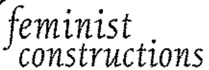

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8

Narrative and Moral Life

The last two decades of the millennium saw a surge of philosophical inquiry into the role of narrative in moral life. Why narrative? Why now?

The obvious answer to the first question is that people tell lots of stories—stories about themselves and their own experiences, about people they know and their experiences, about people, past, and present, whose lives they know of second-hand, and about people whom they imagine. Intentional agency—schematically, a purpose moves someone to act in order to bring about an outcome—coincides with the most familiar, barebones narrative template—beginning/purpose, middle/act, end/outcome. It is hardly surprising, then, that people's lives are so full of stories. Personal narratives track and articulate social encounters as well as the eddies of subjectivity. An individual's past experience may recur in the form of flashbacks, but more often people recollect their experience in narrative form. Moral relations also capitalize on narrative, for assigning responsibility and excusing misdeeds depend on identifying protagonists, characterizing their state of mind, and specifying their actions and the consequences of their actions. Phenomenologically, the answer to the question "Why narrative?" seems to be "Because it's so pervasive and ineliminable."

Since narrative is such a prominent feature of human life, ignoring narrative-making, narrative-telling, and narrative-understanding would seem to be a case of philosophical ineptitude, if not malpractice. Yet,

narration and narrativity have hardly been central topics in twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. Only since Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Alastair MacIntyre, and Alexander Nehamas cast narrative in a leading role in their moral and political theories has it gained sustained attention.[1]

Building on this work, narrativity theorists have recently advanced a number of intriguing claims about the philosophical significance of narrative. According to Marya Schechtman, those individuals who "weave stories of their lives" are persons.[2] A person's identity, she adds, "is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers."[3] Margaret Walker makes narrative pivotal to morality. "A *story*," in her view, "is the basic form of representation for moral problems."[4] Leading a morally creditable life that is distinctively one's own requires developing and enacting narratives of "identity, relationship, and value."[5] Seyla Benhabib accents the relation between narrative and agency: "Our agency consists of our capacity to weave out of those [socially furnished] narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us, as unique individual selves."[6] Likewise, Hilde Nelson claims that identities are "complex narrative constructions consisting of a fluid interaction of the many stories and fragments of stories surrounding the things that seem most important, from one's own point of view and the point of view of others, about a person over time."[7] Moreover, because demeaning, culturally transmitted narratives can damage the identities and agency of members of systematically subordinated social groups, respectful counternarratives are necessary to repair these individuals' identities and to secure their agency.[8]

Is human reality (or some especially important dimension of it) itself narrative in nature? Is human reality (or some especially important dimension of it) impossible to understand except through narrative devices? Or do narratives provide a particularly felicitous and easily communicated vehicle, but by no means the primary, only, or best vehicle, for representing human reality (or some especially important dimension of it)?

There is reason to be cautious about overplaying the narrativity card in metaphysics or epistemology. A variety of nonnarrative modes of representation—pictorial imagery, poetic tropes, and dance gesture, not to mention theoretical analysis—can be expressively powerful and revealing of human reality. I would stress, moreover, that people avail themselves of all of these modes of representation collectively as well as individually—that is, at the level of cultural production and consumption and at the level of personal utterance and communication. In this respect, narrative is not privileged. In addition, the huge assortment of narrative forms available to Western narrators together with the possibility that acquaintance with other cultures might reveal an even vaster array of narrative templates raises doubts about what is being asserted when this or that is said to be narrative in structure or structured by narrative. Although I think I know a story "when I see one," I am not at all confident that anyone can distinguish narratives from theories, sequential listings of events, and other forms of representation with enough clarity to grasp what is being denied when narrativity is affirmed.[9]

Many narrativity theorists implicitly acknowledge these points by adopting very capacious views of narrative. They include story fragments and pictorial imagery in their conception of narrative; they do not exclude giving reasons from self-narratives; and they allow that autobiographical narratives need not be thematically unified or characterologically consistent, and that they need not cohere as a single plotline.[10] Others mute their metaphysical claims by treating narrativity as an "organizing principle" of the lives persons lead or by treating personal identities as discursive constructions while distinguishing personal identities from persons or selves.[11] When fully spelled out, affirmations of narrativity sometimes prove to be less contentious than they initially sound.

I set these matters aside, however, for my purpose is not to debate the merits of particular accounts of narrative and narrativity, nor is it to assess the tenability of basing metaphysics or epistemology on narrative. Rather, I wish to pose the question, "Why narrative now?" Thus, the first three sections explore the philosophical confusions, disappointments, and yearnings that motivate the turn to narrative. Philosophers invoke narrativity to underwrite conceptions of the moral subject, moral knowledge, and moral agency. I shall consider why these proposals are as attractive as they are. Although I think there is much to be learned from this approach to moral philosophy, I believe there are two disturbing omissions in narrativity theory. The first section concludes by pointing out the failure of narrativity theory to account for the richness of the moral subject's constitutive experience—the material that the narrator's stories relate. The last section argues that excessive attention to narrative leads philosophers to overlook the capacities that make narration possible and valuable.

THE MORAL SUBJECT

Moral subjects are members of moral communities. They regard themselves and one another as intentional agents, and they hold themselves and one another responsible for what they do. To those who lead this kind of life, nothing could seem more ordinary and natural. Yet, characterizing the creatures who engage in this form of interaction sparks heated controversy. An adequate account of the constitution of moral subjectivity

must explain what enables people to reflect on moral problems and participate in moral relations, and there are quite a few accounts that have demonstrated their usefulness in explaining people's moral powers. I shall consider five of the most widely espoused and widely debated conceptions of the moral subject. Some theorists advocate the Kantian unitary self. Others embrace the communitarian social self, the psychoanalytic divided self, or the feminist relational self. The embodied self seems all but orphaned in these debates, but it seems to me that slighting the embodied self slights important forms of moral experience.

Rationality is both the essence and the triumph of the unitary self. Proponents of this conception of the moral subject hold that reason enables individuals to discover and justify moral principles for themselves. By ensuring the mutual consistency of those principles, reason ensures unity within the individual's action-guiding system and thus unity of purpose for the moral subject. Furthermore, since the unitary subject's rationally mandated desires and actions express its essential nature, those desires and actions are most genuinely its own. Equally importantly, rationality endows individuals with critical powers. When unitary subjects detect conflicts within their system of principles or between their principles and their conduct, they seek to resolve these conflicts by amending their principles or reforming their conduct. They may apply the same critical skills to their society's institutions, policies, and practices. The unitary self appeals to moral theorists, then, because it makes sense of people's capacity for independent judgment and also because it underwrites a life of integrity. The unitary self leaves many moral theorists dissatisfied, though. Not only does this conception screen out all of the work (largely done by women) of nurturance and training in the "arts of personhood," as Annette Baier calls them, but also it assumes a universality of moral rationality that even a superficial acquaintance with comparative cultural studies belies.[12]

The communitarian social self addresses these concerns by underscoring the fact that moral subjects are socialized or enculturated. To become competent moral subjects, individuals must acquire a stock of cultural values, attitudes, and interpretive frameworks and learn how to use these resources to understand and negotiate social relations. They must assimilate social norms and master appropriate ways to speak and act. Internalized, this material is constitutive of the individual's identity. This cultural enmeshment of the social self injects a welcome note of realism into discussions of moral subjectivity. It demystifies the source of people's moral values and dispositions. It offers an explanation of the development of moral subjectivity that acknowledges cultural diversity and that makes sense of people's loyalty to their communities and cultures of origin. However, opponents of this view worry that, conceived as a social

self, the moral subject becomes a virtual captive of her or his social context. Their critical leverage minimized, people are limited to tinkering with the norms they inherit, if they are not destined to reproduce culturally transmitted norms. Undeniable though it is that individuals cannot create their own value systems and styles of conduct ex nihilo and that individuality is parasitic on socialization and enculturation, it is also undeniable that these normalizing processes threaten independent judgment and free choice.

The psychoanalytic divided self is the psychodynamic self. Advocates of the divided self find fault with both the unitary self and the social self because these conceptions oversimplify moral subjectivity. Split between consciousness and self-awareness, on the one hand, and elusive unconscious affect and desire, on the other, the divided self is characterized by inner depth, complexity, and enigma. The distinctive, but open-ended psychic economy of the divided self is manifest in a unique subjectivity and personality. There is no universal core humanity, but individuals do not merely sponge up their cultural environment. Since individuals process cultural inputs, and since this processing is not constrained by universal rational standards, the divided self undermines moral theory's most reliable stanchions—tradition and reason. The psychodynamic conception also complicates moral subjectivity by curtailing self-supervision. As Freud memorably remarked, the ego "is not even master in its own house."[13] Beset by unconscious drive and repressed desire, people are not transparent to themselves, nor can they exert complete control over their conduct. For this reason, the divided self is the natural locus of a major species of excuses—"I couldn't help it"; "I don't know what came over me"; "I lost it"; and the like. Because unconscious motivation can account for moral fecklessness without accusing the agent of malice, the divided self explains why many of our excuse-making and excuse-accepting practices are warranted forms of moral leniency.

The feminist relational self is the interpersonally bonded self. This view seeks to respond to several criticisms of the preceding conceptions. Like proponents of the social self and the divided self, proponents of the relational self deny that critical reason can or should fully determine the moral subject's deliberations and decisions. But proponents of the relational self object to the social self on the grounds that it abstracts and reifies society and to the divided self on the grounds that it overestimates the importance of biology. The relational self personalizes society by emphasizing the influence of interpersonal relations throughout life, including but not limited to the formative interaction between children and their caregivers. The relational self interpersonalizes biology by insisting that children take their developmental cues from their caregivers and by denying that anatomy is intrinsically meaningful.[14] As relational selves with lasting emotional

attachments to others, people share in one another's joys and sorrows, give and receive care, and, generally, profit from the many rewards and cope with the many aggravations of friendship, family membership, religious or ethnic affiliation, and the like. These relationships are sources of moral identity, for people become committed to their intimates and to others whom they care about, and these commitments become central moral concerns. Invested in a circle of family, friends, or other close personal connections, the relational self anchors the patterns of moral partiality that most people regard as justified and routinely enact. Yet, morally crediting these ties poses a problem for ethical theory. Since responding to others' needs can become so consuming that the individual is deprived of any opportunity to pursue personal goals and projects, valued relationships can morph into a "plague of commitments," to borrow Margaret Walker's striking phrase.[15] Thus, proponents of the unitary self and the divided self may counter that the relational self is insufficiently separated from others—too entangled in its relational web to achieve a distinctive moral identity.

The embodied self is often ignored in discussions of the moral subject. This is strange, for people can neither take action nor partake in sensuous pleasure unless they are embodied. Also, that so much childrearing effort is aimed at regulating the body and so much cultural machinery is dedicated to enforcing canons of physical appearance attests to society's preoccupation with bodies and their comportment. This concentration of attention heightens people's investment in their body image—their sense of what they look like and what their physical capabilities are. Since attacks on bodily integrity can be traumatic even when they are not life-threatening, prohibitions on physical aggression are among the most stringent moral norms. Still, it would be a mistake to reduce the embodied self to its manipulability and vulnerability. To be sure, ingrained bodily skillfulness is crucial to personal safety, but it is also crucial to social engagement. Body language—facial and gestural expressivity—conveys much of the meaning of people's speech as well as their nonverbal behavior. The embodied self is also a repository of memory. Experiences of well-being as well as experiences of suffering are viscerally encoded and shape subsequent conduct.[16] Physical misery, such as chronic hunger and backbreaking labor, often signals injustice and may catalyze social critique. Thus, the embodied self is a wellspring of moral insight and innovation as well as a vehicle of moral enactment and self-revelation.

Each of the preceding conceptions of the self captures a significant dimension of moral subjectivity—of what it's like and what it means to be a participant in a moral community. Yet, these conceptions are usually presented as mutually exclusive. A theory of moral subjectivity, it is assumed, must take a stand on which kind of self the moral subject really is and must somehow subsume the other four phenomenal selves within that conception. Indeed, because familiar theories of the self endeavor to incorporate the strengths of the five conceptions sketched above, my discussion may seem to artificially pry them apart. In my view, however, the move to synthesize these conceptions has two unfortunate consequences: 1) Each conception must be stretched and twisted to accommodate dimensions of moral subjectivity that fit far more easily into alternative conceptions, and 2) dimensions of moral subjectivity that cannot be crammed into one's preferred conception must be dismissed as peripheral or illusory. In light of these problems, it would be better to drop the synthetic imperative and to regard the five conceptions of the self as articulating five faces of the moral subject—five dimensions of subjective experience, five loci of value, five schemas for understanding oneself and others, and five foci of moral concern. Alas, this suggestion seems to amount to recommending a cumbersome, perhaps incoherent, account of the moral subject. Yet, if my dissatisfaction with theories that embrace the synthetic imperative is well grounded, parsimony and completeness may not be jointly attainable.

Here, I would urge, is where narrativity gets its purchase. In self-narratives, people effortlessly weave together the disparate themes that the unitary self, the social self, the divided self, the relational self, and the embodied self highlight.

Consider, for example, Lynne Taetzsch's autobiographical essay, "Fighting Natural," which chronicles her odyssey from poverty and unpopularity in a New Jersey high school to dissociating from herself at USC after trying to masquerade as a California coed and finally to donning a professional getup and teaching writing at George Washington University. The pivotal motif in Taetzsch's story is dying her hair. Blatantly at odds with her general indifference to her appearance—she doesn't bother to wear makeup and prefers casual clothes—her dedication to this ritual baffles her.[17] In addition, it conflicts with her principles. Preparing to teach bell hooks's critique of Madonna's Blonde Ambition performances, she reproaches herself for betraying the cause of gender and racial equality and also for forsaking her students who need her to model an alternative to the beauty codes promulgated in the mass media.[18] With an assist from her divided self, however, she represses the contradictions her rational, unitary self descries and blithely opts for a blonder-than-blond frosting the very next day. At home after the treatment, inspecting the results, she is appalled by what she's done but loves the way she looks anyway.[19]

How could she have come to be so ambivalent about and alienated from herself? That's partly a story about her relational self—the father who agreed with the high school counselor who condemned her for thinking she was "smarter than everyone else" and the first boyfriend who dated her only to "make his old girlfriend jealous."[20] It's also a story about her social self and the stereotypes that frame perception and social

positioning. At USC, men read her "California-girl look-alike attempt" as a sexual come-on, and later at Cooper Union, fellow students and faculty members read her no-holds-barred sex-object pastiche as slutty.[21] Not surprisingly, the embodied self figures prominently too: "I'm fifty-one years old and can't remember a day when I felt at home in my body."[22] Near the end of her story, the divided self resurfaces:

> I had nowhere to put my rage. So I took it out on my hair. What I've done most to my hair is torture it. I've bleached it, permed it, burned it, cut it, tied it, and dyed it with a vengeance to disfigure, not enhance my appearance. The Clairol home treatment—whether silver blond or blue-black—has been a kind of purging for me, a tearing out of my old life so that I might look in the mirror and see a new person, find a new life, a way to be in the world that worked this time.[23]

Reacting to a gender system that identifies women with their looks, that demands that women fight their "natural" looks, and that condemns them for looking unnatural, Taetzsch turns her aggression on herself.

Without ever naming the five conceptions of the self that I have identified Taetzsch tells a succinct, coherent story that includes every one of them. I realize that her story is an artfully crafted memoir, not an ordinary self-narrative. Still, I do not think her inclusion of these five dimensions of selfhood is atypical of the latter.

It is troubling, however, that narrative accounts of the moral subject do not so much *re*solve as *dis*solve the tensions among the five conceptions. The themes remain, and they are articulated. But the disparate origins of these identity-constituting experiences remain implicit. Because self-stories do not distinguish the respective roles of reasoning, enculturation, interpersonal relations, bodily processes, and intrapsychic dynamics in the constitution of moral subjects, the analytical incompatibilities and incongruities of the corresponding conceptions of the self disappear. Thus, narrativity theory provides the sought-after synthesis, but at the cost of explanatory power. Taetzsch's story depicts the experiences of a remarkably complex individual, but it does not purport to explain what kind of being is capable of undergoing the many kinds of experience she describes. If "a story-telling being" is not an informative characterization of such individuals, it seems to me that narrativity theory must retain the five conceptions of the self I have sketched.

MORAL KNOWLEDGE

Twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy puts a premium on codifying moral knowledge. According to Margaret Walker, however, this

epistemological demand has not always held sway. She traces its assent to Henry Sidgwick's monumental survey, *The Methods of Ethics*.[24] Subsequent to Sidgwick's schematization of ethical thought, the approach to moral philosophy that Walker dubs the "theoretical-juridical model" came into currency.[25] Henceforth, moral philosophy's foremost tasks include articulating a finite set of action-guiding principles, organizing them into a hierarchical system, and defending this system. Correlatively, possession of a rationally justified system of principles is conceived as the key to moral deliberation. To figure out how they should act, moral subjects must distill morally significant information from their circumstances and identify relevant moral principles. Using these materials as premises, they must then construct deductive arguments that yield judgments about what they ought (or ought not) to do. Thus, the theoretical-juridical model aspires to bring theory and practice into alignment.

No moral theory has fulfilled this promise, however, for the project of codifying moral knowledge is fraught with peril. First, no simple principle is determinate and absolute. Any credible principle must be interpreted to clarify the meaning of the terms in which it is couched and qualified to countenance various generally recognized exceptions. Fully explicit statements of moral principles turn out to be lengthy, complicated, and unwieldy—a far cry from the succinct *Thou shalts* and *Thou shalt nots* of the Decalogue. In addition, it is doubtful that a fully explicit statement of any moral principle could ever be finalized.[26] New circumstances—brought about, for example, by scientific discoveries, demographic upheaval, unprecedented technology, or political or economic transformation—might point up the need for further amendment. Worse, even supposing that fully explicit and final statements of our moral principles could be obtained, these philosophical behemoths would be of little practical use to real-world moral subjects whose cognitive capacities and time for deliberation are limited.

Second, no hierarchical ordering of principles is universal and absolute. Every principle can be trumped by another principle under some conceivable circumstances. Indeed, one reason why no single instantiation of the theoretical-juridical model has ever commanded wide assent among professional philosophers is that they are trained to dream up clever situations in which a seemingly inviolable principle would have to yield to more compelling moral considerations. This strategy casts doubt on the most enduring systems of rank-ordered principles. To defend their views against such challenges, some theorists limit the scope of applicability of their prioritized principles. John Rawls, for example, confines his theory of justice to pluralistic societies with democratic political traditions.[27] Rawls is vague about justice in other types of society. Other theorists give up on assessing the relative stringency of principles and assigning them

fixed rankings. W. D. Ross, for instance, affirms that all principles hold prima facie—that is, each is binding unless some other principle overrides it—and that individuals must rely on intuition to determine which principle is binding in a given situation.[28] For moral theory, definitive systematization of principles is as elusive a goal as complete articulation of principles.

The rigidity of the theoretical-juridical model portends its downfall. But the deindividualization of moral life that moral codification entails is no less troubling. Intuitionism seems to furnish a more flexible alternative. However, its epistemology is unpersuasive. Intuitionists typically maintain that people share a common faculty of moral apprehension and that people whose faculties are not impaired by self-interest, bias, or some other distorting influence will reach the same moral conclusions. Not only does this claim rule out moral individuality, it also flies in the face of abundant evidence that many reasonable and conscientious people profoundly disagree about morality. Different people prioritize different values and have different styles of moral enactment. Yet most of these diverse individuals lead morally decent lives. A theory of moral knowledge should be able to explain how this is possible.

Plainly, these individuals are not complying with a universal moral code, nor are they following the dictates of a universal faculty of moral intuition. But neither are they impulsively doing whatever they happen to feel like doing or shrewdly calculating how to get whatever they happen to want most. They have values and interpersonal commitments; they make judgments about what they ought to do; they reproach themselves when they fall short of their ideals. Narrativity theorists maintain that these individuals are telling certain sorts of stories to themselves and to the people they associate with. They are anticipating what sort of story they will be able to tell if they do this or that;[29] they are recalling the story of a particular relationship in order to ascertain what the other person can legitimately expect of them;[30] they are crafting counterstories designed to resist a master narrative that depicts them in demeaning ways.[31] They are improvising, to be sure, but their creativity is constrained by narrative conventions as well as by other people's willingness to accept their stories. Thus, narrative accounts offer an explanation of how moral knowledge can be both individualized and well justified, and this explanation positions these accounts to repudiate pernicious individual relativism along with the theoretical-juridical model. Since serious deficiencies have been found in every moral theory based on the theoretical-juridical model, and since glaring disparities separate this model's conception of moral deliberation from the ways in which moral subjects actually think as they go about their lives, it is no wonder that narrative accounts of moral knowledge are steadily attracting converts.

MORAL AGENCY

The problem of moral agency is traditionally construed as a problem about free will and responsibility. Exercising moral agency requires free will. People can be held responsible for their conduct and for its foreseeable consequences provided that it arises from free will. Many philosophers take this much for granted. Where they differ is over the nature of free will. Followers of Kant maintain that persons are endowed with reason, a faculty said to transcend the nexus of causal determinism. Provided that reason can steer volition, the will is free. Followers of Hume contend that such transcendence is a fiction. According to this view, people have free will when no external force prevents them from doing what they want to do or compels them to do what they do not want to do. As long as the cause of an action is internal to the agent, that individual is free.

The dispute between Humean and Kantian accounts of moral agency has never been resolved. But in the twentieth century, Marxist insights into the impact of dominant ideologies on individuals' lives have complicated discussion of this topic. Specifically, it has become clear that a tenable theory of moral agency must contend with internalized oppression, for internalized oppression compromises self-determination.

Internalized oppression afflicts many members of systematically subordinated social groups. To internalize oppression is to incorporate the experience of occupying a subordinate social position into the structure of the self. Cramping norms and humiliating attitudes become embedded in the cognitive, emotional, and volitional capacities of affected individuals. As a result, their self-perception, their grasp of opportunities, their hopes for the future, and their choices comport with the social position to which they have been relegated rather than with their real abilities and rightful ambitions. People who have internalized oppression "voluntarily" replicate derogatory stereotypes and reproduce disadvantageous behavior patterns. They are acting on "their own" values and preferences, but they are also perpetuating their own oppression.

This paradox poses formidable problems for both the Kantian and the Humean approach to moral agency. Rationally willed transcendence is hardly an option for those who find themselves in the grip of internalized oppression. Yet they rationally gauge how best to cope with their lot in life. External coercion does not compel them to act as they do. Yet they are by no means *self*-determining agents. Holding members of subordinated social groups responsible for complicity in their own oppression would (literally) add insult to injury. Plainly, the problem of responsibility and agency must be reframed to take account of the menace of internalized oppression.

Claudia Card's approach accents the temporality of responsibility and displaces the issue of free will. In her view, an exclusively backward-looking

conception of responsibility—one that focuses on imputing praise or blame for past actions—overlooks a more fundamental form of responsibility.[32] While acknowledging the need to place blame where it belongs, Card stresses how practices of taking responsibility—assuming the burdens of meeting needs or grappling with problems—pervade interpersonal relations and social life.[33] Many of these undertakings enact subordinating norms and may result from internalized oppression. However, some of these undertakings defy wrongful social norms and resist internalized oppression. One of Card's examples is her own refusal of her culturally sanctioned sexual identity and her taking responsibility for redefining her erotic identity as a lesbian.[34] As she points out, people who are not responsible for inflicting injustice may nevertheless need to take responsibility for ending it.[35] If those who are harmed do not band together and resist, no one else will.

Neither the Kantian nor the Humean conception of agency adequately addresses Card's forward-looking form of responsibility. Although taking responsibility need not involve overcoming internalized oppression, the kinds of responsibility-taking that particularly interest feminists and other progressive philosophers often do. What is needed, then, is a theory of moral agency that appreciates the power of internalized oppression to subvert self-determination and that also explains how resistance is possible and why it is necessary. For Kantians, internalized oppression can have only a superficial impact on moral agency, for it cannot penetrate to and corrupt the individual's core rational capacity. For Humeans, internalized oppression may (perversely) reduce the urgency of resistance. Since people who have internalized oppression do not want to do anything that would challenge social norms and provoke an antagonistic response, individuals can be acting freely (doing as they want without external interference) in virtue of having internalized oppressive norms. An adequate theory of moral agency must distinguish genuine self-determination from choice dictated by internalized oppression, and it must explain resistance to injustice without underestimating the damage to agency that internalized oppression causes.

Autobiographical narrative provides a way to finesse philosophical impasses on the topic of free will and doubts about hyperindividualistic accounts of moral agency. Likewise, it provides a way to counteract philosophical worries that anti-individualistic accounts of moral agency, which emphasize enculturation and institutional constraints, gut self-determination. For purposes of explicating innovative moral thought and resistance to oppressive norms, narrative theories of moral agency invoke linguistic competence. To be a fluent speaker is to be capable of generating an indefinite number of different sentences. Since the potential for creativity is built into a commonplace human capability that also empowers people to tell their own life stories, it is to be expected that

some people will project futures for themselves or for their society that overturn established values and conventions. People do not need a pure rational capacity that is insulated from social influence to conceive new options, for internalized oppression does not neutralize linguistic competence. Still, people need to be able to distinguish novel options that they really want to pursue from novel options that would be no more satisfying or worthwhile than those that subordinating norms prescribe. Here narrativity theorists often point to dissident discursive communities, such as friendships, political organizations, and support groups, that encourage people to revise their self-narratives and that facilitate critical scrutiny of unorthodox plotlines.[36] Although others' acceptance of one's self-narrative cannot serve as the sole criterion of its credibility, exchanging stories often helps people refine a basically convincing story or discard implausible ones.

Linking moral agency to autobiographical narrative renders taking responsibility for one's identity and resistance to internalized oppression intelligible. Not only can a modified self-narrative resignify the meaning of the protagonist's inveterate feelings, attitudes, desires, and behavior, but also it can project a continuation of the story that keeps faith with the protagonist but breaks with the past. The settings of the story may change and prompt different behavior, or the protagonist's changed interpretation of the same settings may lead to fresh ways of engaging with them. By tracking the protagonist's subjective responses along with her or his conduct, self-narratives expose moments of self-alienation and habits of self-betrayal. By envisioning alternative episodes in which the protagonist feels different, acts differently, or both, self-narratives can bring behavior into accord with subjectivity. The device of self-narrative can free up individuals' imaginations without cutting them off from reality. Thus, narrativity clarifies how people can be profoundly influenced by their social context and yet retain their capacity to shape self-determined moral lives—to transvalue values, reroute their own pathways, and reconfigure their social ideals.

WHAT'S MISSING FROM NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS?

Recent philosophical treatments of narrativity are enormously edifying. They bring out serious weaknesses in traditional philosophical formulations of the moral subject, moral knowledge, and moral agency. They impart density, nuance, and dynamism to these concepts. Too often, philosophical abstraction and analysis squeeze the life out of moral experience. Narrativity theory successfully resists this tendency. Still, narrative accounts retain their critical edge, for moral experience includes reflexivity, exchanging

rebukes as well as reassurances, and negotiating ways to reconcile or live with moral disagreements. Narrativity theory preserves this richness and vitality. However, I shall argue that, in explicating the epistemology of narrativity, narrativity theory has paid insufficient heed to the processes through which people generate and certify moral self-narratives.

Narrativity theory's perilous proximity to poststructuralism is one reason why this oversight concerns me. The poststructuralist subject is a discursively constructed and reconstructed "nodal point" in the continual, sometimes turbulent interplay of discursive currents.[37] This conception of subjectivity meshes well with the sheer rush of experience, the transience of impulses, the effervescence of feelings, and the fissures in consciousness. The splintering and instability that this conception enshrines make it a good antidote to conceptions that exaggerate coherence and wholeness to the point of falsifying moral experience. However, these very strengths concomitantly undercut its viability as an account of moral subjects, their knowledge, and their agency. Moral subjects must be capable of taking responsibility; moral knowledge must schematize perception and shape action; moral agency must express commitments (at a minimum, the commitment to refrain from committing). If so, there must be limits to the extent and frequency of change that moral subjects, moral knowledge, and moral agency can undergo. But continuity is anathema to poststructuralism, for it can only be achieved through repression of difference.

My reading of narrativity theory suggests that it can accommodate substantial moral change without succumbing to the unfettered volatility that is fatal to the poststructuralist model. To avoid the pitfalls of poststructuralism, narrativity theory must posit 1) a narrator who is adept at using a set of skills that for the most part generate accurate memory stories and plausible anticipatory stories, and 2) an independent interpersonal and institutional world in which narrators site their stories. Neither the narrator's autobiographical competence nor the narrator's world can be reducible to discursive formations.

Many narrativity theorists insist on the distinctions between narrators and their autobiographies and between the worlds narrators inhabit and their stories about them.[38] They believe, as I do, that narrators can be deceived about themselves, suffer memory lapses, misread other people, acquiesce in the workings of unjust social structures, err in their moral judgments, and act badly. Consequently, these theorists seek to characterize credible stories. Although epistemologies of narrativity differ in specifics, two criteria recur in these accounts—coherence within self narratives and consensus between oneself and others regarding one's self-narrative.

As Hilde Nelson maintains, vetting self-narratives often depends on assessing their coherence. To decide between conflicting stories of a particular relationship, for instance, it is useful to determine which coheres better with other uncontested stories about the individual.[39] Also, a story's correlation to past action and structuring of future action—that is, its coherence with personal recollections and with anticipatory self-narratives—adds to its credibility.[40] But an additional check on self-narratives is needed, for it is possible to produce a coherent self-narrative that contains more fantasy than reality. Thus, Margaret Walker cautions, individuals do not have the final say in assessing the merits of their self-narratives. Since moral values and justifications are "shared understandings," moral self-narratives are subject to others' challenges and sometimes their outright dismissal.[41] Yet, because auditors can be ill informed or biased, consensus can be misleading too. Neither consensus nor coherence suffices as an epistemic standard for self-narratives. They complement and correct one another.

I am well aware that it would be preposterous to demand an epistemic metric to rule on the credibility of self-narratives. Moreover, I have no doubt that coherence and consensus are reasonable bases for evaluating self-narratives. They are so deeply rooted in everyday practices of self-reflection and interpersonal arbitration that it is hard to imagine what it would be like to do without them. Yet, these criteria do not sit well with two insights regarding the self and social reality that narrativity theorists have helped to make philosophically salient.

Moral subjectivity, moral knowledge, and moral agency are never altogether coherent. Narrativity theorists accent the multiplicity within moral subjects. Their metaphors include "ensemble subjectivity" and a "small squad of Possible Selves."[42] Moreover, individuals rightly consider disparate values and behaviors appropriate to the widely divergent contexts in which they function, and there is no alchemy that can transmute their situated judgments into a consistent set of precepts. Since close observation of moral subjects, moral knowledge, and moral agency demonstrates that no strictly coherent, overarching narrative could credibly depict them, individuals must deploy the coherence criterion judiciously. It can alert them to confusion, rationalization, and other sources of distortion in their stories. But if it is applied indiscriminately and rigorously, it requires narrators to omit significant material that does not fit neatly with predominant autobiographical themes, motifs, tonalities, and so forth.[43] Unless people take the coherence criterion with a grain of salt, they will edit the unruly, disruptive incidents out of their self-narratives.

A major problem with the consensus criterion stems from the fact that auditors occupy social positions which are defined by multiple vectors of domination and subordination.[44] Because differently positioned auditors are equipped with and, perforce, listen through different interpretive frameworks, some are more likely to confirm, whereas others are more

likely to dispute the same self-narrative. Obtaining consensus for an episodic self-narrative involving people from different social spheres is seldom possible; obtaining intergroup consensus for a synoptic autobiographical narrative is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, like coherence, consensus seems indispensable to and inextricable from everyday practices of self-reflection and interpersonal arbitration. Just as people routinely ask themselves "Does this make sense?" and mean "Is this story coherent?" so too they routinely do "reality checks" to solicit feedback and establish consensus. But successfully wielding the consensus criterion presupposes making wise decisions about whose feedback to trust, and these decisions are tricky. Auditors who hold power over the narrator often seem authoritative and command more deference than they deserve. Also the narrator's own self-destructive or self-aggrandizing proclivities are liable to skew perceptions of listeners' trustworthiness. Thus, many self-narratives that satisfy the consensus criterion encode internalized oppression or internalized privilege.

The intuitive plausibility of the coherence and consensus criteria rests on assumptions about the quality of narrators' discernment and judgment. Individuals need to select materials that can be organized into intelligible stories, but they also need to register the significance of anomalous information and to keep tabs on branching, parallel, and colliding plotlines. Narrators need social recognition for their stories. Still, they must filter out ignorant or hostile reactions while factoring in "hard truths." Although people need to compile facts and recollect the past accurately, they must not neglect the future, which enlists them in composing aspirational self-narratives that express their ideals and hopes for themselves and for their societies. Seyla Benhabib alludes to the skills that enable individuals to juggle coherence, consensus, and the facts both as they believe them to have been and as they want them to become when she writes of the "*ability* to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and to others."[45] In my view, this utterly marvelous, extremely recondite, and blithely taken-for-granted ability is crucial to the epistemology of narrativity.

Narrativity is the output of processes that mobilize a wide range of human capacities—skills that enrich human experience and provide material for stories and skills that enable people to compose insightful stories and to revise stories that prove to misrepresent their experience and understandings. The following are among the skills that contribute to self-narrativity:

1) Introspection skills that sensitize individuals to their own feelings and desires, that enable them to interpret their subjective experience, and that help them judge how well a narrative conveys their sense of themselves.

2) Communication and listening skills that enable individuals to get the benefit of others' perceptions, background knowledge, insights, advice, and support and that also enable them to expose flattery, bigotry, schadenfreude, and other sources of misleading feedback.
3) Memory skills that enable individuals to recall relevant experiences and apposite narrative devices—not only from their own lives, but also from stories that associates have told or that they have encountered in literature or other art forms.
4) Imagination skills that enable individuals to envisage feasible options—to preview a variety of plotlines their lives might follow and to consider what it would mean to be the protagonist of those stories.
5) Analytical and reasoning skills that enable individuals to identify the advantages and disadvantages of different projections of the possible turns their life stories could take.
6) Self-nurturing skills that enable individuals to secure their physical and psychological equilibrium despite missteps and setbacks—that enable them to appreciate the overall worthiness of their self-portraits and their self-narratives, to assure themselves of their capacity to carry on when they find their self-portraits wanting or their self-narratives misguided, and to sustain their self-respect if they need to correct their self-portraits or revise their self-narratives.
7) Volition skills that enable individuals to resist pressure to capitulate to convention and that enable them to maintain their commitment to the continuations of their autobiographies that they consider genuinely their own.
8) Interpersonal skills that enable individuals to join forces to challenge and change cultural regimes and institutional arrangements that pathologize or marginalize their priorities and projects, that deprive them of accredited discursive means to represent themselves to themselves and to others as flourishing, self-respecting, valuable individuals, and that close off their opportunities to enact their self-narratives.[46]

It is important to bear in mind that people's competence with respect to this repertoire of self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skills varies. Individuals are more or less proficient with respect to each skill, and they are more or less adept at coordinating the skills they possess. My claim is that profiting from using the coherence and consensus criteria is contingent on one's overall level of competence with respect to these skills and therefore that one's confidence in one's self-narrative is justified provided that it is commensurate with one's overall level of competence and provided that one has made good use of one's competence in developing this narrative.

It is tempting to look for properties that all credible self-narratives share, for narratives are entities that can be inspected. Likewise, it is tempting to look for interpersonal tests that credible self-narratives must pass, for stories are articulated in the medium of language, and language is a medium of social intercourse. However, neither coherence nor consensus can be made sufficiently precise to obviate the need for judgment on the part of narrators, and good judgment hinges on good self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skills.

There can be no foolproof method for vindicating self-narratives. But this is no cause for regret. On the contrary, it builds respect for individuality into narrativity epistemology. It is advisable to give narrators plenty of discretion by leaving the coherence and consensus criteria ambiguous, for putting teeth in them would unduly regiment people's lives. Construed narrowly, coherence valorizes caution, control, and regularity. Thus, fidelity to this criterion could suppress spontaneity, experimentation, and yielding to lucky happenstance. Consensus can impose similar strictures. On the assumption that many of one's prospective interlocutors accept prevailing social norms and oppose radical change, consensus militates against dissent and nonconformity. To avoid capitulating to these convention enforcing, opportunity foreclosing subtexts, individuals must adapt coherence to their own values and styles of enactment, and they must seek consensus within communities of kindred but thoughtful and candid spirits. In other words, to apply these criteria well, narrators must individualize them, and they can only individualize them by exercising the self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skills I have sketched.

To ensure respect for the diversity of morally decent lives, narrativity theory must explicate the credibility of self-narratives in terms of this repertoire of skills. Self-narratives are not all equally valid, revealing, and conducive to flourishing, but there is no property internal to self-narratives nor any interpersonal test that can rank them. The best gauge of a self-narrative's credibility, then, is the narrator's overall degree of mastery of the self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skill repertoire and the extent to which the narrator made use of this competency in constructing a particular self-narrative.

Generic storytelling skills cannot be the sole resources that narratives laying claim to articulating moral subjectivity, moral knowledge, and moral agency draw on. Generic storytelling skills produce all sorts of fictions—fairytales, negative utopias, science fiction, romances, and horror stories—as well as autobiographical narratives. Some superb storytellers are poor autobiographers. Notoriously, Ernest Hemingway's deficient self-discovery skills mar his autobiographical writing. *A Moveable Feast*, which contains some appallingly self-serving and arguably

delusional passages, illustrates this failing. With the assistance of self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction skills, though, storytelling skills become tools of moral individuality, moral insight, and moral self-determination. In many cases, it may be true, as Jerome Bruner claims, that "adventures happen to people who know how to tell it that way."[47] But it is also true that people can pad their self-narratives with adventures that did not happen and that people can suffer for want of the right words or framework in which to articulate how something actually transpired. To curb overactive imaginations, to overcome isolating silence, and to secure the credibility of self-narratives, the competency that keeps people attuned to themselves and alive to life's possibilities must underwrite the processes of self-narrating.[48]

NOTES

1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).
2. Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 94.
3. Ibid.
4. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 110.
5. Ibid., 111.
6. Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs* 24 (1999): 335–61, 344. See also J. David Velleman, "The Self as Narrator," unpublished manuscript.
7. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 20.
8. Ibid., 9.
9. John Christman, "Narrative Unity as a Condition of Personhood," unpublished manuscript.
10. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 112–14, 129; Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 158; and Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs* 24 (1999): 348.
11. Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 113, 116; and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 20.
12. Annette Baier, *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 84.

13. Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 16), ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1915–1916), 285.

14. Here I am contrasting the classic biologistic conception of the divided self that Freud propounded with the relational self. However, it should be noted that the object relations school of psychoanalysis develops a nonbiologistic synthesis of the divided self and the relational self.

15. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 108.

16. Susan Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity," in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), 17–18.

17. Lynn Taetzsch, "Fighting Natural," in *Minding the Body: Women Writers on Body and Soul*, ed. Patricia Foster (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 233.

18. Ibid., 234.

19. Ibid., 235.

20. Ibid., 237, 239.

21. Ibid., 242–45.

22. Ibid., 242.

23. Ibid., 245–46.

24. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), ch. 2.

25. Ibid., 36.

26. Neo-Kantian Christine Korsgaard concedes this point by distinguishing provisional universality from absolute universality and by acknowledging that it is advisable to regard moral principles as provisionally universal, i.e., to be prepared to add qualifications to them as need be (Christine Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant," *Journal of Ethics* 3 [1999]: 1–29, 24–25). However, under this interpretation, as I argue below, the universality criterion ceases to be a practical guide to acting well and becomes a formal requirement of interest mainly to philosophers.

27. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 13–15.

28. David W. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (London: Clarendon Press, 1930), 19, 41–42.

29. Richard Rorty, "Freud and Moral Reflection," in *Pragmatism's Freud*, eds. William Kerrigan and Joseph Smith (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 18.

30. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 111.

31. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 6–9.

32. Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery* (Philadephia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1996), 29.

33. Ibid., 28–29.

34. Ibid., ch. 7.

35. Ibid., 41.

36. For example, Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1–6.

37. Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 534.

38. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 120; Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 102; and Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 119.

39. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 94.

40. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 95. For related lines of thought, see Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 97–98; and Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 75, 114.

41. Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 106, 113–14, 119–20. See also Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 95; and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 81.

42. Ibid., 119; and Jerome Bruner, "The 'Remembered' Self," in *The Remembering Self*, eds. Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 46.

43. Ibid., 144–48 and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 190.

44. Margaret Urban Walker, Ibid., chs. 7 and 8; and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, Ibid., 92, 97.

45. Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs* 24 (1999): 335–61, 346–47. Also see Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 10, 66.

46. I have discussed these skills in some other works, including my *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 78–84, 87, and my *Gender in the Mirror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18–21.

47. Jerome Bruner, "The 'Remembered' Self," in *The Remembering Self*, eds. Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48.

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