Siddhārtha's emerging sense of himself.

When Siddhārtha ventured outside the palace and saw the figure of an old man, the first of the sights that eventually led him to leave his home, his reaction was focused purely on himself: "Who is this man, dear charioteer. . . ? Is it a transformation (*vikṛti*)? Is it his natural state (*prakṛti*)? Or is it simply chance?" (3.28) When he heard his charioteer's answer, like Gilgamesh reacting to the death of his friend Enkidu, he said: "Will this evil affect me too?" With the second sight, a person who was afflicted by disease, his concern began to shift into a feeling of sympathy and compassion for others.[33] By the time he saw the insects and worms broken by the plow, his feelings had evolved into the pity (*kṛpā*) that sets this text so decisively apart from the teaching of the *Gītā*. After Siddhārtha's renunciation, his father's household priest tried to persuade him to come back by appealing to love for (*priya*) for dharma and for himself (9.15–17). But Siddhārtha has set his sights wider than mere love for his father or his family. His mind is set on liberation. His situation is reminiscent of Karl Potter's description of liberation as "greater and greater concern coupled with less and less attachment."[34] Compassion (*karuṇā*) returns as a concept in Chapter 13 when "a certain invisible being" (*bhūtaṃ kīcid adṛśyarūpam*) sees Māra's attempt to shake Siddhārtha's resolution and says: "give up your hostility and go home" (13.57). Why? "[Siddhārtha] has compassion (*karuṇā*) for the suffering world, and he is working to find the medicine of knowledge" (13.61). In the description of Siddhārtha's awakening in the next chapter, AśvaghoṢa attributes compassion to Siddhārtha twice in a single verse: "Remembering birth and death in various many lives, the compassionate one felt compassion for sentient beings" (14.4). With this feeling came the realization that saṃsāra had no substance, like the core of a banana tree. As the night went on and his realization deepened, his compassion became even greater: "As he saw the good and evil actions of sentient beings and their deaths and births, his compassionate nature increased" (14.09). By this point, the rhetorical structure of the text is clear: Siddhārtha's realization of self and no-self involves a complex transmutation of love in the passionate, limited sense of physical pleasure and family loyalty into a universal concern for the welfare of all sentient beings. For someone who is familiar with the literature of the Mahāyāna, this is not a surprise. But it is unusual and moving in an aesthetic sense to see it given such vivid narrative form in AśvaghoṢa's text.

At the start of *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum suggests that some

views of the world cannot be fully expressed by conventional philosophical prose.[35] Some views are more complex and mysterious, and are better expressed in forms that are more complex, allusive, and attentive to particulars. This is especially true of the delicate and ambiguous problem of asserting, enacting, and questioning one's own identity. Texts that are written in the philosophical mode, like Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way*, may define a conceptual frame where selfhood, or the lack of it, can be tested and understood. But there is nothing quite like the story of a young man enmeshed in a complex world of conflicting responsibilities and feelings to bring it to life. And the question of life, in all its complexity and messiness, is what set Martha Nussbaum's literary and philosophical investigations in motion. It also is the question that has brought Buddhists back again and again to the narrative of the Buddha's life, to tell it again in different ways in response the demands of different social, aesthetic, and ideological conditions. AśvaghoṢa may have provided a compelling and original account of the story of Siddhārtha, but he has hardly given the last word. That belongs to the generations of Buddhist who have and will continue to fashion their lives in response to Siddhārtha's example.

The volume in which this essay appears is concerned with the relationship between narrative and selfhood. I would like to conclude this essay by responding to one of the views discussed in this volume, the view expressed by Peter Strawson, in his essay "Against Narrativity."

At the beginning of his book, *The Mess Inside* (Goldie 2012), Peter Goldie sets out two contrasting approaches to this question. On one side are those who maintain that "having the right kind of narrative of our lives is in some sense integral or constitutive of our being the person that we are" (1). On the other side are those who say that "[n]arratives, whatever they might be, do not play any significant part in out understanding of our lives, or in living a life." In his essay "Against Narrativity," Peter Strawson (2004) puts himself in the critical camp and argues against two particular claims about the relationship between narrative and selfhood. One of these claims is descriptive, as in the claim by Jerry Bruner that "the self is a perpetually written story." The other is normative, as in the claim by Marya Schechtman that "[a person] must be in possession of a full and 'explicit narrative [of his life] to develop fully as a person.'" What troubles Strawson about these two claims is not the concept of narrative *per se*, but the idea that narrative stands in some important or even necessary relation to what he calls one's "self-experience." By "self-experience" he means "considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or 'self' of some sort" (429). In other words, his argument is not against narrative. After all, who can really deny that human beings love to tell stories? His objection is against "narrativity," and

narrativity involves the relationship between narrative and self. Obviously AśvaghoṢa, as a Buddhist narrative thinker and literary artist. also is concerned about stories of the self. How could AśvaghoṢa's account of the self (and the lack of self) be used to frame a response to Strawson's argument?

Strawson develops his position by distinguishing between two different views of the self: a Diachronic view in which the self is considered to be "something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" and an Episodic view in which "one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" (430). He places himself firmly in the Episodic camp and goes on to say that a person who holds an Episodic view has no particular need for the narrative construction of a self. In fact, it might even be pernicious and misleading. On the face of it, Strawson's position is very similar to the classic Buddhist view of the self. In AśvaghoṢa's *Life of the Buddha*, Siddhārtha moves beyond the Sāṃkhya view of a self to be truly awakened: "the best of men saw no self, all the way down from the top of existence, and he attained peace, like a fire that has consumed all its fuel."[36] The point returns at the moment of Siddhārtha's final nirvana in the teaching he delivers to Subhadra. In a sense, this is a classic affirmation of Strawson's Episodic position: Siddhārtha awakens to the realization that nothing called "self" continues from one moment to the next. To say that Siddhārtha has achieved "awakening" (*bodhi*) is another way of saying that he has achieved the freedom or liberation (*mokṢa*) that so concerned Māra in his encounter with Siddhārtha as he sat under the tree of his awakening. Liberation in this definitive sense involved not just the renunciation of Siddhārtha's palace, his family, and all the trappings of worldly life, but renunciation of a permanent self.

It is fascinating to read Strawson's account of his own Episodic self-experience. Since the Episodic view presumes no essential connection with the past or the future, Strawson notes that, in a sense, "Episodics are by definition more located in the present than Diachronics, so far as there self-experience is concerned" (432). This could be a starting point for the practice of Buddhist meditation. But Strawson also acknowledges that as a "human being" he knows he has a past, and remembers aspects of it "from the inside" as "the experiences of the human being that I am" (434). It is this qualification—this reference to a "human being" that is different from a "self"—that moves Strawson even more decisively in a Buddhist direction. Buddhist tradition involves the denial of a permanent "self": in that sense it is Episodic. But it also insists that this denial has to be held together with a pragmatic, functional recognition of personal continuity. To think that the "self" is permanent restricts the possibility of

change, and to think that the "self" is annihilated makes it difficult, perhaps even impossible, to take responsibility for one's actions or to enjoy the results of all the choices involved in the process of living. The structural relationship between these two positions—the avoidance of two extremes—is what Buddhists mean by a Middle Path, where the word "path" (*pratipad*) means not just a way of acting but a way of knowing.

Buddhists have worked out the conflicting requirements of the Middle Path differently at different times and in different Buddhist cultures. One obvious way is to plot these two perspectives in narrative form, as in AśvaghoṢa's *Life of the Buddha*. As AśvaghoṢa tells the story, Siddhārtha had to begin his quest for awakening by separating himself radically from the people that defined him as a prince. In narrative and ideological terms, this involved the assertion of a separate self (pictured here in the language of the Sāṃkhya *puruṢa* or "soul"). As his knowledge and his experience of renunciation developed and matured, he reached a stage where this "self" also had to be given up. No-self may have been the final goal of his quest, but it had to be realized through an assertion of the self, or, in the words of Jack Engler: "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody" (35).

But narrative is not the only way to express the balance of Buddhist approaches to the self. The no-self doctrine can also be pictured in a series of common comparisons. When AśvaghoṢa says that, in the moment of awakening, Siddhārtha "attained peace, like a fire that has consumed all its fuel," there is an implicit image of the personality as a fire. Moral actions—the good and bad karma that brings some form of moral retribution—are like fuel added to the fire of personality. Over time they are burned up. If one can avoid adding new fuel to the fire, there comes a moment of extinction or nirvāṇa, when the fire of the personality goes out. A so-called "fire" is constantly changing: each moment is different from the moments that come before and after. But the "fire" involves a sense of causal continuity: each moment follows and is in some sense "determined" by the moments that come before. As an image of the personality, it has aspects of continuity and of perpetual change. Another common comparison is the image of the personality as a house. Steven Collins points out that the process of "leaving home" involves three stages. The first is the separation of the body, as in Siddhārtha's departure from the palace on the night of his "going forth." The second is the separation of the mind, when the mind learns to give up all the attachments and distraction that tie it to the world that has been left behind. This is sometimes visualized as cleaning up a room: "Negligence produces a lot of dust and dirt, even a whole heap of refuse. It is as if in a house only a very little dirt collects in a day or two; but if this goes on for

many years, it will grow into a vast heap of refuse" (Collins 173). The third stage involves complete separation of the house of self, as in the well-known verse from the *Dhammapada*: "I have wandered through many births in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the housebuilder; repeated birth is full of suffering. Housebuilder! You are seen, you will not build a house again. All your rafters are broken, your ridge-pole is shattered. My mind is beyond conditioning, and has reached the end of desire." [37] Here the word "separation" (*viveka*) is the same one that was used for the solitude Siddhārtha sought when he was contemplating his separation from the palace and the world of material nature.

For a more discursive account of the no-self doctrine, one of the most cited sources is the conversation between the monk Nāgasena and the Greek King Milinda in *The Questions of King Milinda*. The king begins with a question: "By what name, Reverend Sir, are you known?"[38] Nāgasena replies: "I am known as Nāgasena, and my co-practitioners address me as such. But, your majesty, … there is no Person (puggala) to be found here." Here the word *puggala* refers to an aspect of the personality that continues from one moment to the next. The king then question Nāgasena in more detail: Who is it who accepts the gifts offered to a monk, practices the path, keeps the precepts, and attains nirvana? Is there nothing in all the well-known constituents of the personality, from the body all the way to consciousness, that can considered "Nāgasena"? When the answer to all these questions is no, the king concludes that there is nothing called "Nāgasena." Nāgasena responds by asking how the king got to their meeting: Did he come on foot or in a chariot? The king explains that he came in a chariot. Nāgasena then shifts the conversation and asks about the part of the chariot: Is there anything in any of these parts that can be called "chariot"? The king responds that the word "chariot" is just a term or a conventional designation used to refer to these various parts. Nāgasena then turns the king's language around and applies it to the "person": "It is a designation, a description, an appellation, nothing but a name. But in the final analysis, the ultimate sense, there is no Person to be found herein." The key to this conversation lies in the formulation of Nāgasena's response. In the final analysis, from the ultimate point of view, there is nothing to be called "Nāgasena," but in a nominal or practical sense, the name can be used to designate a series of changeable parts. One can imagine the king puzzling over the distinction between these two points of view while the nominal Nāgasena gets in the nominal chariot and drives happily away.

Sometimes the relationship between these two points of view, known more conventionally as the "two truths," takes the form of an implicit philosophical narrative. One begins, as the Dalai Lama did in his lecture on the self at Harvard,

with the nominal or "conventional" perspective: "If you want to know yourself, have compassion for your neighbor." Then one analyzes the self from the ultimate point of view and does not "find" (to use Nāgasena's language) anything to which the word "self" or "person" refers. Holding these two perspectives together is the Middle Path; it is a balanced mode of understanding that makes space for both the Diachronic and the Episodic experience of self. Both are necessary to make sense of the complexity of human experience. My response to Strawson would not be to quarrel with his view of Episodic self-experience. If anything, Buddhist views of self are even more radically Episodic than his. My point would be that he needs to make more of the distinction between the Diachronic view of the self and his own sense of himself as a "human being" (Strawson 434). To be a "human being" for whom memory has "special emotional and moral relevance," but who has no continuous "self," strikes me as precisely the point Buddhists are making when they insist on a Middle Way in their approach to the self.

To convey a sense of his Episodic self-experience, Strawson mentioned a comment by Henry James in a letter written in 1915 to James's "indomitable, sharp-tongued old friend Rhoda Broughton": "I think of it, the masterpiece in question, as the work of quite another person than myself, at this date—that of a rich (so much rather than a poor) relation, say, who hasn't cast me off in my trouble, but suffers me still to claim a shy fourth cousinship."[39] James's words are embedded in a series of remarks about his health (which seems to have been unusually bad), novels he has been reading, and hopes that they would soon meet in London for tea. You might expect a comment like this from someone who was just not "feeling himself." But it reflects James's deep fascination with the ironies of self-experience and choice. Shortly after James published *The Portrait of a Lady*, with its innovative and sensitive exploration of the consciousness of Isabel Archer, his brother William published an article that launched the term "stream of consciousness" into Anglo-American philosophical discourse (1884). Henry wrote that his brother's essay had "defeated" him, but it could be read as a "crib sheet" for the treatment of consciousness in Henry James's own novels.[40] What both brothers make clear is the complexity of consciousness. Consciousness "pools and it flows, spreads wide and runs deep, but its activity never ceases and there is no part of our mental life that does not belong to it."[41] The same can be said of one's sense of self. To reduce it to a simple opposition between Diachronic and Episodic does not do justice to its complexity. It has aspects of both. And it is precisely this ambiguity and complexity that make it so amenable to expression in narrative, whether it is the

story of James's slim shade of a young woman "affronting her destiny"[42] on the lawn of a European country house or a young prince confronting his dharma in the chambers of an Indian palace. For both of them, the challenge of fashioning a self involves losing a self, at least the self that they once had imagined at the start of their journey.

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Footnotes

1 Nussbaum 1990: 3.

2 I will be quoting text and translation from Olivelle 2008.

3 *Buddhacarita* 5.63–67, translation quoted from Olivelle 2008.

4 Linda Covill has given a cogent discussion of AśvaghoṢa's apparent misogyny in his other mini-epic, the *Saundarananda* ("Handsome Nanda"). In canto 9 ("The Attack on Women") a monk "launches into a misogynistic diatribe that identifies the home as bondage and women as dangerous, ignoble, and duplicitous" (Covill et al. 2010: 129). She points out that elsewhere in the text AśvaghoṢa gives a more sympathetic account of Nanda's wife Sundarī and in this passage attributes the diatribe to an anonymous monk, rather than to the Buddha or one of the Buddha's named disciples. Here, however, in this passage from the *Buddhacarita*, AśvaghoṢa attributes the critique of women's natures to Siddhārtha himself. This raises problems of interpretation that I address in the next paragraph.

5 *Buddhacarita* 12.17, 20.

6 O'Flaherty 1984: 128.

7 Johnston 1936, 1995; Larson and Bhattacharya 1987. Stephen A. Kent has summarized the issues clearly in Kent 1982.

8 In *Sāṃkhyakārikā* 3: “Primordial nature is uncreated. The seven—the great one (*mahat*), etc.—are both created and creative. The 16 are created. *PuruṢa* is neither created nor creative.” Here the term *vikṛti* is equated to the term *vikāra*. This quotation from the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*s is taken from Larson 1979.

9 *Sāṃkhyakārikā*s 59, 65, and 68. The Sanskrit text is found in Larson 1979. Here the translation is my own.

10 “This action is done by *prakṛti* for the liberation of each *puruṢa*” (SK 56).

11 Larson and Bhattacharya 1987: 11.

12 Hattori 1968; Eckel 2008; Li 1995: 133.

13 Larson and Bhattacharya 1987: 10–11.

14 Olivelle 2008; Hiltebeitel 2006: 229–86.

15 *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.2–3, 31. Translations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are quoted from Miller 1986.

16 *Buddhacarita* 13.9; translation quoted from Olivelle 2008.

17 *Buddhacarita* 5.5–6.

18 *Bhagavad Gītā* 1.47, 2.1.

19 *Buddhacarita* 5.8.

20 The word that Olivelle translates as “clarity” (*viviktatā*) could also mean “solitude” or “separation.”

21 Nussbaum 1990: 4.

22 Rooney 2008: 249.

23 Hesse 1971: 41–42.

24 *Buddhacarita* 12.13–14.

25 On “birth” (*prasava*) as a characteristic of *prakṛti*, see *Sāṃkhyakārikā* 11.

26 *Buddhacarita* 12.69–70, 76, 82.

27 *Buddhacarita* 14.56: des ni lha yi spyan gyis ni // las las ’jug par mkhyen pa ste // dbang phyug las min rang bzhin min // bdag las ma yin rgyu med min //. After verse 14.31, the Sanskrit no longer survives, and we are forced to work from the Tibetan translation.

28 *Buddhacarita* 14.83–84: ma rig pa ni mtha’ dag med las de bzhin du // ’du byed ’gag par drang srong chen pos mkhyen pa ste // ’di las mkhyen bya ’di ni yang dag mkhyen mdzad nas // sangs rgyas zhes ni ’jig rten na rab gnas par gyur // yan lag brgyad dang ldan pa rab tu shar ba yi // rtse mor myur ’gro dam pa’i lta ba’i lam gyis ni // srid rtse’i bar las mchog gyur bdag med rnam gzigs nas // bud shing tshig pa’i me bzhin zhi bar gshegs par gyur //.

29 *Buddhacarita* 26.23.

30 *Buddhacarita* 26.19: ji ltar ’jig rten dag ni skye ba rtogs nas su // des ni chad pa’i lta ba rnam par spangs pa ste // ’jig rten dag gi nub par ‘gro ba shes nas su // rtag pa’i lta ba brtan po skyen par spangs pa’o //. The term “ordinary things” (’jig rten dag) is ambiguous. The Tibetan translator often uses this term to represent the Sanskrit *loka* in the sense of the human world or the world of sentient beings.

31 Collins 1982: 104–105.

32 ātmety api prajñaptitam anātmety api deśitam / buddhair nātmā ca nānātmā kaścid ity api deśitam //.

33 The words here are *anukampa* and *karuṇā*.

34 Potter 1972: 10.

35 I am paraphrasing Nussbaum's observations on page 3 of *Love's Knowledge*.

36 *Buddhacarita* 14.83–84. Tibetan text in note 27.

37 *Dhammapada* 143–44. The commentary explains that the house is the *attabhāva* or the totality of the personality (Collins 292).

38 Translated by John S. Strong, in *The Experience of Buddhism*: *Sources and Interpretations*, second edition (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2002): 93–95.

39 Strawson 429–30, quoted from Horne 1999: 562–63.

40 The description belongs to Michael Gorra 2012: 235.

41 Gorra 2012: 235.

42 From the preface to the 1906 edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, in Henry James 1984: 1076.

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6. How Sartre, Philosopher, Misreads Sartre, Novelist: *Nausea* and the Adventures of the Narrative Self

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> *Besides, art is fun and for fun, it has innumerable intentions and charms. Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification. Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing.*
> (Iris Murdoch 1997, p. 4)

> *If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.*
> (Thomas Pynchon 1973, p. 434)

Both those who write in favor of and against the notion of the narrative self cite Sartre and his novel *Nausea* as exemplary opponents of it. Alasdair MacIntyre, a central proponent of the narrative self, writes: “Sartre makes Antoine Roquentin

argue not just […] that narrative is very different from life, but that to present human life in the form of a narrative is always to falsify it" (1984, p. 214). Galen Strawson, a critic of narrativity, writes that "Sartre sees the narrative, story-telling impulse as a defect, regrettable. […] He thinks human Narrativity is essentially a matter of bad faith, of radical (and typically irremediable) inauthenticity" (2004, p. 435). I think that this type of interpretation of *Nausea* is blindered and bad and relies on an impoverished approach to reading fiction typical of philosophers: of taking one character at one moment as mouthpiece for both a novel as a whole and author behind it. Beginning as it does in description, the novel challenges these conceptual orders rather than taking one side or the other; it thus invites us to rethink the terrain of narrativity. Here, I sketch a more holistic reading of *Nausea* and its notion of "adventures," one which undercuts the claim that it opposes a narrative conception of the self. I suggest as well that this leaves us with a robust notion of why the novel as a form has a certain kind of philosophical importance, an importance exactly passed over by the sort of approaches that allow, for example, *Nausea* to be reduced to an argument.

6.1 MacIntyre and Strawson on Sartre/Roquentin

MacIntyre, in his comments on *Nausea*, makes no distinction between the standpoint of Roquentin, as character, and Sartre, as author of the novel specifically or philosopher and literary figure in general. Rather, he distinguishes between Sartre/Roquentin, Sartre/Heidegger, and Sartre/Marx and claims that Sartre/Roquentin believes that living and storytelling are mutually exclusive: "There are not and there cannot be any true stories. Human life is composed of discrete actions which lead nowhere, which have no order; the story-teller imposes on human events retrospectively an order which they did not have while they were lived" (p. 214). Strawson is initially more careful in distinguishing Sartre and Roquentin, ascribing such a view to the character alone (p. 429), but he quickly conflates them as well, thus doing away with the interpretative problems with which Sartre for better or worse burdens us when he chooses a form other than the treatise and doesn't speak in his own voice. Strawson ascribes to Sartre and Roquentin the view that we impose narrative form on our lives, but doing so is falsifying and so we shouldn't: "the storytelling impulse" is "regrettable" and "inauthentic," though natural and nearly unavoidable (p. 435). This is, I think it is safe to say, the orthodox reading of *Nausea*, among philosophers and most especially with respect to narrativity.[1]

The key moment to support this reading occurs early in the novel. Roquentin

muses on the possibility of what he calls “adventures”:

> for the most banal even to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story. (1964, p. 39)

All this falls under Strawson’s descriptive “psychological Narrativity thesis,” which he differentiates from the normative “ethical Narrativity thesis” (p. 428). Roquentin continues, however, making his own normative claim:

> But you have to choose: live or tell. […] Nothing happens while you live. […] But everything changes when you tell people about life; it’s a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories. […] I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. You might as well try and catch time by the tail. (pp. 39–40)

A fuller reading of the novel along these lines would suggest that here, early on, Roquentin realizes the inauthenticity of narrativity. What follows is then a dramatization of his struggle to give up viewing his life as a story and tarry instead with raw, unstructured existence, nauseating as it is—a brave decision philosophically, a foolish one practically, within the frame of the novel. And if this were all the novel had to say on the matter, then MacIntyre and Strawson might be right to identify Roquentin as an opponent of the narrative self (though even then extending such a claim to the novel and Sartre would require further moves). Formally, *Nausea* becomes a rather odd novel by this reading, with its key moment occurring so close to its beginning, less than a fourth of the way into the novel. Indeed, this moment begs to be considered in conjunction with at least two other scenes: when Roquentin goes to see Anny in Paris and the close of the novel. Doing so undercuts the claim that Roquentin, the novel as a whole, and Sartre finally sanction the choice: “live or tell.”

Despite its fractured beginnings and diary form, *Nausea* evolves into a fairly traditional novel. It begins with such formal contrivances as an “editor’s note,” which, in a Kierkegaardian manner, describes what follows as “found among the papers of Antoine Roquentin” and “published without alteration” (p. 1), as well as a number of undated pages whose gaps and illegible sections are highlighted by supposedly editorial footnotes (pp. 1–3). Only two more footnotes follow (pp.

4, 12), and then the device is abandoned. Roquentin's entries become longer and more straightforward, lengthy stretches of action related naturalistically with less and less commentary. They lose their diary-like character, becoming instead a typical first-person narrative. As Frank Kermode writes, "Sartre began *La Nausée* as an episodic work, and Roquentin's practice reflects this; but the need for structure grew imperious" (2000, p. 146). All this is to say that *Nausea* gradually becomes just the sort of story that MacIntyre and Strawson claim Sartre/Roquentin opposes, with a clear arc from a motivating crisis, through various rejected possibilities for restoration, to a final epiphany. Roquentin has been beset by the titular nausea, a feeling of unknown cause and meaning that comes over him repeatedly during the course of the novel when he is in close observation of various objects around him. Simultaneously, he has been thrown into what we familiarly call (in large part due to *Nausea*) an existential crisis. He gives up his writing and is plagued by the thought that he "hadn't the right to exist" (p. 84). Figuring out how exactly these two problems are related—or whether they are really just one problem—requires interpretive work, but they motivate everything that follows. In the middle of the novel, Roquentin is presented with traditional solutions to at least his existential purposelessness: the self-taught man offers him humanism and socialism as reasons for living (pp. 103ff), and Bouville offers him images of the life of society.[2] Rejecting all of these options, Roquentin is left fully abject: "there is absolutely no more reason for living, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can't imagine any more of them. […] My life is ending" (pp. 156–7). About to leave for Paris to retire from life at his young age, Roquentin comes, in the novel's final scene, to his great realization while listening to the jazz record. This traditional epiphanic structure is obscured because the novel cuts off just after Roquentin's realization without dramatizing its consequences. It is there nonetheless and set up by Roquentin's musings about "adventures." Before moving forward with my reading of the novel, I want to compare its notion of "adventures" to Georg Simmel's concept of the same name.

6.2 Simmel and Sartre on Adventures

Simmel's essay "Philosophie des Abenteuers" appeared in the newspaper *Der Tag* in Berlin in June of 1910. It was reprinted as "Das Abenteuer" in Simmel's *Philosophische Kultur* in 1911, with a second edition following in 1919. It begins from the claim that every experience is twofold: it can be taken immediately, by itself, or it can be taken as "a segment of a course of a life"

(1959, p. 243). The difference is not in the content of the events themselves, but rather in how they are taken, the "form of experiencing" (p. 253). The first manner of taking an experience—as immediate, detached from the course of life—Simmel names "adventure." Given two experiences that "are not particularly different in substance," it could be that only one is "perceived as an 'adventure' and the other not," because everything hangs on us, not the events (p. 243). This line of thought is mirrored in Roquentin's first, fumbling attempts to explain the nausea and the change that has come over him. "I think I'm the one who has changed," he writes (p. 4). And later: "This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events: I have proved it. It's rather the way in which the moments are linked together" (p. 56).

"[T]he most general form of adventure," Simmel writes, "is its dropping out of the continuity of life" (p. 243). Its events are actually continuous with what comes before and after them in the course of a life, but "an adventure stands in contrast to that interlocking of life-links," and "in its deeper meaning, it occurs outside the usual continuity of life" (p. 243). In what would seem to be a paradox, an adventure, while marginal to the course of life, "is distinct from all that is accidental and alien"; it is ultimately "connected with the center" (p. 243). It should thus not be confused with "the merely accidental episode" (p. 252). In an early encounter, Roquentin is "astonished" when the self-taught man introduces the concept of adventures, on which Roquentin himself has been privately musing, into their conversation. And the self-taught man's definition echos Simmel's: "an event out of the ordinary without being necessarily extraordinary" (p. 36).

Afterward, in memory, an adventure takes on a dreamlike quality, Simmel claims. And "What we designate as 'dreamlike' is nothing but a memory which is bound to the unified, consistent life-process by fewer threads than are ordinary experiences" (p. 244). Indeed, an adventure can appear so detached from the normal course of one's life as to be thought of as someone else's experience: "we might well feel that we could appropriately assign to the adventure a subject other than the ego" (p. 244). Roquentin moved to Bouville after traveling for a number of years, and it is these experiences abroad that provide the initial template for adventures in the novel: "in the old days, in London, Meknes, Tokyo, I have known great moments, I have had adventures" (p. 37). He describes the end of this stretch of his life as like waking "from a six-year slumber" (p. 5; see too p. 98). Thinking about his time in Meknes, he becomes unsure "whether they are memories or just fiction" (p. 32). And, again recalling Simmel, he writes that "There's a person who does this, does that, but it isn't I, I have nothing in common with him."[3] He takes this back mere pages later,

writing with double emphasis “Well you can call that by any name you like, in any case, it was an event which *happened to* ME” (p. 37). Yet he is unsure, at least at this point, “what the word [adventure] means” (p. 36), leaning momentarily toward the conclusion that, in fact, he has “never had adventures” and “It isn’t a question of words” (p. 37).

Simmel writes further that “We ascribe to an adventure a beginning and an end much sharper than those to be discovered in the other forms of our experiences” (p. 244). Being disconnected from the larger course of life, an adventure’s beginning is not dependent on prior events’ endings, and its own ending does not necessarily give way to subsequent events’ beginnings.[4] Roquentin seems again to take up Simmel’s language. Sitting in a cafe, he thinks: “I marvel at these young people: drinking their coffee, they tell clear, plausible stories. […] If I were in their place, I’d fall over myself” (p. 7). Why? Because he sees now that “you plunge into stories without beginning or end” (p. 7). But this is true of non-adventurous experience in the normal course of life. Of his adventures abroad, Roquentin claims “I could tell stories, tell them too well (as far as anecdotes are concerned, I can stand up to anyone except ship’s officers and professional people)” (p. 33). Even as he comes to doubt whether these really were adventures and whether there can be adventures at all, Roquentin still appears to employ Simmel’s vocabulary: “The beginnings would have had to be real beginnings. Alas! Now I see so clearly what I wanted. Real beginnings are like a fanfare of trumpets, like the first notes of a jazz tune, cutting short tedium, making for continuity” (p. 37). In turn, endings are emphasized as well: “Something is beginning in order to end: an adventure does not let itself be drawn out.” (p. 37). An adventure forms a self-standing whole.

Simmel draws a connection between the adventurer and the artist: “For the essence of a work of art is, after all, that it cuts out a piece of the endlessly continuous sequences of perceived experience, detaching it from all connections with one side or the other, giving it a self-sufficient form as though defined and held together by an inner core” (p. 245). Roquentin puts the storyteller in the place of Simmel’s artist. Coming back now to the key passage, one has to choose, “live or tell,” because “nothing happens when you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition” (p. 39). Telling organizes an experience by way of a beginning and an ending, making it akin to an adventure. “Everything changes when you tell about life [….] You seem to start at the beginning […, but] in reality you have started at the end,” because “the end is there, transforming everything” (p. 40). Such is impossible of lived rather than recalled experience, though we all too easily

"forget that the future [is] not yet there" (p. 40).

This emphasis on beginnings and endings, which are said to be absent from the normal course of life, leads Roquentin to a further comment on adventures: whereas life is merely one thing after another, in an adventure the exact chronology matters. There is a "rigorous succession of circumstances" (p. 23). He thus equates the "feeling of adventure" with the "irreversibility of time" (p. 57). Recalling his adventures abroad, Roquentin writes that "never was I able to turn back, any more than a record can be reversed."[5] Such a feeling is in contrast to the random, happenstance quality of Roquentin's everyday life in Bouville, where he can take a walk, visit a cafe, work in the library, and so forth in any order he pleases. While experiencing the feeling of adventure, Roquentin says he "cannot even conceive of anything around [him] being other that what it is" (p. 54). Everything is determined and has its exact place. In contrast, normally everything is contingent: "*Anything* can happen, *anything*" (p. 77).

Roquentin's larger fate seems to hang not on whether adventures as such are possible or not, despite his sometimes putting it this way. Even after declaring it impossible to have an adventure—and experience it as such in the moment instead of just telling it that way after the fact—he still has momentary feelings of adventure.[6] Rather, Roquentin's problem is perhaps that such moments are not enough: he wants his entire life to be an adventure. "I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered," he writes (p. 40). Simmel argues that this is in fact possible: "Life as a whole may be perceived as an adventure" (p. 247). As noted, the seeming paradox of adventures is that, while detached from the wider course of a life, they seem to bear on, or represent more forcefully, the meaning of an entire life. "[I]t connects with the most recondite instincts and some ultimate intention of life as a whole," Simmel writes (p. 252). And again: "an action is completely torn out of the inclusive context of life and […] simultaneously the whole strength and intensity of life stream into it" (p. 254). But if an adventure somehow distills or compacts a life's larger meaning into one episode, how can life as a whole be experienced as an adventure? "To have such a remarkable attitude toward life," Simmel writes, "one must sense above its totality a higher unity, a super-life as it were, whose relation to life parallels the relation of the immediate life itself to those particular experiences which we call adventures" (p. 247). He goes on:

> Perhaps we belong to a metaphysical order, perhaps the soul lives a transcendent existence, such that our earthly, conscious life is only an isolated fragment compared to the unnamable context of an existence running its course in it. […] Whoever senses through all actual life a secret,

> timeless existence of the soul, which is connected with the realities of life only from a distance, will perceive life in its given and limited wholeness as an adventure when compared to that transcendent and self-consistent fate. (pp. 247–8)

As his lengthy conversation with the self-taught man demonstrates, however, Roquentin rejects any principle of order or meaning beyond himself such as humanism or socialism, to say nothing of religion (pp. 112ff). At the same time, he rejects the idea that he himself can bequeath a meaning to his life. The self-taught man offers such an alternative as well: "Life has a meaning if we choose to give it one. One must first act, throw one's self into some enterprise. Then, if one reflects, the die is already cast, one is pledged" (p. 112). Sartre is frequently taken to sanction something like this view in his doctrines of radical freedom and a life project. Here, however, Roquentin at least rejects it: "I think that that is precisely the sort of lie that [the others in the cafe] tell themselves" (p. 112). At least one way of reading the novel is that Roquentin used to have such a goal or principle guiding his life and that it is its loss that initiates his crisis. Having lost any sense of what he's doing with himself, Roquentin can no longer experience adventures which speak to a larger meaning. At best he can experience brief flashes of dramatic, heightened feeling. But these are now taken as mere feelings, an illusion to be seen through.

If the normal course of life is "continuous" and "whole," according to Simmel, with a "consistent process run[ning] through the individual components" (p. 243), but it is only adventures that have real beginnings and endings ordering and shaping their meanings, where is narrativity to be found? As I began by noting, *Nausea* is frequently taken as a venue for disputing narrativity, or even an argument against it. But is a rejection of adventures a rejection of narrativity, or is their identification too quick? Roquentin writes, in one moment, "at last an adventure happens to me and when I question myself I see that it happens *that I am myself and that I am here; I* am the one who splits the night" (p. 54). To the extent that adventures are associated with such "absolute presentness" (Simmel, p. 254), it would seem that a rejection of their possibility is exactly *not* a rejection of narrativity. Rather it is the normal course of a life which is said to consist of one thing linked to and following another, seemingly a quality of narrative. A great strength of *Nausea* as a novel is that its descriptions elude didactic subjection to our more straightforward conceptual orders. It doesn't dramatize preexisting philosophical theses—it describes the (or a) world. Against the thought that it is merely or at the very least first and foremost a piece of pedantic philosophical pedagogy, it seems to me that *Nausea*

begins from a set of familiar experiences in all their inarticulateness and apparent contradictions and honestly describes the crisis they bring forth. A narrativist reading of *Nausea* should take it not as an argument, but an invitation to new and further distinctions, an invitation to the thought that the current vocabulary of narrativity fails to get at experience as we actually have it.

Is narrative best characterized by temporal succession, by beginnings and endings, by meaningfulness, by unity? I've argued elsewhere[7] for a particular characterization, and one can't extract an attack or defense of narrativity from *Nausea* absent such touchstones. My baseline characterization of narrative focuses on two core features. First, narrative concerns temporal objects. All discourse is temporal in a formal sense, as words are said in a certain order, not all at once. Narrative discourse is distinctive in that its content, the objects which it is about, are temporal. A landscape isn't narratable. Put someone in that landscape, doing things in time, and everything changes. Thus the second core feature: narrative concerns humans—or at least anthropomorphizable—agents. A description of a chemical reaction, though temporal, isn't yet a narrative. Described in a peculiar way, such that the reactants are (falsely) imagined to have perspectives and experiences, are sufficiently human-like that we can project ourselves into them, and again everything changes. Following my characterization, in which unity, retrospection, and actual beginnings and endings are less important than temporal succession, there is no clear link between adventures and narrativity.

The notion of adventures invoked in *Nausea* is so similar to that in Simmel's essay that it is hard for me to think other than that Sartre knew of it. So far as I can tell, no scholar has made this connection before, and there is perhaps no way of proving it, as Sartre hardly ever refers to Simmel in his work, and never to "Das Abenteuer."[8]

6.3 A More Holistic Reading of *Nausea*

Let us return now to my larger reading of *Nausea*. Visiting his ex-girlfriend Anny, Roquentin realizes that she too appears to have come to the realization that adventures are impossible, only she has a different vocabulary. She says she has realized that "there are no more perfect moments" (p. 144). As a child seeing the few pictures included in a history book ("three pictures for the whole sixteenth century") she came to believe that there were "privileged situations," "which had a rare and precious quality, style."[9] It is left to people who find themselves in privileged situations to make them into perfect moments.

Roquentin, carried away, fills in the explanation for her: “In each one of these privileged situations there are certain acts which have to be done, certain attitudes to be taken, words which must be said—and other attitudes, other words are strictly prohibited. […] In fact, then, the situation is the material: it demands exploitation” (p. 148, see too p. 62). Notice that, despite the similarity, there’s at least one decisive difference between adventures and privileged situations. An adventure is only an adventure after the fact, in telling. But one is aware, in the moment, that one is in a privileged situation—thus the ability and responsibility one has to make use of it, to realize a perfect moment. Roquentin suggests that a perfect moment is like an artwork and thus, perhaps, that the normative weight here is aesthetic, but Anny cuts him off and says this is wrong, that making a perfect moment of a privileged situation was rather a duty, even a moral duty. And Anny disagrees further when Roquentin explains to her his realization about adventures. She says:

> Well, you’re not thinking like me at all. You complain because things don’t arrange themselves around you like a bouquet of flowers, without your taking the slightest trouble to do anything. But I have never asked as much: I wanted action. You know, when we played adventurer and adventuress: you were the one who had adventures, I was the one who made them happen. I said: I am a man of action. Remember? Well, now I simply say: one can’t be a man of action. (pp. 150–1)

It’s not at all clear that Roquentin agrees with this and even less clear that the novel as a whole could be said to endorse it. Roquentin has, as Anny suggests, been asking the question of whether life *is* an adventure. But their conversation holds other tensions. Roquentin used to think that adventures naturally befell him. Here Anny reveals that she made them happen, both for herself and him. He’s never asked whether one can *make* one’s life an adventure. We’ve witnessed him wander around Bouville, thinking and telling himself stories, but never even attempt to really *do* anything. Thus we have the beginnings of a distinction between one’s life as a narrative and the narrativizing impulse—the *action* of making one’s life a narrative or of *taking* it as such. And in the move from the vocabulary of adventures to that of privileged situations and perfect moments, the manner of this taking is no longer limited to retrospective storytelling—it is available in the present. I’ll come back to this, but here we should notice that Roquentin hasn’t clearly rejected the possibility of action, as Anny has. In fact, immediately following her monologue, Roquentin reports: “I couldn’t have looked convinced” (p. 151).

The conversation turns to the question of what to do, given all this. Anny says she "outlives" herself. She seems to mean that her life is already over and she's now just filling time meaninglessly until death. "Outliving oneself" is contrasted to acting: describing a painter, Anny says that he "isn't like us—not yet. He acts, he spends himself" (p. 153). By contrast, we're told that she travels widely and lives off a man who "keeps" her (p. 151). But now Roquentin is lost in thought about the possibilities of art. From the impetus of the "strange happiness" the jazz record gives him each time he hears it, he says: "I was wondering if, in that direction one couldn't find or look for…" and trails off before making explicit the thought that art might offer some sort of happiness, consolation, or salvation (pp. 151–2). He rejects the possibilities of painting and sculpture, saying that they "can't be used" because "they're lovely *facing*" him.[10] He needs something he can embody, not something given to him from outside, again suggesting the distinction between observing one's past life as a narrative and living or experiencing it as such in the present. Elsewhere Sartre writes: "An event: that's to say, a temporal flow that *happened to me*—that wasn't *in front of* me, like a picture or piece of music, but that was made around my life and in my life, with my time" (1999, p. 283). Roquentin rejects theater as too tied to its audience. Finally he says that he "tried to write a book…" but is interrupted (p. 152). The scene quickly moves to an end, but it has now set up the novel's finale.

MacIntyre notes as evidence for his interpretation that Roquentin gives up writing his historical biography of Rollebon: "either he will write what is true or he will write an intelligible history, but the one possibility excludes the other" (p. 214). Astonishingly, though, MacIntyre says nothing about the fact that *Nausea* ends with Roquentin *deciding to write a novel*.[11] This despite the fact that he holds it against Sartre that "in order to show that there are no narratives, he himself writes a narrative" (p. 214). So MacIntyre would seem to have us believe that Sartre's use of narrative is evidence of its importance, but Roquentin's use of narrative doesn't suggest anything parallel in his (fictional) or Sartre's (real) thinking. How does Roquentin get to this point? At the beginning of the novel he says "you plunge into stories without beginning or end" (p. 7). Now, though, he views his previous life as ended and decides to make a new beginning: "I am still fairly young. I still have enough strength to start again. But do I have to start again?"[12] Here he hasn't quite yet resolved to do so, instead taking up Anny's notion of outliving oneself: "My whole life is behind me [….] I am going to outlive myself. Eat, sleep, sleep, eat. Exist slowly, softly, like these trees, like a puddle of water, like the red bench in the streetcar" (p. 157). By the

closing scene of the novel, however, Roquentin has gathered new resolve. He goes back to the Railwaymen's Rendezvous one last time, and the waitress puts the jazz song on for him. In the length of two plays (he asks her to repeat it) he is again captivated, transported from the dismissive thought that "there are idiots who get consolation from the fine arts" to the resolution that he will become an artist himself (p. 174). He thinks about the singer and songwriter: "They are a little like dead people for me, a little like the heroes of a novel; they have washed themselves of the sin of existing" (p. 177). And he thinks he could do the same:

> Can you justify your existence then? Just a little? […] Couldn't I try.... Naturally, it wouldn't be a question of a tune … but couldn't I, in another medium? … It would have to be a book: I don't know how to do anything else. But not a history book: history talks about what has existed—an existant can never justify the existence of another existant. […] Another type of book. I don't quite know which kind—but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that would never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and as hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence. (p. 178)

There's much to remark upon here. One can't justify the existence of another person or thing but can, at least in part, justify one's own. And Roquentin proposes to do this exactly by producing a story.[13] That story itself couldn't happen in life, but the telling of it will justify his life. And it seems important to him that he be understood as a novelist, that he lives *that* story, in which he is identified with a typical role and character. "A novel," he writes, "And there would be people who would read this book and say: 'Antoine Roquentin wrote it, a red-headed man who hung around cafes,' and they would think about my life as I think about the Negress's [the jazz singer]: as something precious and almost legendary."[14]

There seems to me no irony in any of this—either on Roquentin's or the novel's part.[15] That is, this way of revitalizing himself really is proposed as a solution to his crisis. The novel, against the standard reading of it, doesn't finally dismiss the notion of the narrative self, I think. MacIntyre and Strawson have to hold that Roquentin falls back into inauthenticity at the end of the novel. By this reading, the full arc of the story is this: the novel opens with Roquentin's first experiences of the nausea and his initial failures to articulate its meaning. By the time he poses the choice "live or tell," a quarter of the way into the novel, he has

grasped its core, though he will nuance his explanation in later scenes. The main part of the novel then dramatizes Roquentin's attempts, with various backslidings, to live without the consolations of narrativity. Its climax is then his failure, his return to inauthenticity, buttressed now with false rationalizations of narrative in the guise of narrative art. I am skeptical of such a reading most of all because I see nothing in the final pages to undercut Roquentin's epiphany and turn to art. The idea that one's life—especially one's entire life—literally *is* a narrative remains dubious, but Roquentin will aim to justify his existence through producing narrative, and exactly doing so will allow him to understand himself (and have others understand him) within a certain narrative, that of the cafe-frequenting novelist. Narrative is not inherently falsifying, either, sanctioned by a merely practical rubric: it is both justifying and a legitimate form of understanding. Roquentin's "live or tell" motivates the events of the novel; it is not a solution to them. Once we diagnose the nature of Roquentin's crisis, we have to see this and everything else he says not as epigraphs or philosophical theses, but instead claims made from inside a particular and likely problematic mood and mindset. Thus let me sketch how I interpret both the nausea and Roquentin's larger existential crisis, as well as the relation between them.

First, then, Roquentin's existential crisis. Though it is thematized only in the later portions of the novel, after various episodes of the nausea, it seems to me that Roquentin's crisis of purpose is actually more important, and indeed at least a condition of the possibility, if not the cause, of the nausea. Roquentin has isolated himself in Bouville to write a biography of Rollebon. He has no family, no friends, and his only personal interactions are with the proprietress of the Railwaymen's Rendezvous, with whom he occasionally has sex (p. 6), and with the self-taught man, whom he mocks mercilessly in his diary. Indeed his isolation is perhaps best exemplified by his agreeing to spend time with the self-taught man, despite loathing him, apparently in order to have something, anything, to do outside of his writing. Roquentin declares that "Rollebon now represents the only justification for my existence" (p. 70). Midway through the novel, though, he abandons writing the biography, leaving himself with no such justification. This, in and of itself, is unremarkable, however. Roquentin seems to think that practically no one else's existence is justified either. He speaks of the young couple in the cafe, for example, as needing to "find something else to veil the enormous absurdity of their existence" (p. 111). What is remarkable is only that Roquentin, unlike everyone else, notices this lack of justification. At times, not noticing seems equated (though perhaps only sardonically) with having a justification—reducing it to a subjective psychological fact ("it was

psychology, the kind they write about in books"; p. 84). Roquentin looks, for a long time, at a portrait of one of the city's past luminaries, saying of the man: "The slightest doubt had never crossed those magnificent grey eyes," and "He had never looked any further into himself: he was a leader," and thus he, like the other leaders portrayed, "had a right to everything: to life, to work, to wealth, to command, to respect, and, finally, to immortality."[16] It might seem, then, that Roquentin's existential crisis is really a subjective matter: it's not that various people's existences are or aren't objectively justified, but rather that he's lost his ability to interpret his life, as, having given up writing the biography of Rollebon, he no longer has any goal or purpose. This is to suggest, despite MacIntyre's seeing Sartre as an opponent, that the novel is actually in line with the wider analysis in *After Virtue*:

> When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*. Hence the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such persons to have been lost. (p. 217)

Nausea, as novels do, arrives at this point by way of plot and psychological description, not argument and analysis, however. In fact, the argument nested within the novel—"live or tell"—is a red herring, seen as inadequate when understood within the larger dramatic framing of the story.

Roquentin denies his problem has anything to do with purpose, however. He tells the self-taught man that "there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing." The self-taught man interprets this claim as one might: "you undoubtedly mean, Monsieur, that life is without a goal?" But Roquentin thinks to himself that this is wrong: "Certainly not, that is not the question I am asking myself" (p. 112). Instead, he comes to equate the realization that one is not justified in one's existence with the very realization *that* one exists. Other people, "they don't know they exist" (p. 122). They can, by Roquentin's way of seeing things, therefore delude themselves into thinking their lives have meaning. Previously, he had thought this way as well: "Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of 'existence'. I was like the others [….] I said, like them, 'The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull,' but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself" (p. 127, see too p. 124). Now, though, he realizes: "I

hadn’t the right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant or a microbe” (p. 84). “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance,” he declares (p. 133). The nausea is equated with this realization. “So this is Nausea,” he concludes, “I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That’s all” (p. 122).

From Roquentin’s own perspective, then, the nausea comes first. He realizes, due to the heightened experiences of the pebble at the shore, the waiter’s suspenders, and so forth, that objects exist—that is, that they exist contingently and without purpose. He then extends this thinking to himself, bringing about an existential crisis. From our perspective as readers, however, it seems to me we should think the order is in fact the opposite: he has lost the ability to interpret the ongoing course of his life, which leaves him in crisis. Roquentin is an unreliable narrator in the banal sense that we all are inasmuch as we are not necessarily best located to interpret the meaning of our own experiences. While Roquentin’s own stated reason for starting his diary is to understand the changes that first befell him while holding the pebble on the shore, and only later does he think he has lost his life’s purpose, anyone else can see that already at the beginning of the novel his ennui is being displaced onto innocent objects. It is from within this particular mood that Roquentin makes the strange mistake of extending the category of justification to material objects. This allows him to reinterpret his own crisis as a weighty philosophical discovery. But asking after the “justification” of material objects is just a category mistake. And when Roquentin has a real epiphany in the novel’s final scene of the value of art, he regains the possibility of assigning himself goals and interpreting his actions in relation to them.

To read the novel in this manner is to suggest that many of Roquentin’s philosophical “realizations” aren’t that because they are false. It is thus perhaps to downplay a certain kind of philosophical worth the novel is sometimes thought to have and to play up its psychological insight into the rather ordinary phenomenon of a hermeneutic crisis. That’s not to say that it lacks philosophical insight—it’s just to suggest that its insight is not of the most abstract, metaphysical sort, into the arbitrariness of being, but anchored instead always in our particularly human way of being-in-the-world.[17]

6.4 Reframing the Narrative Self

Nausea, in the particular ways that it evades the contemporary conceptual apparatus of narrativity, should lead us to rethink the common conception of the

narrative self. Philosophical debates have often been preoccupied with the question of whether our lives and selves, treated as objects, are narrative in form. And so we see MacIntyre face the objection, for example, that real lives don't have beginnings and ends, and his overly glib response: "one is tempted to reply, 'But have you never heard of death?'"[18] MacIntyre and Strawson are right that Roquentin, Sartre, and *Nausea* all reject this notion of the narrative self. Here they can martial their evidence of Roquentin musing on the lack of objective beginnings and ends, the perverting shaping of telling, and so forth. And *this* criticism—of the notion that our lives just *are* stories—is right, I think. The idea that most of our lives literally enact a plot diagram, say, of exposition, rising action, complication, climax, and resolution is almost farcical. MacIntyre's reliance on the nearly archaic word "quest" is telling (pp. 219ff). Some of our lives may indeed involve a fairly reliable search for happiness or wealth or knowledge, but most of our activities aren't as dramatic as *that*, but instead usually banal, repetitive, and irrelevant to the larger course or meaning of our lives.[19] Any epoch defined by people on quests has long since passed. Probably the notion that there ever really was such an epoch is emptily nostalgic.

I take it as evidence that all of this seems to miss the point, however. Are our lives narratives? This seems the wrong question. Rather: do we take them as narratives? Do we interpret our lives in the same way we interpret narratives? Such would be the idea not that our lives are, divorced from any viewpoint, narrative in form, but that we necessarily understand or take them that way, that our manner of being sorts the world out according to narrative threads. This would allow us to admit that under one (vaguely scientific) description our lives are contingent, formless, and usually undramatic, while at the same time admitting, when we're not abstracting to a more distanced and objective perspective on ourselves, that our lives seem to have shape and intelligibility. If it is we who are narrativizing rather than our lives that are narratives, then our attention and concerns act as the filter which emphasizes moments of importance while passing over the routine and banal.

David Carr, in his *Time, Narrative, and History* (which is woefully ignored in the recent literature), reframes the questions of narrativity exceptionally well along these lines. The relation between narrative and the "real world" is miscast and misunderstood, he writes, "By stressing the discontinuity between 'art' and 'life'" and taking narrative as a form of representation (1986, p. 16):

> In discussing the "representational" character of narrative, theorists such as [Louis] Mink and Hayden White are sometimes unclear on exactly what it is in their view that narrative tries, but is constitutionally unable, to

> represent. “The world,” “real events” are terms they often use. But this way of speaking introduces a very misleading equivocation. Narratives, whether historical or fictional, are typically about, and thus purport to represent, not the world as such, reality as a whole, but specifically *human* reality. But when the term “reality” is left unqualified, we are tempted by the strong naturalist prejudice that what counts as reality must be physical reality. What this suggests is either the random activity and collision of blind forces, devoid of order and significance, or, alternatively, a reality totally ordered along rigorous causal lines without a flaw or gap in its mechanism. These two notions are of course incompatible with each other, but what they have in common is the idea that in either case “reality” is utterly indifferent to human concerns. Things simply happen, one after the other, randomly or according to their own laws. Any significance, meaning, or value ascribed to events is projected onto them by *our* concerns, prejudices, and interests, and in no way attaches to the events themselves. […]
>
> All this confuses the issue because, as these theorists very well know, what stories and histories represent or depict is not purely physical events but human experiences, actions, and sufferings, including the human activity of projecting meaning onto or finding meaning in physical and other events. (pp. 19–20)

The right question to ask is not whether the events of our lives, under an objectifying description, have the shape of artistically wrought stories. The right question to ask is whether, from the perspective of lived experience, we see and organize our lives in such a manner. Whether, to put it even more strongly, our notion of what we are as people, and how people differ from other entities in the world, is ultimately grounded in such a way of organizing experience. Above, I made the initial distinction between the notion that our lives are narratives and the notion that we make or take them as such. Carr writes: “the narrative character or structure of our experience and action is not something that simply *va de soi*. Life can be regarded as a constant *effort*, even a struggle, to maintain or restore narrative coherence in the face of an ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels” (p. 91). Working from Husserl’s account of temporality and time-consciousness, Carr criticizes the tempting analogy between isolated events and sense data or, better, criticizes the notion of isolated events in the same way that others have criticized the notion of sense data. They are abstractions, not building blocks (pp. 24, 66). Heidegger, following Husserl, offers a well known set of examples:

> We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things—as this thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly. (1971, pp. 25–6)

The novelist Don DeLillo offers an even richer example:

> She was in town, driving down a hilly street of frame houses, and saw a man sitting on his porch, ahead of her, through trees and shrubs, arms spread, a broad-faced blondish man, lounging. She felt in that small point in time, a flyspeck quarter second or so, that she saw him complete. His life flew open to her passing glance. A lazy and manipulative man, in real estate, in fairview condos by a mosquito lake. She knew him. She saw into him. He was there, divorced and drink-haunted, emotionally distant from his kids, his sons, two sons, in school blazers, in the barest blink.
>
> A voice recited the news on the radio.
>
> When the car moved past the house, in the pull of the full second, she understood that she was not looking at a seated man but at a paint can placed on a board that was balanced between two chairs. The white and yellow can was his face, the board his arms and the mind and heart of the man were in the air somewhere, already lost in the voice of the news reader on the radio. (2001, p. 72)

We don't merely hear a car rather than a set of sounds; Heidegger's example is still abstracted from any wider context in which we might actually hear a car. Nor do we merely mistake a pile of junk for a person. Rather, we ascribe character and story to that gestalt, experience it most immediately in a richly meaningful form. In ordinary experience, we don't witness isolated events, one after another, then put them together: "The bedrock of human events, then, is not sequence but configured sequence" (Carr, p. 44).

Reframed in this way, it's not clear that narrativizing is falsifying. Bad faith, in Sartre's terminology, occurs most often when being-for-itself takes itself as being-in-itself. This can happen, as in his famous scenarios, when we slip entirely into social roles, behaving in a certain way because that is how one in that situation—one playing that role—typically acts. Thereby we avoid taking

responsibility for our behavior (1969, pp. 55–67). But simply to understand one's self and one's situation in narrative terms isn't necessarily to fall into bad faith. This happens only if it reifies one's self into a thing—a thing rigidly defined, a thing that *is*—instead of understanding, much more provisionally, that one is always projecting an understanding of oneself and where one is going.

This suggests, then, that the appropriate master equation or analogy is not that a life is or is like a story, but that living is or is like reading. Narrative is of philosophical and phenomenological interest not because we think back on our pasts like we think back on a novel that we've just finished reading. MacIntyre writes: "Stories are lived before they are told—except in fiction" (p. 212). But isn't it part of our character as self-conscious beings that we don't live, then tell, and keep these acts isolated from one another, but see the larger, emerging structure of our lives even as we live them? Don't we sometimes act *for* narrative reasons?[20] Considering the sweep and architecture of a novel as a whole exactly *doesn't* seem to say anything about the meaning of our lives. Instead it leads us into more formal concerns unrelated to the structure of living. But the process of actually reading a novel (reading rather than having read), of finding oneself in the midst of a hermeneutic situation, projecting the future plot, receiving new information, entering into and abstracting beyond characters' perspectives—this tells us much about our own situations and the fact that our self-understanding is always located, projecting, fragmented, and progressive, not retrospective and whole. Perhaps, then, we need to shift away from talk of lives as wholes to a consideration of our grasp of the narrative contours of particular moments. Only in exceptional circumstances (near-death experiences, the writing of autobiography, truly off-putting self-indulgence) do most of us probably cast an eye over the shape of our entire lives. But our understanding of individual situations and our motivations for acting within them are ridden through by narrative and intertextual concerns.

6.5 Against Didacticism

I have yet to say much about how Sartre himself understood *Nausea*, despite the title of the essay. I admit that I don't much care about the answer to this question, and I'm not sure that one can substantiate the claim that Sartre viewed all narrative as a manifestation of bad faith. Instead, I think Sartre's misreading of his own work is more categorical, that his theory of literary interpretation is flawed. It's clear, though, that Sartre himself did care about this sort of question. In his autobiography *The Words*, he identifies Roquentin with himself

completely and suggests how he understood the novel's larger meaning, while ironically suggesting some embarrassment[21] looking back:

> At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea*—quite sincerely, believe me—about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and of exonerating my own. I *was* Roquentin. I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life. I was *I*, the elect, chronicler of Hell [….] I was impossible myself and differed from the others only by the mandate to give expression to that impossibility [….] I was a prisoner of that obvious contradiction, but I did not see it, I saw the world through it.[22]

In his *War Diaries*, Sartre discusses *Nausea* as if it were a treatise: "In *La Nausée*, I assert that the past is not…"; "I appeared to be saying, in *La Nausée*, that [adventure] didn't *exist*. But that's wrong…"; "I'd already explained all that in *La Nausée*" (1999, pp. 209, 198, 283).

More importantly, in his "What Is Literature?," written some two decades before, say, Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author," Sartre emphatically endorses authorial intentionality. He begins by making a strong distinction between poetry and prose. Poets treat words as things in themselves, not as signs, and so they don't traffic in meaning at all, since their words don't refer to anything beyond themselves. "Poets refuse to *utilize* language," Sartre writes (1998, p. 29). Prose is then *just* a utilization of language and *only* about something beyond itself. This leads Sartre to the conclusion that a prose writer is always communicating something and his affirmation of authorial intentionality as the locus of meaning for a text:

> And if prose is never anything but the privileged instrument of a certain undertaking, if it is only the poet's business to contemplate words in a disinterested fashion, then one has the right to ask the prose-writer from the very start, "What is your aim in writing?" (p. 36)

Even more strongly, he goes on to argue that a prose writer always knows the meaning of his or her texts in advance and never discovers anything in them: "he knows them [his words] before writing them down [….] Thus the writer meets everywhere only *his* knowledge, *his* will, *his* plans, in short, himself" (pp. 50–51). Here is the philosopher's way of reading fiction at its worst: a novel has a meaning that exists behind it, perhaps even before it, and its purpose is merely to dramatize that meaning. Once it is extracted, it's unclear that the novel has any

remaining value. Often even the complexities of dramatization are ignored, as in MacIntyre's and Strawson's readings of *Nausea* when a character is understood to simply speak the meaning of the novel.[23] One might call this the disquotational theory of literary meaning: find the most epigraphic line of dialogue in the novel and remove the quotation marks. Indeed it may be worse than this. The novel may only be a bad, imperfect instantiation of the meaning it points back to, a meaning which might be better—more purely—presented in treatise form. Cynically, then, the novel might have value only inasmuch as one can find more readers for novels than treatises.

Affirming these basic hermeneutic practices, Kermode takes a reading of *Nausea* as far as one can in his *The Sense of an Ending*. He too starts from the claim that Sartre distrusts fictions. "The absurd dishonesty of all prefabricated patterns is cardinal to his beliefs," Kermode writes (2000, p. 133). And so he argues that *Nausea* represents the struggle between the ideal and real, fiction and contingency. But since he starts from Sartre's philosophy, he can't but conclude that philosophy is true and fiction only useful inasmuch as it gets the philosophy right, out-and-out wrong inasmuch as it misrepresents it: "Insofar as it [*Nausea*] gives structure and form to the metaphysical beliefs expressed in the treatise [*Being and Nothingness*], it both represents and belies them."[24] The interpretive path remains one-way: "In all these ways, then, the novel falsifies the philosophy" (p. 139). Never is there any talk of the treatise falsifying the novel, and indeed that seems a strange thought, but perhaps it is a thought we should have.[25] Kermode's reading remains penetrating in that it sees these interpretive issues as themselves integral parts of the workings of the novel. They are not a mere failure on Sartre's or the novel's part, then, but structural: "it [*Nausea*] reflects a philosophy it must, in so far as it possesses novel form, belie" (pp. 144–5). Finally his reading is unnecessarily limited by the assumptions of authorial intentionality and unidirectionality in the relationship between philosophy and literature. "The novel, then, provides a reduction of the world different from that of the treatise. It has to lie. Words, thoughts, patterns of word and thought, are enemies of truth," he writes (p. 140). And so he agrees with Strawson that Sartre views fiction as "distrusted" yet "humanly indispensable" (Kermode, p. 150).

Playing the role of a critic of his own novels, it's clear that Sartre agrees. "I'm perfectly well aware that in a novel it's necessary to lie in order to be true," he writes (1999, p. 158). Giving up authorial intentionality, it seems to me that Sartre's novels don't distrust themselves in these ways, however. As mentioned, *Nausea* becomes a more traditional novel as it progresses, its diary form quickly

becoming a forgettable bit of artifice as it gets caught up in longer and longer stretches of naturalistic narration. Most of Sartre's other fictions display no ironies at all about their status. To the extent that Sartre's philosophy and fiction are in tension, I'd suggest we conclude not that the fiction is falsifying, but instead that he's a better novelist than his own theories and most specifically his theory of prose allow. Once one makes such a move, his own stated interpretation of the novel and identification of Roquentin with himself become mere anecdotes from literary history, curiosities that we'd be better off ignoring. *Nausea* seems to me a somewhat embarrassing novel if about the horror of contingency, but a very good one if about a man in hermeneutic crisis. Having lost his sense of where his own life is going, Roquentin starts to view the justification of everything's existence as unmoored—even mere physical objects, to which applying the concept of justification seems in fact merely confused. Similarly, Camus's *The Stranger* seems to me somewhat tedious if taken as a polemic about the absurdity of existence but very good if taken as a black comedy about an inarticulate man. Only if we view characters strictly as puppets manipulated by authors for polemical purposes (as Sartre himself seems to) need we conclude that existentialist novels are about existentialism, or any novel about its novelist's beliefs.[26] Instead, we might view characters not as objects, but instead structures of sensibility—indeed ways of being, of existing—that we can work to inhabit.[27] And so even if one is finally unsympathetic to Sartre's or Camus's philosophical program, one might think that they had real talents as fiction writers, and exactly part of what constitutes such talent is putting more or other on the page than one conceptually intends. Indeed, Sartre dramatizes a moment in *Nausea* which speaks exactly against his own later theory, in which Roquentin writes a sentence only to have its meaning escape him:

> I had thought out this sentence, at first it had been a small part of myself. Now it was inscribed on the paper, it took sides against me. I didn't recognize it any more. I couldn't conceive it again. It was there, in front of me; in vain for me to trace some sign of its origin. Anyone could have written it. But *I* … I wasn't sure I wrote it. (p. 95)

According to Sartre's theory of prose, the meaning of a sentence can't "takes sides against" its author—it just means what the author wants it to. Elsewhere, Sartre describes "the writer who does not want to be responsible" for what he or she writes as a "schizophrenic dreamer," and that such is the "inverted and inauthentic dream of freedom."[28] But when he actually writes fictional prose, he dramatizes his alter-ego's realization that things are more complicated.

The overarching idea that philosophy's truths are truer than fiction's truths is wrongheaded, I would suggest. One of the great attractions of the existentialist philosopher/novelists was the apparent thought that the novel might be a better venue for thinking than the straightforward treatise if our thinking (and living) in fact isn't itself straightforward. Iris Murdoch, herself a philosopher/novelist and a great promoter for existentialism, seemed to give in to these parochial notions in her early encounters with existentialism, writing that "Sartre's novels and plays have a strictly didactic purpose."[29] A decade later, however, Murdoch criticized Sartre's theory of prose and argued that literature might help us recover from the reductions modern thought has performed on our lives. "We have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality," she writes in "Against Dryness."[30] And so now "We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with [….] We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being" (p. 293). But if it is a categorical, formal difference in approach between philosophy and literature that has allowed the former to impoverish us and that gives the latter hope, surely it is not further concepts that we need at all. Better: "It is here that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy. Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives" (p. 294). Sense, not concepts: that is, literature has an ability philosophy lacks, to imply or perform or produce thoughts rather than literally inscribing them onto the page. To show rather than tell. The mistake that MacIntyre and Strawson make in reading *Nausea*, and that philosophers all too frequently make in reading fiction generally, is to think that the meaning of a fiction must be right there on the page and not require any critical work greater than quotation for extraction. Philosophers are well accustomed now, both personally and professionally, to the charge that they have no real expertise or that their field has no use at all. In turn, though, they have a bad habit of leveling the same charge against criticism and the study of literature. Brian Leiter, for example, in an influential if controversial statement, writes with hubris: "Whatever the limitations of 'analytic' philosophy, it is clearly far preferable to what has befallen humanistic fields like English, which have largely collapsed as serious disciplines while becoming the repository for all the world's bad philosophy, bad social science, and bad history" (2011). It's possible to think that we can do without the talents of literary critics and that one can read the meaning of a novel right off the page only if one thinks that literature's functioning is no more complicated rhetorically than philosophy's. Such a view often seems to take the phenomenology of reading to consist of nothing but the reception of acts of

communication and in no need of closer formal and critical attention. If we're interested not in the self as an object with a narrative shape, but instead the manner of our being inasmuch as we understand ourselves through narrativizing, then it is perhaps literature with its rhetorical complications and not philosophy which will allow us to explore this phenomenology. And so the quotation from Murdoch I've placed atop this essay: "Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing" (1997, p. 4).

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Footnotes

1 See too Abbott 2008, pp. 22, 135–6; Brooks 1984, p. 22.

2 This latter is represented by Roquentin's Sunday walk down the Rue Tournebride (pp. 40ff) and visit to the Bouville Museum to look at the portraits of the city's past luminaries (pp. 82ff). Hayden Carruth makes a similar point in his introduction to the novel (pp. xi–xii).

3 p. 33. A line that, given a longer treatment, Strawson would surely emphasize.

4 Compare this claim to Aristotle's in the *Poetics*: "By 'beginning' I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence. An 'end', by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a general rule, but need not be followed by anything else" (1987, p. 39).

5 p. 23. The novel frequently draws an analogy between life and melody. It never remarks explicitly that a melody, like a narrative, can only be experienced in time, though it comes close in Roquentin's description of the jazz singer's voice: "it is the event for which so many notes have been preparing, from so far away, dying that it might be born" (p. 22).

6 In one moment, he recalls "I felt my heart swell with a great feeling of adventure," but there is no sense that the retrospective narration is creating this feeling. He goes on to report his real-time feelings while writing in the diary: "I am as happy the hero of a novel" (p. 54). In another entry he writes again in the present tense (p. 135).

7 "The (Re)Presentation of Temporal Human Meanings," Chapter 3 in Roth 2014.

8 In a diary entry from March 7, 1940, he refers to "historical relativism of the Simmel type" (1999, pp. 298, 300).

9 p. 147. The novel highlights the similarity: Roquentin uses the phrase "a rare and precious quality" (*une qualité rare et précieuse*) early on to describe adventures (p. 37). Anny, unprompted, uses the same phrase (*une qualité tout à fait rare et précieuse*) here to describe privileged situations (p. 147).

10 p. 152. Earlier, he rejects ceramics as well, saying “baked objects […] do not amuse [him]” (p. 82).

11 This move is foreshadowed earlier, when Roquentin lets his imagination of Rollebon’s situation run rampant only to conclude that, taking this tack, he’d be better off writing a novel about him instead of a biography (p. 58). Even earlier, he writes “I have the feeling of doing a work of pure imagination” (p. 13).

12 p. 156. Interestingly, he seems to take this language over from the young couple whom he overheard (and mocked in his thoughts) in the cafe while talking to the self-taught man (p. 110).

13 Hazel Barnes claims that the novel Roquentin will produce is *Nausea* itself (1959, p. 203). This is possible, but she offers no argument for this claim, and I see no evidence for it.

14 p. 178. Again, this is set up early in the novel. He writes “I am so happy when a Negress sings: what summits would I not reach if *my own life* made the subject of the melody” (p. 38).

15 Against Fredric Jameson, for example, who writes that “it is characteristic of Sartre’s way of dealing with such literary problems that he should tell an anecdote to demonstrate the impossibility of anecdotes, that he should possess the means to make this lived time spring drearily from the page at the same time that he is demonstrating how irreducible it is to language” (1961, p. 25). I’ll return to this point in my discussion of Kermode’s reading of the novel below.

16 pp. 83–4. See too Sartre’s story “The Childhood of a Leader” (1975, pp. 84–144).

17 Elsewhere, I use this interpretation of *Nausea* as a springboard to a Heideggerian conception of the narrative self, and in fact I think the novel owes more to Heidegger’s *Being and Time* than to Sartre’s later *Being and Nothingness*. See “A Narrativist Interpretation of Heideggerian Everydayness,” Part II in Roth 2014.

18 p. 212. MacIntyre’s rhetorical frame (that this response is merely “tempting”) here covers over the fact that he does respond this way and doesn’t obviously have any more substantial response.

19 I would suggest, as a better alternative to “quest,” the concept of “the search” from Walker Percy’s novel *The Moviegoer* (1998). MacIntyre might respond that “search” is not open-ended enough. We quest after the holy grail, something whose appearance and perhaps even existence we’re unsure of (p. 219). We search for our car keys or a missing hiker. Invoking “the,” rather than “a” search, as Percy’s novel does, perhaps overcomes this objection; the definite article inflates the term’s importance and abstraction.

20 See Velleman 2005. I develop this claim through a reading of Rousseau’s *Confessions* in Roth 2012.

21 That’s how I take the interjection in the first sentence. Elsewhere, however, Sartre names the novel first when asked how he wanted people to remember him (Charlesworth 1976, p. 154).

22 1981, pp. 251–2. In his *War Diaries* as well, Sartre identifies Roquentin (as well as Mathieu from the *The Age of Reason*) with himself (1999, p. 338).

23 This way of reading might be traced back to Aristotle’s claim in chapter six of *The Poetics* that the “thought” of a tragedy consists in the actual statements and arguments uttered by the characters. Stephen Halliwell insists that one shouldn’t confuse the thought internal to a tragedy with the poet’s own guiding thought, however, and thinks Aristotle might not embrace any concept at all of the latter (Aristotle, pp. 38, 96, 171–3). By contrast, Paul Ricoeur writes that “‘Thought,’ in this narrative context, may assume various meanings. It may characterize, for instance, following Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the ‘theme’ (*dianoia*) that accompanies the ‘fable’ or ‘plot’ (*mythos*) of a tragedy” (p. 175 in Mitchell 1981). We might even reach all the way back to Plato here. Recall the opening of Book III of the *Republic*, for example, where Socrates reads off countless lines of poetry as the sorts of things that need to be barred from the city, seemingly taking mere inclusion of a statement in a poetic work to suggest sanction. Of course Plato’s own dramatic maneuverings complicate this situation.

24 p. 137. Kermode (and Murdoch, whom I’ll discuss momentarily) straightforwardly takes the novel to present the philosophical thinking of *Being and Nothingness*, despite the fact they were written in the opposite order, with some time in between.

25 Milan Kundera writes, in a discussion of Sartre, “This is still the old ineradicable error, the belief that the relation between philosophy and literature goes only one way, that insofar as ‘professionals of narration’ are obliged to have ideas, they can only borrow them from ‘professionals of thought’” (2006, p. 63).

26 I’m reminded here of Curtis White’s lament that his friends, when asked about *Saving Private Ryan*,

seemed unable to think of the characters as anything but real people, that is, to also think of them as part of a structure of meaning manipulated by by Stephen Spielberg (2003, p. 42), White (2003, p. 42). One thinks that we're in rather bad shape if, at the other extreme, we can *only* think about characters as such puppets.

27 And so what I'm defending here is a certain kind of psychologically realist novel, though "psychology" is not a broad enough category. Better: what Murdoch (following French critics, she says) calls "the phenomenological novel" (1997, p. 101). See too Farrell in Gibson et al. 2007, pp. 254–6. There are other arguments to be made for the philosophical importance of other versions of the novel.

28 1992, note p. 46. See too p. 53.

29 Iris Murdoch, "The Novelist as Metaphysician," in 1997, p. 103. I steal "encounters" from editor Peter Conradi's section heading. The later section heading is telling as well: "Can Literature Help Cure the Ills of Philosophy?"

30 1997, p. 287. See too Kundera's "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes": "If it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being" (1990, pp. 4–5).

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7. Aristotle on Narrative Intelligence

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In Aristotle's view, the nature of cognition is determined by the objects of knowledge.[1] "Our discussion will be adequate," he writes in the *Ethics*, "if it has as much precision as the subject matter admits of; exactness is not to be sought alike in all discussions (*logoi*), any more than in all the products of the arts" (*NE* 1.3.1094b11-14).[2] Different fields of inquiry admit of different degrees of precision and dictate the kind of understanding that is appropriate to them. Accordingly, the analysis of the nature of the objects that poetry imitates (*mimemata*) is the first step to discover[3] the philosopher's conception of the kind of understanding that can be attained through literary works. Tragedy,[4] he writes in the *Poetics*, represents the world of human affairs, since it "is a mimesis of … action and life" (*Poet*. 6.1450a1517). It depicts the most familiar and most universal human experience, i.e., individuals placed in circumstances that are not of their making, and connected by a web of relations to other agents, who strive to attain happiness. Specifically, it shows a series of events that mark the dramatic characters' passage from good to bad fortune or vice versa.[5] The premises and the settings of the stories that the poets compose can be, and often are, out of the ordinary and outlandish. *Muthoi* are not meant to be factually true

since they do not represent events that have actually happened (*ta genomena*), but "events as they might happen (*hoia an genoito*) or are possible according to probability or necessity" (*Poet*. 9.1451a36–8). They have, however, an essential connection to real life happenings, by virtue of which they can be recognized as their imitations.[6] The men and women who enact dramatic actions (*praxeis*), for instance, embody real ethical types:

> Since the imitators (*oi mimoumenoi*) imitate men in action (*prattontas*), and it is necessary that the latter are either serious or of little worth (for characters almost always conform to these types, as it is through vice and virtue that the characters of all men vary), they will imitate people who are better than us, worse than us or like us (*Poet*. 2.1448a1-5).[7]

Both the reference to "us," i.e., the spectators or readers, and the claim that "characters almost always conform to these types," make clear that the persons being imitated are real persons. For this reason, no matter how unique their predicament and social standing may be, their actions and reactions display patterns that are characteristic of living, historical individuals of their kind.[8] The notions of moral character (*ēthos*), thought (*dianoia*) and moral deeds (*praxeis*)[9] at work in the *Poetics*, as well as their relations, are, for the most part, those with which we are already familiar both from life and from Aristotle's ethical and rhetorical treatises.[10] Character, for instance, is that in virtue of which agents are of a certain kind or quality[11]; it is best revealed by choice (*proairesis*),[12] and—together with thought—it is the cause of their deeds.[13] Aristotle's emphasis on the primacy of action over *ēthos* and thought,[14] moreover, does not simply express his understanding of poetic works, according to which the plot, that is, the "element" that imitates *praxis*, "is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of tragedy"[15] so that a drama without action would be, like a soulless organism, a tragedy only in name.[16] It also reflects "his wider philosophical evaluation of the relative importance of action and character in life."[17] As is the case for every entity in the Aristotelian world, man's nature is fully actualized in the active exercise of his functions. Character is a disposition to act and feel in a certain way which, if not exercised, does not enable him to attain his distinctive good, i.e., *eudaimonia*. Indeed "as in the Olympic games it is not the most beautiful and strongest that are crowned [if they remain inactive] but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so in life *those who act rightly win noble and good things*" (*NE* 1.8.1099a4-6; emphasis added).[18]

Similar considerations hold for the passions (*pathemata*) aroused by dramas,

which, without being identical to those that we suffer in real life,[19] bear a close resemblance to them. In both cases, for instance, pity is for those who do not deserve to fall into misfortune,[20] and are similar to us.[21] On the other hand, while in real life we fear primarily evils that may befall us, spectators fear what might happen to the heroes.[22] The passion that they experience, however, preserves the self-regarding nature of actual fear because it is felt for *dramatis personae* that are like us (*Poet*. 13.1453a5).

Finally, and most importantly, the philosopher's insistence on the requirement that the episodes of a poem be ordered according to relations of necessity or probability[23] finds its explanation in the fact that these are the relations that govern the events of the human world. Although, as a rule, actual happenings include, in addition to causally connected events,[24] events whose links are purely temporal, and are thus less orderly than "fictional *pragmata*,"[25] the world depicted by the poet is still recognizable as a simplified version of the familiar domain of human affairs.[26] As Redfield puts it: "The poet creates his world, but he does not create it just as he wishes. The beginnings are invented, but the consequences follow as they really would. In this sense, fiction presents an unreal world which is about the real world."[27] For this reason, mimetic works can be said to offer a form of vicarious experience which, as such, mobilizes in the audience powers and resources that neighbor on those at work in practical life.

Making sense of events in the real world requires mastery of a group of interrelated concepts that define the domain of action (*praxis*) and distinguish it from physical movement.[28] To understand an action in a given context, one needs to grasp who is acting, what the agent is doing, for what reasons and for the sake of what he's acting, towards—or against—whom the action is directed, whether it is performed at the appropriate time etc. The capacity to follow a plot in fact seems to presuppose this competence in the "grammar of action," and to build upon it. The spectator is expected, for instance, to attribute motives and intentions to characters even in the absence of any clear indication of them, to appreciate the discrepancy between the intended and the actual consequences of their deeds, to imagine the complex feelings that a hero(ine) may harbor towards another, to appreciate whether their choices and reactions are true to their nature, and so on. This is a form of intelligence that, unlike the wisdom of the philosopher, does not require the apprehension of general principles and causes. Rather, it is an "implicit understanding" that originates from experience and remains within the horizon of particular events and situations. An individual who

possesses it may know "perfectly well what matters in life, what in substance holds men together, what moves them, what power dominates them" without having grasped "this knowledge in general rules nor expounded it to others in general reflections."[29] He may make clear to himself and others his ideas "in particular cases . . . real or invented, in adequate examples … determined in time and space" without allowing "the universal to emerge on its own account."[30] Thus narrative intelligence resembles *phronēsis* which, although involves mastery of general principles,[31] "must also recognize the particulars, for it is practical, and *praxis* is concerned with particulars" (*NE* 6.7.1141b15-16). The distinctive "gift" of the prudent man is his sensitivity to the nuances of concrete practical settings that enables him to "see things correctly"[32] and to choose "*in each case … what is appropriate to the occasion*."[33] Just as he acquires this capacity by becoming experienced in the human world,[34] the spectators' ability to make sense of fictional plots draws on their familiarity with practical events.[35]

Both kinds of intelligence, moreover, are a manifestation of our distinctively human nature. Theoretical reason, which apprehends "objects whose principles cannot be otherwise,"[36] is, according to Aristotle, the best and most authoritative part of our being which connects us to the divine.[37] Practical intelligence, on the other hand, is the excellence of human beings qua human, not only because it is exercised on the contingent world of the *anthrōpina*,[38] but also because it belongs to our nature as composites of matter and form.[39] A person cannot be practically wise if she does not possess the virtues of character, which involve essentially the emotions, and thus the body.[40] Virtues of character, in turn, require the exercise of right reason.[41] The *phronimos* feels the right passions, towards the right object, with the right intensity, for the right amount of time etc.,[42] and their contribution to his excellence is not only that they help to provide him with the proper motivation to act.[43] They also enhance his understanding and assessment of the ethical world, since, for Aristotle, emotions are selective responses to determinate objects and situations, which, therefore, involve the capacity to discriminate among them.[44] Anger, for instance, is "a desire, accompanied by pain, for open revenge for an apparent slight towards ourselves or one of our friends, when such a slight is undeserved."[45] The very experience of this passion thus involves an interpretation of the nature of the deeds, as well as the persons, that arouse it, which is far more immediate than our reasoned evaluations. Our emotions, then, make us aware of what is happening in our interactions with others. Moreover, they add a dimension of *felt*

significance to the events we witness that would not be available to a detached agent.[46] Anger for a slight directed toward a friend, for instance, not only signals what is going on; it also makes us perceive what it feels like to be unjustly targeted and to rebel against this sort of treatment. As a result, the passions make us more alert to the human significance of practical situations and improve our ethical perceptions.

Narrative intelligence, brought to life by emotionally charged dramatic events, exhibits a similar interplay of passions and understanding. The ideal spectator/reader is someone who, without identifying fully with tragic heroes, feels an affinity with them. As noted above, pity and fear are emotions that are rooted in a real or apparent similarity between the subject and the object of the passion. While the typical tragic characters are among "those who enjoy great renown and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes and eminent men of such lineages" (*Poet*. 13.1453a11-12)—and are in this respect different from the average spectator—they are, like most people, neither supremely virtuous nor vicious but fall in between these two extremes (*Poet*. 13.1453a8-10). Aristotle's theory thus contains precise indications about the intended recipients of mimetic works. They should be decent citizens who have received a good upbringing and are capable of sharing the values and goals of the plots' protagonists.[47] This "partial identification" with the dramatic characters allows the audience to make sense of the story not only from the point of view of external viewers, but also from that of the dramatic characters themselves, and thus to participate in their vicissitudes from within, so to speak. Moreover, the "tragic passions" complement the intellectual understanding of the drama. Fear completes the expectation, "generated" by the plot, of imminent evils befalling the heroes, and pity adds—to intellectual comprehension—the emotional understanding of the undeserved character of the *dramatis personae*'s sufferings[48] or, at least, of the disproportion between their errors and the consequences that they pay for it.[49] Indeed one of the marks of the masterful tragedian is his capacity to appeal both to the audience's emotions and to its capacity for discernment in such a way as to realize a full integration of the two.[50]

It would seem, however, that there is a major difference between the way in which the man of action apprehends events and the way in which the spectator does. The former is completely immersed in the situation in which he finds himself and has a forward-looking perspective that goes beyond what is, and anticipates what will be. Moreover even if he is excellent and makes the best use of the information available to him in his deliberations, the knowledge at his disposal is always at risk of being limited and incomplete, as Aristotle's

discussion of involuntary actions makes clear (*NE* 3.1.1110b32-1111a21). For this reason, the practical man's standpoint seems to be rather that of the heroes, who act on the basis of their imperfect knowledge of the circumstances, than that of the spectator.[51] In ancient Greece the latter was presumably already familiar with most tragic stories—based, as a rule, on traditional myths—[52]and knew more about the characters' lives and careers than they themselves did. It may be thought, therefore, that this made him an omniscient observer. If a defining characteristic of Sophocles' Oedipus, for instance, is his lack of self-knowledge, wouldn't the spectator, who knows Oedipus' identity all along, experience and understand the story quite differently than the King of Thebes? The *Poetics* suggests that the answer to this question cannot be an unqualified "yes," and that for Aristotle the spectator's and the hero's perspectives are in this respect more similar than one might suppose. He writes that, in the best tragedies at least, the change of fortune, which is the turning point of tragic *muthoi*,[53] is *unexpected* not only for the heroes but also for the audience.[54] In these stories the events happen "contrary to expectation because of one another" (*para' tēn doxan, di'allela*) (*Poet*. 9.1452a3), and for this reason make one wonder. Given that what is known can hardly be unexpected, his theory seems to assume that the spectator's experience of the performance is not exclusively, or even primarily, shaped by his pre-existing knowledge of the story. Presumably, the direct experience of the play makes this knowledge recede in the background, so that he is guided by, and responds to, what is immediately given to him on stage. In other words, Aristotle seems to distinguish between *external* knowledge of the plot, on the one hand, and the beliefs—and emotions—generated by the internal development of the dramatic action, on the other.[55] Without being erased, the former is weakened and the latter "take hold of him" and command his attention. This process, promoted by the audience's natural ability to identify with the heroes, enables the *theōros* to adopt the forward-looking take on the action, which defines the dramatic characters' standpoint, and to develop expectations whose content is determined by the logic of the *pragmata* as constructed by the poet. For this reason he can be surprised by what happens. Similarly, it allows him to experience the heroes' passage from ignorance to knowledge,[56] through which they come to know the truth about themselves, at the same time as his own discovery of that truth or, perhaps more precisely, as a re-discovery of it comprehended in light of the elements provided by the plot.[57] Although we know who Oedipus is, for instance, we discover it again, and comprehend the devastating significance of the revelation of his identity anew, through the king's gradual and painful process of coming to see it. If, then, the spectator's

perspective on the dramatic action is unique and does not exactly coincide either with that of the practical man or of the *dramatis personae*, it is not entirely severed from that of men and women in action because it partakes, in a distinctive way, of the limitations of their horizons.

They are distinguished, however, by the nature of their relation to the *pragmata*. The man of action (*prattōn*) considers the situation in which he finds himself from the point of view of its potential of being transformed by his choices and deeds. He regards his environment as admitting of being otherwise and of being improved by his own efforts, that is to say, as an object of deliberation (*NE* 3.3). By contrast, although the spectator (*theōros*) partakes emotionally in the adventures of the heroes, they are to him an object of contemplation (*theōria*),[58] to the development of which he does not—and does not feel called to—contribute anything. In this respect he resembles the philosopher for whom the world is not to be changed but understood and, thus, enjoyed. For both, moreover, cognitive progress depends on previous acquaintance with the objects they learn about.[59] The philosopher's distinctive work, i.e., bringing to light the intelligibility of things, presupposes familiarity with the phenomena. Indeed there can be no meaningful investigation of "the why" (*to dioti*) without previous apprehension of the "that" (*to hoti*), or of the facts whose reasons one seeks.[60] Aristotle makes a similar point about the "observers of imitations" in *Poetics* 4, where he connects mimesis and learning. After noting that all human beings, although in different degrees, derive from imitations the pleasure that learning produces in the members of our species (*Poet*. 4.1448b8-17), Aristotle writes that "if one happens not to have seen the [original] object before, the image will not give pleasure qua mimesis but because of its execution or color, or for some other such reason" (*Poet*. 4.1448b17-20). The pre-condition to delight in imitations qua imitations, because they make possible to "learn and infer what each object is" (*Poet*. 4.1448b18-20), is thus, also in this case, previous experience with the subject matter represented by the maker.[61]

The nature of the objects the spectator "looks at" accounts for further connections between narrative intelligence and theoretical reason. Despite the similarities outlined above, *poetic* events are not the same as actual ethical doings.[62] The most relevant distinction between the two is not that "mimetic actions" are fictional but that, even if they were based on historical happenings, their organization would distinguish them from real events.[63] Aristotle holds that the poet is first and foremost an imitator because he makes (*poiein*) plots (*Poet*. 9.1451b28-29), which he defines precisely as "the organization or arrangement

of events."[64] The *muthos* offers a . In actual experience multiple series of events —with no discernible connection to one another—take place simultaneously, and within each series they happen not only because of one another but also simply one after the other.[65] An individual, moreover, is involved in a number of *pragmata*, some of which are connected only because they are performed, or suffered, by the same person, without "forming" a unitary action.[66] The tragedian, by contrast, imitates a single chain of events in which each episode contributes to the development of the story. That is to say, he represents an "action that is one and complete" and whose "parts, consisting of events, must be so put together that if one of them is transposed or removed the whole is dislocated and destroyed."[67] This organization of the episodes into a self-contained whole (*holon*)[68] guides and facilitates the viewers' discovery of the action's intelligibility. In fact, it can be suggested that the poet's artful arrangements of the episodes plays for the reader/spectator of tragedies a role comparable to that of the working hypotheses that the philosopher formulates to discover the causes and principles of the phenomena. Both allow the soul to focus only on relevant factors[69] and to identify meaningful patterns in the observed "material."

Most importantly, the plot prompts the *theōros* to engage in a process that mirrors the philosophical pattern of inquiry from *aporia* to resolution. The phenomena, which are the starting point of genuine philosophical investigations, include not only observable "data" but also the reputable views (*endoxa*) held about them as well as the difficulties and problems that they generate.[70] Becoming familiar with the *aporiai* that surround a given subject of study is an essential step in the search for truth, in the first place, because it deepens the wonder that animates the philosopher's desire to understand. Second, awareness of the complexity of the issues and the problems that await resolution allows the one who inquires to formulate definite explanatory hypothesis rather than proceeding at random. In Aristotle's words: "those who inquire without first considering the difficulties are like people who do not know where they have to go;"[71] for "the subsequent solution (*lusis*) is a release from the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot (*desmos*) of which one does not know."[72] "Tying a knot" (*desis*) and "untying it" (*lusis*) are, similarly, the two stages of plot construction, according to Aristotle's analysis (*Poet*. 18.1455b24-32). The poet first presents a problematic—or even inextricable—situation from which there does not seem to be any exit, just as an *aporia* appears to frustrate every attempt to find a solution. Then he provides the elements to unravel the

puzzle. Sophocles' *Oedipus*, for instance, first offers conflicting indications concerning the identity of Laius' murderer(s), which leave the audience, as well as the chorus,[73] disoriented. Then, starting with the news that the Corinthian messenger brings to Thebes' royal family, it weaves those apparently discordant elements into a coherent pattern. The "opacity" of the initial part of the dramatic action—the complication—makes us uneasy and challenges our intelligence, while the second part—the resolution—offers a way out and allows us to see, retrospectively, the inner necessity of the story. The best kinds of tragedies, moreover, are those like *Oedipus the King* in which the characters' change of fortune (*metabasis*) is a sudden reversal (*peripeteia*) and coincides with their passage from ignorance to knowledge (*anagnōrisis*).[74] In these plots an event that is unpredictable and surprising, such as the arrival of the messenger from Corinth, also reveals the connection between the episodes that eluded the mind up to that point, and thus opens the way to the discovery of the story's intelligibility. Besides being most effective in arousing the tragic emotions, the unexpected combined with an insight into the connection of events that determined the direction of the action, makes the audience wonder, according to Aristotle (*Poet*. 9.1452a2-6), and thus adds another element of affinity between spectators and lovers of wisdom. Wonder (*to thaumaston*) is the experience that singles out animals who by nature desire to understand, and pushes them to seek cognitive satisfaction.[75] Thus, presumably, the spectator's wonder is the beginning of a more comprehensive attempt to make sense of the story. Ideally at least, the insight he gains when he recognizes that events that are contrary to expectations also happen because of one another[76] make him keener to identify the relations between *all* the *pragmata* that led the story to its probable or inevitable conclusion. If the process is successful, his soul should, like that of the philosopher who discovers the causes of the phenomena studied, turn from wonder to its opposite state, namely, the recognition that things could not be different than they are.[77] What this means, however, varies with the character of the objects that the two contemplate (*theōrein*). The philosopher abstracts from the fortuitous[78] and the particular, and focuses on the essential and *per se* attributes of the objects he studies.[79] His understanding of the why of things is the realization that their nature necessarily manifests itself in typical activities and characteristics or, to use Aristotle's expression, that they are the way they are "always or for the most part" (*aei ē hōs epi to polu*).[80] For instance, once he has understood the relation between the diagonal of a square and its side, "there is nothing that would surprise a geometer so much as if the diagonal turned out to be commensurable" (*Met*. 1.2.983a19-21), and he knows in advance that their

incommensurability can be predicated of every square.

The fact that in a well-made plot the events are linked by causal relations of probability or necessity, on the other hand, does not make the conclusion foreseeable. Unlike the philosopher, the tragedian does not exclude the fortuitous and the accidental from his stories, which is rather the source of the all-important element of surprise. The viewer's understanding of the *muthos*, thus, is not the appreciation that, given the ethical character of the protagonists, they are predictably doomed to fall.[81] Rather, it is the acknowledgement that when individuals of their nature are situated in the unique circumstances imagined by the poet and are subject to the fortuitous turns that punctuate their lives, they are bound to end up in misery. As Ricoeur puts it: "to understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story."[82]

Finally, both the philosopher's inquiry and the cognitive experience of the *theōros* result in the discovery of some sort of universality, although, once again, of a kind determined by the different character of their objects. The former, moving from what is first for us to what is first in itself—or from the sensible to the intelligible—grasps the highest kind of universals, namely, the common features of a class of particulars abstracted from the individuals and their idiosyncratic features. The spectator, on the other hand, "witnesses" deeds and sufferings enacted by individuals situated in particular circumstances and, for this reason, never leaves the horizon of the experiential. Yet what he apprehends goes beyond simple experience (*empeiria*) because it does not consist of facts (*to hoti*) whose relations are unintelligible. Rather, he becomes aware of the inner logic of the chain of events imitated, which, thus, appear as *patterns* of human acting and suffering. These patterns are the universals of poetry to which Aristotle refers in the *Poetics*.[83] Although they are one of a kind, they are akin to the universals of philosophy in that when we apprehend them, not only do we understand *that* certain events shaped the heroes' lives, but also *why* they displayed a certain trajectory and ended up the way they did.[84] By the end of the play, then, the observer gains a privileged perspective on a cross-section of the human world, which is rarely, if ever, available in experience. As noted above, history presents us with events in which causal and purely temporal connections are regularly mixed together, thereby making the discovery of their intelligibility, to the extent that it is possible, arduous.[85] In addition, the open-ended character of the consequences of human actions and interactions prevents us from fully understanding their nature and significance.[86] Looking back at the progression of

the plot,[87] by contrast, the spectator can see the clearly demarked outline of a group of characters' lives with a well-defined starting point, development, and end-point which delimits the consequences of the heroes'—often failed—struggle to attain happiness.

On this interpretation of Aristotle's view, then, the spectator of art focuses on the objects and relations that are the distinctive domain of practical intelligence in use, but understands them through a process that is homologous to philosophical learning and yields similar results. Moving from puzzlement to lucidity he sees the articulate completeness of a human event and—in virtue of the imitative relation that binds art and life—gets a glimpse of the intelligible skeleton of the human world that is often lost in ordinary experience. He thus gains a quasi-philosophical perspective on a level of the human world that, because of its inextricable link to particularity and the fortuitous, is outside the domain of philosophy.[88] Tragedy offers him the rare opportunity to take a step back from the active involvement in human affairs and to contemplate human lives and passions, as well as to rejoice in the discovery of their intelligibility.[89] In this way he comes to share the standpoint of the lover of wisdom who, operating in the city that makes his activity possible, distances himself from its urgent practical demands and makes it an object of contemplation (*NE* 10.7.1177a28-1777b5).[90] The extraordinary characteristic of narrative intelligence, then, is that it is a quasi-divine gaze on the most human of the domains, cast with human eyes.

For those familiar with Aristotle's bias towards *theōria* and his rationalistic approach to art, this interpretation of narrative intelligence may not be (too) surprising. The issue of its plausibility as an account of the cognitive experience of actual Athenian audiences, however, remains. Tragic performances took place in the context of religious festivals where thousands of participants celebrated, and problematized, the values of the *polis*. Thus for many the theater, far from providing an opportunity to detach themselves from the city, was an occasion to be at the very center of it and to bond with fellow citizens primarily through the sharing of powerful emotions. Did the philosopher suppose that the average spectator would (easily) be induced to get into a "speculative frame of mind" or to display the level of curiosity and cognitive sophistication that the interpretation suggested in this paper requires of him?[91] His occasional remarks on the incapacity of the audience to appreciate the true value of tragedy[92] suggest that he did not harbor this illusion.[93] But then, one has to wonder, whose experience was his "theory" meant to capture? The answer lies in his teleological view of art. He holds, characteristically, that poetry exhibits a natural

development towards its proper end (*telos*), which actualizes its nature and perfection.[94] On this interpretation, the various genres of Greek literature form a progression that gradually approaches their natural *telos*, and contribute to its coming into being. Tragedy is the final goal of the serious kind of poetry,[95] and Aristotle devotes most of his treatise to it because "the final cause and end of a thing is . . . its nature . . . and the best" (*Pol*. 1.2.1252b32-1253a1). Tragedy itself, in turn, undergoes a series of transformations until it reaches its perfect form[96]—exemplified by plays such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* or Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*—[97] which provide the philosopher with the criterion to assess the merits of existing tragedies.

Just as he offers a normative account of poetry and drama, then, one would expect him to present an equally normative view of its reception. That is to say, it is consistent with—and even required by—his approach, that his "account" of narrative intelligence does not aim primarily to explain the experience of historical spectators. They, most likely, were first and foremost affected by tragic performances emotionally[98] and, although experienced surprise, only "sensed" the intelligibility of the story, so to speak.[99] Rather, it is likely that Aristotle formulated his "theory" to explain how tragedy would (and ought to) be received by an *ideal* audience.[100] This optimal audience would care for, and would try to make sense of, the connections among all the events of the story; it would appreciated painful conclusions when, and because, they are the logical outcome of their antecedents rather than hoping for happy endings for deserving characters (*Poet*. 13.1453a33) and, more in general, it would be enchanted by the light that well composed *muthoi* shed on human life.[101] The idea that Aristotle had in mind sophisticated and reflective recipients of drama is corroborated by his repeated observation that "the effect (*dunamis*) of tragedy is realized also without public performance and actors" (*Poet*. 6.1450b18), that is to say, simply by *reading* the plot.[102] Given that, even in fourth-century (BCE) Athens, readers of tragedies were far less numerous than spectators of tragic dramas,[103] his statement would seem to confirm that his primary target was a rather select group of citizens. More importantly, perhaps, reading appears to be more conducive to the kind of understanding that Aristotle suggests we may gain from dramas than watching a theatrical performance is. Not only does this way of appropriating tragedy force one to focus exclusively on what he takes to be the life of dramas, i.e., their plot, while excluding spectacle, which "is quite foreign to the art of poetry, and . . . not integral to it" (*Poet*. 6.1450b19). It is also a more personal and private way to experience art that makes it easier to severe the

connection to its civic significance in favor of a more theoretical appropriation of it.

Aristotle's views on narrative intelligence, then, are less informative about the reception of poetry in his time than about his take on the role of poetry in the life of reflective individuals. For this reason, they can be helpful to articulate our experience of Greek drama, which we enjoy primarily through written texts, and can shed light on the way in which ancient tragedies affect our own understanding of the world.

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Footnotes

1 This essay focuses on what we learn from literature rather than on the cognitive powers that make this form of understanding possible. It is generally agreed that imagination (*phantasia*) is primarily involved in the experience of art. For a recent treatment of this topic see M. Heath, "Cognition in Aristotle's Poetics" *Mnemosyne* 62 no. 1 (2009): 51–75.

2 See also *NE* 2.2.1104a1-9; NE 6. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Greek are my own.

3 Aristotle does not explicitly thematizes the nature of "narrative intelligence," although, as Ricoeur notes, he "makes clear that it really is a question of a kind of intelligence, beginning in Chapter 4, where he establishes his leading concepts by way of their genesis." See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* Vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 40.

4 Following Aristotle's approach in the treatise on poetry, this article focuses primarily on tragedy.

5 *Poet*. 7.1451a11-15. See also 9.1452a22ff; 1452a31ff; 18.1455b28.

6 On the mimetic relation between art and the world see, e.g., John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 21–29; Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*: *The Tragedy of Hector*, expanded ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 55–67; Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 151–76, 186–93; Silvia Carli, "Poetry is more Philosophical than History: Aristotle on Mimêsis and Form," *The Review of Metaphysics* 64, no. 2 (2010): 303–36.

7 See also *Poet*. 4.1448b24-28; 5.1449a33; 5.1449b10-11.

8 Aristotle holds that conformity to type is the major source of the "universality" of plots. He writes that "'universal' means the kinds of things it fits a certain sort of person to say or do according to probability or necessity" (*Poet*. 9. 1451b8-9).

9 I am referring here to the characters' individual ethical deeds, rather than to the poetic action as a whole.

10 *Poet*. 6.1450b5-12; 19.1456a33-b8

11 *Poet*. 6.1450a6; 1450a19; 4.1448b24-28.

12 *Poet*. 6.1450b8-9; 15.1454a18-19.

13 "It [tragedy] is mimesis of an action, and the action is conducted by some agents (*upo tinōn prattontōn*), who necessarily are of a certain quality of character and thought (and because of these factors we also say that their actions are of a certain quality). *There are*, *by nature*, *two causes of actions*, *namely*, *thought* (*dianoia*) *and character* (*ēthos*)" (*Poet*. 6.1449b36-1450a2; emphasis added). Here Aristotle brings character and thought together as the determinants of the nature of ethical deeds, as he does in the *Ethics*. See *NE* 3.2.1112a15ff; 6.2.1139a33ff; 6.13. Both in chapter 6 and 19, however, he defines *dianoia* in a way that virtually assimilates it to rhetorical argument, i.e., to verbal demonstration, refutation etc. See *Poet*. 6.1450b5-12; 19.1456a33-b8. On the relation between these two characterizations of *dianoia* in the *Poetics*, see Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, with a New Introduction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 1998), 154–158.

14 *Poet*. 6.1450a14-15; 1450a24-25; 1450a36-1450b5.

15 *Poet*. 6. 1450a37.

16 *Poet*. 6.1450a24-25; *DA* 2.1.412b19-22.

17 Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 157.

18 It should be noted, however, that in the *Poetics* external goods have a more prominent role in determining the quality of a person's life than they do in the *Ethics*. Indeed Aristotle uses the term *eudaimonia* only once in this treatise (*Poet*. 6.1450a17); typically he uses *eutuchia* (good fortune, prosperity). See *Poet*. 7.1451a.11–15; 11.1452a32; 1452b2; 13.1452b35-1453a17; 13.1453a26; 18.1455b28.

19 See below for the explanation of this point.

20 *Poet*. 13.1453a6; *Rhet*. 2.8. On the legitimacy of using the discussion of the emotions in the *Rhetoric* to illuminate Aristotle's brief remarks in the *Poetics*, without disregarding the difference between the two

treatises, see Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 168–184.

21 On the similarity between the subject and the object of this emotion in the *Rhetoric* see *Rhet*. 2.8; for the *Poetics* see below.

22 *Rhet*. 2.5.1382a28-30; *Poet*. 13. 1452b31-1453a13.

23 *Poet*. 7.1450b26-34; 7.1451a13; 11.1452a23ff; 8.1451a27; 9.1451a37-8; 9.1451b33-1452a1; 10.1452a18-21; 15.1454a35-b2; 23.1459a17-30. There are, however, significant exceptions to this rule. On this point see n. 67 below.

24 On the nature of the relation among historical events see Silvia Carli, "Aristotle on the Philosophical Elements of *Historia*" *Review of Metaphysics* 65 (2), 2011: 321–349.

25 In limit cases, however, events in the real world can display "flawless" patterns of probability or necessity that are indistinguishable from fictional happenings. See *Poet*. 9.1451b30–33.

26 On the difference between real and poetic world see below.

27 James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 59.

28 See *NE* 3.1.1111a3-6, as well as the definitions of the various virtues NE 3.6-5; *Poet*. 25.1461a4-9. On this point see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 54–55.

29 G. F. W. Hegel, *Aesthetics*: *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1 trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 40.

30 Ibid.

31 *NE* 6.7.1141b15.

32 *NE* 6.11.1143b13.

33 *NE* 2.2.1104a8; emphasis added.

34 See, e.g., *NE* 6.7.1141b14-22; 6.11.1143b11-14; 1.3.1095a2-3; 2.2.1104a1-9.

35 See *Poet.* 4.1448b18-20.

36 *NE*. 6.1.1139a8

37 *NE* 10.7.1177b26-1178a7; 1178b8-23.

38 *NE* 3.3; 6.1.1139a8.

39 *NE* 10.8.1178a15-21.

40 See, e.g., *NE* 2.3.1104b13-15; 2.6.1106b15-27.

41 *NE* 6.13.1144b1-16; 10.8.1178a17-19. The two kinds of *aretai* are so intertwined, according to Aristotle, that it is not sufficient to claim that one is in accordance with (*kata*) the other; rather, it should be said one is conjoined with (*meta*) the other (*esti gar ou monon ē kata ton orthon logon, all' ē meta tou orthou logou hexis aretē estin*) (*NE* 6.13.1144b25-27).

42 See *NE* 2.7; 4.

43 Experiencing the proper emotions, and thus harmony between the rational and the appetitive parts of the soul, is also a manifestation of the excellence of one's nature. See *NE* 1.13.1102b14-1103a3.

44 See, e.g., *Rhet*. 2.1.1378a220-28.

45 *Rhet*. 2.2.1378a31-33.

46 On this point see Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*: *Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 44–50, 165–171.

47 This is also the intended audience of the lectures on *Ethics* (*NE* 1.4.1095b4-6).

48 If we assume that the heroes cannot be blamed for the error (*hamartia*) that leads to their downfall (*Poet*. 13.1453a10). For this reading of *hamartia*, see, e.g., Nancy Sherman, "*Hamartia* and Virtue," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 177–196, esp. 186–90; P. Donini, *La tragedia e la vita* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2004) 87–106, esp. 101–3; M. Heath, "The Universality of Poetry in Aristotle's *Poetics*," *The Classical Quarterly* (New Series) 41 No. 2 (1991), 391–398, esp. 393, 395; Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Chance and Blame*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 295–8; Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 215–237, esp. 220, 229.

49 If we understand *hamartia* as culpable error. For this interpretation of *hamartia*, see, e.g., Dorothea Frede "Necessity, Chance and 'What Happens for the Most Part' in Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. A. O. Rorty, 212–13, 219 n. 39; Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 168ff.

50 On the integration of discernment and passions see, e.g., Stephen Halliwell "Pleasure, Understanding, and Emotion in Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. A. O. Rorty, 241–260; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 42–45.

51 Indeed "Those who imitate, imitate men who act (*mimountai oi mimoumenoi prattontas*)" (*Poet*. 2.1448a1).

52 Aristotle confirms that many tragedies were based on traditional stories (*Poet*. 13.53a8-12; 1453a17-22; 14.1454a9-13), and even recommends that poets do not deviate significantly from them (*Poet*. 14.1453b23-26). At the same time, he notes that the plots could also be based on historical events (*Poet*. 9.1451b30–33), or they could be invented (*Poet*. 9.1451b19-23).

53 See e.g. *Poet*. 7.1451a13-16; 18.1456a24-29.

54 *Poet*. 9.1452a3-5.

55 On this point see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 240 n. 26.

56 *Anagnōrisis* (*Poet*. 11.1452a31-32).

57 On this point see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 240 n. 27.

58 In the ordinary sense of *theorein* as "to look at," "to observe."

59 This is a general principle of Aristotle's theory of cognition. See *Post. An*. 1.1.

60 See, for instance, *Historia Animalium*, 1.6.491a7–14; *Post. An*. 2.1.89b21–3; *Met*. 1.1.981a1-981b9.

61 The example that Aristotle presents in *Poet*. 4 concerns the recognition of a previously known particular individual from the observation of his image or portrait. For a careful analysis of this passage see Stavros Tsitsiridis, "Mimesis and understanding: an interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics* 4.1448B4-19," *Classical Quarterly* 55 No. 2 (2005): 435–446. As several commentators have argued, however, Aristotle's thesis can be extended to other forms of mimesis, including poetry. See, e.g., Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 70–81; Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 157–171; P. Donini, "Introduzione" in Aristotle, *Poetica*: *traduzione e cura di Pierluigi Donini* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2008), LXIII-LXVII.

62 On this point see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 40.

63 Aristotle, however, recognizes that there can be limit-cases in which a chain of historical events display the same organization as mimetic *pragmata* (and can for this reason be the proper object of artistic plots). See *Poet*. 9.1451b30–33.

64 "*Legō … muthon . . tēn sunthesin tōn pragmatōn*"(*Poet*. 6.1450a5); "*ē tōn pragmatōn sustasis*" (*Poet*. 1450a14-15).

65 *Poet*. 23.1459a22-29.

66 *Poet*. 8.1451a17-19.

67 *Poet*. 8.1451a32-34. It must be noted, however, that Aristotle is quite flexible in the application of his principle of the organization of the events according to probability or necessity, and admits connections that are simply plausible or believable. See Poet. 24.1460a26-7; 25.1461b11–12; 1460a35-b5, 1460b23-6, 1461b11ff. For the explanation of the inclusion of the plausible in the construction of the plot see Frede, "Necessity, Chance and 'What Happens for the Most Part' in Aristotle's *Poetics*," esp. 208–12; Donini, "Introduzione," XLVIII-LVI.

68 *Poet*. 7.1450b24-31.

69 In the case of scientific hypothesis, allegedly relevant.

70 For Aristotle's rich view of the nature of ta phainomena, which include observable facts and endoxa, see G. E. L. Owen, "Tithenai ta Phainomena," in Articles on Aristotle vol. 1, eds. J. Barnes, M. Schofield and R. Sorabji, (New York: St. Martin Press, 1975), 113–126; Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) esp. Ch. 8; John J. Cleary, "*Phainomena* in Aristotle's Methodology," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2 no. 1 (1994): 61–97; Christopher P. Long, "Saving Ta Legomena: Aristotle and the History of Philosophy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 60 no. 2 (2006): 247–67.

71 Aristotle, *Met*. 3.1.995a34–6.

72 Aristotle, *Met*. 3.1.995a26–30; see also *NE* 7.1.1145b3–7.

73 Sophocles, *Oedipus The King*, in *Sophocles I*: *Oedipus The King*, *Oedipus at Colonos*, *Antigone*, 2nd ed., trans. David Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 483–486.

74 *Poet*. 11.1452a22-34.

75 *Met*. 1.2.982b12-22.

76 See *Poet*. 9.1452a3 and above p. 10.

77 See *Met*. 1.2.983a13-21.

78 *Met*. 6.2-3.

79 *Post. An*. 1.9; *DA* 1.1.402a7.

80 "All science is either of that which is always or for the most part" (*Met*. 6.2.1027a20).

81 I am referring to tragedies that, like the *Oedipus*, show a passage from good to bad fortune; tragic actions can also, however, show averted disaster and thus a passage from bad to good fortune. See *Poet*. 7.1451a11-15; 9.1452a22ff; 1452a31ff; 13.1453a8-17; 14.1453b35-36, 1454a4-9; 18.1455b28.

82 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 67.

83 On Aristotle's view of the universals of poetry see, e.g., Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 55–

60; Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 193–201; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 40–41; Heath, "Cognition in Aristotle's Poetics," 70; Heath, "The Universality of Poetry in Aristotle's Poetics," 390; Carli, "Poetry is more Philosophical than History."

84 As noted above, however, this understanding is limited by the inclusion of the plausible that at times takes the place of objective necessary connections. See n. 67 above.

85 *Poet*. 8.1451a17-23; 23.1459a21-30.

86 *NE* 1.7.1097b11–13; 1.10-11. On this point see Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 64–65; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 190–92.

87 It is worth noting that in *Poet*. 7 Aristotle writes that the length of the action must be such as to allow the spectator/reader to *remember* it as a whole: "In the same way, then, as bodies and animals must be of some size, but a size to be easily taken in at a glance (*eusonopton*), so a story or plot must be of some length, but of a length easy to remember (*eumnēmoneuton*)" (*Poet*. 7.1451a4-6).

88 *Met*. 6.2.1026b4-5; 1027a20; 1027a27-28.

89 "Everyone delights in imitations. … The reason … is that learning gives the greatest pleasure not only to philosophers but equally to others, although the latter have a smaller share of it" (*Poet*. 4.148b8-14).

90 This is not to say that poetry does not also contribute to the refinement of practical intelligence. Indeed, given the similarity between the domain of *praxis* and the poetic world, it is likely to enhance the audience's capacity to read real life events. See e.g., P. Donini, "*Mimèsis* tragique et apprentissage de la *phronèsis*," P. D'estrèe (trad.) *Les Études philosophique*, 4 (2003): 436–50; P. Donini, "La Tragedia senza la catarsi," *Phronesis* 43 (1998): 26–41; M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, esp. Ch. 2 and Ch. 10; Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, esp. 60–67.

91 M. Heath argues that, although works of poetry can be understood at different levels, the cognitive capacity to follow a *muthos* is minimal. See Heath, "Cognition in Aristotle's Poetics."

92 "Second-best is the plot that it is *said by some people to be best*: the kind with a double structure like the *Odyssey* and with opposite outcomes for the better and the worse characters. *It is thought to be best because of the weakness of the audience*; the poets follow the audience's lead and compose whatever is to their taste" (*Poet*. 13.1453a33-35; emphasis added). On this point see also *Poet*. 13.1453a13-14. Similarly, Aristotle notes that "the same mistake [as made by those who prefer double plots] is made by those who complain that Euripides does this in his plays, and most of them end in misfortune. For this, as explained, is the correct way" (*Poet*. 13.1453a24-27). The philosopher also writes that while some poets compose episodic plots—the ones in which the sequence of events is neither necessary nor probable—because they are bad (*Poet*. 9.1451b33-37), good poets do too "on account of the actors: in writing pieces for competitive display they draw out the plot beyond its potential and are often forced to distort the sequence of events" (*Poet*. 9.1451b37-1452a1). It seems plausible to assume that the actors' display was for the sake of (at least a significant part of) the audience, who enjoyed virtuoso performances and therefore gratified them as well as the poets who bent to the actors' demands. On this point see M. Heath, "Should There Have Been a *Polis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*?" *Classical Quarterly* 59 (2), 478.

93 In addition, in the *Politics* he writes that "spectators are of two kinds, the one free and educated, and the other a vulgar crowd composed of mechanics, laborers and the like" (*Pol*. 8.7.1342a18-20). One might go further and ask whether Aristotle regarded all spectators of the first kind as inclined and capable to appreciate tragedy in the way that he suggests.

94 See *Poet*. 4.1448b20-1449a15.

95 Similarly, comedy is the *telos* of the species of poetry that depicts the laughable (*to geloion*). See *Poet*. 4.1448b28-1449a6.

96 See *Poet*. 4.1449a7-32. At *Poet*. 4.1149a14-15 Aristotle explicitly writes that "after undergoing many transformations, tragedy came to rest, because it has attained its proper nature."

97 These are the two plays that Aristotle regards as the best specimens of their kind. See *Poet*. 13.1453a8-13; 1453a19-20; 11.1452a23-27; 1452a33-34; 14.1453b4-8; 1454a5-8.

98 See Aristotle's sobering comments on the nature of actual citizens in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he writes that most people are ruled by emotions and follow the laws primarily because they fear punishment (*NE* 10.9.1179a33-1180a4).

99 Creatures like us, who by nature love to learn, are likely to be drawn to what is intelligible even if they

don’t understand why.

100 Contrary to Sifakis’ view, who writes: “we may be certain that the audience he [Aristotle] had in mind when he spoke of the effect of tragedy was the real Athenian audience of the fifth and fourth century.” See G. M. Sifakis, *Aristotle on the Function of Tragedy* (Herakleion: Crete University Press, 2001), 133.

101 On this point see Donini, “Introduzione,” CXXI–CXXXIV.

102 See also *Poet*. 14.1453b4-7; 26.1462a11-14; 1462a17.

103 See Leon Woodbury, “Aristophanes’ *Frogs* and Athenian Literacy: *Ran*. 52–53, 1114.” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 106 (1976): 349–57; G. Cavallo, “Alfabetismo e circolazione del libro” in M. Veggetti (a cura di), *Introduzione alle culture antiche, I*: *Oralità, Scrittura, spettacolo* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992), 166–186; G. Cerri, “La tragedia” in G. Cambiano, L. Canfora e D. Lanza (a cura di), *Lo spazio letterario della Grecia Antica*, Vol. I/: *La produzione e la circolazione del testo* (Roma: Salerno editrice, 1992), 301–334.

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8. Dostoevsky and the Literature of Process: What Open Time Looks Like

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What I am really interested in is whether God could have made the world in a different way; that is, whether the necessity of logical simplicity leaves any freedom at all.
(Einstein)

8.1 Closists and Openists

I would like to describe two images of time that have persisted in Western thought. One pictures time as closed; the other, as open. By closed time, I mean that at any given moment one and only one thing can happen. If the identical situation were repeated, the identical outcome would result. By contrast, time is open if, at least at some moments, more than one event could take place. As William James expresses the point, the number of possibilities exceeds the number of actualities.[1] Some events are contingent in Aristotle's sense of the term: they could either be or not be.

Each of these views has typically been accompanied by others. The

associations are so frequent that they feel like logical entailment even though they are not. Proponents of closed time – let me call them "closists" – typically presume that underlying all the complexity we see around us, simple laws govern. Contemplating the number of subatomic particles that seemed to fit no pattern, Enrico Fermi remarked that "if I could remember the names of all these particles, I would have been a botanist."[2]

By contrast, openists have regarded complexity as ultimately ineliminable. The further back one traces the causes of historical events, Tolstoy insisted, the more causes of causes one discovers: events do not simplify, they ramify. There is no a priori reason to presume that the number of laws governing phenomena is smaller than the number of phenomena themselves. Gregory Bateson famously observed that if you order your room, and then neglect it, it will soon grow messy, but the reverse never happens.[3] Order requires work, but mess is fundamental.

Closists also like to posit some principle of optimality. The world is comprehensible because it tends somewhere – to the simplest, to the best, to the most efficient, to the most "beautiful" (as mathematicians and physicists say) or to "equilibrium," as economists prefer. For openists, perfect efficiency is inconceivable. At least in the biological and social realms, there is always what Clausewitz calls "friction," by which he meant the sum total of all those things ensuring that "the simplest thing is difficult" and the most efficient outcome vanishingly rare.[4] The world appears optimal when we exclude contrary evidence.

It should be obvious that closed time, simplicity, and optimality do not logically entail each other. The world could be deterministically governed by unsimple laws and tend to a suboptimal result. But in practice these three assumptions have come as a package. After all, if events tend to an optimal outcome, they presumably lead to a single outcome, and that makes predictability easier. So does rule by simple laws. The reason these three criteria have often seemed as if they were aspects of the same thing is that together they promise predictability. And for those who aspire to predict, that is a comfort.

Still more important than these three criteria is a fourth. Closists think in terms of a single moment of causality or design, whereas openists tend to imagine many. What I mean by this will become clear later.

8.2 Sufficient Rhyme and Reason

The best illustration of closed time is a perfectly made literary work. Despite

their manifold differences on other points, almost all schools of criticism have agreed that a good poem has some sort of structure, which ideally subsumes every last detail. In a successful work, as Aristotle first explained, "the structural union of the parts is such that, if any of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole."[5] Ideally, there is a sufficient reason for every detail, explaining why it is the best possible. That assumption lies behind the common critical exercise of showing why an apparently extraneous element does too fit the structure.

Consequently, optimality governs. Both fit and optimality eliminate contingency. Nothing needed is missing, nothing extraneous included. For Aristotle, the absence of contingency in poetry is what differentiates it from life.

Structure results in causality that works in both directions.[6] Foreshadowing most readily exemplifies backward causation. When a storm foreshadows a catastrophe, it does not cause it the way it might cause a shipwreck. That would be ordinary causation, with an earlier event causing a later one, but with foreshadowing the direction is reversed. It is the future catastrophe that causes the earlier sign of its approach. The same logic applies in real life if one believes in omens. The flight of birds or the entrails of beasts do not cause the event they predict, they are caused by it.

Novelistic events may characteristically be explained either as pushed or pulled. When Pip gives a pie to a convict in Chapter One of Great Expectations, we know it will mean something; otherwise, the work would lack design. The plan of the whole governs each part, and so incidents may be explained either as the result of prior incidents or as the best way to complete the overall design.

With structure comes closure, the tying up of all loose ends. When readers nearing the end of a novel count up the unmarried males and females to guess who will marry whom, they are expressing their faith that there will be an ending at which point everything is resolved. No continuation would make sense. In life, there is never such a moment.

The design of a well-made literary work is singular. Martin Chuzzlewit is flawed precisely because, when the initial installments failed to attract readers, Dickens radically changed the plan. For the same reason, a good literary work cannot rely on a deus ex machina, a term always used pejoratively. Events should follow from the overall design governing from the first word to the last. That is, it conforms to a single causal moment – the plan of the whole – and the author cannot intervene without harming the work. The reason that a deus ex machina constitutes a flaw is that it introduces a second causal moment to

introduce an outcome that the initial plan does not insure.

The author of a successful work remains outside the events. In Bakhtin's vocabulary, this outsideness ensures "aesthetic necessity," the sense that what does happen had to happen, and in just that way.[7] From outside, the author grasps the pattern as a whole. So can the reader who has finished the work. In effect, ideal reading is re-reading, the understanding of each detail in terms of a known whole. For the sophisticated reader of works with structure, even a first reading becomes an anticipated rereading, an exercise in guessing events by discerning the emerging pattern.

From the outside perspective, there is no suspense. Suspense takes place only when the reader temporarily foregoes the experience from outside and identifies with a character within. Since the character does not know the future, neither does the reader. For the character, as for people in real life, suspense is real, whereas with literature it is easily shown to be an illusion.

In practice, readers switch often between an internal perspective with suspense and an external one that makes design visible. University literature classes may instruct that the internal perspective is naïve while the latter is sophisticated, but to enjoy a work as it was designed to be enjoyed one needs to alternate repeatedly between both perspectives. If one never assumes the internal perspective, one cannot identify with the character or even care about her fate. If one surrenders the external perspective, one foregoes the special pleasure and beauty of a well-made artifact.

8.3 The God of Pope and Leibniz

You have probably surmised that theology in which God is the perfect author also exemplifies closed time. All history is His narrative, whose ending makes sense of it all. The Christian Bible begins "in the beginning" – the very beginning – and ends at the very end: "even so, come Lord Jesus." We are characters in the middle. In closist theology, God sees history complete from outside. It was a medieval commonplace that the future was as unchangeable as the past. And Giordano Bruno observed that "the divine mind contemplates everything in one altogether simple act at once and without succession, that is, without the difference between the past, present and future; to Him all things are Present."[8]

God's omniscience means that he cannot be surprised, as we always are. Surprise exists only for beings who experience time from within. For the same reason, God is never in suspense.

Leibniz made the implications of this model explicit. As in a well-made poem, there is a "sufficient reason" why everything is exactly as it is. Leibniz does allow for contingent events but only in a special sense. So that he can say that he does not eliminate contingency, he defines the term to mean events that are logically possible – in the sense that they involve no contradiction – but not actually possible.

Leibniz reasons that if more than one path were possible – two sets of identical circumstances could have two outcomes – then two fundamental principles would be violated. If two paths are possible, then, by definition, whichever happens lacks sufficient reason insuring that it had to happen. Second, if the two paths were different, one would have to be better, and so the worse one would contradict God's absolute goodness. Only one can be optimal, so only one can happen. In the divine economy, any change would damage the whole. That, of course, is the metaphysical "optimism" parodied by Voltaire's Candide, but endorsed by Alexander Pope:

> All nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
> All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
> All Discord, Harmony not understood;
> All partial Evil, universal Good:
> And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
> One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.[9]

Pope's "Essay on Man" presents itself as the perfect poem about the perfect world.

One more analogy with the perfect poem holds: in the world of a perfect God there can be no deus ex machina. That is Leibniz's key point in his famous correspondence with Clarke, who represented Isaac Newton. Leibniz objected to Newton's solution to the problem of the stability of the solar system, which Newton's equations did not establish. And yet it was obvious to all that the solar system simply had to be stable since it was produced by the divine mind.

Newton had suggested that perhaps God occasionally intervened to keep the system stable. Leibniz reacted in fury. Was God an inferior watchmaker, he demanded, who could not get things right from the beginning? No, God acted once, and from the beginning everything follows His already perfect design.

For God to intervene would mean He was affected by events in the world. But a perfect Being must be entirely outside the world. How else could He – as Leibniz said – "see the future in the present as in a mirror"[10]?

This view, however piously intended, at least seems to contradict other

Christian beliefs, such as a personal God who loves (which seems to involve being affected by people) and performs miracles (violates the natural laws He established). It certainly contradicts all those passages in the Bible where God is surprised. He brings on the Flood because he "regrets" having made Mankind, and regret entails lack of perfect foreknowledge. In Judges, he is repeatedly surprised by the sinfulness of the Hebrews. In the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, God, seeing Abraham would indeed have killed his son, commands: "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son" (Genesis 22:12). Now I know: God did not know before. He had to perform a test, and then wait and see how it would come out.

The God of the Hebrew Bible often changes his mind. Spinoza – who identified God with Nature – could interpret all such anthropomorphic passages as concessions to the naïveté of a primitive tribe. There could be no miracles. But Leibniz, for obvious reasons, could not deny miracles. He therefore solved this problem the way philosophers often do, and the way he himself took the sting from contingency, by redefining the term so that the problem disappears. For Leibniz, a "miracle" is not an event violating the laws of nature but a natural event that rarely happens, like snow in the Sahara. Miracles exist but not because of Divine interference. On the contrary, they are part of the initial design.

In the closist view, we, like literary characters, experience the future as uncertain, not because it is uncertain, but because we are in time. Uncertainty, surprise, the urgency of the present: all these are illusory. No matter how many times we read Anna Karenina, we see her doubt the future even though we know what will happen to her. Our future is as certain as hers.

8.4 Subtracting the Agent

A poet makes a perfect poem, and God has made the best of all possible worlds, but closed time need entail no such outside agent. Today, for most intellectuals, it usually does not.

God withered away. At first, the tradition of natural theology presumed that God had given us two books, the Bible and nature, and one could read the Divine mind through either. Therefore the discovery of natural laws was, far from impious, a celebration of God. God acts through secondary causes, the laws He made.

It should be obvious that this view easily slides first into Deism and then into atheism. Just subtract God and the identical picture of the world remains. Recall how Laplace explained Newtonian astronomy to Napoleon, who at last asked

about the role of God. “I have no need for that hypothesis,” Laplace famously replied.[11]

Laplace believed in the world of natural theology but without God.

He thought he had solved the problem of planetary stability and needed no divine interventions. In fact, he had not, because the so-called three-body problem – the equations needed to show how all the planets, moons, and sun interact – remained, and remains, unsolvable. Instead of a Divine mind, Laplace posited a merely hypothetical demon who knew all natural laws and the position of each particle at a given moment. For such a calculating demon, Laplace wrote, “nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present in his eyes. The human mind offers, in the perfection which it has been able to give to astronomy, a feeble idea of this intelligence.” Nothing could happen differently because of “the evident principle that a thing cannot occur without a cause which produces it. This axiom, known by the name of the principle of sufficient reason, extends even to actions which are considered indifferent.”[12] The devil who haunts Ivan Karamazov alludes to Laplace’s demon – he knows his demonology – when he describes such a world as “insufferably tedious.”[13] There are no surprises.

Laplace also contributed to probability theory, but he insisted that in describing the probability of an event he was not saying that events were less than absolutely certain. Strictly speaking, he explained, what is probable is not events but the correctness of our guesses about events.

8.5 Social Physics

The universe behaves as if a perfect God had made it. This vision inspired social “sciences,” whose inventors have presumed that what Newton did for astronomy could be done for the social world. These “moral Newtonians,” as Elie Halévy memorably called them,[14] include Helvétius, Holbach, Bentham, Marx, Freud, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, the anthropological functionalists and the economists relying on rational choice theory – which is to say, until recently, almost all of them. Auguste Comte, who invented the term sociology, originally proposed to call his new discipline “social physics.” In founding economic equilibrium theory, Léon Walras explicitly evoked the idea of “equilibrium” in astronomy, that is, the stability of the solar system that Laplace had supposedly proven. He even solicited Poincaré’s endorsement of his equation of economic with planetary equilibrium. Unfortunately, by then Poincaré had become convinced that the three-body problem invalidated the proof Walras assumed. It is this

history that has led Stephen Toulmin to conclude that economics was based on "a physics that never was."[15]

Social science so conceived relies on what I call God substitutes. The world behaves as if it were made by a perfect God because, without God, God substitutes do what a perfect God would do. So conceived. social laws, no less than natural ones, banish contingency and ensure simplicity.

God substitutes also enforce a tendency to optimality. When social scientists refer to a process as "Darwinian," they mean that some analogy to natural selection – say, the "invisible hand" of competition – drives results to an optimal point. As we shall see, Darwin said something close to the opposite.

For that matter, so did Adam Smith. People who do not actually read The Wealth of Nations are surprised to discover that about half of it traces English economic history, in which the driving force is, far from rationality, what Smith calls "human folly." But Smith, like Darwin, has been Leibnizized.

Why does Smith need narrative explanation at all? In the mid 1990s, I spent a year as a token humanist at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where it was patiently and repeatedly explained to me that when a discipline achieves scientific status, it can dispense with narrative, which can at best serve to illustrate but not to explain. The laws fully explain events. Think of it this way: although one could tell a story about how Mars recently traced its orbit around the sun, it would be pointless to do so because Mars's motion at each moment is already given by known physical laws. The more science, the less narrative. Before the 1950s, a doctorate in Economics required mastery of economic history, but as the discipline decided it was a true, mathematically based science, it reduced such courses to marginality.

Given human experience, what, apart from metaphysical predisposition, would induce someone to believe in optimality? How far have we really departed from the ancient view that heavenly motion must be circular because a circle is the perfect form?

8.6 Appendicitis

Malinowski, the founder of anthropology as a discipline, argued that anthropology can claim to be a science because it has banished contingency. Or, as he put it, has disproven the existence of "adventurous and fortuitous happenings." The disproof – I am not making this up – is that otherwise anthropology could not be a science! With chance excluded and laws known, Malinowksi anticipated that anthropology would soon permit "prediction of the

future." Lévi-Strauss also insisted that the chanciest human events – such as changes in women's fashion – would soon be predictable.

For the functionalist school Malinowski established, cultures work with perfect efficiency. In this sense, they are optimal. Anything disrupting a culture from outside is immediately integrated into a new, optimally efficient structure. As in a poem, everything serves a function or it would have been eliminated. Thus, there can be no mere vestiges – or to use the term then in use, no "survivals" – merely persisting from the past. Whatever looks like a survival must be an element that has changed its function, like horse-drawn carriages now used for romantic rides. To maintain otherwise, Malinowski argued, would be to yield to the "anti-scientific concept of 'dead-weights' or cultural fossils in human culture."[16]

I want to ask: Did Malinowski have an appendix?

8.7 The Openist View

Imagine visiting a city where all the streets are laid out in perfect geometrical order, like the centers of Petersburg, Philadelphia, or Brasilia. One would likely guess that someone had designed that downtown. Of course, it is logically possible that, by sheer chance, a series of independent and contingent decisions just happened to lead to the same result. But only a fool would draw that conclusion.

Perfect design almost certainly results either from a designer or a process that acts as a designer would. On the other hand, a jury-rigged mechanism, downtown London, or the federal tax code probably required input from many people at many times. A town hall – like the historic one in Ghent, Belgium – with wings built a different times and remodeled in different ways, with now obsolete materials overlaid by others in several increasingly modern styles, could have been planned as such by some whimsical architect, but, more likely, reflects the varying tastes and budgets of new users. One plan shows through another. In short, perfection and symmetry suggest a single design, whether conscious or natural, while imperfection layered on imperfection testifies to a historical process in which not everything was given at the outset.

It is precisely these considerations that led Darwin to conclude that organisms are not the product either of God or a God substitute, but of a contingent historical process. They result from a process, a term I use in a special sense to exclude the gradual unfolding of an initial plan. Rather a process, as I shall henceforth speak of it, refers to a sequence without such a

plan, a sequence of independent causal moments or decisions. Not everything is present at the outset and new choices intervene.

In The Voyage of the Beagle and again in The Origin of Species, Darwin describes a species of mole that has eyes but lives its entire life underground. Even if the mole should venture into the light, it still could not see because a thick membrane covers its eyes. The eyes are not only useless but positively harmful, because they consume calories and get infected. No perfect designer would have created the organism that way. The eyes are evidently there because some remote ancestor had actually seen with them. For Darwin, such imperfection signals that a contingent historical process had been at work.

Stephen Jay Gould has correctly argued that to presume natural selection insures perfection – that it is "Darwinian" – is to miss the point. Not optimality, but layers of suboptimality, point to process.

Darwin offers another example:

> He who believes that each being has been created as we now see it, must occasionally have felt surprise when he has met an animal having habits and structure not at all in agreement. What can be plainer than that the webbed feet of ducks and geese are formed for swimming. Yet there are upland geese with webbed feet that rarely go near the water. … In such cases, and many others could be given, habits have changed without a corresponding change in structure. The webbed feet of the upland goose may be said to have become rudimentary in function, though not in structure.[17]

Isn't it more likely that these geese are descended from others who did live near the water than that they are optimally designed for their present environment? And if habits and structure need not coincide even in biology, why should we assume the sort of perfect cultural alignment posited by Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and Foucault?

This is what open time looks like. Around the geometric core of Philadelphia, the streets go off every which way, as in London or Moscow. It is easy to see where the initial design stopped. Of course, it is possible that someone designed Philadelphia to have a symmetrical center surrounded by asymmetry, but it is much more likely that after the center was designed, many independent decisions uncoordinated into any plan produced the rest.

8.8 Remember the Hungarians!

In his marvelous book, How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built, Stewart Brand argues against the architectural maxim that "form follows function."[18] He describes buildings old enough to have been partly remodeled many times, as needs and tastes changed. Partly remodeled, because it rarely pays to redo the whole. And so a building comes to have the equivalent of those mole eyes: corridors that are not needed or even blocked off, closets designed for the smaller wardrobes of the past, and many changes due to technology: rewirings more than once a decade. "A building properly conceived is several layers of longevity of built components." Rooms are jumbles of old and new, and the building as a whole is "time-laden." Again, it is possible that blocked corridors and disconnected wiring systems were deliberately put there by some postmodern architect, but if the building is a century old, that explanation seems less than compelling.

I have before me a chart of the Indo-European languages. It shows 13 branches from Proto-Indo-European, including not just the familiar Germanic, Italic, and Indo-Iranian, but also Albanian, Armenian, and Tocharian (spoken in Western China and now extinct). Some branches have no sub-branches, while others branch many times. Indo-Iranian divides into Dardic, Indic, and Iranian, with Dardic leading to one language, and Indic to Bengali, Romany, Gujarati and eight others.

Asymmetry reigns everywhere, and asymmetry testifies to process, a series of separate causes not already immanent in Proto-Indo-European. West Slavic was divided from South Slavic because Hungarians invaded Europe and settled between what became the two branches. Russian Formalist linguists aspired to explain language change in terms of entirely immanent laws – systemic imbalances whose correction led to more imbalances elsewhere, ad infinitum. But if one remembers those Hungarians, it should be clear that no laws of linguistics would suffice to explain how languages change. Some changes result from "exogenous" causes. In the history of Indo-European languages, unforeseeable extralinguistic forces intervened many times.

8.9 Narrativeness

The most important difference between closed and open models is the number of distinct causal moments. In the closed model, one initial design unfolds over time. In the open model, several causal moments form a process. Closed time has a direction, open time does not.

Open time exhibits genuine contingency in the sense that causal moments are

irreducible to each other. When time is closed, contingency is illusory, like apparently irrelevant details in Dante.

Open time displays what I call narrativeness.[19] Phenomena possess narrativeness to the extent that narrative is required to explain them.

Narrativeness demands that some moments have what Bakhtin calls eventness: they can turn out more than one way. The present matters because it is not the automatic derivative of the past. It has presentness. We will really overcome the dominant theological tradition when we overcome the model of time that goes with it.

8.10 Intention

Dostoevsky argued that, contrary to common sense and legal tradition, human intentions are sometimes genuinely processual. Their time is open.

John Locke expresses the common sense view. It is obvious, he argues, that our actions necessarily derive from a prior complete intention. Of course, we may change our intentions, and we may "hold our wills undetermined until we have examined" the relevant circumstances. But if we are to act at all, then at some point we must arrive at an intention. Once we have, then, if no external obstacles intervene, "what follows after that, follows in a chain of consequences, linked to one another, all depending on the last determination of the will."[20] The literary analogy of this "last determination" would be the final plan of the work, as distinguished from all the trials of the creative process.

Locke's model is one of unfolding. The action follows from a single act of will unless an obstacle intervenes. In Dostoevsky's view, some decisions work this way, but many do not. Consider the Kairova trial, about which Dostoevsky wrote several articles. The mistress of a married man, Kairova discovered that her lover was sleeping with his wife in Kairova's own apartment. She purchased a razor, waited outside the apartment for a while, then went in where she found the couple asleep. She attacked the wife, but the couple awoke and prevented her from continuing the attack. She was accused of attempted murder. Specifically, the jury was asked whether Kairova, "having premeditated her act," intended to kill the wife "but was prevented from the ultimate consummation of her intent."[21] This is the Lockean model of intention as unfolding. Dostoevsky comments that the question to the jury is unanswerable because it presumes a kind of intention that probably does not apply in this case.

In all likelihood, there was never a moment in which Kairova's intention was complete. Rather, there was a succession of intentions, or, if one prefers, a

process of intentionality with no necessary outcome. Kairova was angry, murderously angry, and she bought a razor with the sense that she might somehow use it. At every moment, she responded to contingent events with another decision, which led her on to yet another moment of decision. "Most likely," Dostoevsky observes, she had no idea what she would do

> even when sitting on the steps with the razor in her hand, while just behind her, on her own bed, lay her lover and her rival. … Moreover, even though it may seem absurd, I can state that even when she had begun slashing her rival, she might still not have known whether she wanted to kill her or not and whether this was her purpose in slashing her.[22]

Had she not been restrained, Kairova might have done many things. She might have passed the razor over her rival's throat "and then cried out, shuddered, and run off as fast as she could." Or she might have turned the razor on herself. Or she might have flown into a frenzy "and not only murdered [the wife] but even begun to abuse the body, cutting off the head, the nose, the lips; and only later, suddenly, when someone took that head away from her, realize what she had done."[23]

All these actions, Dostoevsky insists, "could have been done by the very same woman and sprung from the very same soul, in the very same mood and under the very same circumstances."[24] If identical conditions can lead to different results, then time is by definition open.

Dostoevsky's point is not that Kairova's actions were guided by an unconscious intention. The Freudian model, so often imposed on Dostoevsky, still locates a complete intention at a single moment. Nor can it be said that Kairova was unaware of what she was doing. She was aware of what she was doing at every moment, but never decided what she would do at the next moment. There was never a moment corresponding to Locke's "last determination of the will," never a point after which actions simply unfolded.

Dostoevskian intention resembles an old building: it is intrinsically "time-laden" and processual.

8.11 Representing Process

Could a writer represent open time in a successful literary work? The entire tradition of poetics tells us no, because even the theme of open time must conform to an overall design. And yet, such works – let me call them processual

– are not only possible, but have been made by several great writers, including Sterne, Byron, Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky.

By a processual work, I mean one in which there are multiple independent moments of design. As a result, not everything fits, there is no structure, and closure is unthinkable. Such works stop, they do not end. Consequently, as in life, causality goes only one way: events are pushed into an open future, not pulled to a predetermined outcome.

Consider The Idiot. It has countless loose ends, the equivalent of staircases that go nowhere and of moles eyes that do not pay their way. Like London streets, plot lines sometimes wander off or peter out. In Part One, Myshkin is entirely naïve and childlike, but at the beginning of Part Two, he warns a cheat not to take him for a child. The conception of Myshkin changes several times. In Part One, Myshkin says he can't marry because he is an "invalid" – whatever that means – but for the rest of the novel he is constantly getting engaged with no reference made to his impairment. The novel's opening chapters center on a conflict between Myshkin and Ganya, who three times, ominously and eponymously, calls him "an idiot!," and says they will either be great friends or great enemies. But the promised confrontation never occurs. Ganya turns into a minor character playing no role in the main stories. Myshkin wonders why his father was once arrested, but the mystery is never mentioned again. When Myshkin mentions his benefactor Pavlishchev, Lebedyev asks: which Pavlishchev, since there are two who are cousins. Why mention this "other Pavlishchev" if we are never to hear of him again? Several times, notably with Vera and Radomsky, we are told that a character has an important secret, but the secret is never revealed.[25] It is as if Dickens never returned to Pip's pie. You might almost call Dostoevsky's book Frustrated Expectations.

Neither could one improve The Idiot by textectomy – omitting passages leading nowhere – because some of the best parts would have to go. Ippolit, who plays essentially no role otherwise, occupies 40 pages with a "confession" that is arguably the novel's high point.

One can give both external and internal explanations for such incoherence. The external one is well documented. Dostoevsky wrote the novel abroad where he had gone to escape debtor's prison. He and his young wife had to pawn their wedding rings, even their clothes, and they lost a newborn daughter because of their poverty, or so Dostoevsky believed. They went hungry. Dostoevsky gave in to his gambling addiction and always lost. He suffered epileptic seizures. He repeatedly begged his publisher for yet one more advance.

In these circumstances, Dostoevsky worked fitfully on a novel he called The idiot, but which bears almost no relation to the work we know. It was supposed

to tell the story of an evil man's conversion to Christ, but Dostoevsky could not make it psychologically convincing and refused to send in something mediocre.

At last, on December 4, 1867, he discarded everything and started with a new idea: he would begin with a hero who was already Christlike and test whether Christian goodness, if unaccompanied by supernatural power, would do more good than harm. Dostoevsky was genuinely unsure because he understood better than anyone that people resent their moral betters, and that such resentment can lead them to worse and worse behavior. In Karamazov, Fyodor Pavlovich is asked why he hates a certain person so much, and "he replied with his shameless impudence, 'I'll tell you. He's never done me any harm, but I once played a nasty trick on him and have never forgiven him for it."[26] We are all like that, only most of us are not self-aware enough to know it. It is therefore possible that a Christ figure would provoke evil more often than he would inspire good. If so, then the ideal of Christian virtue would be refuted.

Dostoevsky had no idea how the story would turn out or what incidents it would contain. He wrote from installment to installment without a clue about the next chapters. He confided to one friend, "I took a chance as at roulette. Maybe it will develop as I write it.'"[27] He did not know whether his Christ figure would pass the test, and the notebooks record countless possible plot lines and endings. The ending we know did not occur to him until he was completing the third of four parts, and even after that he toyed with many alternatives. As a Christian, he was distressed that Christian virtues in the end failed the test.

Understandably enough, critics have been perplexed by this novel. On the one hand, their theories tell them that, since a successful work requires structure, The Idiot must be a failure. One critic has indeed been bold enough to drop it from the list of Dostoevsky's great novels. The problem is that The Idiot is manifestly a great work. One might suppose that if an example flatly contradicts a theory, the theory might be questioned or revised, but literary critics are as unable to imagine an alternative to poetics as social scientists to moral Newtonianism, perhaps more so. Some have found ad hoc explanations. Most have Leibnizized the work: they have imposed a structure on it. There have even been critics who have discovered foreshadowing, despite knowing how the book was written. The best, and truly illuminating, study of the novel takes this approach. But I think, for all its perspicacity, it misses the big picture.

The Idiot relies on an alternative to structure. Dostoevsky was probably inspired by Tolstoy's War and Peace, which was being serialized at the same time and whose main theme was contingency. In 1868, Tolstoy published an essay in which he explicitly states that he is deliberately writing his book from

installment to installment so as to escape the false temporality of novels, with their "denouement" and neat endings. He writes not knowing what his fictional characters will do until they do it. Loose ends be damned. Or as Tolstoy put the point, he would give each part "an independent interest which would consist not in the development of events, but in development itself."

Development itself meant a process with multiple moments of intentionality. The Idiot borrows Tolstoy's method, but with a difference. Tolstoy began with the idea of representing contingency by writing processually. Dostoevsky did not discover that his real theme was process – that is, the very way he was writing – until the novel had already begun to appear. The very idea of process was, appropriately enough, discovered in process. To make this discovery unmistakable, Dostoevsky had characters refer and respond to real-world events that happened between installments and so could not have been part of any initial design. Ippolit's "unnecessary" confession expresses the book's theme and method:

> Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was happy not when he had discovered America, but while he was discovering it. Take my word for it, the highest moment of his happiness was just three days before the discovery of the New World, when the mutinous crew were on the point of returning to Europe in despair. It wasn't the New World that mattered, even if it had fallen to pieces.
>
> Columbus died almost without seeing it; and not really knowing what he had discovered. It's life that matters, nothing but life – the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, and not the discovery itself, at all.[28]

That is the human experience of time: an everlasting and perpetual process.

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Footnotes

1 See William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," "The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Psychology" and "Human Immortality" (New York: Dover, 1956), 145–183.

2 As quoted in The Yale Book of Quotations, ed. Fred R. Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 254.

3 Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 5.

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5 Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S. H. Butcher, as reprinted in Hazard Adams, ed., Critical Theory Since Plato (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 53.

6 I discuss foreshadowing in detail in Morson, Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

7 Caryl Emerson and I discuss outsideness, aesthetic necessity, and related concepts in Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

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9 Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man," I: 289–294, in Alexander Pope, Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1965), 137.

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18 See the many illustrations in Stewart Brand, How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They’re Built (New York: Penguin, 1995).

19 See Gary Saul Morson, “Narrativeness” in *New Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Winter 2003), 59–73.

20 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover, 1959), vol. 1, 349.

21 Fyodor Dostoevsky, A Writer’s Diary, volume 1, 1873–1876, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 476.

22 Dostoevsky, A Writer’s Diary, volume 1, 476.

23 Dostoevsky, A Writer’s Diary, volume 1, 477.

24 Dostoevsky, A Writer's Diary, volume 1, 477.

25 These features of the novel are discussed in more detail in Morson, "Tempics and *The Idiot*" in *Celebrating Creativity*: *Essays in Honour of Jostein Bortnes on the Occasion of His 60 th Birthday*, ed. Knut Andreas Grimstad & Ingunn Lunde (Bergen: Univ. of Bergen, 1997), 108–134.

26 Dostoevsky, Karamazov, 99 (translation modified).

27 As cited in Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865–1871 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 271.

28 Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Idiot, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1962), 475.

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9. Narrative and the Literary Imagination

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The full passage is: “The three facets of the great writer—magic, story, lesson—are prone to blend in one impression of unified and unique radiance, since the magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story, in the very marrow of thought.” (Nabokov 1980: 6)

The magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story.
(Vladimir Nabokov)

9.1

What I wish to discuss here are two ways of thinking about the imagination and its relationship to literature. The basic difference I am concerned with can be playfully put it terms of the divergence in sensibility and interest we encounter when reading David Lewis on Sherlock Holmes and Friedrich Nietzsche on Oedipus (see Lewis 1978; Nietzsche 1999). It is, at root, the difference between seeing the literary imagination[1] as essentially concerned with *fiction-making* or *culture-making*. Each way of thinking takes seriously that the imagination, both in general and as it concerns literature, is apt to “serve our worldly existence by pulling us out of its dumb immediacy,” (Brann 1991: 798) but they differ in respect to how they understand what this “pulling out” amounts to. According to one approach, it makes possible a fugitive act that allows us to create worlds that

are in obvious and often wondrous excess of the real—clearly much art puts such freedom to good use. According to the other, it is what allows us not to escape the real world so much as to assert ourselves over it: to achieve, say, sufficient critical distance from "existence" so that we can discover how to infuse it with new forms of meaning and value. The first way of thinking about the imagination is embodied in claims such as Jean-Paul Sartre's that to imagine is "to hold the real at a distance, to free oneself from it, in a word, to deny it." (1972: 198) The second is detectable when a philosopher such as Mary Warnock argues that the imagination "enables us to see the world, whether absent or present, as significant." (1976: 196. See also Lennon 2010; Pillow 2009)

The savvy reader will wonder why there should be a tension between these two ways of thinking about the literary imagination. I share this sense of puzzlement, but the trick, as always, is to explain philosophically how they might be brought together, and this is what will occupy me here. My argument will imply that a better source for guiding thought about the literary imagination is Kant on Milton, though by this no slight to Lewis or Nietzsche is intended. In Milton Kant found a nearly perfect artistic answer to a precise philosophical question.[2] The question, in Sanford Budick's words, is how an author's creative activity can be "characterized by *independence and spontaneity*—the *originality* (*Originalität*) of the poetic genius, preeminently—and at the same time inherit one's given world, one's past…?" (2010: 1) While I have no intention here of engaging in Kant scholarship, I do hope to show that asking how certain artworks successfully negotiate "independence" and "inheritance" can inspire a fresh way of thinking about the vexed relationship between the unreal and worldly in literature. As I will pursue the idea here, this is to wonder how the literary imagination can create freely and originally, unbounded, in some sense, by the "dumb immediacy" of the real world and its (actual) history, yet do so in such a way that sets the stage not, or not just, for abandoning the world but also, in a manner, for inheriting it: for receiving it in order to offer it back to us in culturally and cognitively significant ways.

It will be no surprise to hear that the labor of the imagination at times issues in *narratives* of an exemplary sort, and I also hope my discussion will cast light on why narrative is such an apt vehicle for the inventions of the literary imagination. Narrative is surely not the only vehicle of the literary imagination —the modern lyric, so frequently hostile to the presence of narrative in poetry, has shown us that this cannot be—but it is clearly among its most frequent and reliable. The imaginative achievement of a great expanse of prose literature is inseparable from its narrative achievement, and what needs to be understood better is how narrative can, at least on occasion, bring into harmony the literary

imagination's interest in both the imaginary and the real.

9.2

Let me begin with an unlikely example that raises a serious question. Consider what you would say to someone who claimed that Milton's power of imagination would have been more perfectly displayed had he written *Paradise Lost* without standing upon an inheritance of European Christianity: if the content of his epic poem had been *entirely* an invention of his imagination, Heaven, Hell, Eden, Original Sin and all. Why does it feel, as it should, wrongheaded to think that *Paradise Lost* would have been more imaginative just if Milton had made more of it up? If one thinks that the power of the literary imagination is essentially the power to "deny" the real, to liberate ourselves from "existence", or simply to create imaginary objects and events, why does it not follow as a simple point of logic that *Paradise Lost* would been more imaginative had Milton relied less on the world, such he took it to be, for his content?

The idea of the imagination as the power to abandon, to free oneself from, (etc.) existence is central to many of the theories of the imagination the history of philosophy has given us, and it is for this reason that a philosopher of literature can now get away with claiming that "a contrast with reality seems to be present in all forms of imagining" (New 1999: 72). But from the inevitable idea that the literary imagination "denies" or "contrasts with" reality *in some sense* we surely are not entitled to the conclusion that it is essentially unconcerned with it, as though the contrast must be categorical and the denial absolute. This is why the Milton example is useful. A good part of why the example seems silly is precisely because it runs afoul of our sense that Milton's —and hence literature of a like sort's—claim to creativity, originality, and artistic accomplishment is bound up with his imaginative handling *of* his culture: of his *lebenswelt* or *lebensform*, as certain philosophical traditions would have it.[3] What seems so naive about the question is that it appears to assume that the literary business of the imagination is solely that of underwriting the ways in which literature takes flight from the real and worldly. Since *Paradise Lost* weaves a fictional narrative, surely a good amount of "denial" of the world can be found in its lines. But the denial in Milton's case also seems so intentionally and essentially linked to mode of inheritance that the idea that his claim to imaginativeness would have been strengthened if he had loosened his poem's bond to his world should strike one as risible.

The question, naturally, is just what does it mean to say that a literary work's particular way of "denying" reality can also constitute its mode of inheritance? While the idea is bound to sound obscure at first mention, I hope to show that it

brings to view an important problem in literary aesthetics, and one that reveals just how central the concept of narrative should be, but unfortunately is not, to this area of philosophical debate. In this section I attempt to isolate the precise problem and to specify what confronting it requires of us, and in the following section I suggest a strategy for meeting this requirement. But before beginning, I need to bring some clarity to this talk of inheritance and denial.

To insist that the literary imagination can "inherit culture" is to insist that it can, on occasion a least, reveal to us something nontrivial about the texture of real human lives and practices, about the nonfictional world most, but perhaps not all, of us seem to inhabit. There are many ways a literary work might so reveal the human world to readers, and by "culture" I mean to capture in a broad gesture the various forms of worldly import and "real" mattering we might reasonably expect to find one ascribe to literature, from the capacity to engage in precise forms of cognitive and epistemic labor (the articulation of truth and the production of knowledge, most obviously) to the pursuit of more diffuse forms of ethical, affective, political, and psychological insight. Quite apart from the question of exactly what it means to say of a literary work that it explores and exposes human culture—the point of this essay is to come to understand this, so it is premature to demand more precision here—when we cannot say this, what we have before us is *whatever* remains when the imagination disengages its interest in the real and worldly: a work of mere fantasy, an exercise in pure make-believe, or "an entertainment", in the unflattering sense of the expression. Note that to claim that an author's work attempts to inherit her culture is to say in a general way that through her literary activity she is attempting receive and present back to readers a world, or aspects of a world, *presumed* to be real. I say "presumed" because authors and audiences might find that what they take to be real will under scrutiny turn out to be a myth, bunk, or false (Milton's Christian worldview, say). But it is the mode of presentation that most matters when trying to understand what literature does with the world and this is what I want to understand better when I speak of inheritance; metaphysical and epistemic concerns about conditions of success are another matter, linked to, but still separable from, the question I am exploring here.

It is easy to bring down to earth philosophy's enticing but misty talk of the imagination's liberation from reality and its abandonment and denial of existence. Whatever else this may consist in, in the context of literature it in large part is a matter of the imagination's way with *fictions*. Surely part of the literary imagination's creative activity just is its creation of fictions, and the imagination would seem to declare its freedom from "dumb immediacy" most assuredly in the particular manner in which it goes about generating fictional

content. It is the capacity to tell a story that never happened, and to do so without misleading or being guilty of a lie, that brings into focus the central imaginative feat at the heart of much narrative art. And it should come as little surprise that as we pass from the heyday of phenomenology and existentialism to contemporary philosophy of literature, we see that talk of the imagination's power of denial and abandonment has settled into a less poetic and more systematic study of fiction-making. While there is a healthy diversity in our theories of fiction, in the majority of those currently popular the imagination is linked to various forms of pretense or make-believe, though the latter is clearly dominant. On the make-believe model, when we consume fictions, "we are supposed to engage imaginatively with them, making-believe that the events narrated really have taken place, that the people described really do exist, and so on" (Friend 2003: 37). In a child's game a water balloon can become a lethal bomb and an old doll a dazzling dance partner, and imaginative literature is in effect a highly sophisticated way of using words much as children use these mere objects: as *props* in a game of make-believe.[4] It is generally granted that to call a text fictional is not to imply that it is a continuous string of sentences none of which have real referents or that the semantic reach of literary language can never extend beyond the fictional and into the world (though one might worry that the make-believe model will struggle to account for this in satisfying manner. See Gibson 2007: 157–173). Nor does anyone serious think that imaginative literature is so-called because its content is *wholly* made up, untrue, or fictitious. Anything, within reason, can become a prop in a game of make-believe, and to this extent the imagination is perfectly free to roam reality in search of fictions. The "abandonment", the "denial" of existence comes once one decides to make-believe, that is, imagine—it amounts to the same thing on this model—rather than believe what one finds there.

With these clarifications in mind, we can return to trying to understand exactly what it means to say that the literary imagination's way of abandoning existence might also constitute its mode of inheritance. Recast in light of these clarifications, the question is: how can the literary imagination's construction of fictions *also* be its manner of engaging with and exposing a world taken to be real? To move the discussion forward, consider the following suggestion for offering a speedy answer to this question. The suggestion will turn out to be deeply unsatisfying, but seeing why will help us understand what the true problem is.

Say that I claim that the literary imagination can produce narratives with two distinct layers of content, one primary and manifest the other secondary and oblique. On the whole, I claim, literary works explicitly (and literally) speak

about fictions and fictional worlds: this, and typically only this, is what the semantic surface of literary works connect readers to, and the content it produces here is simply fictional content. But on a deeper level, I claim, literary works can produce a kind of serious and often even philosophical content distinct from its manifest fictional content. This deeper layer of nonfictional content comes in the form of *implicit* points, *implied* propositions, *suggested* views, *hinted-at* claims about reality that literary works allude to and, in so doing, indirectly make available to appreciation. It is in this spirit that John Searle claimed, and many others have echoed, that while writers explicitly perform pretended illocutionary acts when creating a work of fiction, they may use the texts that are the products of these acts as vehicles for implying serious assertions: '"almost any important work of fiction conveys a "message" or "messages" which are conveyed by the text but which are not in the text"' (Searle 1975: 332). And as Kendall Walton puts it, "perhaps fiction is more often a means of performing other illocutionary acts—suggesting, asking, raising an issue, reminding, encouraging to act—than a means of making assertions about the world." (1990: 78. For variations of this approach, see Kivy 1997: chapter 5; Mikkonen 2013: chapter 2)

Points of this sort perhaps mark one way in which literature can connect to the real—I will just grant this—but I think they miss the hard problem. Before I can state what I take the hard problem to be, note that the emphasis on suggestions, hidden messages, and the like makes the cultural, the *real*, interests of literature at best a clandestine affair, something that is not to be encountered when we bear witness to what a literary narrative actually says but rather only when we move from the manifest content of a literary work to consider a proposition to which it gestures but which it does not contain. Much as I can, if circumstances are just right, convey to you that I no longer really care are to see you by uttering, "I'll see you around," literature, on this view, is revelatory of culture only when it means something other than (or in addition to) what it actually says. There is something to this, as we will see, but my worry is that the very talk of *implying*, *suggesting*, even *making an assertion* identifies the wrong currency of commutation for explaining what we most need explained. I am not concerned with denying that literature can ever imply or suggest propositions; it would be plainly silly to argue such a thing. But I do think we should be very skeptical of any theory which claims that a work of literary fiction itself cannot straightforwardly *contain* that which gives it a purchase on the world, that tells us it cannot really be "in" a literary work. This is because the ways in which we expect literature to expose culture are often too direct, too enmeshed in its manifest content, to be captured fully by talk of implied or indirect assertions and the like. Let me explain.

Imagine that I am beholden to this double-content view and you ask me to demonstrate how this might fashion an attempt to make sense of an actual literary work. Taking up your challenge, and perhaps revealing my innocence, I offer to try to isolate the basic messages I take to be implied by Milton's telling of the story of the fall in *Paradise Lost*. The poem, I say, hints at something basic about the human predicament: "basic" because in Adam and Eve we see, in Milton's words, "the whole included race." (IX.416[5]). The implied message, I say, is that what is most tragic about life is that human separateness is an inescapable feature of it; that we are bound to find ourselves alone even in the company of others and that this is because genuine community is impossible here on postlapsarian earth. Naturally you tell me that this message I have elicited from Milton is mightily underdetermined by anything *Paradise Lost* actually says. So to put some flesh on the point I think implied by Milton's poem, I argue that it suggests a vision of human nature as inevitably leading us to undo our relationship to the very thing that makes genuine community possible: God, or, for the modern reader who must render metaphoric what Milton meant literarily, the good, love, or whatever we take to be the principle that can bind. To support this, I draw your attention to Rafael's words to Adam, "If ye be found obedient and retain/Unalterably His love entire/Whose progeny you are. Meanwhile enjoy/your fill what happiness this happy state/can comprehend, incapable of more," (V.501–6) which concludes with the warning, "Attend: that thou are happy, owe to God/That thou continuest such, owe to thyself/that is, to thy obedience; therein stand/this was the caution given thee; be advised." (V.520–3). In these and surrounding passages, I claim, Milton implies that human nature is such that once we discover that if we just follow a simple rule we can live in paradise, we inevitably wish to break that rule. Milton's poem, I propose, suggests the idea that the greatest paradox of human nature is that we come to experience whatever makes paradisiacal existence possible as a barrier, a limitation, and so something we have a powerful drive to overcome through a defiant act of self-assertion. The point of Book IX, I conclude, is to intimate that something altogether basic to our humanity leads us to undo the bond that most matters to us, thus leaving us, like Adam and Eve, distanced and doomed to pass "fruitless hours" bickering "in mutual accusation," (IX.1187–8) an activity most couples since Adam and Eve will recognize as familiar.

You may grant that I have provided progressively less unreasonable grounds for my reading, but, if you are clever, you will play the skeptic and ask me why I think the poem implies precisely these propositions and not others. And to relieve your skepticism, I shall have to say more and more about the *poem* to justify the worldly messages I have ascribed to it. But as I do this, I am bound to

sense how meager these implied messages feel in respect to the significance of the pieces of the poem I invoke. In other words, I will begin to feel that what is doing virtually all of the work in my account of how Milton reveals something basic about the human predicament is the manifest *text*, the surface, in some sense, of poem itself. Again, this is not to deny that there may be messages, assertions, points, and suggestions implied by the work. But the point I am leading to is that invoking them to explain the poem's power of cultural articulation feels unjust since doing so ignores our powerful sense that it is the fictional *narrative* of the poem and the story it explicitly that is functioning as the primary site of revelation.

Anyone familiar with criticism, with how professional readers actually talk about literary artworks, will have noted that my reading of Milton would have sounded much more natural, and certainly more forceful, had all this double-content talk been dropped and the critical points simply been asserted of the narrative, offered as ways of characterizing its surface and the forms of aboutness it bears. This will only sound odd if one thinks that the narrative a work of imaginative literature weaves can bear no aboutness other than mere fictional aboutness. But this, of course, cannot just be assumed: such a reductive position, and one so unflattering to the literary imagination, should be taken with great suspicion. We need to explore the possibility of locating literature's capacity to give expression to culture much more directly in the work. Consider that in much recent work on self-expression it is thought that in standard cases it is more philosophically accurate to say that a smile after receiving a kindness *manifests*, as opposed to implies, gratitude, or that a shrug upon hearing options for dinner *shows*, as opposed to *intimates* or *indirectly conveys*, indifference. In these cases the relationship between vehicle and expression is too direct, too intermeshed, for the language of suggestion, indirectness, and implicitness to be philosophically appropriate: we are not given mere evidence for the meaning of my gestures but see it, in a significant sense, fully declared in them.[6] Philosophical aesthetics is of course littered with kindred ideas about the relationship between work and meaning, form and content. Literary expression, like self-expression, in paradigmatic cases refuses to let message achieve much independence from messenger. Or so we expect, and my point is that we should take this expectation seriously when wondering how imaginative literature gives expression to its interests in the real. And this leads to what I take the hard problem to be: how can we see culture, in the sense used here, revealed, *contained*, in narrative content that is explicitly fictional and is appreciated as such?

The dangerous assumption is that if we are to connect literature to culture

and the worldly, we must find in a work of fiction something *in addition to a fictional narrative*. Out of respect for the literary imagination we should attempt to see how fictional narratives might themselves be all we need for the task at hand. What is frustrating about double-content views is their literalism when they wonder how literature might *say* something serious, sending them off as it does in search of genuine or serious "utterances" and that which they convey in standard linguistic contexts: propositions, chiefly, or the content of a discrete "idea", "belief", or "attitude" whose expression takes the form of something fundamentally statement-like. It proceeds as though insight can in effect only be delivered in the assertive mode of speech. While making the problem soft and thus easily soluble, views of this sort ignore the fact that at the most fundamental level literature might engage culture, as it were, narratively and not declaratively,[7] by telling a kind of story and not by producing a kind of claim. It is now generally accepted that narratives bestow a unique kind of meaning, import, and cohesion upon the material they recount (see Goldie 2012: 15–30), and what seems amiss about anything that amounts to a double-content view of how literature is made to matter about life is that *this* power of narrative is overlooked. This is unfortunate, since it would seem to hold out the promise of a novel and intuitive way of approaching the issue: one which treats narrative and the kinds of meaning it is apt to generate as providing the foundation for understanding how fiction binds itself to culture (I return to this in the following section).

While this is frequently overlooked, the hard problem is not whether we can see reality *in works of fiction* but whether we can see reality *in fictions*. There is an important difference here. Recent work in the field often struggles to show that in works of fictions we can find genuine assertions, that is, utterances which prescribe belief rather than make-belief; we can find, in other words, not merely implied but explicit, truth-apt statements about reality in works of fiction (see Davies 2012; Friend 2008; Gaskin 2013: 38–62). This work is important for all sorts of reasons, but note that it offers us little to clarify how fictional narratives engage with culture in the respect in which the question is most challenging and most in need of an answer. A response that argues that we can find in literature stretches of truth-apt or world-representing content will repeat the problem of the double-content view but now in terms of two distinct kinds of content *explicitly* found in works of fiction. We want know whether we can vindicate our sense that we experience culture in the explicitly *fictional* content of the work: whether one and the same content can in some basic sense *be* both fictional and worldly. And we ignore this problem more or less entirely if we argue that insights into reality are to be found in those regions of a work that are not

fictional, just as we do if we place them in a realm of implied propositions.[8] In fact, since we are talking about imaginative art, we should very much expect the manner in which imaginative literature engages with culture to be, well, imaginative, which would seem to mean: in part bound up with its fiction-making, in part revealed *in its fictional narrative* and not, or not just, in a nest of nonfictional or "genuine" assertions we find uttered on this or that page of a work. We should attempt to see literature's characteristic mode of inheritance not in those moments when its narrative stops abandoning and denying reality but when it does so proudly.

What I have done in this section is identify the burdens we have to assume if we are to take seriously the problem of how the literary imagination engages with both fiction and culture. Even if we still have no answers, we have derived a set of expectations about how we should go about providing such an answer. We expect the mode of inheritance, in central and primary instances, to in some sense be manifest in a work, part of its content and bound up with, again in some sense, its meaning. And we also expect the act of inheritance to be *narrative* in nature, a matter of how a certain story is crafted and expressed and not an issue of how certain kinds of nonfictional utterances might be found lurking in literary-fictive content. Lastly, and to say in effect the same thing, we expect the literary imagination's mode of cultural expression to be of a piece with, indeed contained within, its fictional expressions.

9.3

So how might we move forward? The discussion thus far makes the following line of thought attractive. The literary imagination's power to create fictions is what gives it its most obvious claim to "autonomy", as Kant might put it: its freedom to venture out in often wild and spectacular excess of reality. And the next step is to try to locate the literary imagination's complementary power of cultural articulation in this fictional activity. And we do this, I suggest, by arguing that the cultural significance of this fiction-making consists in large part in how the imagination endows these fictional flights from existence with a kind of *aboutness*. It is in virtue of its ability to make these fictions matter in precise sorts of ways that the literary imagination can create works whose fictions may be of "real" significance. It is often thought that if art is to bind itself to the world, it will do so by generating *representations* of the real. The suggestion here is that we should conceive of the literary imagination as expressing its real interests not mimetically but by producing a certain kind of meaning.[9] This may still be a kind of representation, depending on your theory of representation. But it has little to do with making fictions picture or in some manner generate

likenesses of real states of affairs and it has much to do with how seeing how fictions achieve a kind of relevance, a manner of mattering, in fairly precise ways.

It is important to recall that talk of the imagination is welcome just about whenever we have to designate the form of thought that allows us to make present that which is not materially available to the mind or to the senses that feed it. We find the work of the imagination not only when beholding wondrous fictional worlds but also in humbler acts such as taking delight in the image of a friend who has not been seen in years. In fact, we can detect a trace of the imagination's power to go beyond the merely given in many forms of aspect perception, in coming to see human behavior as endowed with complex ethical and aesthetic properties, even in the ability to see confusion in the furrow of a brow, love in the expanse of a smile, or the French in a Frenchman. At some level these all gesture towards the labor of the imagination, perhaps co-opted by acculturation and made second-nature but still a testament to the mind's power to make more of the world than "dumb immediacy" offers us. The reason it is so difficult to draw a tidy boundary around the notion of the imagination is that the imagination is implicated in one way or another in such a vast array of cognitive, artistic, emotional behavior. I am not sure what unifies all of these cases, but in the shadow of grand acts of fiction-making are all the workaday feats of meaning-bestowal that make up a good share of out attempt to endow life with sense. It is through this, ultimately, that we make existence amenable, perhaps even tolerable, to human perception; to our ability to look upon it and see a reflection of our interests and values in it. Weaving narratives is one such way in which we do this.

In fact, as it concerns us here the relevant fictional activity of the literary imagination is inseparable from its narrative activity. It is hardly news that narrative is among the most useful tools we have for bestowing meaning, import, and cohesion upon life, fictional or otherwise. And the first philosophical point to be made is that narrative, certainly in the case of literature, is a testament to the imagination as a power of *reconfiguration*, a power that permits us to take material from the common world and place it in ever new relations (think, again, of Milton and Christianity).[10] But to narrate is also to bestow a kind of order, and an attendant kind of meaning, on the material one recounts. It is a way of showing it to matter in this or that way, in this manner suffusing it with distinct forms of aboutness and significance. The ways in which the literary imagination can take from the common world the beliefs, desires, interests, practices, events and even persons found in it and place them in novel relationships and contexts reveal how its creative activity can be, as Sartre says, a kind of liberation from

the world but still, with Warnock, a way of seeing the world as significant. This ability to create from the raw material of a culture's past or present a narrative that endows it with meaning is what I am suggesting we ought to identify with the cultural power of the literary imagination. The inventing of fictions turns out to be exactly what makes available to the literary imagination the tools for stepping into cultural space so that it may reorganize and reorder this space in novel ways.

Consider the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. This is very roughly the distinction between story and narrative, though "fabula" implies something more precise than the English term "story" does. The idea that animated this distinction for the Russian formalists is that a story can be told in many ways, and that each different way of narrating a story will generate a unique meaning. "Meaning" here identifies the distinct sense that is produced when a story is narrated in this way and not another: the narrative organizes a way of thinking and feeling about the events that constitute the story, a framework through which a manner of understanding these events is made possible. When it is said that the same story can be narrated variously, "sameness" is clearly not a concept of identity and it does not suggest the patently absurd idea that the content of a story remains, literally, uniform across various narrative articulations of it. The point is the weaker and more earthbound one that "the story" of common culture material can told in a great variety of ways: the story of the fall would be one example, though at the right level of generality any form of human experience an artist might explore can become that story which can be narrated variously. "Story" here identifies the slices of life around which narrative goals revolve: the goal of telling the story of modern alienation, of small town English life, of the black experience, of the founding of the state of Israel, of teenage angst, and so on (see Gibson 2011). The point is that narration, as the act of telling and so giving determinate shape to a story of common human experience, links that form of experience to a unique way of conceiving its meaning, even its nature (a proper literary example is forthcoming).

If this is so, then narrative meaning is a kind of meaning which accrues to the narrative itself, and it is detected only once we move beyond what its various lines mean and ask what *the narrative means*. "Meaning" here is better seen as an axiological than semantic notion, that is, a term that indicates that a certain stretch of language bears certain kinds of value, in the broadest sense possible. When we ask what a narrative *means*, we are asking, in the primary instance, what the story is a story of, not as a request to catalogue the events which constitute it but to give voice to how and why these events, told in this manner, *matter*: what general concerns they speak to, amplify, or explore. When we pass

from standard forms of linguistic meaning to narrative meaning, we are not concerned with the "content" of an expression but with articulating the significance of a series of events or constellation of experiences *expressed in a particular manner*. We are concerned with what they are "all about", as the phrase has it. If you know nothing of me, of the academic profession, or of a life lived in constant fear of nothing in particular, a well-wrought narrative of such a slice of life will imbue your understanding with a form of sudden and rich determinacy. It will give you a sense of the shape of a kind of life lived in a certain way, and the particular shape it is given will prompt a unique understanding of what it *means*—in a perfectly familiar sense of "meaning"—to be me, a professor in the humanities, or a coward. Through the narrative a series of events is, as it were, *made meaningful* in this way or that. Philosophers of language at times distinguish between "linguistic meaning", as Michael Kremer puts it, "and 'meaning' in a broader 'existential' sense of significance." (Kremer 2001: 56). If talk of "existential meaning" feels purple, talk of narrative meaning should not, and it captures the basic idea very well: meaning at times is a matter not of signification but significance. It concerns the import, the consequence, of the events as narrated and attempts to make available a distinct cognitive and affective orientation toward them.

It is in this sense that we can claim that in paradigmatic cases the literary imagination's vehicle of cultural communication is a narrative and not some proposition or suggestion indirectly expressed through it. To see this it is sufficient to point out something crude in thinking about fictional narratives, an idea that in part explains the allure of double-content views of the sort explored above. It is, again, the reductive idea that since the semantic surface of a fictional narrative describes fictions and fictions alone, its aboutness is merely fictional, extending no further than the boundaries of the imagined world the narrative generates. We can now see the myopia of this. Our sense of the meaning of the content of a narrative is only in part determined by the "meaning" of the representational content of the various descriptions which constitute it, which, let us grant, yield only fictions to appreciation. But from the moment we are first introduced to the practice of story-telling as children, we are trained to experience narratives by the light of a conception of *why they matter*, what their point is, of what grander things they are *about*, all of which can extend our experience of narrative aboutness well beyond merely fictional states of affairs and bring it to bear on culture. And note that since this is a claim about how we experience narrative aboutness, it is a claim about how we experience a story's content, of what we find *in* it (see Gibson 2006). This is a crucial point, for if it is sound it implies that, in the case of literature, we experience narrative

meaning as part of its manifest content, as, that is, bound up with, *contained in*, the story which unfolds between the covers of a work. This meaning is not *stated* in any literal sense in the language of the work, but since we are not talking about a kind of linguistic meaning, this is hardly a surprise. We experience narrative meaning in a work not because be glean it off this or that stretch of language but because in our very attempt to understand a work we must form conceptions of its broader cultural and artistic projects, and these are experienced not as readerly projections but as part of the literary narrative itself: of what it is *about*. We can get it wrong, of course, as we can with any act of meaning attribution, be it to sentences, gestures, artworks, and to almost anything else under the sun. The point I am making concerns our experience of narrative content, and its relevance is that it gives us reason to believe that once we form a conception of narrative meaning in the context of literature, we treat that meaning as having primary domicile in the work itself and not, as the double-content view had it, in a realm of implied or suggested propositions. This, I take it, shows how we can make good on the promise to treat the problem as hard, in the sense I gave it above, and still find a way of overcoming it.

Narrative meaning is a species of *imaginative* meaning in at least three overlapping senses. First, it is an expression of the imagination's power of meaning-bestowal, in Warnock's sense of imagination as seeing-as-significant. Secondly, it is imaginative is the altogether obvious sense that in the relevant kind of literature *fiction-making*, the imaginative act par excellence, is what underwrites story-telling and gives it its particular content and so that which the narrative makes meaningful. And, finally, it is imaginative in the sense that if we are to experience a narrative and its aboutness and not just a concatenation of sentences each with discrete meanings, we must make present something which is not immediately given, and it thus demands an act of imaginative transcendence. Most of us are sufficiently competent readers that we do this with ease and usually unawares. But as anyone who has a child knows, the moment a mind becomes capable of explaining a story *without* recounting everything that occurs in it, the moment a mind can get to the point and say quickly and insightfully what a story itself is about, is the moment we know a child has figured out how to put the imagination to work.

Let me now offer a brief literary example, once that will bring to earth my points about stories, narratives, and imaginative reconfiguration. Our literary heritage clearly offers us a surplus of stories of wickedness. Think of Satan, the fictional form in which so much literature offers its particular image of evil. Consider first Dante's representation of Satan, of "Dis", who in *Inferno* is represented as wholly *devoid* of agency, frozen, and simply the furthest pole one

reaches in Hell. And note that depicting Satan this way is equal parts brilliant philosophy and brilliant poetry, for it gives all the agency to *us*, the human sinner, and reveals Hell to be a place we voluntarily enter, not prodded by pitchforks and devilish promptings but by *ourselves*. It thus offers us a powerful image of the human as freely evil, and of Dis as having an almost eliminable role in explanations of our propensity to sin. Next think of Shakespeare's own Satan of sorts, Iago, who, unlike Dante's Satan, is pure agency and is presented as entirely human. Iago is evil packaged as the perfectly false friend. His traps reveal him to be a creature possessed of immense creative and improvisational power, a kind of Miles Davis of malice who plays us off one another and in doing so creates the conditions of human separateness so characteristic of how much Renaissance and Early Modern literature imagines Hell. Yet if Dante's Dis has no voice and so no story to tell, Iago, though certainly with a story to tell, still refuses to render intelligible the source of his evil: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: From this time forth I never will speak a word." (*Othello*, v.ii.203). For this reason, his behavior is bound to baffle, striking us as human yet inexplicable, incapable of rational explanation. And surely one way of getting at Milton's accomplishment in *Paradise Lose* is to highlight the extraordinary manner in which the voice and activity, if not person, of Satan are made to appear fully human yet now also fully intelligible. Satan's words to Eve sound terrifyingly close to words the better part of human reason would produce, and we hear them as such. When Adam claims, "Nor can I think that God, creator wise/Though threat'ning, will in earnest so destroy us, dignified so high" (ix.937–940), he completes in his own voice an argument begun by Satan and passed through Eve, and we hear ourselves, guided by temptation and desire, but still *reasoning* in an altogether familiar way. The ground of evil here seems finally to have come home and been given domicile in the human mind: wholly a matter of human agency, just as for Dante, and a wholly human voice, just as for Shakespeare, but now also intelligible and capable of explaining itself in terms altogether graspable by creatures such as ourselves.[11]

These poets all use familiar cultural material yet beat out of this inheritance novel, distinct ways of thinking and feeling about this material, of conceiving its meaning, though "meaning" is now used in a purely narratological sense. If each of these poets attempts to tell the story of the sources of human evil, their tellings make available very different ways of making sense of it: of thinking about it, of conceiving its nature and significance, *of understanding it*. If we say this, then we are entitled to say that literature's relation to the real is perhaps better seen as foundational than representational, issuing not in images of the real but in acts of meaning-making which open up new possibilities for grasping

the sense of some feature of human experience. In the case of Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, we see works which can each *ground* a way of taking ourselves and our worldly situation to be, offering as they do narratives which organize a purchase on the nature and import of the regions of human culture they address. As we pass from one work to another, we are regarding works that are *constitutive* of a sense we can ascribe to the world. As such, we can say without being guilty of obfuscation that a literary work's particular manner of "abandoning" reality may also constitute its mode of inheritance. For the respects in which these works fashion a distinct sense of features of human circumstance and predicament is inseparable from the respects in which they create fictions that suffice to generate this sense and, with it, a sense of the kind of world we inhabit. In this respect, the literary imagination's fiction-making can at times also essentially be an act of culture-making.

9.4

I have no illusion that I have offered a fully developed account of how we can reconcile the literary imagination's interest in the fictional and the real, or even of exactly what the literary imagination is. What I have tried to do, at root, is motivate an interest in approaching the imagination in a much more expansive manner than we find in contemporary literary aesthetics. We are currently overflowing with powerful, sophisticated theories of the imagination and its role in creating fictions. And I hope the discussion of this essay gives one reason to think that result has been a one-sided view of what the imagination is and why it matters to literature. The aspect of the imagination contemporary philosophers of literature have explored is surely crucial, but it is at best just one half of the story of we should be telling. The other half, I have suggested, will concern the role of narrative in getting these fictions to matter in a particular way, and a way that can vindicate our sense the products of the literary imagination are often, and essentially, cultural artifacts that show us as much about existence as they do about how to escape it.[12]

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Footnotes

1 By “literary imagination” I mean nothing technical. The phrase functions to indicate that a point is being made not about the imagination *simpliciter* but as it is implicated in the production of narrative literature.

2 See Budick (2010) for a striking study of Kant’s interest in Milton.

3 The concept of a *lebenswelt* or “lifeworld” makes its way into the phenomenological tradition via the work of Edmund Husserl, and the notion of *lebensform* or “form of life” into ordinary language philosophy via the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

4 In recent years it has become popular to combine Walton’s make-believe theory with speech-act theory. This approach tends to favor making the notion of a fictional utterance explanatorily primary. A fictional utterance is grammatically indistinguishable from an assertion except that it is produced with the recognized intention that “we make-believe what is expressed by [the] utterance, rather than believe it.” (Davies 2006: 42) The virtue of having recourse to speech-act theory here is that its reliance on speaker intentions allows us to offer a tidy way of explaining the difference between something being fictional and something merely being treated as fictional, a basic distinction many worry Walton’s otherwise acceptable theory cannot accommodate (see Davies 2006: 40).

5 All book and line references to *Paradise Lost* indicated in parentheses are to Milton 2006.

6 That is to say, in the epistemic vernacular of this debate, that they offer *knowledge*, and not mere evidence, of the mental states so expressed in these gestures. See Green 2007 and Bar-On 2004. If it is worth mentioning, my suggestion is not that we should model literary expression on self-expression. The analogy is fruitful but clearly limited.

7 As grammarians, so to say, understand a declarative statement. I am unconcerned here with those areas of ordinary language philosophy and linguistics in which declaration is a technical notion for a speech-act that is to be contrasted with assertion.

8 If one agrees with Stacie Friend that "fiction" is a genre term and functions neither to characterize the status of a work's content (as, say, all made-up or imaginary) nor to specify the kind of cognitive attitude (belief or make-belief) to be taken up in respect to it, then it is question begging to call truth-apt or world-representing stretches of literary language *nonfictional* (see Friend 2007, 2008). I am sympathetic to this but do not rely on this model of fictionality here.

9 Arthur Danto often conceives of the representational quality of artworks in this light, making it a matter of their embodied meanings (see Danto 2000). I am reluctant to think of the meaningfulness of artworks, at least in the sense I give it here, as in any interesting respect "representational." Regardless of this, what I am denying is the relevance of the traditional mimetic notion of representation: the old idea that a literary representation of life somehow offers an image, picture, or mirror of reality.

10 I ignore here discussion of whether we should be narrativists in respect to actual life and real selves. I agree that narrative has as much potential to distort as it does to reveal, and this admission implies exactly nothing about the extent to which literature makes use of narrative to bear on reality. For an excellent discussion of this, see Goldie 2012: 150–171.

11 It is true that a culture could possess these stories without possessing a literary tradition, and that my example thus does not say much about the specifically *literary* significance of these narratives: of how the literary and aesthetic dimension of these works matter to their narratives and the value we find in them. A fully developed theory of literary narrative would clearly have to address thus. Here, however, I am simply exploring a point about the importance of possessing stories—about what we acquire in virtue of having access to narratives that organize cultural material in a particular way—and I do not have the space to tackle this larger issue. I think it should be clear that my point about narrative sets up a novel way of approaching these literary and aesthetic issues, but it is another project. I thank Tzachi Zamir for bringing to my attention that I owe a word on this.

12 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference in honour of Sanford Budick at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and it is worth saying that the paper itself grew out of an attempt to make sense of Budick's immensely suggestive claim that the way in which poetry, as exemplified in Milton, reconciles originality and inheritance "may be said to constitute culture itself, perhaps even what is considered to be human" (2010: 1). I am grateful to Tzachi Zamir and Sanford Budick for discussion of the ideas presented here and for their hospitality during my stay. Zamir offered extensive criticism on the version published here, and while the argument will still fall short of convincing him, I hope it is clear that it is at least better on account of him.

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10. "*And We Shall Compose a Poem to Establish These Truths*": The Power of Narrative Art in South Asian Literary Cultures

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Over more than two millennia, premodern South Asian poets of all religious persuasions—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and Muslim—produced an enormous quantity of narrative literature in a wide variety of languages, the bulk of it displaying highly sophisticated literary artistry. Most well-known, perhaps, are the so-called "epics," the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, their Sanskrit forms fixed at some point in the early centuries of the common era, their combined volumes (in pared down, critical editions) taking up several feet of library shelf space. Yet the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* form just the tip of a very large iceberg. Of the incomplete corpus of Sanskrit texts that have survived, a staggering amount is in narrative form: epics, Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, Hindu *purāṇa*s, courtly poetic narrative and drama, Mughal romances, life-stories of *jina*s, *buddha*s, and *bodhisattva*s, hagiographies, and so on. Other genres also contain long narrative passages. Premodern philosophical discourse often interweaves

technical exposition with stories, while sacred literature such as the Veda combines ritual mandate with rich veins of narrative. Narrative forms suffuse virtually every genre of textual production in premodern South Asia.

Such tremendous weight is perhaps most obviously given to narrative because of its close association, in the extant theoretical literature, with cultivating *dharma* or the moral life. Indeed, Indian literary tradition in every language is unanimous in contending that narrative (and, again, this means most often very long and finely wrought *poetic* narrative) can do things—humanly very important things—that other forms of discourse simply cannot. In the opening chapter of a fourth-century Tamil poetic narrative from South India known as the *Cilappatikāram* or "The Lay of the Anklet" (Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ 1978), for example, a grain merchant rushes in to tell his friend, the prince, the awesome events he has just witnessed: a young woman, her husband unjustly killed by the king of Maturai, tore off her breast, flung it at the city, burned the city to the ground, and then ascended into heaven as a goddess to be reunited with her slain beloved. The astonished but ever wise prince replies with the words of this essay's title: "We shall compose a poem with songs … to establish these truths" (line 60), suggesting that it is only in poetic narrative form that such wondrous events become humanly comprehensible. The seventh-century Sanskrit literary theorist, Bhāmaha, in his *Kāvyālaṅkāra* (2008), lists five types of *kāvya* or poetry at verse 1.18, of which the first four are clearly narrative in form: drama (*nāṭya*), epic or "great narrative" (*mahākāvya* or *sargabandha*), biography or history (*ākhyāyikā*), tale or story (*kathā*), and lyric or independent verses (*anibaddha*). He further contends that "the study of good poetry imparts skill in the fine arts and in ethics (*dharma*), material well-being (*artha*), love (*kāma*), and liberation (*mokṣa*); it provides both pleasure (*prīti*) and fame (*kīrti*)" (verse 1.2). Quoting Bhāmaha, the great tenth-century Kashmiri Śaiva literary theorist, Abhinavagupta, concurs that poetry (*kāvya*, ornate courtly poetic narrative) confers both pleasure (*prīti*) and moral instruction (*vyutpatti*), with the "instruction" of poetry (as opposed to that of religious scripture or history) defined by its pleasurable qualities, with "bliss" (*ānanda*) as its chief goal (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 41). Another Kashmiri and perhaps a contemporary of Abhinavagupta, Kuntaka, maintains that "*kāvya* [poetic narrative] … is both a means (*upāya*) of practicing *dharma*, etc., and a delight to the hearts of the high-born" (1977, verse 1.3). In the seventeenth century, Jagannātha, arguably one of the last great literary theorists writing in Sanskrit, defines poetry (and particularly poetic narrative or *kāvya*) as "sound (*śabda*) that gives rise to pleasurable (*ramaṇīya*) meaning … the 'pleasurable' (*ramaṇīyatā*) being that which produces transcendental delight" (1903, 5–6). Far from merely

entertaining, in other words, poetic narrative is quite ubiquitously assumed to "instruct" in what are known as the "four aims of human life" (*puruṣārtha*): ethics, material well-being, love, and eventual liberation from bodily rebirth and redeath.

For those drawn to recent Euro-American theoretical interest in what might loosely be called "narrative ethics" via the work of Levinas and Benjamin, Nussbaum, Rorty, and Ricoeur, among others, the details of the connection between narrative and ethics, between poetic art and moral formation, remain frustratingly opaque in the premodern South Asian theoretical universe, perhaps precisely *because* such connections are so ubiquitously assumed, like the workings of *karma*, the plurality of divine beings, or the fact of human hierarchies of caste. Pollock (2001), for example, attempts to map out what he calls the "social aesthetic" of Sanskrit literary theory, concluding that "literature in India was conceived of not only as verbal icon or metaphysical experience, but also and eminently … as social practice, indeed, equipment for living" (223). Hudson offers a reading of the *Mahābhārata* epic attentive to both the poetics and ethics of suffering (2013). Premodern literary theorists and commentators writing in Sanskrit toss off tantalizing tidbits regarding "pleasure," "moral instruction," and "liberation," but then proceed quickly to the technical details of how plot structure, scene, character, context, image, figure of speech, sentence structure, verb tense, and grammatical ending all work to produce a certain kind of experiential effect in the audience that is seldom connected in any direct way to what would today be called "ethics." How exactly the consumption of poetic narrative serves to shape the moral personhood of the reader or listener is never spelled out in any detail.

This essay attempts to tease out and develop some of these connections between poetic narrative form and the cultivation of *dharma*, between ethics and aesthetics, drawing examples from a sizable theoretical literature that space does not allow one to address in full in any way. Having considered possible ways that the reading of poetry or the watching of a staged drama might contribute toward realization of the four classical aims of moral life (and beyond) theoretically, a close reading of a dramatic comedy from South Asia will serve as a working illustration. In conclusion, the potential relevance of such an exercise for contemporary Euro-American discussions of narrative ethics will be briefly considered.

A bit of background on the general concerns and approaches of pre-colonial South Asian literary theorists—questions, definitions, and debates that remain surprisingly consistent in form if not in content and conclusion for roughly a millennium, from the seventh century CE through the seventeenth—is first

required. Of obvious concern is the definition of poetic narrative itself; how is poetry (*kāyva*) distinct from ordinary or ritual language? In the seventh century CE, Bhāmaha defines poetic narrative or *kāvya* as the beauty of both "sound and meaning together" (2008, verse 16), Daṇḍin as a linguistic "body with adornments … the body a series of words conveying a desired meaning" (1957, verse 10); Daṇḍin goes on in his work, the *Kāvyādarśa* (also known as the *Kāvyalakṣaṇa*), to treat quite exhaustively the varieties of poetic "adornment" such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and so on. Daṇḍin further defines *mahākāvya* or "great" poetic narrative in terms of character, theme, plot, and style: it must be based on a historical incident or at least be realistic; it must have royal characters and vivid descriptions of landscapes and courtly life; it must focus on themes of love and war; it must be full of poetic adornments evoking various sentiments (1957, verses 14–19). Over time, however, the focus of literary theory shifts from the formal analysis of *alaṅkāra* or poetic adornment to the ways in which such adornments affect the reading or listening audience; the scope of narrative meaning, in other words, turns from formal analysis of the poetic text itself to careful consideration of the audience experience generated by that poetic text. This is the great innovation of the Kashmiri literary theoretical tradition, first with Ānandavardhana in the ninth century, followed by Abhinavagupta in the late tenth (McCrea 2008). Drawing on categories of audience experience developed centuries earlier in the analysis of theatrical performance, Ānandavardhana, for example, identifies *dhvani*—the suggestive power of language unique to poetic utterance—as "the soul of poetry" (*kāvyasya ātmā*) that "delights the hearts of sensitive readers" (*sahṛdayamanaḥprītaye*) in his first verse (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 8), cultivating in those sensitive readers, according to the commentator, Abhinavagupta, a "stable state of mind" (*cittavṛtti*) that is "aesthetically relished" (*āsvādyatva*) (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 79). This "aesthetic relishing" made possible through the "stable states of mind" produced in learned readers by great poetic narrative, is termed *rasa*, a word that ranges in meaning from "sap" or "juice" to "essence" but that is perhaps best left untranslated in this literary context. After Ānanadavardhana, *rasa* becomes more or less definitive of poetic narrative; if a literary work does not produce *rasa* experience in the learned audience, it simply does not qualify as poetic art (McCrea 2008, 441–442).

What exactly is this *rasa* experience, and how is it produced? Ānandavardhana returns to the earliest formulation of *rasa* that has survived: the perhaps second- or third-century CE analysis of theatrical performance (dance drama) attributed to Bharata, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Here Bharata likens *rasa* to the way in which a gourmand savors an excellent meal. Just as a culinary

connoisseur relishes the delicate blend of spices, tastes, aromas, and textures, so, too, does the literary savant relish the many constituents of any dramatic performance. *Rasa* in the audience is produced by the various stimulants (*vibhāva*s), consequences (*anubhāva*s), and psychological states (*vyabhicāribhāva*s) on stage; altogether these create a lasting mood (*sthāyībhāva*) that the dramatic critic or connoisseur then relishes (1980, verses 6.32–37). Imagine for a moment a theatrical production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that Bharata might well have liked in part, although (following the theatrical vision of his *Nāṭyaśāstra*) he certainly would have staged it as a musical and altered the ending to ensure the happy reunion of the hero and heroine. Imagine Act II, Scene II: earlier in the day Romeo and Juliet have seen each other and immediately fallen head over heels in love. Later that evening, a lovesick Romeo lingers under Juliet's window. Suddenly spying his new beloved, he cries out, "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," and the well-known, love-fraught "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" conversation between the two ensues (Shakespeare 1974, 1068). In the eyes of Bharata and the later literary theorists who would apply his stage analysis to poetry read on the page, the *rasa* to be relished here is clearly "the erotic" (*śṛṅgāra*), so often in Indian narrative at its heightened best when lovers are physically separated, here by a wall hard to climb and an ever-watchful nurse. The *vibhāva*s or stimulants to the relishing of the erotic (here the particularly favored mode of love-in-separation) might begin with the very scene itself: a beautiful young man and woman deeply attracted to each other but physically kept apart. Among the *anubhāva*s or consequences are the loving looks and gestures, sighs and words of the actors. The psychological states or *vyabhicāribhāva*s would include a complex mix of infatuation, frustration, bashfulness, excitement, and impatience. All of this would lead to an overall lasting mood of love (*rati*) that would then be savored by the literary connoisseurs in the audience as a non-person-specific and non-situation-specific *rasa* experience of "the erotic."

For Bharata there are eight modes of *rasa* experience, all described in terms of emotional states made abstract, universal or impersonal in their savoring. Lasting moods of love generate the *rasa* of "the erotic," while moods of humor yield "the comic" (*hāsya*), grief "the compassionate" (*karuṇa*), anger "the furious" (*raudra*), energy "the heroic" (*vīra*), fear "the frightening" (*bhāyanaka*), disgust "the loathsome" (*bībhatsa*), and astonishment "the wondrous" (*adbhuta*) (Bharata 1980, verse 6.15). Later literary theorists add a ninth *rasa*, *śānta*, "the peaceful" or "the quiescent," and assign it enormous potential in human life (see Masson and Patwardhan 1969).

Before turning to the topic of what promise this aesthetic relishing holds for ethics or moral development, it is important to keep in mind that premodern South Asian literary theory is decidedly undemocratic. *Rasa* experience, simply put, is not open to everyone. Bharata is the first to address the qualities necessary in the spectator that allow for the *rasa* experience; interestingly, he is also quick to point out that narrative art must speak to *all* levels of audience, not simply the elite among the crowd. The qualifications of the ideal spectator (*prekṣaka*) are many for Bharata, including: good character, high birth, virtue, impartiality, artistic proficiency, general learning in grammar and poetics, honesty, sound judgment, and, perhaps most importantly, empathy (1980, verses 27.50–55). Yet he goes on to recognize that few possess such admirable qualities in full; audiences are always a mix of the superior, the middling, and the inferior, each with its own unique level of interest to which the effective playwright, director, and cast must speak (verses 27.56–57). *Rasa* is experienced by the superior, while the middling enjoy love-scenes and learned instruction in religion or *dharma*, and the inferior prefer slapstick comedy and elaborate costumes and make-up (verses 27.60–61). Commenting on an earlier passage in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Abhinavagupta beautifully describes how a drama can give courage to the person overwhelmed by sorrow, respite to the weary; drama provides instruction, the full effects of which perhaps manifest only long after the final curtain has fallen. Only for those detached from the endless worries and anxieties of quotidian life, however, can the play meaningfully provide insight into the *puruṣārtha* or four aims of human existence, including both *dharma* or ethics and *mokṣa* or liberation (Masson and Patwardhan 1969, 56–57). Poetic narrative in pre-colonial South Asia, in short, in order to merit the title "art," must evoke in its most sophisticated audience the non-situation-specific, impersonal, abstract experience of *rasa* but must also simultaneously and engagingly impart life-lessons to the middling audience and entertain the inferior. Bhāmaha summarizes the universal appeal of good poetic narrative in the seventh century by praising the clarity (*prasādavat*) of good poetry: "That *kāvya* is clear whose meaning is apparent to all, from the learned down to women and children" (2008, verse 2.3). Again, Shakespeare in his day perhaps provides the most accessible example from the Euro-American literary tradition. Sword-fights and shuffling grave-diggers entertained those standing right in front of the Globe stage in the Yard. The more educated a few rows back could appreciate the lessons on love, loss, and valor enacted and given voice by Romeo, Hamlet, and King Lear. Those wealthy elites sitting in comfort in the galleries might alone savor the *rasa*s of the erotic, the comic, the heroic, and the compassionate.

This insistence that narrative speak to multiple levels of audience awareness and interest—very consistently maintained throughout a millennium of South Asian theorizing about literary art—makes the relationship of narrative meaning to narrative wisdom, *dharma* to *rasa*, ethics to aesthetics, quite complex. While the theoretically inferior audience cares only about plot, costume, action, and a good laugh, the middling audience, according to virtually every theorist from Bharata onward, revels in the *vyutpatti* or moral instruction of the text, the lessons in *dharma* gained from dialogue, wise characters in teaching mode, paradigms of valor, romance, obedience, humility, and compassion. This middling audience is certainly in luck, for pre-colonial South Asian dramas and poetic narratives are positively bursting with ethical instruction of this sort. "There is no duty greater than truth" (*nāsti satyāt paro dharmo*) learns the attentive audience of the epic *Mahābhārata* (1971, verse 1.69.24), although later they also learn that "non-violence is the greatest duty" (*ahīsā paramo dharmaḥ*) (1971, verse 1.11.12). The hero of the epic *Rāmayaṇa*, the prince of Ayodhyā, is praised throughout as the paradigmatic son, husband, brother, friend, and king. Ascetics in medieval Jain Sanskrit literature instruct the listening audience in the value of self-restraint and mental discipline (Granoff 2006); Buddhist *jātaka*s (stories of the Buddha's previous births) praise the *bodhisattva*'s compassionate sacrifice of his own body to feed a hungry tigress and her cubs (Āryaśūra 1959, verses 1.1–38). *Kathā* or story literature such as the well-known *Pañcatantra* (perhaps a source for Aesop's fables), through its mesmerizing array of wise animal characters, regales its audience with lessons on friendship, hospitality, and pity against a backdrop of ugly, bumbling, and often uncouth humans (Viṣṇuśarman 1997). There is much ethical wisdom in pre-colonial South Asian narrative literature, in other words, hiding in plain sight. Amidst all the battles and bedroom scenes, wise characters say wise things, and those wise sayings often circulate as independent verses in Sanskrit and in all of India's spoken languages (Sternbach 1974; Rao et al. 1998).

Yet this is narrative ethics for the middling audience alone, perhaps in part for the unwittingly inferior; what of those elite connoisseurs whose *rasa* experience is the main focus of so much South Asian literary theorizing? That *rasa* transforms those capable of experiencing it in humanly very significant ways seems a ubiquitous theoretical assumption in Sanskrit; *kāvya*, after all, yields not only *dharma* or ethics but also *mokṣa*, liberation, the highest of the four human aims. How exactly does it do so?

Returning to that most undemocratic assumption in South Asian literary theorizing, literary narrative can do its most important work only on those readers, listeners, or spectators who have cultivated certain capacities and

qualities within themselves, qualities and capacities that, when listed even in part, have that distinct look of the ethical. As mentioned above, Bharata requires an impressive list of qualifications to serve as an ideal spectator or *prekṣaka*, including: good character, virtue, impartiality, honesty, sound judgment, and empathy (1980, verses 27.50–55). Abhinavagupta in the tenth century elaborates on the quality of empathy in defining the ideal reader as a "person with heart" (*sahṛdaya*) who can "identify with the subject matter … and who respond[s] to it sympathetically in [his] own heart" (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 39–40). He goes on to say that the traditional sources of Brahminic ethics —"those works of *śruti* [scripture] and *smṛti* [tradition] which consist in commands, like those of a master, to do this or that"—only go so far; princes may be given genuine instruction in the *puruṣārtha* (human aims) only through the relishing of *rasa* in their hearts (368–369).

How one achieves the audience qualities required by Bharata, Abhinavagupta, and other theorists is, of course, never stated explicitly in the genre of literary theory itself. Yet it requires no great stretch of the imagination or historical leap of faith to imagine what Bharata or Abhinavagupta have in mind. As Abhinavagupta's brief allusion to *śruti* (scripture) and *smṛti* (tradition) suggests, Hindu (as well as Buddhist and Jain) ethical life was (and is) highly regulated by complex practices of ritual, devotion, initiation, social interaction, diet, hygiene, and the like. In other words, literary theorists, when describing the promise poetic relishing holds for the connoisseur, *assume* a mature audience who have led lives in accordance with the technical treatises on Brahminical *dharma*, the complex codes of conduct for both Jain laity and ascetics, or the Buddhist monastic rules and practices of meditation, worship, and so forth. Poetic narrative, through the cultivation of *rasa* experience, in other words, does its transformative work on an ethical body, heart, and mind already highly disciplined in multiple ways. The ethics of law and code necessarily precede the ethics of narrative poetry. While all theorists in this tradition assign the origins of great poetry to some mixture of imagination (*pratibhā*), knowledge, and practice (*abhyāsa*) on the part of the poet (see, for example, Rājaśekhara 1934, 49, for a list of the "eight mothers" of poetic composition), neither the production nor the consumption of poetic narrative is here envisioned as a wildly creative, unfettered act of the rebel. The disciplined creativity assumed throughout implies a great deal of prior attention to the formation of the moral self through community-specific mental and physical disciplinary practices.

The tenth-century Kashmiri Śaiva theorist, Abhinavagupta, reveals in his commentaries on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* the powerful tie between the aesthetic relishing of poetic narrative and moral

development, culminating in the ultimate human goal of liberation from the cycle of rebirths and redeaths. Recall that Abhinavagupta defines the reader or spectator with the requisite qualifications to experience *rasa* as *sahṛdaya*, "the person with heart" who can "identify with the subject matter … and who respond[s] to it sympathetically in [his] own heart" (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 39–40). *Rasa* experience begins with a sympathetic understanding of the situation on the page or stage; the connoisseur's own life-experiences and memories allow for a level of identification with the human scene before him, an empathy whose particular person- and situation-specific causes (memories of analogous situations, etc.) are eventually shed in the *rasa*-savoring of the poem or scene (162–163). With his response rooted in his own experience of everyday life (remember that Daṇḍin had stipulated several centuries before that great poetic narrative or *mahākāvya* must be recognizably realistic), the connoisseur eventually experiences—as the cumulative result of various stimulants, responses, lasting moods, and the like—something that transcends that human particularity. The relishing of *rasa*, Abhinavagupta insists, is an other-worldly or transcendental (*alaukika*) delight (162); *rasa* is a form of knowledge enabled only by the removal of ignorance, of "the obscuration of the blindness that is the cloud of delusion" (*ghanamohāndhyasaṅkaṭa*) (200). Ignorance of what, exactly? Space does not permit a full treatment here of Abhinavagupta's particular brand of tantric Śaivism peculiar to medieval Kashmir; suffice to say for the present purposes that Abhinavagupta operates within a worldview in which the soul or Self with a capital "S" (*ātman*) remains distinct from ultimate reality (*brahman*, theistically identified by Abhinavagupta with Śiva) in everyday life only because of our own inadequate understanding, our imposition of distinction between subject and object that ultimately dissolves with the cultivation of genuine insight or recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) (see Gerow 1994). *Rasa* experience generated by poetic narrative, Abhinavagupta suggests throughout his literary theory, is a crucial step—at times in his prose it seems *the* most crucial step—in the cultivation of such insight. Indeed, he suggests that the relishing (*āsvāda*) of the highest reality (*parabrahma*) resembles the relishing of *rasa* (*rasāsvāda*) (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 200).

In the relishing of great literature, according to this Kashmiri Śaiva literary tradition, the connoisseur loses himself completely in imaginative delight, a delight that is quite significantly said to be "devoid of any thought of 'I' or 'You'" (Masson and Patwardhan 1970, 69). This experience of the dissolution of ordinary subject-object distinction, Abhinavagupta continues, is both different from and superior to ordinary perception (in which one hopes to attain the object

of desire) and yogic or ascetic perception, which he terms “dreary” (*paruṣa*) (69) for its lack of interest or delight in the world itself. Poetic narrative, in other words, generates an experience—albeit a transient one—into the true nature of Self and Reality, an experience of delight unsullied by desire, a flash of genuine insight that does not negate the beauty and joy of the world.

Yet not all *rasa* experiences are created equal, however, and for Abhinavagupta the *rasa* of *śānta*, “the peaceful” or “the quiescent,” is by far the most important, for it alone generates the kind of insight into *ātman* or Self and ultimate reality discussed above. *Śāntarasa* leads to *mokṣa* or liberation, the most important of the four human aims (*puruṣārtha*) (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 434); elsewhere he writes that the capacity to experience *śāntarasa* actually arises from the desire for *mokṣa* (Masson and Patwardhan 1970, 139). Arguing that all the other eight *rasa*s are actually subsumed under *śānta* (129), Abhinavagupta further contends that knowledge of the true Self or *ātman* is the actual *sthāyibhāva* or “lasting mood” that allows for the aesthetic relishing of *śānta* (130–131). To this knowledge of *ātman* intimately connected with the poetic experience of *śāntarasa* Abhinavagupta assigns enormous moral weight. The relevant passage from his *Nāṭyaśāstra* commentary is here worth quoting in full:

> For the man who has done all that must be done with regard to his Self, (i.e., who has realised the true nature of his Self), his efforts are all for promoting the good of other people, and so his energy takes the form of an effort that is prompted by the wish to help others. This is a synonym for compassion, and it is very intimately connected with *śānta* (Masson and Patwardhan 1970, 133).

Finely wrought poetic narrative, evocative of the *rasa* of “the peaceful,” in other words, returns its learned audience to the world with a highly developed sense of empathy—not the sympathy with specific characters and situations that all readers or spectators share, but an empathy rendered more abstract, more universal, more general in conception and application.

Abhinavagupta’s preference for *śāntarasa* and the moral weight he assigns its experience in human life is, as above, inextricably tied to his own particular Śaiva worldview, one in which the world itself (as an emanation of sorts from the divine) is highly regarded, and knowledge of Self yields eventual liberation of the soul to dwell forever at the lord’s feet. Not all literary theorists will agree with Abhinavagupta; in the centuries to come, others will debate the number of *rasa*s, the nature of *dhvani* or suggestion, the value of *śānta*, and a variety of

other topics. In the eleventh century, Bhoja, for example—working within a wholly different philosophical framework—will come to the opposite conclusion about the nature of *rasa* experience vis-à-vis Self-knowledge. *Rasa* experience for Bhoja reinforces rather than negates the assertion of an "I" and the distinction of subject (self) and object (of desire) (Warder 2009, 47; see also Pollock 1998). Yet the assumption that aesthetic relishing or *rasa* yields some sort of moral transformation in the connoisseur remains remarkably consistent (albeit for different reasons according to each theorist).

Yet much contemporary scholarship on pre-colonial South Asian narrative—particularly on questions of ethics or moral formation—rests almost entirely on what Bharata might identify as middling-level readership, culling the *dharmic* lessons from the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, from so-called Jain "didactic" story literature and Buddhist *jātaka*s, and largely leaving unexamined the possible moral implications for the aesthetic "relishing" of such texts. What might attention to the theoretical tradition's connection of aesthetic experience to moral formation/transformation add to our understanding of narrative ethics in pre-colonial South Asia?

Space allows only a brief example or two of narrative poetry drawn from the author's current research project on medieval Jain literature in both Sanskrit and Tamil, focused in part on the ubiquitous use of humor in poetic narratives and plays attributed to Jain monks. While Jainism is today often portrayed as a tradition steeped in values of asceticism and disciplinary restraint (Jaini 1979), its narrative traditions primarily aimed at inculcating lessons on *karma* and virtue (Granoff 2006), Jain *kāvya* and *nāṭaka* (courtly poetry and dramas, respectively) evoke the full range of emotional affect theorized from Bharata onward, often dwelling on scenes that might, at first glance, seem somewhat contrary to Jain monastic disciplinary praxis. In particular, the illustrative examples below are drawn from the Sanskrit dramatic work, the *Prabuddharauhiṇeya* (literally "Rauhiṇeya Awakened"), attributed to the twelfth-century Jain monk, Rāmabhadra, about whom little is known.

Among the many Jain theatrical works in Sanskrit that heavily emphasize the comic (*hāsya*) (Warder 1999, 2004, 155–279), few in any language are as full of humor as Rāmabhadra's *Prabuddharauhiṇeya*. While Kṛṣṇa names Rauhiṇeya a great prince of the Pāṇḍava lineage in the second book of the epic *Mahābhārata* (1971, verse 2.13.56), Rāmabhadra clearly draws his story from a popular narrative of Rauhiṇeya as a lifelong thief—born to a family of thieves—who eventually renounces the familial occupation to become a pious Jain monk after he inadvertently hears a sentence of the Jina's teachings. Hemacandra, the great twelfth-century scholar-monk attached to the court of the Śaiva king

Kumārapāla, for example, narrates the life of Rauhiṇeya in 110 verses in his *Triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣacaritra*, a lengthy rendition of Jain universal history through the lives of 63 great beings (Hemacandra 1904–1908, verses 10.11.1–110; Johnson 1924). The fifteenth-century *Rauhiṇeyacaritram* attributed to Devamūrti (Devamūrti 1916; Johnson 1920) elaborates the more basic story told by Hemacandra, while the fifteenth-century *Paryuṣaṇāṣṭāhnikavyākhyāna* summarizes Hemacandra's version briefly, as does the *Upadeśaprāsāda* (Moore 1924, 2).

The tone and evocative rendering of Rāmabhadra's *Prabuddharauhiṇeya* could not be more different. While all Jain versions of the Rauhiṇeya story share the same elements of plot—the young thief, sternly warned by his father not to listen to the Jina Mahāvīra, inadvertently overhears a bit of Jain *dharma* and, after a series of adventures (including imprisonment by the king), becomes a Jain monk—Rāmabhadra infuses the basic storyline with humor and sarcasm at each turn. The playwright's Rauhiṇeya, for example, not only steals material goods, but also makes quite a career for himself as a cleverly playful abductor of women and children, beginning in Act One with the kidnapping of a young girl named Madanavatī during a springtime festival (Rāmabhadra 1917, 8–16). In the second act, Rāmabhadra reworks a story given a much more somber cast in the fifteenth-century *Rauhiṇeyacaritram* and ignored in other versions of the narrative: Rauhiṇeya's abduction of a young bridegroom from his own wedding party. In Devamūrti's fifteenth-century telling, the unrepentent thief disguises himself as a horse and carries off the unsuspecting groom, stripping him of clothes and ornaments; the scene ends with the king's chief household minister admonishing the king to catch the criminal (Devamūrti 1916, verses 208–224; Moore 1920, 180–181). In Rāmabhadra's play, by contrast, Rauhiṇeya enters Rājagṛha in the disguise of a young Brahmin boy (*baṭu*) in order to survey the mansions of the city's wealthy merchants as possible targets; an assistant to the merchant leader Subhadra describes him as "wonderous in body" (*rūpam … adbhutam*) (Rāmabhadra 1917, 23), with a crooked crocodile mouth, a triangular head, and feline eyes. Rauhiṇeya's friend, Śabara, quite hilariously distracts the wedding party (while Rauhiṇeya readies his abduction plan) by dancing outlandishly, slapping (literally "sounding") his hips (*kaṭī taṭaṃ vādayan nṛtyati*) (23) and humiliating the maid Vāmanikā by claiming to be dancing just like her (26). All of this amounts to a ruse, of course, as Rauhiṇeya disguises himself as the bridegroom's mother, the bridegroom himself being none other than the merchant Subhadra's surprisingly young son (Warder 2004, 239, suggests that he seems as young as five, and rightly notes that "such a child marriage seems to be unprecedented in Indian literature"). The child wails when he realizes that

Rauhiṇeya-in-disguise is not his true mother. The thief then tosses a stained piece of cloth that the wedding party mistakenly takes to be a serpent; as the assembled crowd rushes about crying “Snake! Snake!” (*sarpaḥ sarpaḥ*) in confusion and fear, Rauhiṇeya flees with the child. Śabara, in turn, having finally managed to pick up the reluctant Vāmanikā, throws her down and runs after his companion (Rāmabhadra 1917, 30).

Many elements of Rāmabhadra’s play are comedic, particularly in comparison to the far more sober rendering of Devamūrti. From Rauhiṇeya’s odd appearance as a Brahmin boy jealously eyeing the personal wealth of Rājagṛha’s merchants—with cat-like eyes and crocodile-like fangs—to his side-kick’s exaggerated, heavily sexualized dancing in the style of women, the playwright transforms a straightforward narrative of thief-redeemed-as-monk into a comedy of costume and slapstick. Likewise, the image of the child-groom running into the arms of his mother after his own wedding—a mother who turns out to be the hero-thief in disguise—suggests humor on multiple levels, from the startling youth of the groom himself, to his attachment to his mother and his surprise at recognizing Rauhiṇeya. That Rauhiṇeya makes a clean get-away by tossing a fake serpent at the assembled crowd—followed by Śabara throwing down the young woman he had just been diligently trying to seduce—only enhances the comedic ethos of the scene.

Also rife with humor are the concluding scenes in the sixth and final act, wherein Rauhiṇeya renounces his life of thieving and takes refuge with the Jina. The basic outline of the story remains consistent across the many pre-colonial Jain tellings. Rauhiṇeya, who has been captured by Prince Abhaya but who has not yet confessed to his theft, is brought (in a drugged state of intoxication) to a false heaven constructed by the prince, where various actors (employed by the prince) attempt to trick the thief into confessing his crimes. Suddenly remembering the words of the Jina Mahavīra that he had earlier overheard (describing the nature of the heavenly gods), Rauhiṇeya realizes that Abhaya is attempting to trick him, as the actors and actresses begin to perspire and their flower garlands wilt; the thief launches into a long description of his virtuous deeds on earth as a Jain layman. This begins his final transformation from thievery to monkhood, as he is eventually released (Hemacandra 1908, verses 10.11.53–100; Rāmabhadra 1917, 78–96; Devamūrti 1916, verses 304–349).

Rāmabhadra’s dramatic telling of Prince Abhaya’s futile staging of a heavenly paradise to forge a confession is filled with exaggerated pomp and luxury, continuing the over-the-top excesses of the previous Act Five, in which Rauhiṇeya is unceremoniously dressed for execution and mounted on a donkey when the prince and his father suddenly intervene. For fully nine pages, the

playwright dwells on the thief's intoxication and luxurious garments, while celestial women (*gandharvakā*), queens, attendants, dancers, and musicians—all under the watchful direction of a drama instructor—ply the befuddled thief with love-songs and dances, while the heavenly gate-keeper (*pratīhāra*) looks on (78–86). Only mid-act does Rauhiṇeya fully awaken to realize that he has no business in heaven, being utterly without merit (*niṣpuṇya*); noticing that the so-called deities are sweating and walking on the ground (contrary to the Jina's description of the gods that Rauhiṇeya inadvertently overheard in Act Four), he quickly launches into a long list of his meritorious acts as a pious Jain layman—including serving Jain teachers, giving alms, building temples, and the like—and staunchly declares that he has never done anything bad or evil (*duścaritram mayā kvāpi kadā cit api no kṛtam*) (87). All of this abject lying earns Rauhiṇeya an audience with King Śreṇika; before the king, he reveals his true identity and confesses all his crimes (90). In a breathtakingly rapid series of scenes, the now suddenly repentant thief promises to restore all he has plundered and leads everyone to a temple dedicated to the goddess Caṇḍikā; behind a secret door lie the abducted girl, the child-bridegroom, and all the stolen wealth. Rauhiṇeya then proceeds to take refuge with the Jina (90–96). A long and drawn out yet futile attempt at princely artifice and a stunning string of lies on the part of the "hero," in other words, suddenly fast-track Rauhiṇeya to Jain monkhood.

Why would Rāmabhadra infuse the otherwise somber Jain story of a thief-turned-monk with such absurdity, with such humor and sarcasm? As above, scholarly analysis of much Jain narrative to date has largely focused on its didactic qualities or lessons. Yet Rāmabhadra's *Prabuddharauhiṇeya* is an elaborately crafted dramatic text that, one could argue (following Bharata above), has more aesthetically transformative aims in mind than simply to entertain or teach. On the one hand, one might interpret the Jain dramatic propensity for the comic as simply a show of poetic talent in a courtly world where entertaining the king and his retinue generated royal patronage. Again following Bharata, there is a good story here for the inferior audience—full of intrigue, theft, and violence—as well as plenty of moral instruction in a Jain mode for the more middling among the crowd. In the case of Rāmabhadra's dramatic rendering of the Rauhiṇeya story, with its sophisticated poetic artistry, there are at least two distinct claims being made through the very form of the narrative itself: (1) that Jains, too, can claim ownership of the aesthetic traditions of Bharata, Daṇḍin, and others; and (2) that Jain poetic narrative, turning upside down here, as it so often does, typical Brahminic courtly fascinations with marriage, righteous kings, and heroes, results in something more important than a hero and heroine in eternally loving embrace, namely: the renunciation and

liberation of the hero from worldly life, his escape from the eternal miseries of embodied rebirth and redeath, in the final scenes evocative of none other than *śāntarasa*—the peaceful or quiescent—where all Jain narrative texts eventually end.

It is here—with the aesthetic work of a text on its audience, with which Sanskrit theories of *rasa* are concerned—that one can perhaps begin to imagine why Jain poetic narrative literature in Sanskrit is often so comical, and why the sarcastic romp through the dangers of child bridegrooms, inadvertent run-ins with great teachers, the futility of princely artifice, and the miseries of human life would be composed specifically by Jain *monk*s. If the composition and consumption of narrative poetry in the comic mode leading to *śāntarasa* can be taken as important disciplines of ascetic practice among premodern Jain monastic communities—and the sheer volume of narrative literary output of Jain monks in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and a variety of South Asian languages makes it clear that they were—then why is the evocation of "the comic" so prominent?

The proper relationship among the *rasa*s, their proper ordering and the ways in which they can interact in a single work, is a subject much debated in classical Sanskrit literary theory. "The comic" is listed second among the *rasa*s in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* after "the erotic," *śānta* added to Bharata's list of eight perhaps first by the second-century Jain theorist, Āryarakṣita, in his *Aṇuogaddāra Sutta* (Āryarakṣita 1970, 90; Warder 1999, 343). The ordering of the *rasa* elements of a poetic text, and their proper mixing or interaction, would seem to be somewhat fluid, open to interpretation and rearrangement either directly in theory or in poetic practice, based on particular sectarian concerns about the proper "work" of poetry (as above, Abhinavagupta, for example, favors *śānta* as the most important). While Jain authors clearly favor something akin to *śānta* in the under-cutting of love (the erotic) and war (the heroic) and in the inevitable renunciation of the hero, "the comic" would seem to hold a prominent place in the *rasa* hierarchy of value. Certain Brahminic theorists writing in Sanskrit contend that disenchantment (*vairāgya* or *nirveda*) with the world is the necessary pre-condition, the basic emotion (*sthāyībhāva*) for generating *śāntarasa* (Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta 1965, 397); for Jain monastic authors, "the comic," would seem to play a critical part in generating the properly ascetic detachment from the world that in turn cultivates disenchantment and the urge to renounce. Indeed, the listing of the nine *rasa*s in the *Aṇuogaddāra Sutta* cited above might be read in terms of a general engagement with the sensory world (with the heroic, the erotic, the wondrous, and the furious as the first four *rasa*s), followed by a general disengagement from that same sensory world through the shameful, the disgusting, the comic,

the piteous, and—eventually—the tranquil (Āryarakṣita 1970, 90). In Rāmabhadra's finely crafted drama of Rauhiṇeya the thief, the evocative "movement" of the text leads from paternal admonition never to listen to a Jina to hilarious scenes of child abduction, thievery, inadvertent over-hearing of merely a snippet of the Jina's teachings, evasion from police, capture, preparation for execution, a princely staging of life in heaven to extract a confession, a mouthful of lies, and finally renunciation. The hero-thief—like a king, with his own side-kick jester (Śabara)—encounters one non-sensical scene after another, taking on various disguises, kidnapping and stealing, evading police capture, and outwitting the prince's fake heaven, leading the audience through, at the very least, the shameful, the comic, and the tranquil. Laughter, sarcasm, and humor assume an instrumental value here in a particularly Jain poetic telos of *śāntarasa*. Cleverly anti-heroic poetry in a comic mode frames a set of poetic practices (of both composition and reception) that might, indeed, have been perceived as aesthetic elements of an ascetic discipline.

Yet few models exist to understand the composition or performance of a text such as the *Prabuddharauhiṇeya* in the context of monastic discipline, Jain or otherwise. Not only does attention to the art of narrative in pre-colonial South Asia open an interpretive window onto practices of moral development, but it also demands a fuller incorporation of the literary arts into contemporary scholarly understanding of religious discipline. One still tends to think of religious virtuosos—monks, Brahmins, ascetics—engaging in worship, meditation, philosophical debate, and the writing of commentaries; evidence concerning the authorship and audience of poetic narratives, however, demands more sophisticated understanding of the critical role that the reading, performance, and writing of literary texts play in technologies of self-cultivation.

Does the pre-colonial South Asian case, in turn, productively suggest anything for current discussions of narrative ethics in the Euro-American context? Space only permits the briefest of gestures here. First, as in the study of premodern South Asian religious life, the role of aesthetic experience—the reading and writing of poetry, for example—continues to remain somewhat outside the fold of religious studies proper; the study of the literary arts and the practices associated with them has yet to be fully integrated into scholarly vision of the religious life alongside ritual, worship, scriptural study, prayer, meditation, and the like. Second, current approaches to the relationship of narrative to ethics/moral formation pay relatively little attention to the aesthetic dimensions of narrative text when compared to the South Asian theoretical materials considered above. South Asian literary theory lingers at length over the qualities of poetic narrative—from plot structure and character to verb tense and

grammatical ending—that generate specific types of experience in the learned audience; this kind of attentive formal analysis might serve to expand ongoing discussions about the ways in which narrative shapes its readers. Third, as much criticism of the "reader-response" approach to literature has pointed out, those readers are not all created equal. While in contemporary Euro-American contexts one tends to think of differences among readers along gender, racial, economic class, and educational lines, South Asian literary tradition invites theoretical attention to readerly differences along ethical lines, in terms of moral development or awareness in the full context of an individual human life that includes all manner of practice and experience.

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Part II
Philosophy, Narrative and Life Writing: Philosophical Biography and Biographical Philosophy

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11. Descartes' Biography as a Guide to His *Meditations*

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It seems obvious to reflective readers today that it would be a fundamental mistake to extract sentences from translated versions of texts that were written centuries ago, and to attribute to the original author the apparent meanings that such decontextualized and translated excerpts have in the reader's vernacular. The history of biblical interpretation provided some of the most vivid examples of such a lack of hermeneutic sophistication. When the Council of Trent (1545–1563) considered the words that three of the gospels attributed to Jesus Christ at the last supper: 'This is my body, this is my blood', it understood them literally and then used a scholastic theory of substances to explain how what looks like bread and wine could be, in fact, something entirely different. By doing so, the Council failed to acknowledge the history of spiritual or metaphorical interpretations of the Bible that had been current since at least the fourth century; it endorsed a theory of substances that was about to be abandoned by philosophers; and it camouflaged its many mistakes by acknowledging that it was teaching a mystery that, by its own admission, human minds could hardly

express in words (Tanner 1990: II, 693–4).

The writings of philosophers of the past are less likely to generate the kind of heated controversies that followed Trent's interpretations of this biblical text. The most obvious reason is that religious traditions attribute a doctrinal authority to the meaning of words or sentences, so that misinterpretation undermines the only basis available for believing what is otherwise described as mysterious or, as Locke argued, unintelligible. Philosophers today do not read the words of their ancient predecessors to learn what to believe; they consult them to extract rationally defensible theories or proposals which, once identified, must stand or fall when evaluated by current epistemic criteria.

For that reason, it might seem irrelevant, unnecessary, or disproportionately scrupulous to dispute about interpretations of old philosophical texts that allegedly misrepresent the ideas or thoughts of their original authors. One could even avoid all controversy about interpreting texts by distinguishing, as some do today, between the original author and some possible author with a similar name. For example, if anyone objects that Plato never meant what someone attributes to him, one could avoid the charge of misrepresentation by replying: 'I don't care what Plato meant and, if you insist, I shall discuss a different author in another possible world, namely Plato[1], who could have held the views that I am interested in discussing.' In this case, the discussant wishes to talk about some philosophical theory or position rather than about what the historical Plato may have written, and it seems like an innocent and useful shorthand to use a variation on Plato's name simply to identify the thesis or position in which the modern discussant is interested. Of course they are risking misrepresentation by using a neologism such as Plato[1]; however, assuming the legitimacy of an ahistorical discussion or analysis of philosophical positions that are not attributed to any specific author, philosophers could coherently discuss whatever issues they find interesting today without engaging at all with historical texts or the contexts in which they were written. Something analogous to this evasive resolution was assumed by Williams (1978) when he attributed to Descartes a project of pure inquiry and described his own analysis as a rational reconstruction of Descartes' writings.

Nonetheless, the assumed academic legitimacy of ahistorical discussions of philosophical issues does not detract from what are equally valid historical inquiries, in the history of ideas, into what some author meant by the words they wrote about issues that still concern us. In fact, one might argue that the latter should be the default position for the kind of inquiry on which we normally embark in philosophy, because to do otherwise is to assume a transcendental

perspective for ourselves—as rational inquirers—that is unaffected by the psychological, social, historical, or other factors that a pure rational reconstruction attempts to avoid. Our own views today are as historically conditioned as those of our predecessors. If our own theorizing, even in the sciences, is historically conditioned (Kitcher 1992), then we have a better chance of understanding other philosophers, ancient or contemporary, by *not* ignoring the language in which they write and the multiplicity of factors that help explain why they hold or held the views that we attribute to them.

These alternative approaches to reading older texts are illustrated by the continued popularity and divergent interpretations of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). On the one hand, this text continues to be read in abbreviated translated editions by almost every undergraduate who studies philosophy in the West, and it is among the best sellers in the philosophy list of any publisher who happens to have a good translation or edition available. It is usually read as if it presented and defended some version of substance dualism or the theory caricatured by Gilbert Ryle as 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine' (1949: 17). However, unless readers are motivated by a desire to identify examples of poor arguments, it is difficult to understand why we should invite students to study such a failed project as substance dualism. John Cottingham has described one of the arguments for dualism on which Descartes relied in various writings—in a letter to Silhon (May 1637), in Part IV of the *Discourse on Method*, and in the *Meditations* —as 'one of the most notorious nonsequiturs in the history of philosophy' (1992: 242). Even if such a lapse in logic could be excused, the dualism that is attributed to Descartes has been recognized since the time of his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia in 1643 as merely labelling a problem without providing a solution. One feels that there must be some other way of reading Descartes so that he does not appear to have been as illogical or theoretically unsuccessful as rational reconstruction suggests he was, and that such an alternative interpretation should be sought by examining the historical context in which he wrote.

11.1 Descartes and Natural Philosophy

During the period 1629–1649, when Descartes composed all his published works, he lived an almost eremitical life in the United Provinces rather than in France, the country of his birth and education. Not only did he live in what was an officially Calvinist state; he also moved his residence very frequently to at least 18 different addresses in different towns, and discouraged most people from visiting him by concealing his address. Henri Reneri (1593–1639) was one

exception to this general rule: Descartes followed him to Leiden in May 1630, to Deventer in May 1632 and to Utrecht in April 1635, and described him as ‘my intimate friend’. There were a few others with whom Descartes was willing to share his residence or information about his location but, for the most part, he lived alone (apart from his manservant) in a foreign country and failed to master the vernacular language of its residents.

It would have been possible for Descartes to compensate for his relative seclusion, as Mersenne did, by reading the works of his contemporaries and communicating with them by letter, for the postal system was slow but effective. One might imagine him as working in a well-stocked study, with shelves full of books, and engaging with their authors by sympathetic and critical reading, at least in the early afternoons when the daylight was adequate for reading and he had summoned the energy to get out of bed. However, Descartes had almost no books in his study and, of those he had—for example, books that were given as presents or sent to him by correspondents to whom he was willing to reveal his address—he rarely read any of them. It was not unusual, therefore, when he wrote a reply to Gassendi’s *Disquisitio* (1644) without having read it; among the other authors that he refused to read were Gibieuf, Campanella, Beaugrand, Galileo, Roberval, Stevin, Hortensius, Herbert, Beaulieu, Jansen, Kircher, Fermat, Hobbes’s essay on the tides, and Digby. He had a good excuse in the case of Digby that he could not read English, but he also declined an offer to have some chapters translated for his benefit into Latin. Of course one might object that, in the case of any author, it would be possible to make a list of books or authors that they failed to read. In the case of Descartes, however, these were authors whom he discussed in print or to whom he objected, and in some cases he even had their books in his study but read only the table of contents or the index. His first significant biographer, Baillet, reported after his death: ‘One must acknowledge, however, that he did not read very much, that he had very few books, and that most of those that were found by his inventory after his death were presents from his friends’ (1691: II, 467).

Despite his intentionally hidden life and his reluctance to read work by other authors, Descartes was involved in disputes all his life, with almost everyone with whom he came into contact. The targets of his often acrimonious objections included Beeckman, Beaugrand, Roberval, Pascal [both Etienne and his more famous son, Blaise], Morin, Plempius, Voetius, the theologians at Leiden, the French Jesuits, and even one of his foremost admirers, Henricus Regius. In some cases, when he disputed the views of others that were reported from Paris by Mersenne, he did not even know the identity of the author against whom he objected—as in the case of Hobbes, to whom he referred as ‘the Englishman’

and whom he believed to have been living in England when Hobbes was actually in Paris. In other cases, he did not know enough about a correspondent to appreciate that their views might be worth examining in detail, as in the case of Pierre Fermat, whose mathematical work was unknown to Descartes for most of the time during which they exchanged reciprocal criticisms and personal insults by using Mersenne as an epistolary intermediary.

During this period of approximately 20 years, while moving house frequently, engaging in bitter controversies with Calvinist theologians in Utrecht and Leiden, and corresponding with numerous other critics of his work, Descartes was dedicated to a single over-arching project: to replace the natural philosophy of the scholastic tradition with a conceptual framework that presupposed a radically new understanding of what counts as an explanation of any phenomenon (Clarke 2006).

This project was developed initially during the years 1629–1633, in a book tentatively entitled *Le Monde*, in which Descartes aspired to provide explanations of a wide and disparate range of natural phenomena—including those that are associated with physiological processes in the human body, and even some (such as memory or sensation) that were usually classified as mental phenomena. This book was almost ready for publication in 1633, when Descartes heard about the condemnation of Galileo and he decided not to publish for fear of a similar censure. Although he subsequently attracted threats of official censure from Calvinist theologians, he had to wait for another 30 years to merit condemnation by Rome of some of his own books in 1663.

Having abandoned plans to publish *Le Monde* in 1633, Descartes found a way of releasing samples of his natural philosophy, in three essays that he published in 1637 with Jan Maire in Leiden: the dioptrics, the meteorology, and the geometry. These appeared in French in a single volume, which omitted from the title page the name of the reluctant author, who was still afraid of incurring an official censure from Rome. While the book was being printed and the publisher awaited completion of the woodcuts required for illustrations, he invited Descartes to write a preface to link together what might otherwise have appeared as three unrelated anonymous essays. Descartes complied by mining ideas from some unpublished essays, including the *Rules for Guiding one's Intelligence in Searching for the Truth*, and wrote the *Discourse on the method for guiding one's reason and searching for truth in the sciences.* Since the pagination of the book had already been set by the printer, from pages 1 to 413, the late addition of a preface had to be paginated separately as pages 5 to 78. The subsequent history of how this book was read illustrates how mistaken one can be about an author's work or intentions: the preface is now often identified as the

principal book, and the original book is described as ‘appendices’ to the preface!

Descartes continued this research into natural philosophy after 1637 by doing experiments and communicating their results (or requesting information about those of others) in lengthy letters to and from Mersenne, and in similar correspondence with Regius and others about physiology, optics, mathematics, magnetism, and all the detailed phenomena that came to his notice. The *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) provided another opportunity to synthesize his scientific theories in a compact textbook that might rival those traditionally adopted in France, especially in colleges operated by his former teachers, the Jesuits. Pierre Borel may have exaggerated when he described Descartes in Alkmaar, in 1645, as pointing to a dissected calf and saying: ‘this is my library’ (1670: 8), but Sorbière reported the same incident (in a different town) as follows:

> One of his friends went to visit Descartes in Egmond. This gentleman asked him, about physics books: which one did he most value, and which of them did he most frequently consult? ‘I shall show you’, he replied, ‘if you wish to follow me’. He led him into a lower courtyard at the back of his house, and showed him a calf that he planned to dissect the next day. I truly believe that he no longer read hardly anything. (1660: 689–90)

Descartes continued to work in natural philosophy and, in 1647, on the occasion of a short visit to Paris, he visited Blaise Pascal and discussed alternative explanations of the barometric phenomena that had been studied by Torricelli. He subsequently claimed that he had suggested to Pascal the famous experiment that was conducted on Pascal’s behalf by his brother-in-law in September 1648 on the puy-de-Dôme and which, according to Pascal’s published account, proved that barometric readings are caused exclusively by atmospheric pressure. Descartes agreed to conduct parallel experiments on the same issue with Pascal and Mersenne, and to share their results. This collaboration continued until the death of the two of the participants, of Mersenne in 1648 and of Descartes 2 years later.

The final published sample of natural philosophy that Descartes published was *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), in which he offered a theory of human emotions from the perspective of a ‘*physicien*’, i.e. that of a natural philosopher. He had drafted this essay during the winter of 1645–1646 for Princess Elizabeth, and continued to work on it until immediately before his departure to Sweden. This represented the culmination of Descartes’ attempt to provide a coherent account of how bodily states interact systematically with mental states, because

emotions were described as mental states that were triggered and supported by specific motions of animal spirits (where the latter were understood as very fine bodily fluids). The fundamental assumption of this theory was that there were a small number of primitive connections between mind and body that are innate—although we lack the means to explain them—and that a type of conditioning similar to what is observed in animals makes possible the establishment of novel mind-body connections by repeated experiences.

One question suggested by these two decades of dedicated research and experimentation in natural philosophy is: why did Descartes also write a book about metaphysics, and what did he aim to achieve by its publication? It is the question that was put forcefully by Regius, in July 1645, when he wrote to a very unreceptive Descartes:

> Many honourable and intelligent people have often told me that they think too highly of your intelligence not to believe that, in the depths of your soul, you hold opinions that are the opposite of those that appear publicly under your name … many of them are convinced that you have discredited your philosophy very much by publishing your metaphysics (AT: IV, 255).

Regius was convinced that Descartes' research record in natural philosophy was incompatible with the metaphysics that appeared in the *Meditations*, and that Descartes was dishonest or at least dissembling when he published that book as if he endorsed its contents. There was a significant tension between Cartesian natural philosophy and metaphysics: in the methods used, the kinds of entity to which they appealed as explanatory, and even the languages—vernacular French or scholastic Latin—in which they were written. If Descartes was not dishonest, why did he write this book in 1640 and what were his objectives in doing so?

11.2 The *Meditations*

Descartes had been communicating with Mersenne by post for over a decade when, in 1640, he decided to revisit a topic that he had previously outlined in 1629. He was then living in Santpoort, in the United Provinces, and was soon to move to Leiden, in April 1640, where the rest of the work was completed. It is difficult to be confident about the specific motivation for this apparent change of direction in Descartes' scholarly interests. Descartes' reasonable fear of ecclesiastical censure had not abated since 1633, and he had very good reasons for not discussing metaphysical questions, because he defined 'metaphysics' as whatever pertained to the nature of the human soul and the existence of God.

The disciplinary boundaries between any discussion of those questions and theology were very permeable; general councils of the Catholic Church had notoriously taught that, while it was possible to address those issues by using human reason, the conclusions of such deliberations could not contradict the doctrines of the Church. In a word, it was impossible to write about God and the soul without getting involved in the kind of ecclesiastical disputes and doctrinal subtleties that led to Galileo's condemnation. If astronomy could incur Rome's censure, dabbling in questions about God's existence and the nature of the soul was even more likely to do so. Why then did a censure-averse author, living in the United Provinces, write an essay about the existence of God and the nature of the human soul and publish it in Paris?

Descartes had acknowledged in letters to Mersenne and to Jean Silhon, in 1637, that the brief metaphysical discussions in Part IV of the *Discourse* were inadequate and possibly misleading. The danger of being misunderstood arose from the fact that the book had been published in the vernacular rather than in Latin, so that uneducated people could read it and might conclude mistakenly that Descartes endorsed the sceptical objections that he discussed as a prelude to addressing metaphysical questions. The option of a more adequate discussion arose when he was considering publishing a Latin translation of the 1637 book, without the *Geometry*; in 1638 he indicated that 'if there is a Latin version of this book [the *Discourse* and *Essays*], for which preparations are being made, I could have it [a discussion of metaphysics] included there' (AT: I, 350). Draft versions of that translation were already circulating in the late 1630s and it seems as if Descartes was eventually persuaded by repeated requests from Mersenne to reveal the foundations of his natural philosophy and to contribute to the apologetic defence of Catholicism that had occupied Mersenne for almost two decades.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, Descartes adopted two defensive strategies. One was to summarize his views in metaphysics briefly, in 'five or six sheets of print', to print initially only 20 or 30 copies and, as he wrote to Mersenne, to send those to 'twenty or thirty of the most wise theologians that I can find to get their opinion of it and to find out from them what I should change, correct, or modify in it before making it public' (AT: II, 622). With the exception of the First Objections, submitted by 'a priest from Alkmaar', he delegated this task to Mersenne, although it is obvious in retrospect that the Minim friar failed miserably. Mersenne shared the draft copy of the text with his correspondents or friends in Paris, including Hobbes (who was certainly not a Catholic theologian) and Pierre Gassendi (who was a Catholic but not a theologian). In fact, the only contributor among the five sets of objections

collected by Mersenne who might have satisfied Descartes' preferences was Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694), who composed the fourth objections.

Descartes' other strategy for protecting himself against theological objections was to request prior approval for his book from the Theology Faculty at the Sorbonne. Again, he delegated this task to Mersenne, and in anticipation of a favourable outcome Mersenne included on the title page of the 1641 edition the phrase '*cum approbatione Doctorum*' [with the approval of doctors]. Unfortunately, he never received this approval and, after the fact, Descartes claimed that he did not need anyone's approval and had never requested it in the first place. Nonetheless, he did include in the published text a 'Letter of Dedication to the Sorbonne' in which he explicitly associated his efforts with the invitation by the Lateran Council (1512–1517) to prove by reason alone the immortality of the soul. That council had condemned the writings of some neo-Aristotelians (including Pomponazzi) who are argued that the human soul dies with the death of the body. Descartes' reference to the Lateran Council was an odd claim, since he had written a number of times to Mersenne to confirm that there was nothing at all in his *Meditations* to prove the immortality of the soul. Mersenne had been delegated by Descartes to edit the text and to delete anything that might attract censure. It was not surprising, then, that the book was published in Paris in 1641 with a misleading subtitle that included the phrase 'in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul is [sic] demonstrated'. In accordance with the author's request, Mersenne also took care to delete some passages about transubstantiation to which theologians might object.

It seems clear that Descartes lost control of the whole publishing project. He was living in Leiden, sending replies by post to objections as they arrived from Paris, and allowing Mersenne wide discretion to edit and arrange for publication. The result was a defective edition, with many misprints, and a subtitle that misdescribed its contents and the intentions of its author. Almost 10 months later, Descartes had not even seen a copy of his own book and quickly arranged to have a new edition printed in Amsterdam and Leiden. He changed the subtitle to read 'in which God's existence and the Distinction between the Human Soul and the Body are demonstrated', he omitted the claim on the title page that he had the approval of the Sorbonne, and he restored the passages about transubstantiation that Mersenne had deleted. In addition, he added the seventh set of objections from Father Bourdin, a Jesuit; Descartes had been keen from the outset to get objections from the Jesuits, and one French Jesuit eventually complied with his repeated requests. As usual, Descartes also added his own replies to Bourdin. The final result was two editions within 2 years of the same

book, only the second of which represented the author's intentions.

What, then, do these brief biographical and contextual items contribute to a reading of Descartes' *Meditations*?

One obvious conclusion is that Descartes did not intend to write a book that proved the immortality of the soul, as Mersenne had written on the title page. He had replied to Mersenne's disappointment in 1640 that he had not written a single word about the immortality of the soul: 'You should not be surprised at that, for I could not demonstrate that God could not annihilate the soul, but only that it has an entirely different nature to that of the body … that is also all that I intended to prove' (AT: III, 266). So, despite Mersenne's subtitle and consistent with Descartes' subsequent correction, the *Meditations* was never intended to prove the immortality of the human soul. In fact, Descartes seems not to have been convinced at all of the immortality of the soul. When he wrote to Huygens in 1642 to offer condolences on the death of his brother, he expressed doubts about religious beliefs in the afterlife:

> Although religion teaches us many things about this subject [i.e. the afterlife], I must acknowledge a weakness in myself that seems to me to be common in most people, namely, that although we wish to believe and even think we believe very strongly everything that religion teaches us, nonetheless we are usually not as affected by things that faith alone teaches us and that are not understood by our reason as by those of which we are also convinced by very strong natural reasons (AT: III, 580).

Secondly, the book was not written as a contribution to the philosophical discussions of scepticism that occur typically in epistemology. It is undeniable that Descartes reviewed pyrrhonist challenges to the possibility of knowledge in the First Meditation and that he thought this was necessary as a prelude to doing metaphysics. All the sceptical objections that were rehearsed in the First Meditation were familiar from the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* in Montaigne's *Essays*, and they were also discussed by Jean Silhon in *Two Truths* (1991). In contrast to what one might expect or require in metaphysics, Descartes had acknowledged for some years prior to 1640 that the kind of knowledge that it was possible to acquire when explaining natural phenomena was necessarily hypothetical and uncertain, and that it was a mistake in principle to demand anything else. However, he seems to have thought that metaphysics requires and is capable of delivering a higher degree of certainty, and that he should dispel sceptical challenges to the possibility of metaphysics before embarking on his own reflections on first philosophy (Clarke 2012). The fact that Descartes

attributed so little validity to scepticism perhaps explains the almost casual facility with which he dismissed sceptical objections in the Sixth Meditation as hyperbolic and ridiculous.

Although Descartes had written both of his earlier works—*Le Monde* and the 1637 book of essays—in French, he decided to write the *Meditations* in Latin (as already indicated) to limit the readership to those who were sufficiently educated to distinguish between hypothetical theses and those endorsed by an author. However, the only Latin available to him was the scholastic Latin that he had learned in a Jesuit college at La Flèche. As a result of this choice of language, he had to use the conceptual framework of the very scholasticism that he consistently rejected. This was a dilemma faced by all those who wished to communicate with an international readership in a language that such readers understood, while insinuating new meanings into old terms or adjusting the implications of familiar words to novel theories with which they were often incompatible.

For example, one of the most fundamental and consistent features of Cartesian natural philosophy since the late 1620s was that one never explains any phenomenon by postulating a substantial form that is named after the phenomenon to be explained. Descartes had introduced that general principle in the opening paragraph of the unpublished *Le Monde*, and it had inspired his search for alternative explanatory models. Accordingly, it would have been as impossible to explain the acknowledged fact of human thinking by postulating a 'form' of thinking as to explain the power of sleeping powder to induce sleep by referring to its soporific form. Secondly, even if a thinking form might be tolerated exceptionally to describe the special faculty that was apparently evident only in human beings, Princess Elizabeth had raised an objection that generations of students in philosophy have since repeated: that one hardly explains human nature by introducing two substances (or even three, if Descartes is read as a trialist) when one has no idea how the substances interact.

> How can the human soul, which is only a thinking substance, determine the movement of the animal spirits in order to perform a voluntary action? … I confess that it would be easier for me to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to attribute the ability to move a body, and to be moved by a body, to an immaterial being. (Descartes 1998: 148, 151)

Finally, Descartes' use of the Latin term '*substantia*' reflected the ambiguity that he inherited from its conceptual history. In one sense, the word 'substance' was merely a synonym for a 'thing', so that a substance was any reality of which

one predicates various properties. Since the term also had connotations of a distinct 'something' that seemed to underlie properties, as Locke later argued, Descartes insisted that it was impossible to know anything about substances except by knowing their properties. He wrote in reply to Arnauld's objections to the *Meditations*:

> We do not know substances immediately, as indicated elsewhere, but only by perceiving certain forms or attributes that, in order to exist, must inhere in some thing [*alicui rei*] and consequently we call the thing [*illam rem*] in which they inhere a substance. If, however, we subsequently wished to strip that substance of those attributes by which we know it, we would destroy all our knowledge of it; and thus we might still be able to apply various words to it but we would not perceive their meaning clearly and distinctly (AT: VII, 222)

Thus, not only do substances explain nothing, but they are unknowable except by means of the properties that are understood as being predicated of a something. It would therefore be impossible to *explain* the properties of any phenomenon by reference to a substance of which they are predicated, since we know nothing about the latter except by means of the former. As Descartes often claimed, it would be both circular and uninformative to use such a failed scholastic model of explanation.

Despite the apparent implications of the circumstances in which Descartes composed the *Meditations*, however, he wrote a lengthy book in scholastic Latin (85 % of which comprised objections and replies), which was dedicated to the theologians of the Sorbonne and purported to demonstrate 'the distinction of the human soul from the body'. The challenge then is how to interpret that book without attributing to its author the kind of dishonesty or inconsistency of which Regius accused him. One possible reading is the following (Clarke 2003).

Descartes extrapolated as far as possible the explanatory resources of his natural philosophy to include a sketch of how to explain sensation, memory, imagination, and the passions. He summarized this as early as 1637, when he reported in the *Discourse on Method* some of the conclusions that he had reached in the unpublished *Le Monde*:

> I had explained all these things in sufficient detail in the treatise that I had planned to publish earlier [i.e. *Le Monde*]. Then I had shown … what changes must be made in the brain to cause waking, sleep and dreams; how light, sounds, odours, tastes, warmth and all the other qualifies of external

> objects can impress different ideas on it [the brain] through the senses … what part of the brain should be taken as 'the common sense', where these ideas are received; what should be taken as the memory, which stores these ideas, and as the imagination, which can vary them in different ways and compose new ones and, by the same means, distribute the animal spirits to the muscles and cause the limbs of the body to move in as many different ways as our own bodies can move without the will directing them, depending on the objects that are present to the senses and the internal passions of the body. (Descartes 1999: 39–40)

As indicated above, Descartes continued to devote his time and relatively meagre experimental resources to this project in natural philosophy by incorporating mind-body interaction and human emotions within the scope of natural philosophy in *The Passions of the Soul*. Despite his unfounded confidence in the potential explanatory power of the elementary concepts that he included in his natural philosophy, such as the size, shape, movement, and configuration of small parts of matter, it seemed impossible in 1641—as it still does—to explain human thinking in terms of parts of matter in motion. The limited conceptual resources of Cartesian natural philosophy were simply inadequate to the challenge.

Rather than decide a priori, as Hobbes had done, that human thinking is reducible to matter in motion, Descartes attempted to describe accurately those features of human nature that require an explanation. They include many properties that seemed reducible, at least in principle, to matter in motion. But they also include this one feature (namely, thinking) that was not amenable to such reduction. On an initial classification of properties, then, Descartes had to conclude that human beings exhibit two kinds of property. Since properties are predicated of corresponding substances, the apparent irreducibility of some human properties to matter in motion was reflected in the substances of which they are predicated. Accordingly, Descartes replied to Hobbes that we should *provisionally* talk about two substances in human nature and defer to later discussion the question whether the two substances are reducible to one.

> Since, however, we do not know a substance itself immediately through itself, but only by the fact that it is the subject of certain acts, it is very reasonable and in keeping with common usage that we apply different names to those substances that we recognize as the subjects of completely different acts or accidents, so as to examine later whether those different names signify different things or one and the same thing (AT: VII, 176).

There was no evidence in 1640 to suggest how human thinking could be explained by what was then known about the properties of matter. The provisional conclusion had to be that mental experiences were, at that time, irreducible to the known properties of matter. ‘Of course one may wonder whether the nature that thinks may perhaps be the same as the nature that occupies space, so that there is one nature that is both intellectual and corporeal’ (AT: II, 38), but a reduction of mental properties to those of matter must await the construction of a viable, integrated theory.

In other words, substance dualism—insofar as it is proposed by Descartes in the *Meditations*—was not a theory of human nature at all, nor was it postulated to explain those features of human nature of which we are conscious when we reflect on our experience of thinking or willing. Neither substances nor substantial forms explain anything, and it would not represent any progress in explaining human thought (1) if we postulated two substances of which nothing is known apart from the very properties that we are attempting to explain, and (2) if we knew nothing about how the properties of such substances could possibly interact in the way required to explain our experience of mind-body interaction.

Instead, substance dualism represents the limits of the explanatory resources of Cartesian natural philosophy when applied to human nature and expressed in scholastic Latin. Descartes could be described more accurately as a property dualist, insofar as he consistently argued that some features of human thinking were irreducible to those properties of matter of which he claimed to have reliable acknowledge. Given the limited properties that he attributed to matter, it seemed to him impossible to find a theoretical link between those properties and thinking. This irreducibility was described as a ‘real distinction’. Cartesian dualism, therefore, is not a *theory* of anything but merely an acknowledgement of the explanatory limitations of the natural philosophy that Descartes endorsed and an index of the work to be done before a viable theory of the human mind becomes available.

Descartes’ contemporaries who were critical of the *Meditations* were closer to an accurate reading of his work that those who read it as endorsing substance dualism. Martin Schoock, who acted as a ghost writer for Voetius, concluded that Descartes was really trying to show how the mind was reducible to bodily states by proposing arguments (apparently in support of dualism) that were so weak that they implied the opposite conclusion. Regius, who had been one of his most supportive allies at Utrecht, rejected Descartes’ metaphysics as incompatible with his natural philosophy and published a textbook of his own to illustrate what Cartesian natural philosophy without metaphysics would look like. Finally,

when some of Descartes' books were listed on the Catholic Church's *Index of Forbidden Books* in 1663, it was not primarily because he had supported heliocentrism (as he had feared in 1633), but because his theory of matter and especially his account of substance was judged to be incompatible with the teaching of the Council of Trent on the Eucharist, and because his account of mental activities did not present them as sufficiently independent of the body. As those critics concluded, Descartes was attempting to apply his natural philosophy to mental phenomena; but his project was defeated by its theoretical and conceptual limitations, and those are reflected in the language of dualism.

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12. Writing the Lives of Philosophers: Reflections on Spinoza and Others

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There are great pleasures as well as many potential pitfalls in the writing of philosophical biography. Some of these are common to all kinds of biographical literature, while others seem peculiar to writing the biography of a philosopher. In this essay, and focusing on the pitfalls, I would like to address some particular problems that I confronted while writing a biography of the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. But before I do so, I would like first to offer some general programmatic thoughts about the "biography of philosopher" genre.

Over the past dozen or so years, we have witnessed a wonderful, even exponential increase in the number of biographies written about philosophers, especially philosophers from the early modern period, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (This period in the history of philosophy is my own specialty, so I will confine my discussion to it). There have recently been published, in English, scholarly and authoritative biographies of Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Kant—with the exception of Berkeley, all but exhausting the traditional teaching canon of major early modern philosophers. Indeed, in the last decade alone, no fewer than five full-length

biographies of Descartes have appeared in English (although one is a translation from a slightly earlier French book), including Desmond Clarke's wonderful volume, which will no doubt be the standard and authoritative one for some time.[1] Before this, we were basically limited to the one contemporary biography of Descartes—the famous two-volume hagiographical work by Adrien Baillet, *La vie de Monsieur Descartes*, published in 1691—and a more recent biography published in 1970,[2] although this latter was not a very thorough or very reliable study. Similarly, my biography of Spinoza,[3] published in 1999, was the first truly full-length biography of this philosopher ever to appear in English, and the first in any language since the early twentieth century; moreover, the same year it appeared, another biography of Spinoza was published by Margaret Gullan-Wuhr.[4] And until a few years ago, there was in English one old, relatively brief but serviceable biography of Leibniz; now we have Maria Rosa Antognazza's brave and magisterial book.[5] I should add—just to incorporate two other interests of mine—that the last 5 years have also seen the appearance of not one, not two, but three major biographies of Maimonides, as well as, less successfully, several biographical studies of Socrates.[6] This recent spate of philosophical biographies is, for both scholars and general readers, a refreshing change and a welcome development from the frustrating rarity of such works in the past.

Of course, any general study of a philosopher and his or her thought usually included an introductory biographical chapter, a "life and times" overview as a preface to the examination of the philosophy itself. And there are well-known exceptions to my general point about the dearth of philosophical biographies in the past: Peter Brown's biography of Augustine, Ray Monk's fabulous biography of Wittgenstein and his two-volume life of Russell, Maurice Mandelbaum's monumental life of Rousseau, and several excellent biographies of Friedrich Nietzsche and of Jean-Paul Sartre. But these exceptions only prove the rule that solid, thorough, book-length biographical studies of the great philosophical thinkers, especially those who lived before the twentieth century, were, for a very long time, quite rare, especially when compared to the abundance of biographies of non-philosophical literary figures. I am willing to bet that the number of biographical studies of Virginia Woolf alone outnumbers the total of philosophical biographies.

To make things even more puzzling, figures whom we now regard as "scientists" seem to have fared better than philosophers in this regard. Again, just sticking to the early modern period, Galileo and Newton have long been subjects of biographical interest (although bear in mind that, in the seventeenth

century, the distinction between philosopher and scientist did not exist; Galileo and Newton were “natural philosophers”).

Why is this the case? Why have there been, relatively speaking and until recently, so few biographies of philosophers? Is it that the life of a philosopher is too sedentary, too dull, to warrant a biography? Did philosophers lead less active, less interesting lives than poets or fiction writers or even scientists? (For the purpose of my remarks here, I am going to bracket the issue of biographies of historical figures, world leaders, politicians, artists and military achievers, such as Caesar, John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Stalin, Picasso and Che Guevara. I think that biographies of these individuals are of a different order in terms of interest and popularity than those of individuals from the world of letters and ideas.) Why did we, for a long time, have so many biographies of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce but none of Spinoza, the most radical and, to my mind, exciting philosopher of his turbulent time? Of course, part of the answer to this is obvious: many, many, many more people have read Virginia Woolf than have read Spinoza (in part because many more people read fiction than read philosophy); and Woolf’s life and times are closer, more familiar and more accessible to our own. There is simply a lot more interest among the general reading public in the life of such important twentieth-century fiction writers as Woolf or Joyce than there is in the life of Spinoza (despite the fact that Joyce’s fiction is, arguably, more difficult than Spinoza’s philosophical writings). But is chronological proximity and historical and literary accessibility the real explanation? There are also many more biographies of writers from a more distant era—Voltaire, Diderot, Mary Shelly, Coleridge—than there are of philosophers from the same general period or later. Is it because there is simply more interest in the life of Diderot than there is in the life of Spinoza or Leibniz? Or is it, in fact, the other way around: Is it the case that there is more interest in the lives of these and other literary figures just *because* there has been so much biographical activity around them? And if this is the case, then we are back to our original question: Why have biographers turned so much more often to literary figures than to philosophers?

Here is one possible but highly speculative hypothesis that may answer the question. Perhaps the reason that there have been, until recently, so few biographies of philosophers is that there are no obvious candidates to write the lives of philosophers. That is, it seems that for a long time philosophers’ lives fell between the literary cracks. Look at it this way: The authors who tend to write biographies are generally themselves writers of fiction or literary nonfiction. The world they know is the world of their subjects, the world of fiction and literary nonfiction. Thus, when turning to biography, they are most

likely to write the lives of figures from the world they inhabit, literary lives the nature of which they are intimately familiar with. On the other hand, these authors of literary biographies may not feel up to the task of taking on the life of a philosopher, someone whose ideas they in all likelihood have not spent a good deal of time studying. Would anyone undertake to write a life of a notoriously difficult thinker such as Spinoza or Kant unless they felt comfortable with Spinoza's *Ethics* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*? Thus, I surmise, those who write biographies will not touch philosophers. The philosophical material is just too far outside their comfort zone.

At the same time, those who *are* most familiar with history's great philosophers—that is, people who are themselves philosophers—do not write biographies. Writing biography would be considered a disreputable task in the world of professional philosophers. It is not doing philosophy. It is hard enough, in Anglo-American philosophy today, for someone who does primarily history of philosophy to earn equal respect from other philosophers; but once you start working not even on the *philosophy* of a historical figure but on his or her life and times, then you've really gone beyond the pale. You might as well transfer to a department of comparative literature. Certainly, only someone with tenure would undertake such a project, but even then it is to risk one's professional credibility.

So, why did the lives of philosophers for so long fall between the literary cracks? Because the people who write biographies do not touch philosophers; and philosophers do not write biographies! Fortunately, this latter fact has changed in recent years, giving us that spate of recent philosophical biographies, almost all of them written by professional philosophers. This is thanks, in part, to the Cambridge University Press series of philosophical biographies begun by the late Terry Moore, the Cambridge philosophy editor in New York.[7] But it is also thanks to some changes in the field of philosophy, and particularly the way in which scholarship on the history of early modern philosophy is pursued.

In the 1960s through the early 1980s, early modern philosophy was studied in what, for lack of a better term, can be called a highly "analytic" manner. The attention was all on a philosopher's theses and arguments, and these were examined—as well they should be—in a most rigorous way. Are Descartes' demonstrations of the mind-body distinction valid? How exactly is Berkeley's "master argument" for his idealism supposed to work? What is the argumentative strategy in Kant's transcendental deduction?

These are, of course, extremely interesting and philosophically important questions. They must be asked. Not to ask them would be not to take Descartes or Berkeley or Kant or other early modern thinkers seriously as *philosophers*. In

fact, it would amount to not doing history of philosophy (as opposed to doing something like intellectual history). We should be grateful for the many fascinating and valuable studies of early modern philosophers that have come out of this way of doing history of philosophy. However, it is also the case that among the practitioners of this analytic style of history of philosophy there seemed to be a willful ignoring of the historical, intellectual, religious and political contexts of a philosopher's thought, as if these were irrelevant to understanding what a philosopher was saying and why he or she was saying it. In fact, let me put this more strongly: there seemed to be an outright hostility to looking beyond the explicit and possible arguments of a text—what a philosopher did say and what he, on logical grounds, could have, would have or should have said—and considering who that philosopher was; where and when he lived; whom he studied; the nature of his audience; the civil, religious and academic authorities with whom he had to deal; and especially what were his other intellectual projects? This anti-historical, anti-contextual approach reached a somewhat laughable apex when Jonathan Bennett, in the introduction to his study of Spinoza's *Ethics*, wrote that he was not going to look at Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, since he found that latter work—one of the most important books in the history of philosophy—to be of no help whatsoever in understanding the metaphysical and moral project of the *Ethics*. Meanwhile, although Descartes was primarily a scientist and mathematician, for a long time most scholarly attention in the Anglo-American philosophical world was focused on his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, something that he considered a one-off exercise that is a mere epistemological preamble to his major projects in natural philosophy. Books on the arguments of the *Meditations* proliferated, and journals published a seemingly endless number of articles on "the Cartesian circle", Descartes' argument for God's existence in the Third Meditation, or his account of mind-body union in the Sixth Meditation. In that kind of narrowly focused environment, what philosopher would dare undertake writing a *biography* of an historical figure?

Fortunately, things have evolved over the past quarter century, and a good deal of scholarship in the history of early modern philosophy now takes a much more contextual and historically sensitive approach. Philosophical work (that is, work by philosophers and not just intellectual historians) on Descartes now looks more closely at his scientific writings, his philosophy of nature, and the Aristotelian scholasticism of his time; philosophical studies of Spinoza now go beyond his metaphysics and epistemology and look at his moral philosophy, his political thought, his views on religion, and the seventeenth-century Dutch and European context of his ideas. This new broader approach to the study of early

modern philosophy by philosophers, I suggest, makes for a much more congenial, even supportive environment for philosophical biography—that is, biographies of philosophers written by those who can do it best: philosophers themselves.

Still, I would like to suggest that, for my taste at least, things can go even further. Many, if not most, of the biographies of philosophers that have appeared so far are what might be called "intellectual biographies" or intellectual itineraries. They are primarily focused on the ideas of the philosopher and how they evolved during the course of his or her career, although they situate all of this in the context of the philosopher's life. The result is often yet another study of a philosopher's philosophy rather than a true study of his life and times. I absolutely do not deny that this contextualizing of a philosopher's ideas and historical examination of their development is a valuable thing to have. But in my view it underestimates what may often be the intrinsic interest of an intellectual's life in a particular time and place. Of course, the ideas cannot be ignored. After all, a reader will pick up a biography of a philosopher at the very least to learn something about his or her philosophy. But we also pick up such biographies to learn about the lives these thinkers led, the lives of others with whom they lived, and the interesting times in which they flourished. It is a shame that too often these elements are given second place, as mere background or scene setting for an examination of the unfolding of a philosopher's thought over time. A contextualized and diachronic look at a philosopher's thought is no substitute for a true literary biography of a great intellectual.

Which brings me to the writing of a biography of Spinoza. In one respect, Spinoza's life was not a very lively or interesting one. He never left The Netherlands, and lived all his life in the province of Holland. He was not actively engaged in politics. While not the recluse or loner that he was long depicted as being, he did often keep to himself and led a fairly mundane existence, devoted to his work. Like Descartes, he valued his peace and quiet and wanted to be left alone to pursue his philosophical interests. And unlike the case of Descartes, there is no sex.[8]

And yet, there is much that is of great interest and relevance in Spinoza's life. He spent his youth in what was perhaps the most cosmopolitan and liberal city of early modern Europe, Amsterdam, right in the middle of the Dutch Golden Age and at a crucial juncture in Western European political history, as the Thirty Years War was coming to a close. He grew up in the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam, founded by former conversos fleeing the Inquisitions in Portugal and Spain and thus essentially living as refugees in a generally tolerant but unpredictable Calvinist society. His vitriolic

excommunication or ban from that Jewish community for “abominable heresies” and “monstrous deeds” remains unexplained, and thus introduces a fascinating mystery at the heart of his biography.

And then there is the radical nature of his ideas: the denial of the providential deity of Judaism and Christianity and the identification of God with Nature; the denial of the immortality of the soul; the rejection of the possibility of miracles; his reduction of “true religion” to a simple ethical principle, free from ceremonial observance and ecclesiastic hierarchy; his claim that the Bible is merely a work of human literature that is of value only for its moral lessons; and his strong and eloquent arguments for toleration in a secular, democratic state. A revolutionary and highly influential thinker, living in a rich, fascinating and dynamic culture (with multi-ethnic components) that was of immense importance to modern European history, Spinoza continues to be of great relevance for us today. His arguments for freedom and for the toleration of the expression of ideas, and his attack on the meddling by religious fundamentalists in the politics of the state are no less important in contemporary American society than they were in the tumultuous world of seventeenth-century Dutch society. What a prime subject for a biography!

Spinoza is both a blessing and a curse for a biographer. He is a blessing because, at least when it comes to writings *by* Spinoza, there is so little primary source material you have to go through. His collected works are in four medium-length volumes. There are 89 extant letters from his correspondence (50 from Spinoza to his correspondents). At one point, I thought it would be interesting to write a biography of another major intellectual figure from the seventeenth century, Antoine Arnauld, the Jansenist firebrand theologian and highly combative philosopher. But he was a verbose and repetitive (and very irascible) man, and there are 43 large volumes in his collected writings. It was all just too much. To this day, we do not have a full-length biography of Arnauld, aside from the extended (and quite valuable) biographical sketch written in the late eighteenth century by the editor of his *oeuvres*.[9] A biography of Spinoza seemed a much more manageable project, one that was also, in a very personal way, much more interesting for me—not the least because I think that Spinoza got it all right.

At the same time, Spinoza is a curse for any biographer, because—well, because there is so little material. The life of Spinoza is for this very reason both the biographer’s nightmare and his field of dreams. Spinoza was born in 1632, but we have nothing from Spinoza himself before ca. 1658, the most likely dating for his earliest philosophical work; and no letters from before 1661. We have his six philosophical works (two of which were abandoned before being

completed, a third left unfinished at his death), plus two other writings (including the Hebrew grammar). And the extant letters that we do have are all of primarily philosophical interest; his friends, when they put together a posthumous edition of his works, apparently destroyed any letters of a personal or even political nature. Then there are the documents around his early life: there is his *herem* or ban from the Portuguese congregation, extant in a Portuguese version (in the record book of the Portuguese-Jewish community, whose archives are now housed in the Amsterdam municipal archives); and there are (thanks to archival research by scholars throughout the twentieth century) a significant number of records from the Amsterdam Jewish community regarding his family, his education, and the environment in which he was raised. There are also, from the Amsterdam municipal archives, notary documents concerning the Spinoza family business and Spinoza's own brief career as an importer/exporter (he was apparently a lousy businessman). We also have many documents related, in one way or another, to the mature Spinoza. We know who his friends were, where he lived, where and when he traveled, and even who his landlords and neighbors were. We have some eyewitness accounts of his behavior, reports of some things he may have said, and lots of things written by contemporaries about his ideas, by both allies and foes.

We also know a good deal about this turbulent period of the Dutch Republic, the political and religious tensions that ran beneath its tranquil Ruisdaelian landscape and whose dangerous developments in the late 1660s so concerned Spinoza. By using all of this information, one can make up for the lack of direct pictures of Spinoza by creating a kind of silhouetted portrait of him, by filling in the spaces around him and building up the structures within which he existed. We thus capture him even if we cannot see the details of the man himself—similar, in a way, to the manner in which some medieval philosophers believed that, while we cannot know anything positive about God's own essence, we can nonetheless know more and more of God through making negative attributions.

A good example for this method is the Shabbetai Zevi episode, which caused a great frenzy in Amsterdam and other major centers of Jewish life in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century.[10] When Zvi proclaimed himself the messiah in Jerusalem in 1666, European Jews, especially Sephardim but Ashkenazim as well, went into a state of messianic hysteria and began selling off their property and moving to the Holy Land, only to be ultimately disappointed when Zevi, under threat of death from the Caliphate, converted to Islam. It is indubitable that Spinoza must have had some fine things to say about this madness, about the religious passions that underlie such irrational behavior. Unfortunately, if there were letters in which he expressed his opinions—and there surely were,

since one of his correspondents explicitly asks him what he thought of it all[11] — they are lost to us. But we certainly know, from his philosophical writings, what Spinoza *would* have said, and it is not hard to reconstruct his take on this event.

This kind of biographical writing is a real challenge, and therein lies its fascination. It took a lot of imaginative work, and I found it to be an extremely rewarding and creative experience. While I had to hedge a lot of my claims with cowardly caveats, annoying hesitations and the subjunctive mood—"Spinoza could have…", "Spinoza would have…", "Perhaps Spinoza did…"—I think what emerged was a relatively full and (I hope) colorful portrait of an individual deeply embedded in his times, and not merely an abstraction engaged in hypothetical actions. In a way, the dearth of concrete evidence was liberating, not limiting. I think a really interesting challenge would be to do the same for a philosophical figure for whom we have even less documentary biographical material: Socrates.

Let me close with some remarks that elaborate on something I said above, namely, that for me this biography of Spinoza was *personally* a very interesting and important project. As philosophers, we tend to write for an exceedingly small audience: ourselves. Like all academic disciplines, we have our lingo or jargon, our style, our themes and our professional cautions. And perhaps this is as it should be. It is a wonderful life to do philosophy, it is a very rewarding and pleasurable way to spend one's time, regardless of its instrumental value. But sometimes, just sometimes, one wants to know that one is reaching more than the 15 other specialists in one's field. One wants to write something that will get read beyond the academy, to make a difference and affect people with ideas. Technical philosophical writing, whether in books or for journals, is not likely to do that. A biography, on the other hand, has a good shot at it. But I did not want to stop working in my area of expertise, seventeenth-century philosophy, since I remained fascinated by it. I also had a deep interest for a long time in the art and culture of the Dutch Golden Age. Finally, I had a desire to work on something that related to my own Jewish heritage. So I considered whether there was some project that met all these criteria: a philosophical subject from the seventeenth century with a Jewish angle in the Dutch Golden Age and in a genre of writing that would be accessible to a broader audience. When I realized that there had never been a biography of Spinoza, I basically discovered a topic that would be my obsession for at least the next dozen years and that would result in five books.[12]

My larger point is that it would be a very good thing indeed for academic philosophy if philosophers, without giving up their specialized philosophical

interests, nonetheless could find a way to make philosophy interesting, relevant and accessible to non-philosophers, if philosophers could reach out to the general educated public that wants to do more than watch “reality television” and wants to extend its reading beyond novels and Malcolm Gladwell-type journalistic ruminations. Accessibly written biographies of philosophers is one way to do this, but not the only way.

The general absence of philosophy from public life in this country is not a good thing, and constitutes an important difference between the cultural/intellectual life here and the cultural/intellectual life in Europe. After the events of 9/11, the American media was full of politicians, civic leaders, journalists, clergy, historians, even poets and artists reflecting on the tragedy. But, as far as I can recall, not a single philosopher. And I dare say that academic philosophy itself bears some of the blame for this.

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Footnotes

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4 *Within Reason*: *A Life of Spinoza* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998). Earlier biographical studies of Spinoza include Stanislaus von Dunin-Borkowski, *Der junge de Spinoza* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1910), and Jacob Freudenthal, *Spinoza*: *Seine Leben und Sein Lehre* (Stuttgart: Fr. Frommans Verlag, 1904). However, these were written well before so much of the important research on

Spinoza's background in the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community by I. S. Revah, Richard Popkin, Jonathan Israel, and others.

5 E. J. Aiton, *Leibniz*: *A Biography* (Bristol and Boston: Adam Hilger, 1985); Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz*: *An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

6 On Maimonides, see Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*: *The Man and His Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides*: *The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); and Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*: *A Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For recent efforts to write a biography of Socrates, see Luis E. Navia, *Socrates*: *A Life Examined* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007); and Bettany Hughes, *The Hemlock Cup*: *Socrates, Athens, and the Search for the Good Life* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

7 The series includes the recent biographies of Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Kant noted above, as well as volumes on Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.

8 Descartes had a child, Francine, with Helena Fransdr, a woman who was a servant in one of the houses in which he lodged during his time in the Netherlands. The girl died at the age of five of scarlet fever; Descartes was heartbroken.

9 *Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*, 43 vols. (Paris: Sigismond d'Arnay, 1775).

10 For a study of this episode, see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*: *The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

11 See Ep. 33 (from Henry Oldenburg), in *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsverlag, 1972 [1925]), vol. 4, p. 178.

12 *Spinoza*: *A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); *Spinoza's Heresy*: *Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); *Spinoza's* Ethics: *An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and *A Book Forged in Hell*: *Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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13. Hume's Own Life

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In this essay I will argue that Hume's autobiographical "My Own Life" was intended to offer a history of Hume-the-writer and in so doing to both exhibit Hume's credentials as a historian and his skill at providing a history of a particularly difficult subject – himself.

There is an obvious problem of bias or partiality in providing a history of oneself. Hume was quite aware of this. From the opening paragraph of "My Own Life" he underscored that writing about one's self seemed terribly vain, and I will argue that Hume seeks to counter the claim of bias in his writings for posterity by offering a relatively unbiased account of himself. "My Own Life" is dated April 18, 1776, 3 days after Hume attached a codicil to his will with arrangements for his burial plot and his stipulation that his tomb ought have "an inscription containing only my name, with the year of my birth and death, leaving it to posterity to add the rest." Clearly Hume had second thoughts about leaving the rest wholly to posterity!

I will begin by comparing "My Own Life" with Hume's other best known piece of autobiographical writing, a well-known letter commonly referred to as the "Letter to a Physician" (henceforth "Letter"). The Letter was written in early 1734 five months before Hume left for La Fleche where he wrote A Treatise and

over 40 years before “My Own Life”.

These two pieces of autobiographical writing are very different which is not surprising given the 40 years between them. The Letter is a private, anonymous letter written by the young Hume to a learned doctor in which Hume described his recent past and present mental state. We do not know whether the letter was actually sent, nor are we sure to whom it was meant to be sent, although George Cheyne seems the most likely candidate.[1] “My Own Life”, on the other hand, was written for Hume’s present and future readers and to be read against the background of his literary accomplishments. Hume requested in a codicil to his will that William Strahan his publisher attach “My Own Life” and a sketch to be written by Adam Smith to the next edition of his “Works”.[2] In the interim between Hume’s death in late 1776 and the appearance in 1778 of the new edition of Hume’s History of England and *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, “My Own Life” was printed in the Scots Magazine in 1777 and then, as a pamphlet, along with Adam Smith’s controversial letter to Strahan describing Hume’s death: *The Life of David Hume, Esq. Written By Himself*.[3] The pamphlet was immediately translated into French and later translated into Latin. When the new edition of the History was advertised, one of its main selling points was “In the course of publication will be given an Account of the Life of the Author written by Himself”. “My Own Life”, along with Smith’s description, was affixed to the beginning of the advertised new edition as well as subsequent editions.

Further notable differences. “My Own Life” focuses almost exclusively on Hume’s literary career, were as the Letter was written before the literary career started and directly before the work that initiated the career – rather disappointingly as it turned out – was begun. After writing the letter, Hume “went to Bristol, with some recommendations to eminent merchants, but in a few months found that scene totally unsuitable” and so proceeded to Paris where he hunkered down and wrote the Treatise. Furthermore, the Letter describes in detail a mental and physical malady – a kind of nervous exhaustion – which Hume thought to be the impediment to him undertaking a philosophical or literary career. After initially plunging himself into philosophy and criticism, Hume found there “seem’d to be open’d up… a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond Measure, & made me, with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it. … I was infinitely happy in this Course of Life for some Months; till at last, about the beginning of Sept^{r} 1729, all my Ardor seemed in a moment to be extinguisht, & I cou’d no longer raise my Mind to that pitch, which formerly gave me such

excessive Pleasure."[4]

This mental exhaustion left Hume unable to put his notes into an overall form, to turn the trees into a well-worked forest, and so he sought the advice of a physician who was also a man of letters and who might recognize the specific symptoms that Hume described in order then to see whether he still might hope for a literary career even while taking up for the moment the life of a merchant to hopefully combat the exhaustion with worldly activity.

These extraordinary events stretching over 5 years and catalogued in detail in the Letter along with mental and bodily symptoms and attempts at cure is described as follows in My Own Life "and my health being a little broken by my ardent application, I was tempted, or rather forced, to make a very feeble trial for entering into a more active scene of life."[5] As presented in My Own Life the contents so carefully detailed in the Letter are a momentary lapse reported before the literary plan of life begins.

Now at first this might not be surprising. There were 40 more years of incidents in Hume's life, many as worth recounting as the episode detailed in the Letter – the intrigues surrounding Hume's failure to get a university post, the controversy over the Four Dissertations and the first volume of the History of England, his many friendships and his famous falling out with Rousseau, as well as his responses to many of the important events of the day such as the '45. What is striking in My Own Life is that these details enter into Hume's account of his life only when directly relevant to his literary career, as with the brief representation of the experience of mental exhaustion carefully illustrated in the Letter. Indeed, after Hume's death a volume appeared entitled Supplement to the Life of David Hume, Esq. (1777) which supplemented My Own Life with funny anecdotes and argued, sympathetically, that Hume's life was not quite as serene as he had made it out to be.

Many readers knew of aspects of Hume's life they might have wished Hume to discuss, not the least his religion or lack thereof which made him a controversial figure in Scotland. Adam Smith's letter describing Hume's death, which was published alongside My Own Life and was presumably added to give additional luster to it, was much more controversial than the work it followed. Not that Hume hid from all posthumous controversy, he arranged to have Smith publish the Dialogues on Natural Religion. But My Own Life, the history of his writings, is notable for absence of controversial claims and for its irenic leanness. Why? To answer this we have to turn to Hume qua historian.

As previously noted, Hume refers to "My Own Life" as providing a "History" of his writings. He uses "history" to describe the main contents of the

Letter as well. The term “history” had wide scope and did not solely refer to what historians do. As would be expected Hume used “history” in a number of senses but two are particularly relevant. First, Hume sometimes used “history” to mean a recounting of or a story made up of facts, events, and incidents that could then be used as the basis for deduction, induction, etc. We might call this anatomical history. The Letter is a story meant by Hume to provide facts about his mental and physical state to a physician in hope that the physician will recognize the details and offer him hope. It is more than that, obviously, but it seems clear that it is not meant as a history in the sense of the work of a historian, much the less in the special sense that Hume would develop from the 1740s onward, and in particular in writing the History of England.

Hume’s History of England was a “history” in a more robust and technical sense. History in this sense also concerned clearly setting out past events, but with causal explanations when possible. In the Natural History of Religion Hume used psychology to provide a coherent, causal explanation of apparently disunified reports and historical records of religious practices. In the History of England Hume sought to provide coherent causal explanations as well, for example the analysis in Volume I of how the emergence of stable law, the independence of the barony and of London, and the luck of the English people in having monarchs like King Alfred who laid the ground for important institutions all gave rise to England’s distinctive liberty. The goal of robust history in providing relevant causal explanations and context was to undermine factional misuse of stories about the past. Hume wrote in My Own Life that he began the History of England “with the accession of the House of Stuart” because that “was the epoch when… the misrepresentations of faction began chiefly to take place” (EMPL xxxvi), and so implied that his goal was to clarify past misconceptions in order to defang present conflict. Hume hoped misconceptions about the reign, which fueled present destructive party faction and would continue to do so if not countered would be dissolved by explaining the grounds for contentious claims and controversial events and characters and offering even-handed judgments.

The two main objects of robust history were particular past characters and events. That a historian would be interested in events is unsurprising, but characters is perhaps a bit more surprising. Hume saw rightly that the characters of rulers were used for factional purposes – Charles I and Cromwell – and he wished to provide careful reflections on characters as derived from a survey of actions and events in order to minimize their factionalizing force.

The History of England is almost entirely divided by reigns, and most of Hume’s accounts of reigns consist of annals of events during the reign and then a

summary view of the character of the ruler as arising from the survey of the events and often an identification of one or more ruling passions. So for one of many examples, Hume concludes his treatment of Richard I with:

> The most shining part of this prince's character are his military talents. No man, even in that romantic age, carried personal courage and intrepidity to a greater height; and this quality gained him the appellation of the lion-hearted, coeur de lion. He passionately loved glory, chiefly military glory; and as his conduct in the field was not inferior to his valour, he seems to have possessed every talent necessary for acquiring it. His resentments also were high; his pride unconquerable; and his subjects, as well as his neighbours, had therefore reason to apprehend, from the continuance of his reign, a perpetual scene of blood and violence. Of an impetuous and vehement spirit, he was distinguished by all the good, as well as the bad qualities, incident to that character: He was open, frank, generous, sincere, and brave; he was revengeful, domineering, ambitious, haughty, and cruel.[6]

In some cases Hume is far less admiring, and in the cases of some of the earlier kings, of Henry VIII and of Cromwell Hume admits he cannot really arrive at a synoptic character judgment from the events of the monarch's life due to lack of evidence in the early kings, to drastic and even conflicting actions in different periods of life in the case of Henry VIII, and to extreme inconsistency of actions with Cromwell.

Following Hume's mention of his impending death he concludes "historically" with his "own character" :

> I was, I say, a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments. My company was not unacceptable to the young and careless, as well as to the studious and literary; and as I took a particular pleasure in the company of modest women, I had no reason to be displeased with the reception I met with from them. In a word, though most men any wise eminent, have found reason to complain of calumny, I never was touched, or even attacked by her baleful tooth: and though I wantonly exposed myself to the rage of both civil and religious factions, they seemed to be disarmed in my behalf of their wonted fury. My friends never had occasion to vindicate any one circumstance of my character and conduct:

> not but that the zealots, we may well suppose, would have been glad to invent and propagate any story to my disadvantage, but they could never find any which they thought would wear the face of probability. (EMPL xl)

The parallel is obvious, and would have been all the more obvious when "My Own Life" was affixed to the first volume of the History of England. Hume is providing a general evaluation of notable qualities of his own character as consistent with or derived from the events of his life detailed previously and a ruling passion – not love of glory but love of literary fame. And the parallel implies he means us to take "My Own Life" as a brief but robust history.

But there is an obvious problem. The focus on particular past characters and events made the object of history distinctively different both from the object of theoretical or abstract philosophy (which considered characters in general) and the object of common life (which considers proximate particular characters in relation to one's own interests):

> When a man of business enters into life and action, he is more apt to consider the characters of men, as they have relation to his interest, than as they stand in themselves… When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue. History keeps in a just medium betwixt these extremes, and places the objects in their true point of view. The writers of history, as well as the readers, are sufficiently interested in the characters and events, to have a lively sentiment of blame or praise; and, at the same time, have no particular interest or concern to pervert their judgment. ("Of the Study of History", EMPL 567–8)

In other words, historians evaluate particular human characters and events in a manner intermediate between the interested embedded stance of common life and the disinterested general view of the philosopher. The more remote the history – in time and place – the easier it is to maintain this intermediate position, but the more difficult it is to find reliable information. The closer the events the more reliable the information but the greater difficulty maintaining neutrality. When the History of England appeared, it was very controversial (one of the few controversies that Hume underscores in My Own Life) because as noted much of the readership had interests and allegiances in the present with respect to the subject matter. When the discussion of the history of the ancient Saxons appeared there was considerably less controversy but also considerably less evidence.

Hume was a controversial figure and he wrote controversial works. The

parallel between the object of robust history and the object of My Own Life points to a parallel between a goal of robust history and a central goal of My Own Life – to decouple Hume the pagan, the *confrere* and then enemy of Rousseau and so forth, from the character of Hume the historian in such a way that readers would find it difficult to dismiss his work or misrepresent its contents by association in the same way that he attempted to decouple the controversies of the Stuart regime and the characters of Charles I and Cromwell from present Whig and Tory factional politics.

But now the obvious problem. What character or events could one be more interested in, and thus more likely to misrepresent, than one's *own* particular life and works? This would seem to be, indeed is, the particular character with which we are most concerned in common life. To impartially extricate one's own life from common life is none too easy. Listing symptoms in a story in hope of a cure, as Hume did in the Letter, seems far less problematic. And what philosopher would see this problem for Hume Historian more clearly than Hume Sceptic?

Hume did, though, provide some support that his evaluation of his own life might be reasonably disinterested – here are a few examples. First, he introduced the survey of his character just mentioned with: "It is difficult to be more detached from life than I am at present… To conclude historically with my own character. I am, or rather was (for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself, which emboldens me the more to speak my sentiments)" (EMPL xl). This mirrors the opening passage of *My Own Life*, "It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself without vanity; therefore, I shall be short" (EMPL xxxi). We realize as we are concluding that the work was indeed short, and Hume bolsters the lack of vanity by claiming that because he was near death he was less susceptible to self interest and consequently better able to appraise his own actions disinterestedly insofar as he had little selfish interest in the future consequences of his actions. There was nothing he, the living Hume, could get from a biased presentation since he was soon not to be.

Next, Hume stressed his financial independence in My Own Life and that unlike many of his contemporaries he never needed to rely on a patron. Again Hume invited the reader to see him as disinterested, reinforcing him as a disinterested judge in general. Also, in the description of his character, Hume offers verifiable evidence that he has drawn his picture roughly right: "my friends never had occasion to vindicate any one circumstance of my character and conduct: not but that the zealots, we may well suppose, would have been glad to invent and propagate any story to my disadvantage, but they could never find any which they thought would wear the face of probability" (EMPL xli).

But most importantly, Hume is trying to show his suitability to the events of his life as a means of underscoring the neutrality of his writings by what he doesn't say. As noted, Hume describes the events of his life relevant to his literary career, i.e., primarily events surrounding his published writings. He does treat a number of the controversies around his work – over the Stuart and Tudor volumes of the History, the Natural History of Religion and his Essays. But in portraying the events, Hume is careful to present the controversies as unimportant, although in the case of the Stuart volume of the History he admits there was much ado but since it was from all sides it did not show Hume to be biased in his presentation. And as noted there were numerous controversies that went unmentioned. In doing so Hume shows his equanimity and the disinterested temper suitable to the historian.

So My Own Life is best understood as a self-application of the goals and object of Hume's History with some justification were that Hume was up to the difficulty of the enterprise. All right then. But I hope you are thinking is that Hume you've presented? It sounds like an hair-shirted ascetic! I have downplayed the dry humor in My Own Life, mainly humor at his own expense about his own inability to stir controversy. But I will conclude by noting a playful point that Hume seems to be making.

As mentioned, Hume states that "love of literary fame" was his guiding passion. This would seem to suggest a tendency to inflate his own works. Furthermore Hume goes out of his way to underscore his vanity; the work opens with three mentions of vanity and concludes with one more – vanity bookends the work. This would further suggest unreliability.

"Love of fame", though, has a specific meaning for Hume: pride or vanity derived from the opinions of others via sympathy and, more specifically, the opinions of discerning others who extol us for "the qualities in which we chiefly excel." My Own Life details the successes and failures of that at which Hume chiefly excelled – writing. In saying he was driven by love of fame he is saying that he was driven to be admired for the quality of his writing by critics capable of appreciating them. This motivation is not at all dubious for Hume, in fact it drives much of what is worthwhile in arts and letters.

Similarly vanity is not strictly pejorative for Hume – Hume often uses pride and vanity interchangeably – and pride is the fundamental passion behind the love of fame and many positive social accomplishments. That said in the introductory paragraph "vanity" is clearly pejorative – My Own Life is short in order to prevent vanity and furthermore the failures of Hume's early writings were not much to be vain about. But in the concluding paragraph vanity is used in a different sense, of justified pride. The extraordinary concluding sentence "I

cannot say there is no vanity in making this funeral oration of myself, but I hope it is not a misplaced one; and this is a matter of fact which is easily cleared and ascertained" makes my case in a nutshell. Vanity is not bad if justified and if the object of vanity is one's character as a writer the only way to confirm it is through the writing. Hume asked that "My Own Life" be placed at the beginning of his works and the reason is now apparent. The best way to dismiss scepticism about an author's capacity to present an accurate history of himself, even when presented with various supports, is consulting the object of the history itself. Look past Hume to the writings. And in this case the object is readily available to the sort of discerning and judicious reader whose praise Hume might care for – it directly follows after My Own Life.

As I noted at the beginning, Hume had second thoughts about the naïvete of leaving only "an inscription containing only my name, with the year of my birth and death, leaving it to posterity to add the rest." Hume the Historian, the admirer of Tacitus, knew all too well how writings could be misconstrued and misused – countering this was a central goal of his own History. Because Hume the Skeptic had become a liability to his writings by association, he needed to associate a different more minimal and judicious Hume with his writings so that they could be read with a clear mind and not just dismissed by silly bigots. In this sense "My Own Life" is an extraordinary literary disappearing act, allowing one Hume to recede so that posterity might read his writings without Bias.

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[CrossRef]

Footnotes

1 See John P. Wright (2003) “Dr. George Cheyne, Chevalier Ramsay, and Hume’s Letter to a Physician.” *Hume Studies*. 29: 1, 125–141.

2 Richard Sher (2006) *The Enlightenment and the Book*: *Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 55.

3 Ibid. See 55–59 for a discussion of the role of Strahan’s violation of Hume’s instructions in the construction of the image of Hume as author.

4 J. Y. T. Greig (ed.) (1932) *The Letters of David Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, v. I, 13.

5 David Hume, “My Own Life” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. E. F. Miller (ed.). Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1985, xxxiii. Hence EMPL.

6 D. Hume (1778) *The History of England*. Liberty Fund: Liberty Classics, 1983. v. I, 403.

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14. The (Ir)relevance of Biography: The Case of Fichte

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14.1

The theme of this section of the volume is Intellectual and Philosophical Biography. If I understand correctly the demands placed upon me by this theme and the fact that I am also asked to direct some of my comments specifically at the case Johann Gottlieb Fichte, then I should say something about the conditions of the possibility of philosophical biography in general and also discuss some of the special problems presented by Fichte. It's clear to me that I very well might not have understood my task correctly, and that it is my Kantian perversion that makes me take the question in this way. But be that as it may, that is what you are going to get. Accordingly, I shall first discuss some widely held views about the philosophical relevance and even the very possibility of philosophical biography. Secondly, I shall try to represent Fichte's views concerning this subject, and thirdly show that, in spite of Fichte's attempts to downplay the importance of biography, his own biography is not at all unimportant for understanding his thought. In doing so, I shall pay particular attention to what I call "the Siegfried motive," apologizing in advance for the Wagnerian overtones. If there is time, I will, by way of a conclusion, make some comments on what I take to be the significance of all this.

14.2

In some ways, the relation between the lives and the theories of philosophers has been a problem from the very beginnings of Western philosophy. The story of Thales, who studied the stars and fell into a well because, to the amusement of a Thracian maid, he did not pay attention to the things nearest to him, is as well known as the Socratic claim in the *Meno* that, while he may never be sure whether his story about the nature of reality was right, we would "be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we never can discover" (86b). And the ancient critics of skepticism did believe that the question whether a skeptic "can live" his skepticism was highly relevant to a discussion of skepticism.

None of this meant, of course, that the biography of a particular philosopher was necessarily relevant for understanding the philosopher's theory. Philosophy and life might be intimately connected, and the philosopher should live his philosophy rather than merely teach or profess it, but it was the philosophical ideal to which we should aspire that was much more important than any particular characteristics of the people who were trying to achieve it. The "self" was not as relevant here as was the totality of the reality with which one was to identify. As Heraclitus already found: "Human nature has no real understanding; only divine nature has it" (fragment 61), and "a man's character is his guardian divinity" (fragment 69). Pierre Hadot certainly got this much right, and Michel Foucault got this very wrong. Biography, accordingly, is largely unphilosophical and therefore uninteresting from a philosophical point of view.

While the works of other writers, like those of Diogenes Laaertius whose *Lives and Opinions of those who Have Distinguished Themselves in Philosophy*, point in a different direction, the doxographic tradition to which he belonged is dismissed by many as too unphilosophical. It was mainly Hegel, who, for better or worse, made a sharp distinction between the individual personality and the particular character of a philosopher and "free thought and the universal character of human beings *qua* human beings [whose] impersonal [*eigntümlichkeitslose*] thought is itself the productive subject" of the true history of philosophy. What makes for the special character of a philosopher belongs in political history, not in the history of philosophy. Philosophical biography, on this view, is an oxymoron.

The most consistent follower of Hegel in this regard was perhaps R. G. Collingwood. Thus he differentiated sharply in his posthumously published *Principles of History* between true history and biography.[1] While he considered

history and especially the history of thought an eminently respectable occupation, he discounted biography altogether. His slogan went: “all history is the history of thought” (67). The historian’s aim “is to trace the thought embodied in action” (70). One might think that this is also what the biographer does, but Collingwood will have nothing of this, claiming that the “biographer … includes in his subject a good deal which does not belong in the object of any historical study whatever” (70). In other words, the biographer is likely to include in his subject events which “embody no thought whatsoever,” and even when an action is described that embodies a thought, it is not included because it embodies a thought, but rather for its “gossip value” (70). In other words, for Collingwood, all biography devolves ultimately into gossip.

Collingwood claimed that he did not choose “gossip value” in a derogatory spirit, but it should be clear that he did not choose “gossip value” because it is entirely free from condescension either. That this is so is abundantly clear from his inability to resist the claim that biography also has “snobbery value,” and then formulate the principle: “gossip value *plus* snobbery-value, both of them fraudulent” (75). Gossip has for him to do with sympathy and malice, with emotions that characterize human beings as mere animals. “The individuality which … arouses our sympathy is not the individuality of an *animal rationale*, it is the individuality of an animal pure and simple” (71). It’s the same kind of sympathy we may have for “any dog” we see “run over in the street” (71). And these are the strings the biographer plays. In other words, “the purpose of biography is to stimulate emotion” (72) without any “scientific value”(73). The “animal vicissitudes” of our lives (birth, death, etc.) are just not that interesting from the point of view of the history of thought.

Furthermore, biography can for Collingwood be nothing but a “scissors and paste affair”, though he is much less clear on why that must be so. But this is not so much to the point in this context. What is important here is that for Collingwood, as for Hegel, biography *qua* biography is of necessity unphilosophical.

This attitude is not restricted to moderate idealists like Collingwood. Take Richard Rorty, for instance, who late in his life seemed to have shed most of his analytic convictions and instead endorsed many post-modernist commonplaces. He also took “a person’s moral character—his or her selective sensitivity … to be shaped by chance events in his or her life.”[2] He also argued that these chance events have little or nothing to do with “the tools” that a philosopher may have “invented at various times to accomplish one or another object.”[3] Indeed, Rorty thought that in the particular case of Heidegger, we might easily imagine other

"chance events" and "independent variations," another "slightly different world," in which Heidegger divorced his wife, married a Jewish woman, emigrated to the U.S.A., taught at the University of Chicago, had a son, was divorced by his wife, who became a passionate Zionist and took their son to Palestine, where he ultimately dies on the Golan Heights, while Heidegger himself returns to Freiburg in 1948, receives, among other honors, membership in the order *Pour le Merite*. At the same time, Rorty asks us to imagine that the books Heidegger wrote in this possible world would be only slightly different from the ones he actually wrote.[4] While Rorty does not go so far as to claim that philosophical biography is impossible, he does suggest that it is of limited or no value for understanding the philosophical theories of anyone. It is pretty much irrelevant for philosophical concerns.

It appears to me that anyone who is engaged in writing a biography of a philosopher needs, in some way or other, to address such views. The response might be indirect or direct. Like most biographers, I have tried the indirect route in my Kant biography and also follow this approach in the Fichte biography. In other words, biographers typically try to *show* that the life of their subject is philosophically interesting without explicitly *telling* the reader that it is or developing arguments to the effect that the opposing view is wrong. This paper is in some ways my first attempt at making explicit to myself what such a direct response within the context of the Fichte biography might or might not involve. I hope it is not just of interest to myself.

14.3

Immanuel Hermann Fichte, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's only child and the author of the first significant biographies of his father (1830 and 1862), felt that Johann Gottlieb Fichte was a unique subject for a biography, just because he was "different from other thinkers, his teaching was most genuinely and exclusively the imprint of his personality" (vii). "His doctrine in its entirety is understandable only through his personal character, for it is the perfect expression and consequence of this character" (viii). And just because he was convinced of it, he conceived his task as one of showing how Fichte's entire development had to be understood as an autonomous development and not as determined by the merely external influence of other philosophers, such as Kant, Reinhold, or Schelling. His father was, he thought, "a genuinely *German* thinker" who gave expression to "the deeply moral core of our nation (*Volk*), of its honesty, conscientiousness and simple incorruptibility of its essence." In other words, he was "the strongest expression of the simple and unadorned, but honorable characteristics of the Germanic essence" (x). Kuno Fischer, to name

just one other example for this approach, claimed: “Fichte is among the modern philosophers a phenomenal character singular in kind, just because his character combines two qualities which otherwise repel each other: the introverted love of speculation and a fiery extroverted love of action on the stage of the world” (I, 125). He also views Fichte’s thought as “inextricably interwoven” with his personality (I, 133). In other words, Fichte’s character and life are key to understanding his philosophy.

One might think that this approach is very much in keeping with Fichte’s own views of the matter. After all, he famously said in 1797:

> What kind of philosophy someone chooses depends on the kind of person he is, for a philosophical system does not consist of dead furnishings one might discard or acquire at will, but it is enlivened by the soul of the man who has it. A character that is flaccid by nature or one that has been made flaccid and crooked by spiritual servility, scholarly luxury and conceit, will never elevate himself to idealism. (I, 434)

He then went on to claim that “one must be born as a philosopher, one must be educated as philosopher, and one must educate oneself as a philosopher, but one cannot, by any human art, be made into one” (I, 434). In other words, either one is born as a philosopher, and thus receives one’s education as a philosopher, and (then) also educates oneself philosophically, or one will never understand, at least if we are to believe Fichte.

To understand Fichte, however, we must see that these claims are polemically motivated. He does not mean to suggest that there are many different kinds of philosophical systems that someone may adopt on the basis of his or her character. There are really only two systems, namely, the one he calls “dogmatism” and the other which he identifies as “idealism,” but which is in fact nothing but his own system. Yet, this simple opposition of dogmatism and idealism does not quite capture the spirit of his claim, if only because dogmatism is not truly philosophy at all. It is mere pseudo-philosophy, and the “only true philosophy” is idealism.

The dogmatic thinker is also morally defective, since when criticized, he “becomes zealous, twists things, and would persecute, if he had the power to do so.” The idealist philosopher, on the other hand, “remains cool, and always in danger of ridiculing the dogmatist” (I, 435). If that were not enough, the dogmatist is typically an old person and “fully formed” (*schon gemacht*). Idealism, by contrast, is what may be hoped for in the young. Even without further analysis of the text in which these claims are found, it should be clear

that “idealism” represents Fichte’s own view, while “dogmatism” refers to the views of those who would disagree with him. The passage represents nothing but an *argumentum ad hominem* against those who disagree with him. So one might perhaps argue on the basis of this text that the biography of “the idealist” may well be philosophically rewarding, even if the biography of the dogmatist is just as worthless as the pseudo-philosophy to which it gave rise.

That this is not Fichte’s view can be seen from a text of 1799 in which he reflects in a more principled way on the relation between philosophy and life, claiming that

> We cannot know (*erkennen*) what we are entangled in. We must go beyond it and look at it from a point of view that is external to it. This getting beyond our real life, this point of view outside of it is speculation. And only insofar as there are these two different points of view, the higher one above and besides life, is it for us possible to know ourselves. We may live—and perhaps even live in accordance with reason—without speculating; for we can live without knowing life; but we cannot know life without speculating. (V, 343)

We might wonder about the truth of these claims. They seem obviously false to me. Nor is Fichte correct when he claims that this expresses Kant’s point of view, as his attempt to establish the necessary conditions of the possibility of experience does not only not presuppose a point of view that would be independent of our experience, but actually shows that such a speculative point of view is not available to us in principle. But we cannot doubt that this is Fichte’s own view. There is the dogmatism of our lives and then there is the idealism of speculation:

> All reality originates for us explicitly and determinately through non-philosophizing, i.e. either through the failure of ever rising to philosophical abstraction in the first place, or through permitting oneself to fall back into the mechanism of life; and the other way around, just as one ascends to pure speculation, *this reality necessarily disappears*, because we have freed ourselves from the mechanism of thought on which it is founded. (V, 342)

Fichte admits that life, and not speculation, is our goal. It is necessary. Speculation is only a means, namely a means for knowing the world. The two,

> life and speculation, are only determinable through each other. Life is quite

> properly *non-philosophizing*; *philosophizing* is nothing but *non-living*; and I know no better determination of these two concepts than this. It is a complete anti-thesis, and a point of union between them is as impossible as the comprehension of the X that underlies the Subject-Object-Self; except the consciousness of the real philosopher that these two points of view exist for him. (V, 343)

Fichte goes even further, claiming that "our philosophical *thinking* means nothing and has no substance whatsoever; only the thinking that is *thought* in this thinking has meaning and has substance. Our philosophical thinking is merely an instrument by means of which we build our work. Once the work is completed, the instrument should be discarded" (V, 341).

If I understand this correctly, then not even the texts written by the speculative philosophers count for much. They are only more life. What really counts for philosophical speculation is the thought which philosophical thinking produces and which is part of a realm that has nothing in common with the mechanisms of life and ordinary thinking. The problem with dogmatists is, of course, that they don't even see the problem they have.

But we might want to turn the tables on Fichte's idealist or, if you will, on Fichte and ask whether his own philosophizing as exemplified in these two passages inspires any confidence in his own speculations. I think the answer can only be that it does not. While the rhetorical flourish about the true philosophical calling with its Manichean overtones in the first passage from 1797 should not be taken seriously as advice about how a philosophical biography should be written, it does reveal something of significance about Fichte himself. The fact that he feels it is appropriate to resort to this kind of *argumentum ad hominem* in the context of an article called "The First Introduction to the Doctrine of Science" reveals a kind of character that might actually seem closer to that of the dogmatist than to the idealist. Indeed, the very way he advertises for the superiority of idealism by maligning dogmatism seems to undercut or contradict the very position itself. Nor does the observation that the idealist is always in danger of ridiculing the dogmatist resolve this tension, for "ridicule" is not identical with scorn, and Fichte heaps scorn on his opponent. At the very least, the tone is false. This does not mean that the substance of Fichte's position is also false, though I think that the argument of 1797 is rather uninspiring as well, as it is based on false—or at the very least implausible—premisses. Perhaps the argument can be fixed, something I will not even try here. I just want to point out that it does not help his cause and actually might get in the way of appreciating the important things he actually did have to say. Fichte himself, or

perhaps better: Fichte's own feelings of superiority and self-righteousness do seem to get in the way of his thinking. Like Siegfried, the hero of the Nibelungen Saga, he has a fatal flaw. This flaw has to do with his inability to see himself through the eyes of other human beings. And this inability is not unrelated to the "singular and irresistible *practical* evidence which [Fichte] possessed of… the 'Independence of the Self' as contrasted with anything having to do with external causality" (Fichte, Biography, ix). It's not something he ever achieved in life or in thought. Indeed, I would argue against Immanuel Hermann Fichte that the most important difference between his father and other major modern thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Hegel consisted in precisely this inability to understand how dependent his philosophical thought was on the views of his predecessors and contemporaries. And how little it was clear to him that he often reacted when he thought he was acting autonomously.

14.4

Here one example from his early life, taken from the son's biography, which must have been an important part of the family lore about Fichte's youth. I quote:

> Once, the boy was about seven years old, his father, to reward the boy's industriousness, gave him the popular story of Siegfried (*der gehörnte Siegfried*) as a present …This book, probably the first he held in his hands apart from Scripture and Hymn book, filled his mind and took all his attention so that he took no pleasure in anything else. He even neglected his school lessons and became irresponsible. This led to serious punishment. Finally, he realized that, unless things would lead from bad to worse, he had entirely to rid himself of the book. At the same time he also wanted to punish the book for all the bad things it had done to him. So, he took the book to the stream behind the fathers house in order to throw it into the water. He hesitated for a long time to undertake the first submission of himself, but then, with renewed decisiveness, he hurled it into the water far away from where he stood. When he saw it floating away, the realization of the loss was too much. He broke down and cried very hard. This is how his father found him and heard about the loss of the book. The boy, from shyness or confusion, remained silent about the true reason and context of the loss. Accordingly, the father became angry about the son's irresponsible handling of the gift and punished him much more severely than usually.

It is clear that the young Fichte felt hard done by, and his son cannot refrain

from making the following comment: “[This was] a foreshadowing of his later life in which he frequently was most misunderstood and misinterpreted for just those things he had done with conviction and earnest forethought, and often for a similar reason based on ignorance of the real context and the true reasons” (7).

It seems to me that this is missing the point, however. It was not that the young Fichte was unjustly blamed for something that did not happen. His offense, if an offense it was, had to do with the loss of a book that had probably cost his poor father more than he could afford—and the book was, as a matter of fact, gone. Furthermore, there was good reason for Fichte not to reveal the real story. If the father had found out that he willfully threw it away, he would in all likelihood have been even more angry. The real context and the true reasons would have made matters worse in his eyes, and punishment would certainly have been even more severe.

Furthermore, the whole idea that the boy “wanted to punish the book for all the bad things it had done to him” is somewhat weird. It may be excusable for a 7-year old boy to think this way and to blame a thing for something that was clearly his own fault, though I am far from sure whether it is. I think that most 7-year olds have already a well-developed sense of responsibility in such matters. Be that as it may, it is certainly inexcusable for the adults, that is, for Johann Gottlieb and Immanuel Hermann, to think that the motive of “wanting to punish the book” by drowning would excuse someone for having thrown it away. Nor is it a sign of “singular and irresistible *practical* evidence which [Fichte] possessed of… the ‘Independence of the Self’ as contrasted with anything having to do with external causality.” I am afraid the same point can be made about other things Fichte did with foresight and earnest consideration, like the infamous “annihilating” of Christian Erhard Schmid as a philosophical opponent. Fichte took great pride in being the only one who truly understood Kant. Schmid had dared to criticize him, so Fichte punished him by an “act of annihilation.”

Anselm Feuerbach, someone who did not particularly like Fichte’s philosophy, disliked Fichte even more, saying in 1799: “it is dangerous to get into disputes with Fichte. He is a wild animal that does not accept any contradiction … I am convinced that he could play Muhammed, if these were still the times for Muhammed, and he could introduce the *Wissenschaftslehre* with the sword and incarceration, and if the lectern were the *throne of a king*.” (Fischer, I, 168).

This attitude also comes through in much of his writing. Not infrequently, there are *ad hominems* and insults, where there should be rational argumentation, and it would have been better, if these blemishes were absent, for I believe that blemishes they are. I do not think that they go to the core of Fichte’s philosophy,

which is another way of saying that I do not accept his son's claim that Fichte was "different from other thinkers, his doctrine was most genuinely and exclusively the imprint of his personality." He was, I believe, the same as any other philosopher: some features of his doctrine are explainable by his character and the times in which he lived, others point beyond them, but none of them are completely independent of their historical context. We are rational animals—at least up to a point—and philosophy is the product of rational animals and not of some faceless "pure rationality." Put differently, "the development of idealist thought was not at all directed by an absolute world spirit. It largely depended upon accidents and reveals human weakness and shortcoming."[5]

14.5

It is for this reason that I reject "biographies" based on considerations of possible world semantics. We may imagine possibilities, however improbable they may be. We may divorce the thought of a thinker from his mere animal existence. We may claim, with Frege or Popper that there is third realm of ideas and theories that is different from the first realm of physical objects and the second realm of mere psychology, and we may argue that to understand the ideas of someone does not presuppose any insight into their lives. I am, however, rather more skeptical about whether such an approach is actually possible.

While such views pretend to show the irrelevance of the actual life of a thinker, they actually reveal not much more than the prejudices of the person who imagines the chance events, the independent variations, and the slightly different world. To return to Rorty's musings, Heidegger had, of course, the chance to marry a Jewish woman, but he did not take it. And I find that the relations between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger are more revealing than what might or might not have happened in some imaginary world.

In any case, such imaginary worlds do not prove that "the philosophical tools" developed by a thinker can be understood independently of the context in which they were developed.

If we take Rorty's analogy of philosophical theories and tools seriously, then we must say that, just as with other tools, our understanding of "philosophical tools" depends on the actual function of these tools; and the function depends on the actual world in which these tools were developed. Whether something is a grapefruit knife or a special kind of screwdriver presupposes some acquaintance with the life-world in which the tool was conceived. That we may imagine a world without grapefruits, in which a grapefruit knife can only be understood as a (fairly primitive) screwdriver, or another world in which there are no screws and screwdrivers can be understood as primitive grapefruit knives, does not

show that a grapefruit knife is a screwdriver (or a screwdriver is a grapefruit knife). They are different tools, and their difference depends on the world, in which they were developed. Nor is history completely irrelevant in this, for there was a time and place, roughly the time in which Johann Gottlieb Fichte lived, when there were neither screws, screwdrivers, nor grapefruits or grapefruit knives.

While there is indeed a world of difference between such tools and the philosophical theories developed by philosophers, it should be clear that similar constraints hold for them. In the same way, we may perhaps be inclined to interpret Kant's moral philosophy as a (relatively primitive or perhaps even very sophisticated) contribution to the problem of normativity. But we should be aware that "values" and "norms" in the relevant sense were invented only in the nineteenth century. They played no role in eighteenth century Prussian lives and letters (nor, in fact, anywhere else). Whatever Kant was taking himself to be about must therefore have been something else.

This should, at the very least, suggest the actual world in which a philosopher lived and fashioned his tools is thus not entirely irrelevant to our understanding of a philosopher and his tools. If we find that they do not lend themselves to some of our purposes, we might pause to consider why or how they were conceived in the first place and this might in fact help us in changing them to something that might serve us better today (or it might lead us to look elsewhere). It is at least one significant aspect of a philosophical biography to limit the number of possible worlds that some might view as convenient in reconstructing the ideas of a philosopher and to introduce at least some notion of probability in this enterprise. The question of how a philosopher lived, worked and died is not philosophically irrelevant. It reveals something about the philosophical tools he "invented at various times to accomplish one or another object"—or so I would like to argue. Furthermore, my biography of Fichte aims to find out whether some of the philosophical tools he invented remain worth keeping. And last but not least, I would like to suggest that the worries about whether a philosophical biography is possible are highly over-rated. Fichte was an interesting character and the story of his life seems to me well worth telling just because it is interesting.

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Footnotes

1 Collingwood R. G. (2001) *The Principles of History and Other Writings in Philosophy of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2 Richard Rorty (1994), “Another Possible World,” in Martin Heidegger. Politics, Art and Technology. Ed. by Karsten Harries and Christoph Jamme. (New York/London: Holmes and Meier), p. 37.

3 Rorty, “Another Possible World,” p. 35.

4 Perhaps a biographer’s task is mainly of negative relevance in the philosophical context, i.e. to show how “the philosophical tools” of a thinker should not be applied (if they are to be applied for the task the thinker developed them for. Ever since the time of Descartes and the beginning of modern philosophy, it has been, to use Locke’s phrase, “ambition enough [for philosophers] to be employed as an Under-Labourer in clearing the Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge.” (Essay 10). Perhaps a biographer in philosophy should be viewed as an under-Labourer of other under-laborers (who may indeed be true philosophers), and be engaged in a preliminary clearing of “the Ground … removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way” of those who really want to understand what a thinker is saying. The effects of this work will not always be predictable. It may make the work of some philosophers easier, it may remove so much of the rubble that there is nothing left to do for someone who thought there was at least some paper in the matter, it may undermine some apparently solid philosophical heaps of rubble, and it may even open up entirely new prospects for others by showing how implausible and incoherent some of the “slightly different worlds” imagined by philosophers really are.

5 Walter Schulz (1968), “Einleitung,” *Fichte-Schelling Briefwechel* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp), p. 13.

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