

# Literature and the Narrative Self<sup>1</sup>

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According to a currently popular view, selfhood or identity is constituted by the narratives that we tell about ourselves. More precisely, we are characters—usually the protagonists—of the stories we tell or could tell about ourselves. This claim about selfhood is usually conjoined with a transcendental claim, to the effect that we also necessarily impose a narrative structure upon the world, that narrative is the ‘lens’ through which our lives are experienced. Experience, in other words, is essentially narrative in form.

In order for this view to be distinctive, its claims on behalf of stories or narratives must be taken as seriously and literally as possible. This paper explores the consequences of doing so and concludes that the narrative view really does mistake life for art.

## I

In its strongest form, the narrative view consists in the two claims noted above (although they are not always distinguished): a claim about the self, which I will call the ‘narrative conception of the self’<sup>2</sup> and a claim about the nature of our experience, or the ‘narrative conception of experience’. These claims can be interpreted in both a factual and normative way. So, it is claimed that at some deep and ultimate level, experience just is inescapably narrative in structure and that our conception of self and the world in general just is narrative. The thought that narrative form is a transcendental precondition for experience at all can be detected in the work of Jerome Bruner, Marya Schechtman and Charles Taylor. Bruner writes that ‘life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not “how it was” but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold’. Ways of telling, he continues, ‘become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to John Cottingham, Galen Strawson, Bart Streumer and Douglas Farland for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will use ‘self’ and ‘identity’ interchangeably to capture ‘who we are’.

up to the present but directing it into the future'.<sup>3</sup> There is therefore no innocent, brute experience or self-conception upon which a narrative is imposed. According to Charles Taylor, a 'basic condition of making sense of ourselves [is] that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*'.<sup>4</sup> Here then, narrative form is not just an essential condition of experiencing the world, but also of understanding our selves.

Along with these factual claims, it is sometimes said that in order to live fully, to have a developed sense of self, or in order to be a person, we should think of ourselves in a narrative way; having a different self-conception from one that is narrative in form (assuming this is possible) is mistaken in a very significant way. Marya Schechtman, for example, writes that '[s]ome, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons'.<sup>5</sup> My interest lies ultimately in this normative claim, although in exploring it, light will also be cast on the factual claim. If one finds the factual claim difficult to accept, it is tempting just to dig in one's heels and insist that here we have a fundamental confusion between life and art, or between a life and the attempt to understand that life. I think the issue does indeed come down to this, but it is usually less than helpful to dig in one's heels without any imaginative exploration of the other side. So, I will first explore the normative claims made by the narrative view: why *should* we think of ourselves and our experience in a narrative way if we do not already and what are the consequences of self-consciously, deliberately doing so? This question assumes what the factual claim would reject, that some of us do think in a non-narrative way. However, we can rephrase the question as follows: why should we think of ourselves and our experience in a narrative way if it seems to us that we do not, or if we do not self-consciously think in that way? Before we can answer this, we need to know what the narrative view comes down to and so how, exactly, we are to think of ourselves and our perception of the world beyond ourselves.

## II

In order to be distinctive, the narrative view cannot be simply that the self and experience can only be properly described and

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Bruner, 'Life as Narrative', *Social Research* 54, No. 1 (1987), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 94.

explained using the form of narrative. This claim is certainly made—witness Bruner: we ‘seem to have no other way of describing “lived time” save in the form of a narrative’.<sup>6</sup> I will not be too concerned with this interpretation in what follows; it is intuitively attractive and probably true in many cases, but it is weaker than most proponents of the narrative view in fact hold. In its stronger sense—and this is the sense I will use in what follows—we just *are* the narrative we tell or could tell about ourselves and our experience just *is* inescapably narrative in structure. This is apparent in the passages from Bruner, Schechtman and Taylor already quoted and finds eloquent expression in Daniel Dennett’s well-known expression of selves as ‘centres of narrative gravity’.<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand the distinct credentials of the narrative view, we must first understand the concept of narrative. The view not only has it that we find, or seek, meaning and coherence in our experience of self and world, but that this meaning and coherence is *narrative* in structure. Taylor writes that ‘we cannot but strive to give our lives meaning or substance, and ... this means that we understand ourselves inescapably in narrative’.<sup>8</sup> What then is a narrative?<sup>9</sup> Essential to the concept of a narrative is that it shows connections between its constitutive elements and traces continuities and changes through time. This is presumably what differentiates a narrative proper from historical records like annals or chronicles, which list events without noting their larger significance or connections<sup>10</sup> and from more experimental fictional forms that lack coherence or closure. Narratives can be historically true or fictional and fictional ones can be more or less ‘true to life’. Narratives are linear, but this linearity is not just chronological; they characteristically try to achieve unity, comprehensibility, internal coherence between elements; they establish patterns and attempt some kind of closure, rather than simply ending up in the air, as do chronicles; the elements of a narrative only have meaning within the overall context of the whole. Narratives thus *fashion* events, whether imaginary or

<sup>6</sup> Bruner, ‘Life as Narrative’, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Allen Lane, 1992), Chapter 13.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *The Sources of the Self*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> The account below is taken from Robert C. Roberts, ‘Narrative Ethics’, *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 474.

<sup>10</sup> On history and narrative, see Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *On Narrativity*, W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.) (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

real, from a vantage point that is more inclusive and knowing and usually retrospective. This form-seeking and form-imposing activity<sup>11</sup> is essential to narrative and the crucial element to bear in mind for what follows.

I have just described what we could call the traditional view of narrative or story: it has a trajectory that follows time's arrow; it seeks coherence and significance. But of course not all our stories, especially our fictional ones, take this form. Some works of fiction depart intentionally from this model, subverting just those form-seeking elements that provide such security (and these are not only modern—recall Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*). Do these experimental forms count as narrative? Most writers do indeed seem to use 'narrative' in the traditional way. While Schechtman discusses 'non-standard forms' of narrative, she insists that it is only traditional linear narratives that constitute personhood (though she also insists that there are many and various types of traditional narratives). This is the sense of narrative that seems to be most relevant to narrative conceptions of the self and views of experience and it is the one which writers most often discuss, whether or not they recognize other forms as narrative. Not just any stories, therefore, can constitute the self and its world.

If this is how we are to understand narrative, how are we to understand the claims that our identities or selves are narrative in structure and that we experience life in a narrative manner? To begin with, we must note that on the narrative view this experience of our lives and selves need not be articulated or conscious: We may not know it, or experience it as such, but our selves *are* narrative in form and we *do* experience life as a narrative. According to Schechtman, however, it must be capable of being articulated. She writes at times of the constraint that we be able to articulate this experience as coming down to being able to explain what we do and why we do it, to tell a story about ourselves that makes psychological sense.<sup>12</sup> This, however, seems too weak a sense of 'being capable of being articulated' for such a strong sense of 'narrative self'. If the claim that the self is narrative in constitution comes down to this, that we be able to explicate our actions to others, then there may be little left to argue about. Moral agency, inter-personal relations and sanity depend on this. But, in fact, the claim is much stronger and must be, if the narrative view of the self is to be dis-

<sup>11</sup> So called by Galen Strawson in 'Against Narrative' (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>12</sup> Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 114.

tinctive. Even in cases of self-blindness, where our 'explicit self-narrative' diverges from our 'implicit self-narrative', Schechtman still wants to say that the implicit self-narrative is an underlying psychological organization that is narrative in form. So both our explicit and implicit psychological organization is narrative. She writes, in a way reminiscent of the passages from Bruner and Taylor quoted earlier:

The sense of one's life as unfolding according to the logic of a narrative is not just an *idea* we have, it is an organizing principle of our lives. It is the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours.<sup>13</sup>

My conclusion will in the end be that exactly the opposite is the case. *Some* of us may think of ourselves and our lives in a narrative manner and then only in our reflective hours, if at all.

So, to say that we experience ourselves and our world through the form of narrative is to say at the least, that we experience ourselves and the world in way that is meaningful and coherent, with a trajectory of development, in a way that promises, or actively seeks closure and significance. The elements of our lives and ourselves cohere, or if they seem not to in isolated moments, we attempt to find coherence. The narrative view therefore says that we experience the world as meaningful, or if it resists yielding meaning, we attempt actively to impose it ourselves. So far, so probably true. But, again, if this is not to be simply the view that we are meaning-making creatures, which we clearly are, there must still be something more to the view. Contrary to Taylor's assertion, we can 'strive to give our lives meaning' without thereby having to understand ourselves in narrative.

A clue is provided by Schechtman when she says that 'the narrative self-constitution view requires that a person have a self-conception that coheres to produce a well-defined character'.<sup>14</sup> If the narrative view is to be distinctive, it must, I think, take as seriously as possible this claim that we are 'characters' and the related claim that we experience ourselves and our lives *as in a story*. Writers on this subject tend to use 'narrative' and 'story' interchangeably, but it is the term 'story' that is most suggestive. In the next section, I will take these claims seriously and explore the consequences of doing so, despite the apparent absurdity. First, however, it will be useful to consider what the narrative view has in its favour.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 97.

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The narrative view is seductive in many respects because it makes sense of some deeply intuitive responses to living and our experience of being a self. It makes sense, for instance, of our being obviously *active* in the construction of meaning. It allows us to think of the self as ‘real’ without hypostasizing it and, staying with the highly charged metaphors, to be active in ‘weaving’ or ‘spinning’ it over time. The self, in other words, isn’t something that is given to us, or that just happens ‘despite ourselves’. We are responsible for its contours and so in a significance sense, are self-made persons. The view also accounts for the significance of stories in our lives. We grow up on stories; they shape our moral and intellectual development and show us the possibilities—heroic and ghastly—open to human luck and endeavour. It is tempting to think that so pervasive are stories that it is natural and fitting that our selves and our experiences should be understood in their terms. They resonate with us because in some sense we are living them.

Thinking of our lives as stories and our selves as their characters also has aesthetic value. It explains the need or habit some people have of wanting their lives to have a pleasing shape, a trajectory with a fitting ending that completes and justifies the progress towards it. This aesthetic value is closely related to the value of personal autonomy: We like to feel we are in control of the shape of our lives and are living towards something we have personally endorsed. At the end of our lives, we wish to look back and see progress and significance, to take with us into the grave the knowledge that all was not a mere succession of events and that life did not just happen to us. The idea that we shape our experience so as to make it meaningful and construct ourselves as ‘well-rounded’ and coherent fits this need. While, as I said, we may accept the view that we are meaning-making without thereby accepting the strong narrative claim, it is a natural extension of it. If we are the protagonists in our own stories, then we are essential to its development; the world does indeed revolve around us, even if our story is a little one and soon ended.

These considerations will seem less pressing to some than to others. Galen Strawson reminds us that some people are less prone to see themselves as continuing ‘diachronic’ entities over time, and so will be less pressed to trace their development and form their character to some fitting closure.<sup>15</sup> But for those who do tend towards diachronic self-conceptions, the narrative conception of the

<sup>15</sup> See Galen Strawson, ‘The Self’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4, Nos. 5–6 (1997), 405–28.

self is indeed attractive, even if not necessarily forced upon them. Despite the attractions, however, I wish to argue in the next section that the view is fundamentally misguided. I will do so by considering one form of written narrative, that of literature, to which the strong narrative view characteristically compares our lives. Some of the points I make will also apply to historical narratives, in which there is a presumption that what is narrated actually happened (in some way or another, maybe not actually as interpreted). In fact, when both histories and fictions are understood in terms of narrative, the differences between them are elided and the fashion to ‘textualise’ all narratives—to emphasize their essentially constructed, linguistic nature—tends to push ‘what actually happened’ to the background, if it is allowed in all. Be that as it may, it is literature that characteristically provides us with the great stories by which we so often do explore life and ourselves and when we do compare ourselves to narrative, it is to such stories that we typically turn. They are thus the strongest case that can be made for the narrative view.

### III

Proponents of the narrative view differ according to how explicit they are that we live stories and are characters within it. Some resist putting it that starkly, but Donald Polkinghorne and Jerome Bruner are happy to be literal on the matter—Bruner quotes Polkinghorne with apparent endorsement:

We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives.<sup>16</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre, too, is explicit that we are characters in a story that is partly of our own making:

The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do; it is in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds. Of course just as they do not begin where they please, they cannot go on exactly as they please either; each character is constrained by the actions of

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 115–6.

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others and by the social settings presupposed in his and their actions...<sup>17</sup>

MacIntyre emphasizes the social and cultural setting of our stories; the roles we play out in our lives are those made available to us by our culture and about which we learn through stories when growing up. We cannot write just any story for ourselves, but are constrained by available roles and the reality of others:

We enter human society... with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how other respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.<sup>18</sup>

This is supported by Bruner:

... one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life. And the tool kit of any culture is replete not only with a stock of canonical life narratives... but with combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives: canonical stances and circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

The idea that we are somehow constrained in our lives by culturally available roles or character types can be linked to another idea that is common in this debate, the idea that our lives fit certain narrative types or genres.<sup>20</sup> Our lives take on the form of a comedy, tragedy, *Bildungsroman* or *Wanderungsroman*, for example. We understand our lives in this way and our selves as the protagonists of one or more such stories.

My suggestion is that if the narrative view is to be distinctive, these claims that we are really characters playing out certain roles in stories must be taken as seriously as possible. While not all writers on the subject express the view in these terms (Taylor, for example, does not talk of roles and genres in *The Sources of the Self*, even though he has a strongly narrative view of moral identity), it is precisely these terms that make the view what it is. Understanding what exactly this comes down to, however, is tricky, and we are faced with the immediate problem that, when put in these terms, the view

<sup>17</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (London: Duckworth, 1982), 200.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>19</sup> Bruner, 'Life as Narrative', p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> See Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, 120–1 and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 196–7.



just seems obviously false—we are clearly not characters and our lives are not stories and it is a blatant category mistake to think so. This interpretation must be a straw man.

There does not, however, appear to be another way of interpreting the view, if we are to do it the favour of taking the way it presents itself and its modes of discussion seriously. Of course, we can never *really* be literal characters if characters are essentially fictional or fictionalized or textual, but the thought seems to be that we think of ourselves *as if* we are characters and our lives stories, or that this is how we *ought* to think of ourselves. The artificiality of this thought is revealed if we deliberately try to think in that way: If I do not already think that I *do* think of myself in this way, how am I to understand what this comes down to? What is it to think of myself *as if* I am a character in a story? Presumably, not doing so is misleading in a factual and moral sense. That is, I am mistaken about a certain aspect of myself and my experience of the world and this has ethical implications for my self-understanding, self-conceptions and experiences.

The claim could come down to saying that we should think of our lives as if they were unified, that the self, in order to be psychologically healthy and ethically aware, should attempt to categorise itself and its experiences in narrative terms—form-imposing, unifying etc. But if we do not already do this and if this, again, is to be more than the thesis that we actively impose meaning on our living, something more must be intended. I wish now to explore the ways in which we could live this *as if* condition and explore its implications, allowing what this might mean to arise in the discussion. Once again, the elements of story and character must play a central role, or the view fails to be distinctive. My argument relies, paradoxically enough, on taking literature and its lessons more seriously than the narrative view seems to. I will be arguing that we learn from literature itself—from the great stories of our cultures—that self and life are not a narrative.

My starting-point is a paper by Paul Seabright on Henry James's novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*. Seabright explores the protagonist's attempts to mould her character according to her ideal of freedom and nobility and the subversive effects this paradoxically has on her character and happiness. Towards the end of the paper, Seabright makes the following perceptive judgement of Isabel Archer:

It may be that what underlies the paradox in her motivation... is best expressed... as fear of being the kind of character whom an

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author like Henry James would have thought insufficiently interesting to write a novel around.<sup>21</sup>

He concludes by remarking that she tries and fails ‘to turn herself into a character that matches her conception of what it is most fulfilling and important to be’; that she is driven by the fear that ‘the story of her life might turn out to be banal’.<sup>22</sup>

Exploring the result of thinking of oneself as a character in a story by beginning with an actual character in a story whose flaw is just that, has its own air of paradox, I realize, but Isabel Archer’s sad history is instructive. (The natural turn to literature to make sense of our selves has always made the narrative view compelling.) The metaphors of ‘fashioning’, ‘forming’, ‘organising’ ourselves and our experiences are legion in narrative ethics, but writers seem to ignore the uncomfortable connotations of self-consciousness and artificiality. However, they are central to thinking of ourselves *as if* we are characters in a story whose ethical and aesthetic credentials are there for us to manipulate at will. Interpreted factually, the view that we do organise our selves and our experience of the world in a narrative manner, whether we are consciously aware of this or not, may detract from the self-consciousness criticism, but if we do not feel we are in fact narrative in outlook, but are told that we *should* be, the danger looms anew.

My first point, which I will make only briefly here, is that if we really do try to think of ourselves as characters, we run the same risk as Isabel, of too consciously ‘moulding’ or ‘fashioning’ our characters and decisions in a way that is not always conducive to real virtue or authenticity. The aim to be a certain kind of person, one that is aesthetically interesting or ethically commendable, may have tragically unintended results. The logic of motivation is such that self-consciously trying to be virtuous is not the same as *being* virtuous and such attempts may have the paradoxical consequence of undermining virtue.<sup>23</sup> To try to have character is certainly not necessarily a bad thing but can, with the purest of motives, impair virtue. It is a matter of bad moral luck for the morally conscientious, that certain

<sup>21</sup> Paul Seabright, ‘The Pursuit of Unhappiness: Paradoxical Motivation and the Subversion of Character in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady*’, *Ethics* 98 (1988), 330.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>23</sup> On this, see Seabright, *op. cit.* and in a different context, Bernard Williams, ‘Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence’, *Contemporary British Philosophers*, H. D. Lewis (ed.) (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1976).

positive character traits may require spontaneity and self-forgetfulness, rather than self-awareness and conscious moral fashioning.

Isabel Archer tries to fashion herself according to certain ethical ideals, but literature also shows us the dangers that can arise by concentrating on the *aesthetics* of fashioning: The aesthete is a recognizable and usually morally unattractive character (Gilbert Osmond, Dorian Gray). In attempting to turn their lives into art, they forget that others are not objects in their private collections; form takes over from substance in their dealings with themselves and with others. If, as Polkinghorne says, we 'are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives', we risk either post hoc modifications in bad faith or thinking that we control the course of our lives in the way the author-God figure does. We 'fashion' and stylise, go over and smooth the edges, and accretions of stylistic modifications may bury what really happened and what it really means. This is not to say that 'what really happened and what it really means' is always available to us. However, stylising and modifying one's interpretation and experience of events and reactions certainly makes the task of clear-sighted appreciation of the facts more difficult.

Of course, one way of interpreting the value of personal autonomy is in terms of self-governance or self-authorship. It requires that we take control over the course of our lives and assume responsibility for the values and beliefs that guide us. However, autonomy also requires self-knowledge and a clear-sighted appreciation of the facts of the situation; it concerns our relation with ourselves and our responses to the elements of our existence with which we initially just find ourselves. To be autonomous, we must decide for ourselves our responses and relation to such initial givens, not write our history as if it were *all* under our voluntary control, both past and future. Autonomy is essentially forward-looking; while it may initiate a reappraisal of our past, it cannot rearrange its events to fit an aesthetic ideal or a wish to be other than we were at that time.

The narrative view is on stronger ground when it claims that we are characters than when it claims we are authors, for characters, at least, find themselves in a world not of their own making. However, thinking of ourselves as characters has its own dangers when this is interpreted in terms of roles, as we find in MacIntyre and Bruner, for example. Rather than thinking of myself as author, I may think that I am a character in a story already written for me, that I have a certain 'role' to play because the 'plot-lines' of my life are set down. In thinking in this way, we risk mythologising, restricting possibilities, misinterpreting events and people as we see them as irrevoca-

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ble elements of a larger story of which we are protagonists. But stories are, precisely, artificial; their elements are arranged in the interests both of verisimilitude and aesthetic form. We may give our lives such form retrospectively, but it is far from apparent that we really do so as we live them, or that we should. I will return to this point in the conclusion.

We must always remember what we are really saying by identifying ourselves with characters and our lives with stories. In her taxonomies of different conceptions of personhood that appear in literature and society, Amélie Rorty writes of characters:

Characters are, by nature, defined and delineated. If they change, it is because it is in their character to do so under specific circumstances. Their natures form their responses to experiences, rather than being formed by them. ...

Since the elements out of which characters are composed are repeatable and their configurations can be reproduced, a society of characters is in principle a society of repeatable and indeed replaceable individuals.<sup>24</sup>

When Bruner and MacIntyre talk about cultural roles, they risk conceiving of persons literally as characters in this sense. Do we really wish to think of ourselves in this way?

Some people do, of course, live out their lives as if destiny has laid them down, or have such a conception imposed upon them by a needy public. They may either see themselves in this way or their personal history may encourage such an interpretation regardless of their own self-conception. Some tend to live on the heroic or tragic scale; we can trace a trajectory and follow their progress. They are people who take up causes and who are, indeed, led by them as if characters in a larger tale, but the causes can threaten to exhaust the significance of the lives, so that we forget weakness and human frailty. (And then we are disappointed to learn that our heroes are in fact human, after all. It is also instructive that in such contexts, 'human' denotes weakness.) Such people do indeed become Characters for us, not people. (Ghandi, Malcom X, Mandela, Michael Collins, Oscar Wilde, Lawrence of Arabia, Owen Meany, to return to literature.<sup>25</sup>) They are also, and

<sup>24</sup> Amélie Rorty, 'A Literary Postscript: Characters, Persons, Selves, Individuals', *The Identities of Persons*, Amélie Rorty (ed.) (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 304.

<sup>25</sup> The weakness in John Irving is, perhaps, that his casts tend to contain Characters, not persons.

sometimes tragically, restricted by their role to the detriment of full human relations with others on a more intimate scale. It is significant that their terrain is characteristically that of politics, which concerns relations on a large and potentially heroic scale. We are often blessed by such lives and are grateful that they happen, but we cannot all lead them or wish for them. And in interpreting others' lives in such a way, even if they do so themselves, we restrict, mythologise and so perhaps, falsify. Our need for stories—for closure and meaning and progress—imposes itself on the lives of others. The Cause or Role or Myth takes over from the individual, at some loss, even if humanity benefits all things considered.

Other people become Characters in ways that are more pernicious—civil servants, bureaucrats and politicians seem at times to have their individuality subsumed within their role, so that responsibility for the individuals who come to them or whose plight they have power over dissipates into the system. If we see ourselves purely in terms of roles, we risk both bad faith in the Sartrean sense—*mauvaise foi*—as well as losing sight of the individuality of persons. Again, we can learn from novels as well as our own experience in the home office: Kafka, J. M. Coetzee's Kafka-esque *The Life and Times of Michael K*.

But can't we live out little stories—the scholar, the devoted parent or servant, the teacher—even if not heroic ones? Doesn't each of these 'characters' carry within them typical stories, typical ways that lives go? And do we not quite innocently 'try on' roles for ourselves to see what fits us best?<sup>26</sup> Doing so seems especially an integral part of adolescence. Well, feminists and post-colonial writers have been arguing for years that individuals are reduced and traduced by forcing their lives into such stories. Both literature and life bear them out. And it is arguably a sign of maturity to outgrow 'role-playing', to stop defining ourselves essentially with any role we may happen to take on and to become comfortable with or resigned to the kind of person we broadly are and to our inescapable limitations.

Thinking of ourselves *as if* we were characters in stories presses us to think of ourselves in ways that are potentially dehumanising and falsifying. Human beings are not always predictable; they do not fit into patterns, they are not exhausted by roles or plots. We must return, in Iris Murdoch's words, to 'the real impenetrable human person'<sup>27</sup> that great literature reminds us exist. If literature

<sup>26</sup> I owe this point to John Cottingham.

<sup>27</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Peter Conradi (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 294.

succeeds in anything, it is to show us that we are not characters in stories and that individuals need not be—should not be—reduced to roles or character types.

I find support for this view more generally in the work of Murdoch, who has written extensively of the tension in literature between the demands of aesthetic form and the demand that novels be true to human contingency and disorder. Without form, there is no art work (*artifice*, *artificial*), but there must be room within that form for characters to develop freely. Form fulfils our need for unity and closure, for summing up and rounding off, but great art simultaneously reminds us that life itself and other persons in particular are not like that. The novel reminds us of ‘the invincible variety, contingency and scarcely communicable frightfulness of life’, so despite its formal qualities, it has an ‘open texture’, a ‘porous or cracked quality’; it is ‘full of holes through which it communicates with life, and life flows in and out of it’. In this way, great art ‘also takes it for granted that the world transcends art’.<sup>28</sup>

The narrative view tends to forget this tension in art between form and contingency. Concentrating on the aesthetic qualities of narrative and our need for that kind of form in our own lives, it ignores the fact that great art never forgets that life itself is *not* unified. In ignoring this aspect of art, the view ignores the reality of life and is thus insensitive to the very thing it wishes to give importance to in our lives and selves. ‘Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which

<sup>28</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 96–7.

At times, Murdoch sounds as if she would agree with the narrative conception of the self. Her well-known remark in ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’ (*Existentialists and Mystics*, op. cit., 75) that ‘[m]an is a creature who makes pictures of himself, and then comes to resemble the picture’ sounds like Bruner’s claim that a narrative structure is imposed on our world. Similarly, in an interview with Bryan Magee, she says, ‘[w]hen we return home and ‘tell our day’, we are artfully shaping material into story form.... So in a way as word-users we all exist in a literary atmosphere, we live and breathe literature, we are all literary artists, we are constantly employing language to make interesting form out of experience which perhaps originally seem dull or incoherent’ (‘Literature and Philosophy’, *Existentialists and Mystics*, op. cit., 6–7). Read carefully, however, and bearing in mind her extensive discussions on the tension between form and contingency in the novel, I believe she would not advocate what I have called the strong narrative view, but would be persuaded by the arguments I put forward in this section.

might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete'.<sup>29</sup>

According to Maria Antonaccio, the tension that Murdoch sees between form and contingency in the novel is thus paralleled by a tension between metaphysics and empiricism in moral theory.<sup>30</sup> Moral theory, in its desire for systematizing human relations and demands, risks forgetting the chancy detail of human lives, the lack of formal unity, however we may desire it. As great novels find a balance between form and contingency, they also depict the needed balance in morality and life itself. They show us, as morality must never forget, the reality of other people in all the peculiar individuality that escapes systems and false unity.

To conclude, I wish to return to something I said earlier and it is also to return to the factual narrative view: I said that we may give our lives form and meaning retrospectively, or in quiet reflective moments, but that it is not at all clear that we do so in the moment of living. In saying this, I am disagreeing with Schechtman's claim that narrative 'is the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours'. How often, in fact, do we tell our autobiographies? When are we, that is, compelled to make sense of our lives, to detect patterns or to evaluate our behaviour in terms of some larger context of significance? While this may indeed happen to a greater or lesser extent and in a variety of ways, it does necessarily support the narrative view.

To the greatest extent, it seems, we seek significance in moments of crisis or confusion, when we turn to a psychologist, a stranger who knows nothing about us and whose job is to find underlying patterns that will help us to make sense of ourselves and the direction of our lives. Or we look for significance when we reach moments of reflection about our lives as a whole; when we question their meaning and development and ask whether they reflect what we think is really important. Here we are attempting to get at the truth, as far as it is appropriate, to discover what we think ultimately important and what we wish to achieve and stand for in our lives.

<sup>29</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 87.

<sup>30</sup> Maria Antonaccio, 'Form and Contingency in Iris Murdoch's Ethics', *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.) (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Antonaccio's perceptive paper has been helpful in understanding Murdoch's concerns and in constructing the arguments of this paper.

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We may have to ‘tell our story’ to the psychologist or to ourselves, but this carries no necessity of the kind of narrativity I have explored. While we sample and delete information, arrange the elements, it is still far from clear that we see ourselves as characters in a story. We are telling about ourselves and if in good faith, we are trying to tell things *as they were*, not as a good story would have them. Self-knowledge involves precisely seeing that we are not characters in stories. Our lives are messier and greater than stories and great stories transcend themselves. In order to achieve self-knowledge, we need to think of ourselves and our lives *as they really are*, independently of any consoling but potentially false unity.

On a more quotidian level, we tell our autobiographies when we meet someone for the first time and want to show that we are open to knowing them better; we offer them information in the spirit of openness and reciprocity. Or when we come home and tell stories about our days, mini tales within the larger tales of our lives, but that for amusement. *Because* it is for amusement or for simple sharing of lives, we may embroider and arrange and cast ourselves as protagonist. Only really in this last case are we ‘narrativising’ events, but this does not entail that we lived the episode as a story at the time it occurred; if we did, spontaneity would disappear. Most of the time, however, we just live. Some live more reflectively but this does not necessarily mean they live concomitantly more narratively.

To end, again paradoxically, with literature: Characters that move us the most, that we care about most deeply, are those that transcend their role in the plot, that break into personhood despite the artifice of their world. We forget that they are not actually persons because they remain mysterious, they grow beyond the words on the page and live on beyond their written end. I suggest that such characters are ‘true to life’; that great art does, in the end, imitate life.<sup>31</sup> The narrative view wishes us to think about ourselves as characters in lesser, rather than greater works of fiction. In so doing, we risk seeing ourselves and others falsely, of ignoring their irreducible individuality and ultimate impenetrability, through the consoling veil of our need for unity and meaning.

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<sup>31</sup> I by no means wish to claim that all art is linear or representational or that it must be so to be great art. But all good art tells us *something* about ourselves and the world we live in.



