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Narrative, Moral Identity and Historical Consciousness: a Social Constructionist Account

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I. Narration

Two decades ago inquiry into narrative played but a minor role in scholarly deliberation; the relationship between narrative analysis and historiography was little explored; the term "narrative" had scarcely entered the vocabulary of psychological science. Today the study of narrative concatenates throughout the humanities and the social sciences, and the problems raised by such analyses for our conception of history, along with the historical consciousness of the individual are profound. Further, there are now many distinct and well articulated orientations toward narrative - realist, phenomenological, psychodynamic, cognitive, textual, and rhetorical among them. Each raises different implications for our understanding of history, identity, and the place of historical consciousness in contemporary society. My aim here is not to review, contrast or compare these various approaches, but rather to elucidate the rudiments of but a single orientation, recent in its emerging self-consciousness, but bold and exciting in implication. I wish, then, to outline a social constructionist account of narratives, and to explore several of its implications with respect to both identity and history. Of ultimate concern will be the role of historical consciousness in the achievement of moral identity.

Social constructionist dialogues have long played a role in human sciences deliberation, with the classic work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) fostering lively and broadscale debate. However, contemporary constructionism has largely abandoned the social phenomenology and social structural analysis of former years. Rather, it draws its primary sustenance from recent history of science, social studies of science, ideological critique, post-structural literary theory, and the renaissance of rhetorical study.¹ As many now see it, social constructionism serves as the principle successor to empiricist foundationalism - now a moribund relic of "high modernism" - as the chief means of understanding the acquisition and generation of what we as human scientists take to be knowledge of the world. For purposes of illuminating the social constructionist view, and providing a platform for contrasting other modes of approach, I shall proceed seriatim to develop a number of rudimentary assumptions regarding narrative, personal identity, and the achievement of moral consciousness through historical narration.

1. Narrative as Discourse: Features and Forms

At the outset, social constructionism brackets the problem of individual minds - as the locus of origin, comprehension, or storage of narrative. The initial focus, then, is on narrative as a linguistic phenomena - typically spoken or written text (but not to the exclusion of pictorial or other expressive media). For purposes of the present analysis we shall consign narrative to the domain of discourse. In this sense, narrative accounting in the present era gains its character from long-standing traditions of story telling, oral history, accounts of personal memory, and a variety of literary genres (including historical writing, the novel, and scientific accounts of cross-time change). How can we characterize contemporary conventions of narrative accounting; what are the requirements for an intelligible story within the present day culture of the West? There have been many attempts to identify the characteristics of the well-formed narrative. They have occurred within domains of literary theory (Frye, 1957; Scholes and Kellogg, 1966; Martin, 1986) semiotics (Propp, 1968; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983), historiography (Mink, 1970; Gallie, 1964), and certain sectors of social science (Labov, 1981; Sutton-Smith, 1979; Mandler, 1984). From these various analyses we may synthesize a variety of common agreements. In particular, the following criteria appear central in constructing an intelligible narrative in significant segments of contemporary culture:

Establishing a Valued Endpoint. An acceptable story must first establish a goal, an event to be explained, a state to be reached or avoided, an outcome of significance - or more informally, "a point." To relate how one walked North for two blocks, East for three, and then turned left on Pine St. would constitute an impoverished story; if this description were a prelude to "finding at last an affordable apartment," the account approximates an acceptable story. The selected endpoint is typically saturated with value, that is, understood to be desirable or undesirable. For example, an acceptable endpoint may be the protagonist's well-being ("how I narrowly escaped death"), the discovery of something precious ("how Jones discovered the phenomenon"), personal loss ("how I lost the debate") and so on. Thus, if the story terminated upon finding 404 Pine St., it would lapse into insignificance; it is when the search for a much desired apartment is successful that we participate in the tradition. In a related vein MacIntyre (1981) proposes that, "Narrative requires an evaluative framework in which good or bad character helps to produce unfortunate or happy outcomes." (p. 456) It is also clear that this demand for a valued endpoint introduces a strong cultural component (traditionally called "subjective bias") into the story. Life itself is scarcely composed of separable events, a sub-population of which constitute end-points and are saturated with value. Rather, the end-point and its value are determined by the teller of the tale. Or more generally, it is only within a cultural tradition that "valued events" can be made intelligible.

Selecting Events Relevant to the Endpoint. Once a goal is established it serves to dictate the kinds of events that can subsequently figure in the account. The myriad candidates for "event-hood" are greatly reduced by establishing the endpoint. An intelligible story is one in which selected events serve to make the goal more or less probable, accessible, important, or vivid. Thus, if one's story is about the winning of a football match ("how we won the game"), the most relevant events are those that bring the goal closer or make it more distant (e.g., "Tom's first kick bounced off the goal, but on the next attack he deflected the ball into the net with the twist of his

head."). Only at the risk of inanity would one introduce into the story of the soccer match a note on 15th century monastery life or a hope for future space travel - unless it could be shown that such matters were significantly related to winning the match (e.g. "Juan got his inspiration for the tactic from reading about 15th century religious practices.") An account of the day (e.g. "it was crisp and sunny.") would be acceptable in the narrative, as it makes the narrative events more vivid, but describing the weather in a remote country would seem whimsical. Again we find that narrative demands have ontological consequences. One is not free to include in the story all that takes place, but primarily that which is relevant to the story's conclusion.

The Ordering of Events. Once a goal state has been established and relevant events selected, the events are typically placed in an ordered arrangement. As Ong (1982) indicates, the bases for such order (e.g., importance, interest value, recency) may change with history. However, perhaps the most widely used contemporary convention of ordering is that of linear, temporal sequence. For example, certain events are said to occur at the beginning of the football match and these precede events taking place toward the middle and the end. It is tempting to say that the sequence of related events should match the sequence in which the events actually occurred. However, this would be to confuse the rules of intelligible rendering with what is the case. Linear temporal ordering is, after all, a convention, which employs an internally coherent system of signs; its features are not required by the world as it is. The linear orientation may be applied or not to what is the case depending on one's purposes. Clock time may not be effective, for example, if one wishes to speak of one's "experience of time passing in the dentist's chair"; nor is it adequate if one wishes to describe relativity theory in physics, or the circular rotation of seasons. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, we may view temporal accounts as chronotopes, that is, as literary conventions governing space-time relationships, or "the ground essential for the...representability of events." (p.250) That yesterday preceded today is a conclusion demanded only by a culturally specific chronotope.

Stability of Identity. The well formed narrative is typically one in which the characters (or objects) in the story possess a continuous or coherent identity across time. A given protagonist cannot felicitously serve as a villain at one moment and a hero in the next, or demonstrate powers of genius unpredictably interspersed with moronic actions. Once defined by the story teller, the individual (or entity) will tend to retain his/her identity or function within the story. There are obvious exceptions to this general tendency, but most are cases in which the story attempts to explain the change itself - how the frog became a prince, or the impoverished young man struggled to financial success. Further, causal forces may be introduced that bring about change in an individual (or entity); and for dramatic effect a putative identity may give way to "the real." However, the well formed story scarcely tolerate protean personalities.

Causal Linkages. By contemporary standards the ideal narrative is one which gives an explanation. As Ricoeur puts it, "Explanations must...be woven into the narrative tissue." (p.278) Explanation is typically achieved by selecting events that by common standards are causally linked. Each event should be a product of that which has preceded. ("Because the rain came we fled indoors." "As a result of his operation he couldn't meet his class.") When events within a narrative are related in an

interdependent fashion the outcome approximates more closely the well-formed story. As it is said, "The king died and then the queen died" is but a rudimentary story; "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is the beginning of a plot. *Demarcation Signs*. Most properly formed stories employ signals to indicate a beginning and ending. As Young (1982) has proposed, the narrative is "framed" by various rule-governed devices that indicate when one is entering the "tale world," or the world of the story. "Once upon a time . . .," "Did you hear the one about. . .," "You can't imagine what happened to me on the way over here . . .," or "Let me tell you why I'm so happy . . ." would all be signals to the audience that a narrative is to follow. Endings may also be signaled by phrases (e.g., "That's it..." "So now you know ...") but need not be. Laughter at the end of a joke may indicate the exit from the tale world; often relating the story's point is sufficient to indicate that the tale world is terminated.

By using these conventions of narration one can generate a sense of coherence and direction in life events. Life acquires meaning and happenings are suffused with significance. However, we also find that certain forms of narrative are broadly shared within the culture. They are frequently used, easily identified, and are highly functional. In a sense, they constitute a ready vocabulary for rendering cross-time intelligibility. What account can be given of these more stereotypic tellings? The question here is similar to that of literary theorists concerned with fundamental plot lines. Since Aristotelian times philosophers and literary theorists, among others, have attempted to develop a formal vocabulary of plot. As sometimes argued, there may be a foundational set of plots from which all stories are derived. For example, relying heavily on the Aristotelian view, one of the most extensive accounts of plot within the present century is that of Northrup Frye (1957). Frye proposed that there are four basic forms of narrative, each of which is rooted in the human experience with nature and most particularly with the evolution of the seasons. Thus, the experience of spring and the uprising of nature gives rise to the comedy. In the classic tradition comedy typically involves a challenge or threat which is overcome to yield social harmony. A comedy need not be humorous, even though its ending is a happy one. In contrast, the free and calm of summer days give inspiration to the romance as a dramatic form. The romance in this case consists of a series of episodes in which the major protagonist experiences challenge or threat and through a series of struggles emerges victorious. The romance need not be concerned with attraction between people; however, in its harmonious ending it is similar to the comedy. During the autumn, when one experiences the contrast between the life of summer and the death of coming winter, the tragedy is born; and in winter, with one's increasing awareness of unrealized expectancies and the death of dreams, the satire becomes the relevant expressive form. In contrast to Frye's four master narratives, Joseph Campbell (1956) has proposed a single "monomyth," from which myriad variations can be found across the centuries. The monomyth, rooted in unconscious psychodynamics, concerns the hero who has been able to overcome personal and historical limitations to reach a transcendent understanding of the human condition.

Although possessing certain aesthetic appeal, these quests after foundational plots are ultimately unsatisfying. There is simply no compelling rationale for why there should be a limited number of narratives. Rather than seeking a definitive account, the

culturally based view favored here suggests a virtual infinity of possibly story forms, with differing forms favored in various historical periods. In the same way that fashions of facial expression, dress, and professional aspirations shift with time, so do modal forms of narration. If we extend the preceding account of narrative characteristics, we can generate a way of appreciating existing norms along with infinite variations.

To elaborate, as we first saw, a story's end point is weighted with value. Thus, a victory, a consummated affair, a discovered fortune, or a prize-winning paper can all serve as proper story endings. On the opposite pole of the evaluative continuum would fall a defeat, a lover lost, a fortune squandered, or a professional failure. Further, we can view the various events that lead up to the story's end (the selection and ordering of events) as moving through two-dimensional, evaluative space. As one approaches the valued goal over time, the story line becomes more positive; as one approaches failure or disillusionment, one moves in the negative direction. All plots, then, may be converted to a linear form with respect to their evaluative shifts over time. This shift allows us to isolate three rudimentary forms of narrative.

The first may be described as a stability narrative, that is, a narrative that links events in such a way that the trajectory remains essentially unchanged with respect to a goal or outcome. Life simply goes on, neither better nor worse with respect to the conclusion. The stability narrative may be contrasted with two others. One may link together events in such a way that either increments or decrements characterize movement along the evaluative dimension over time. In the former case we may speak of progressive, and in the latter, regressive narratives (see Fig. 1). The progressive narrative is the Panglossian account of life, ever better in every way. The progressive narrative is captured with the surmise, "I am really learning to overcome my shyness and be more open and friendly with people." The regressive narrative depicts a continued downward slide. The individual may confess, "I can't seem to control the events in my life anymore," "It's been one series of catastrophes after another." Directionality is also implied in each of these narratives, with the former anticipating further increments and the latter further decrements.

----- Insert Fig. 1 about here. -----

As should be clear, these three narrative forms, stability, progressive, and regressive, exhaust the fundamental options for the direction of movement in evaluative space. As such they may be considered rudimentary bases for other more complex variants. Theoretically one may envision a potential infinity of variations on these rudimentary forms. However, as suggested, in various historical conditions the culture may limit itself to a truncated repertoire of possibilities. Consider, for example, several prominent narrative forms in contemporary culture. There is first the tragic narrative as represented in Fig.2. The tragedy, in this sense, would tell the story of the rapid downfall of one who had achieved high position. A progressive narrative is followed by a rapid regressive narrative. In the contrasting narrative (the comedy-romance) a regressive narrative is followed by a progressive narrative.

----- Insert Fig. 2 about here. -----

Life events become increasingly problematic until the denouement, whereupon happiness is rapidly restored to the major protagonists. (The narrative is labeled comedy-romance in its conflation of the Aristotelian forms.) Further, if a progressive narrative is followed by a stability narrative (see Fig. 3), we have what is commonly known as the happily-ever-after story, which is widely adopted in traditional courtship. And we also recognize the heroic saga as a series of progressive-regressive phases (Fig. 3).

----- Insert Fig.3 about here. -----

In this case, for example, the individual may characterize his/her past as a continuous array of battles against the powers of darkness. Other narrative forms, including unification myths, communion narratives, and dialectic theory may also be charted.

2. The Socio-cultural Lodgment of Narrative Discourse

Because narration is a chiefly a discursive mode of generating intelligibility, it shares with other linguistic formations a lodgment within particular socio-cultural circumstances. In the same way that we confront enormous variations in language practices throughout the world, so we must be prepared for broad variations in narration - both in its existence, and in what counts as a well formed story. This is most obviously the case in terms of fictional narratives. The emergence of the novel in the 19th century, its 20th century transformation in the hands of modernists such as Proust and Joyce, and the dislocation of continuity, time, and authorial standpoint in the work of various postmodernists (see, for example, Kundera and Perec), illustrate the case. In post-modern writing narratives may also turn ironically self-referential, demonstrating their own artifice as texts, and the ways in which their efficacy depends on their structure as narratives (Dipple, 1988). However, such temporal contingency is equally the case in the writing of both auto-biography (see for example, Liebowitz, 1989). As Mary Gergen's (1992) explorations of contemporary autobiography suggest, for example, men are far more likely to accommodate themselves to the prevailing criteria for "proper story telling" than women. Women's autobiographies are more likely, for example, to be structured around multiple end-points, and to include materials unrelated to any particular end-point. Further, as Hayden White's (1973) work makes clear the narrative structure of historical writing itself has changed across the centuries.

3. Narrative Truth as Cultural Convention

Although language is typically treated as representational - as capable of verisimilitude with respect to its relation to the world - this view has virtually succumbed in recent years to a spate of criticisms from all branches of the humanities and social sciences. Such work has obvious relevance to the possibility of narratives as conveyances for truth. Given the above account of narrative components, the

possibility for objectivity in narration is already obscured. As we have seen, there is nothing about the world that demands our singling out end-point events and investing them with value. Similarly, because the well formed narrative places requirements over what events may be included in a proper story, there is an enormous suppression of description. And too, the choice of "chronotropes" and the isolation of beginnings and endings are not matters that can be determined by recourse to "the world as it is." At the same time, these limitations on objectivity do not account for the events, actions, or entities making up the narrative. If we bracket consideration of the requirements for proper storying, can we conclude that narrative descriptions are subject to empirical evaluation?

For many, the arguments of Popper (1935) and Quine (1960), in particular, give substantial reason for doubt. The former argued that in science there was no logical means of inducing general theoretical statements from observation, that is, of moving in a logically grounded way from the level of observed particulars to a general or universal account of classes. This led Popper to embrace Reichenbach's distinction between a "context of discovery" and a "context of justification." The context of discovery - that space in which the scientist makes initial claims to correspondence - was, for Popper, "irrelevant to the logical analysis of scientific knowledge"(p. 31). In effect, the means by which the scientist establishes the ontological claims to be put to study, are not in themselves rationally justified. Quine's (1960) critique raised havoc with even the possibility of solid grounding in the context of justification. What is the possibility, he asked, of ostensive definition, that is, of defining scientific terms through public designation of material referents? Can the terms of a scientific ontology be grounded by the stimulus characteristics to which they refer? In his famous gavagai example (pgs. 26-57), Quine demonstrated the impossibility of doing so. If such a term is used by natives to refer to a running rabbit, a dead rabbit, a rabbit in a pot, or simply the signs of inferred rabbit presence, then what precise stimulus configuration secures the translation of the term as "rabbit?" In the extreme case, each time the native uses the term he may be referring to an assemblage of rabbit parts, and the translator to the rabbit as a whole. We find, then, no means of ostensively linking the "facts" as narrated to the world as it is. This is not to say that truth conditions cannot be established for narratives. However, these conditions must be understood in terms of specific cultural or sub-cultural achievements. In the same way that our reports of the weather, or the balance in our bank account can function for all practical purposes as "true" or "false" with respect to some form of datum, so can narrations of a crime, a space flight, or of a war be subjected to tests of veracity. However, it is critical to realize that these forms of "objective" appraisal are a communal achievement. That is, the languages of description do not reflect or mirror what is the case; rather, the language functions to index a state of affairs for all practical purposes within a given community. Interlocutors come to assign words to given conditions, and if one remains within the community of agreement, it is possible to achieve a sense of objectivity within that community. We shall return to this point again in treating the function of historical accounting.

4. Narration as a property of relationships

Although the preceding account draws significantly from semiotic and literary theory, the social grounding of textuality must be underscored. If language is fundamentally a derivative of social interchange, then we must necessarily view narrative (as discourse) in terms of its social functions. The social utility of well formed narrative is illustrated in research on courtroom testimony. In their volume *Reconstructing Reality in the Courtroom* Bennett and Feldman (1981) describe a study in which research participants evaluated testimonies that either attempted to recall actual events or were fictional contrivances. Ratings made of the stories revealed that the participants were unable to discriminate between the genuine and fictional accounts. However, an analysis of those accounts believed by the participants to be genuine as opposed to false proved interesting: participants made judgments largely according to the approximation of the stories to well formed narratives. Stories believed to be genuine were those in which events relevant to the end point were dominant and in which causal linkages among elements were more numerous. In further research Lippman (1986) experimentally varied the extent to which courtroom testimonies demonstrated the selection of events relevant to an end point, causal linkages among the events, and diachronic ordering of the events. Testimonies approximating the well-formed narrative in these ways were consistently found to be more intelligible and the witnesses to be more rational. The narratives of daily life may not always be well formed, but under many circumstances their structuring is essential to our forms of relationship.

To appreciate more fully the social pragmatics of narratives, it is useful to consider the quotidian functions of several narrative forms outlined earlier. Consider first the primitive narrative of stability. Negotiating social life successfully requires that one is capable of making him/herself intelligible as an enduring, integral, or coherent identity. For example, in certain political arenas it is essential to demonstrate that in spite of extended absences, one is "truly rooted" in the local culture and part of its future. Or, to be able to show on the more personal level how one's love, parental commitment, honesty, moral ideals, and so on have been unflinching over time, even when their outward appearances are suspicious, may be essential to continuing a relationship. In close relationships people often wish to know that others "are what they seem," that certain characteristics endure across time. A major means for rendering such assurance is the stability narrative.

Consider the progressive narrative in this light. Society places a strong value not only on stability but also change. For example, every stabilization may also be characterized - from alternative perspectives - as problematic, oppressive, or odious. For many the possibility of progressive change is of major significance. Careers are selected, hardships endured, and personal resources (including one's most intimate relations) sacrificed in the belief that one is participating in positive change - a progressive narrative. Further, the success of many relationships depends importantly on people's ability to demonstrate how their undesirable characteristics (e.g. unfaithfulness, quarreling, self-centeredness) have diminished over time — even when there are many reasons for doubt. As Kitwood's (1980) research suggests, people make special use of the progressive narrative in early stages of a relationship - seemingly to invest the relationship with increased value and promise for the future. In effect, the progressive narrative plays a variety of useful functions in social life.

Let us finally consider the social value of regressive narratives. Consider the effects, for example, of tales of woe in soliciting attention, sympathy, and intimacy. To relate one's story of depression is not to describe the onset of a mental state, but to engage in one or more relationships. The narrative may simultaneously solicit pity and concern, excuse oneself from failure, and deliver punishment. Within Western culture regressive narratives can also serve a compensatory function. When people learn of steadily worsening conditions, the description often operates, by convention, as a challenge - to compensate or seek improvement. The decline is to be offset or reversed through renewed vigor; intensification of effort may turn a potential tragedy into a comedy-romance. Regressive narratives furnish an important means, then, of motivating people (including oneself) toward achieving positive ends. This compensatory function operates on a national level when a government demonstrates that the steady decline in the balance of payments can be offset by grass-roots commitment to locally manufactured products. On the individual level one may bolster his or her enthusiasm for a given project: "I am failing at this, I've got to try harder."

5. Narrative and cultural value

The groundwork has been laid for this final entry into the treatment of narratives, so I may be brief. However, the brevity of the point is scarcely equivalent to its significance, particularly as we turn to the issue of identity and historical consciousness later in the chapter. It is important here, however, to underscore the extent to which narratives function both to reflect and to create cultural values. In part, the value sustaining and generating function of narrative is textually derived. That is, in establishing a given endpoint and endowing it with value, and in populating the narrative with certain actors and certain facts as opposed to others, the narrator enters into the world of moral and political evaluation. Value is placed on certain goals (e.g. "winning," as opposed to non-competition), certain individuals (e.g. heroes and villains as opposed to communities), and particular modes of description (e.g., the world as material as opposed to spiritual). When a news commentator reports a local fire or describes a turn in the stock market index, she is also reasserting the *topoi* which unite the culture into a tradition. The culture's ontology and sense of values is affirmed and sustained.

However, narrative tellings do more than create conversational realities; they are themselves constituents of ongoing and often institutionalized patterns of societal conduct. In this sense, they function so as to generate and sustain (and sometimes disrupt) cultural traditions. In Austin's (1962) terms, we must not only pay attention to the constative character of narrative discourse (its portrayal of the world), but to its performative aspects - what it achieves in the very act of expression. When a child tells her parents the story of her day in school, she is simultaneously constructing an image and sustaining a relationship which links the parents to her daily pursuits outside the home. In the telling, her parents are constituted as guardians; their evaluative function is asserted; and the parent-child reality (and comfort) is extended from beyond the face-to-face context into the region of spatio-temporal absence. The simple story, then, makes an integral contribution to the sustenance of the family as

such. In the same way, the family's telling stories of their past (e.g. how we survived the war, how we came to live here) serves to define and unite them as a body. Narration inescapably functions, then, to sustain (and transform) cultural tradition.

II Identity

1. Identity as a byproduct of narrative

We must first consider the extent to which "identity," is first of all a discursive achievement. To be identified as this or that person (Kurt, Sarah, or Wilfed), to be the object of various attributes ("kind," "honest," "intense"), and to be self-referential ("I said..." "I went...") is to be realized in language. It is largely through discourse that we achieve the sense of individuated selves with particular attributes and self-referential capacities. To be sure, there there is "something" beyond discourse, but what there is makes its way into the practices of cultural life largely through linguistic interpretation. With the discursive construction of identity foregrounded, there are significant ways in which identity is importantly fashioned through narrative. At the outset, the very categories by which we understand individual identities is largely a byproduct of discursive elaboration. The sense of a self possessing the faculty for rational and objective deliberation, for example, can importantly be traced to the texts (and conversations) of 17th and 18th century educated society (Lyons, 1978) An appreciation of the individual's capacity for genius and inspiration, the recognition of deep passions, and the suspicion of deep disturbance were made possible largely by the discourses (both arts and letters) of the 19th century romanticists (see Gergen, 1991). Further, these concepts of the person - as rational, passionate, inspired, and the like - are embedded within broader narratives. They are not simply names for existing entities, but discursive creations requiring extensive narration. For example, in order to acquire credibility as an existant, the concept of rational process requires a story world in which subject and object are separated, objects in the external world impinge on the subject, and the subject's rational deliberation influences action - essentially a narrative in which rational process gains its meaning through its function in the story world.²

However, it is not only the conceptual components of the narrative which bestow identity on individuals; the narrative forms themselves are a chief means of self-portrayal. As we inherit traditions of storytelling, individual actors play a major role in emplotment; we distinguish between heroes and villains, damsels desirous and dangerous, and so on. Further, these individuals play out their lives within culturally specific forms of narrative, such as the comedy, the tragedy, and the happily-ever-after story outlined above. These forms of emplotment and narrative structure serve as major resources available to persons in detailing their lives to others. One may intelligibly describe one's life in terms of early hardship and then, with continued striving, eventual success - a common progressive narrative. However, to depict one's life as a series of daily rises and falls, each day bringing one back to the level at which the day was begun, would place severe demands on our sense of credulity. There are no common conventions for this form of accounting, and thus one cannot achieve an intelligible identity in its terms. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the limits of

our narrative traditions serve as the limits of our identity.

In this context it is useful to consider the process of personal memory - one's means of identifying oneself through reports of personal history. Traditionally psychologists have treated memory processes as lodged within the individual. As it is typically argued, memory is a central ingredient of human makeup; its functions and potentials are genetically provided and are universal within the human species. In contrast, the social constructionist proposes that the very concept of human memory, as a specific process within human minds, is a discursive artifact (Gergen, 1994). We have no means of identifying a particular psychological state associated with or responsible for producing various actions which we publicly index as "memory." The conditions for ascribing memory are not then signaled by the existence of a mental event, but are socially designated. That is, under circumscribed conditions we collectively treat certain actions as "remembering." We treat the words one writes in an exam as "indicators of memory," while most words spoken in everyday conversation do not count as such. By saying that memory is a discursive achievement, is also to propose that "having a memory" is to participate in a cultural tradition. To speak of one's past is to enter into a tradition of talk for which the rules of well formed storying are apposite. One cannot speak of last week's adventure by recalling a random patch of color, a breeze, a word, and an itch. Rather one must identify oneself as a particular identity, moving through time, in certain directions with certain end-points prominent. To "remember properly" is to generate a story replete with all the earmarks of the well formed narrative.³

2. Lived narratives as forms of relationship

Although personal identity is importantly a discursive achievement, we must remember that discourse is also lodged within the realm of relations. Thus, the discursive creation of identity is more fundamentally a social undertaking. To underscore the significance of the social it is useful here to explore forms of lived narrative, that is, forms of social interchange that we understand or index in narrative terms. For example, in the case of an athletic contest, we have no difficulty in telling a story of the fortunes of each team, recounting perhaps the climax of the game, and the final victory of one side vs. the other. As we watch or play the game, it appears to us as narrative in itself; we feel we are witnessing or participating in an unfolding story. Rather than conceptualizing the game as a "narrative in itself," - prior to discourse - it is more appropriate to understand it as action that is indexed in terms of a narrative forestructure. We articulate the kinds of rules that establish victory as a valued endpoint, divide the world into antagonists, and index various actions in terms of their contribution to victory. In this sense, various patterns of interchange, such as debates, careers, sales transactions, seductions, and the like will carry the sense of lived narrative.

Lived narratives are also essential to the achievement of identity. Consider in particular the importance of emotional expression in determining the character of identity. The identification of a people's feelings, passions, or sentiments is often critical in determining what sort person they are. In present terms, emotional discourse gains its meaning not by virtue of its relationship to an inner world (of

experience, disposition, or biology), but through the way it figures in patterns of cultural relationship. Some forms of action - by current Western standards - are indexed as "emotional expressions." Following Averill (1982), the actions themselves are properly viewed as social performances. In this sense one isn't "incited to action" by emotions; rather, one does emotions, or participates in them much as he/she would in a stage performance. From a constructionist standpoint, to ask how many emotions there are would be similar to asking a theater critic to enumerate the number of roles found in the theater; to explore the physiology of different emotions would be to compare the heart-rate, adrenaline surges, or neural activity of actors who play Hamlet as opposed to King Lear. Emotions do not "have an impact on social life"; they constitute social life itself.

Moving further to understand emotions as lived narratives, it is important to realize the ways in which emotional performances are circumscribed by or embedded within broader patterns of relationship. We tend to view emotional performances as events *sui generis*, primarily because they are frequently more "colorful" (e.g. more or less animated, voluble) than actions in their surrounds. In the same way, we may fasten on the impressive extension of the ballerina during a *pas de deux* with little consciousness of the essential role played by the male counterpart. However, without the actions of others - preceding, simultaneous to, and following the performance of emotion - the emotion would be unintelligible as such. If cut away from ongoing relationships, emotional performances would either not occur or be nonsensical. For example, if the hostess at a dinner party suddenly bolted from her seat in rage, or began loudly sobbing, guests would undoubtedly be unsettled or abashed. Further, if she could not make it clear how such outbursts were related to a series of preceding and/or anticipated events (essentially a narrative account) - if she announced that she was moved to such outbursts for no particular reason - they might consider her a candidate for psychiatric care. To achieve intelligibility the emotional performance must be a recognizable component of an ongoing chain of actions. There is good reason, then, to view emotional performances as constituents of larger or more extended patterns of interaction.

As I am proposing, emotional expressions are meaningful (indeed, succeed in counting as legitimate emotions) only when inserted into particular, cross-time sequences of interchange. In effect, they are constituents of culturally patterned forms of lived narrative. Consider the emotion of jealousy. Expressions of jealousy must be preceded by certain conditions. One cannot properly express jealousy at the sight of a sunset or a traffic light, but jealousy is appropriate if one's lover shows signs of affection toward another. Further, if the jealousy is expressed to the lover, he/she is not free (by current cultural standards) to begin a conversation about the weather or to express deep joy. The lover may apologize, for example, or attempt to explain why jealousy is unwarranted, but the range of options is limited. And, if the apology is offered, the jealous agent is again constrained in the kinds of reactions that may intelligibly follow. In effect, the two participants are engaged in a form of cultural ritual. The expression of jealousy is but a single integer within the sequence; the ritual would be unrecognizable without it; but without the remainder of the ritual, jealousy would be nonsensical. These patterns of relationship can be viewed as emotional scenarios - informally scripted patterns of interchange. The emotional

expression, from this standpoint, is only the possession of the single individual in the sense that he or she is the performer of a given act within the broader relational scenario; however, the emotional act is more fundamentally a creation of the relationship, and even more broadly, of a particular cultural history.

3. Moral Identity, Narrative and Community

The final entry into the present treatment of identity draws heavily from two preceding points, first the arguments for the pragmatic function of narrative in cultural life, and second from the value generating capacities of narrative. By conjoining these arguments, we may say that narratives of the self are used within daily life as a means of creating or sustaining value - the value of both oneself and all other protagonists who feature in the quotidian tellings of a life. In the case of self, the value generating function may be linked in particular to what may be called "moral identity," one's definition as a worthy and acceptable individual by the standards inhering in one's relationships. In western culture, for example, to intelligibly narrate oneself as a stable and coherent individual (stability narrative), who is attempting to achieve a standard of excellence (progressive narrative), and is fighting against earlier setbacks or injuries (regressive narrative), is to approach a state of moral identity, of communal decency in its broadest sense. Heroes and villains are such by virtue of their narrative encasement. As MacIntyre (1984) also points out, we are accountable for these narrative portrayals. "To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death is...to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life." (p.202). To portray oneself as striving for noble ends is to generate expectations, and to open oneself to reproach should the narrative not "ring true" in terms of subsequent actions. By one's narratives, then, one's moral status is negotiated, and the result is one to which the person can subsequently be held responsible.

At the same time, narratives of the self form the basis of what we might view as "the moral community." This is so not only in terms of the mutual accountability generated by a community in which each is known by their life stories. Rather, the incidents woven into one's narrative are seldom the actions of the protagonist alone; others are included as well. In most instances others' actions contribute vitally to the events linked in narrative sequence. For example, to justify his account of continuing honesty, the individual describes how a friend unsuccessfully tempted him to cheat. However, in the same manner that individuals usually command privilege of self-definition ("I know myself better than others know me."), others also demand rights in defining their own actions. Thus, as others' actions are used to make oneself intelligible, so does one become reliant on others' accord. If others are not willing to accede to their assigned parts then one cannot rely on their actions within a narrative. If another fails to see his actions as "offering temptation," the actor can scarcely boast of continued strong character. Narrative validity, then, strongly depends on others' affirmation. This reliance on others places the actor in a position of precarious interdependence. For in the same way that self-intelligibility depends on others' agreement as to their place in the story, so does their own identity depend on one's affirmation of them. An actor's success in sustaining a given self-narrative is

fundamentally dependent on others' willingness to play out certain pasts in relationship to the actor. In Wilhelm Schapp's (1976) terms, each of us is "knitted into" others' historical constructions, as they are into ours.

III History, Identity and Cultural Value

1. Historical accounts as narrative

As historiographers from Mink (1969) and White (1973) to the present have made clear, we inherit a tradition of historical accounting in which history approximates the well formed narrative. What separates history from, let us say a record of events (a chronicle), is its approximation to the western story telling tradition. In effect, the writing of history could scarcely proceed today without the narrative features outlined above: such writing is thus structured around a valued end-point (e.g. economic, political, or technological power; cultural dominion; individual success or failure); events are selected insofar as they bear on reaching this endpoint (e.g. the rise or fall of a given culture, religion, or government; the winning and losing of wars; the development of a technology); a singular temporal trope generally prevails (namely the western calendar) ; the players of history are not protean (e.g. we come to "understand the true character" of Pope Leo X, Napoleon, or Stalin); we are given a sense of unified cultures, such as "the Greek," "the Norse," or "the Chinese"; causal linkages are frequently elaborated (e.g. the linkage between natural resources and a nation's prosperity; trade routes and cultural dispersion; technological advances and military power); and we typically find the beginnings and endings of historical accounts well marked (often by the covers of books). To be sure, there are historical accounts that violate one or more of these rules of narrative (see, for example, Griffin's *A chorus of stones*, or Perec's *W: Or the memory of childhood*). However, the noteworthiness of the exceptions in this case essentially vindicates the rules. To understand the structure of narrative, in a broad sense, is to comprehend the limits and potentials of historical understanding.

In this same sense, the truth bearing capacity of history must be viewed as culturally circumscribed. That is, we inherit first a range of literary and rhetorical devices for generating a sense of the real and the objective (see, for example, Latour, 1987; Gergen, 1994). Second, we inherit myriad traditions, each favoring different deployments of these devices. Thus, what a physicist would describe as "the real," would differ dramatically from the descriptions of, let us say, a spiritualist, an artist, a humanist, or the man on the street. Within these various traditions, one can "tell the truth." Because of the way in which the cultural language has been used to index various "events" people can reach satisfying agreements as to "what actually happened," and such accounts can be challenged to an extent by various "findings." However, these standards of veracity are community specific, and the extent to which they can be sustained depends on the continued capacity of the community to negotiate reality together. As communities or societies become fragmented and their argots diffused, and as the "facts of the matter," are temporally dissociated from the practice of negotiation (as is necessarily the case in historical writing), then the path to the truth about history is progressively occluded.⁴

More broadly we can say that history and community are inextricably intertwined. The beginning of narrative intelligibility signals the beginning of community. It is when two or more persons join together in creating an intelligible story of "what happened," that we locate important seeds of community. And, when communities of intelligibility are formed, so do they more effectively generate the kinds of stories that confirm their intelligibility and their relations with each other. As histories become sedimented - part of the taken for granted past - so do they serve as implicit guarantees of community solidarity.

2. History and the achievement of a moral identity

Let us finally draw together the various strands of this analysis to speak cogently to the problem of historical consciousness today. As I have proposed, narratives are vital both to the the creation and sustenance of value, and to the achievement of individual identity. To the extent that historical consciousness is inherently consciousness of narrative, this is first to say that the conversational realities created by historical accounts inevitably perform certain functions within the culture. They can be valuable constituents of long-standing cultural traditions, serving to demarc (construct) a particular tradition, to invest it with honor, and to articulate a rationale for its future. In effect, historical narration is inevitably linked to cultural values and morality. To lend intelligibility to a given tradition, is to lend silent affirmation to the sense of the good which it embodies.

At the same time, because individual identity is configured or implicated in historical narratives, so is the achievement of moral being sustained (or impeded) by historical accounts. For good or ill, we each live within and are constructed by particular historical narratives - of our people, culture, nation, region, family, and so on. These historical narratives serve as a foreground for achieving moral identity within relevant communities. To paraphrase the logic, "People with our history do not engage in x; we uphold the ideals of y; as you chose y over x, you are one of us; you are a good and worthy person, a moral being." My capacity to achieve moral identity today is intimately linked to my relationship with the narratives of the past.

Let us apply these arguments to the hotly debated case of Holocaust history. The controversy over the "facts of the holocaust," its magnitude and extensity, has indeed been intense. From a constructionist standpoint, we may view this controversy as problematically grounded but essential in implication. The controversy is problematic in its realist premises, that is, that an examination of the "facts of the case" will ultimately reveal the truth of history. As we find, there are myriad means of describing "what actually happened," multiple stories each felicitous within its own community of intelligibility. Further, each history will inevitably select "the facts" necessary to sustain its existence as an intelligible story. There is, in this sense, no impartial history, no story which transcends community, context, and discursive tradition. And, because the conversations have become increasingly remote from the indexed particulars necessary to sustain their "objective" truth, there is little means by which the sense of objective grounding can be secured. In effect, the quest for the truly true of the Holocaust can never achieve satisfactory closure.

At the same time, the significance of the history for ongoing cultural life cannot be

underestimated. For Jews and non-Jews alike, this history has largely been negotiated in terms of a regressive narrative in general, and a morality tale in particular. We have the loss (or negation) of a highly valued endpoint (humane conduct), as represented in the needless slaughter of millions. In the mourning of the loss, the cultural value is vindicated. In effect, the telling of the tale represents the continuation of a long-standing cultural tradition, a humanistic tradition that for most participants in the tradition is beyond question. To tell the tale is to participate and sustain this tradition, and in terms of social pragmatics, to achieve moral identity within its terms. Moral identity is also at stake in terms of one's place within the narrative implicature. For Jews the Holocaust plays a major role in a history in which their present-day identity is the outcome, and in a tradition from which their moral identity is inextricably wed. To question this history, is to challenge the intelligibility, identity, and one's standing as a moral being.⁵

For those who would argue against the Holocaust story, the question is not whether the facts can fully sustain the story. Here we enter the portals of indeterminacy. However, it is of profound importance to inquire into the moral implications of placing the story in question. What is lost to western culture by doing so? To be sure, we must not simultaneously lose sight of the possibility that there are other traditions, other values, and other moral identities that may be placed in jeopardy by the dominant history. Under these conditions, sustained dialogue is essential, not on the adequacy of the facts, but on the nature of the moral society.

In the broadest sense, then, historical accounts are only manifestly "about the past." The creation of this past gains its chief significance in terms of its contribution to contemporary cultural life and the range of values which it instantiates. And it is the manner in which we achieve the sense of the good in contemporary life that establishes the forestructure of intelligibility by which we determine our collective future.

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