Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics
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As the study of narrative has swept across a wide range of disciplines, a variety of implicit and explicit views have developed on what narratives are about and why they are important for us. There seems to be a relative unanimity that narrative does not merely list what happens, but that it brings out or creates meaningful connections between events or experiences, thereby rendering them (at least partly) intelligible. Yet there is no consensus on the precise nature of this organizing activity. In an attempt to elucidate the different approaches to this question, theorists have been divided into those who conceive of narrative primarily as a cognitive instrument for imposing meaningful order onto human reality or experience (for example, Hayden White, Louis Mink, Daniel Dennett) and those who consider it to be primarily an ontological category that characterizes the human way of being in the world, that is, something constitutive of human existence (for example, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre). These can be called respectively the epistemological and ontological position on the significance of narrative for human existence. Galen Strawson, in turn, has made an influential distinction between descriptive and normative positions on the narrativity of experience (what he calls the “psychological Narrativity thesis” and the “ethical Narrativity thesis”). Even though these conceptual differentiations are helpful to a certain extent, such binary terms may also prevent us from paying adequate attention to the complex interconnections between the ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimension of the relation between narrative and human existence.

In this essay, I shall argue that the question of the significance of narrative for human existence can be formulated with an emphasis on any of these philosophical dimensions, but that the answers involve implicit assumptions concerning all three dimensions. It is particularly important to better understand the ontological assumptions underlying different approaches to narrative, because they have been most undertheorized, and little attention has been paid to the crucial impetus they provide.
for different epistemological and ethical perspectives in the debate on narrative and human existence. Integral to this debate are tacit assumptions concerning what is counted as real in general and what kind of role and ontological status is accorded to narrative interpretation of experience in particular. I attempt to clarify the debate by disentangling these assumptions and then suggesting that while it is important not to conflate experience and narrative, it is helpful to see both of them as phenomena constituted by interpretative activity.

I also wish to draw attention to the way in which, particularly since the crisis of storytelling in the modernist novel, fiction has examined and subtly elucidated the role and significance of narratives for human existence from a range of perspectives that throw light on these three philosophical dimensions of narrative. I will briefly delineate some ways in which ideas presented against and for storytelling by some major twentieth-century novelists provide a beneficial ground for exploring the intertwinement of the epistemological, ontological, and ethical dimensions of the significance of narrative for human existence. This is also a way of suggesting that it would be productive to tie the theoretical study of narrative more intimately to the study of the philosophical underpinnings of narrative forms in literary history.

“Against Narrativity”: The Intertwining of the Epistemological and the Ontological

A crucial background for the epistemological approach to narrative is the debate launched by philosophers of history such as Arthur Danto, Louis Mink, and Hayden White, who argued that historical accounts retrospectively project a narrative order on events. For example, Mink famously argues that “stories are not lived but told,” since “life” in itself “has no beginnings, middles, or ends.” He agrees with White “(1) that the world is not given to us in the form of well-made stories; (2) that we make such stories; (3) that we give them referentiality by imagining that in them the world speaks itself.” White, in turn, asserts that a historical narrative “reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished,’ done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart.” Thus, according to White, the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.” What these arguments are suggesting is that narratives project a false order on the disorder of human existence. The reception of these ideas has focused on what they say about our epistemic rela-
tion to history and to the world in general: the discussion has revolved around the value and limits of forms of knowledge that are dependent on narrative. What has been thereby overlooked is that their argumentation depends on a strong ontological assumption about the nature of reality. Danto, Mink, and White acknowledge that narratives play an important role in making sense of reality, but at the same time they suggest that there is a deeper level at which human, lived experience as immediately given, and human existence in general—as part of the flux of the real—is nonnarrative in character.

Similar ontological assumptions seem to underlie several contemporary cognitivist and neuroscientific approaches to narrative. The stance according to which narrative is “merely” a “cognitive instrument” that enables us to come to terms with the disorder of the real is not ontologically neutral: it is based on a certain conception of the nature of reality as a nonnarrative flux of events onto which meaningful order is projected. This ontological assumption underpins, for example, the argument of Strawson, who provocatively maintains that selfhood consists of a succession of immediately given moments, and that all processes of self-interpretation in which one attempts to find narrative continuity in one’s life distort this reality. Modern neuroscience, according to Strawson, has shown that reminiscing about one’s past and telling stories about it necessarily lead to its distortion and hence: “the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being.”

Strawson argues against what he calls the “psychological Narrativity thesis,” a descriptive thesis according to which people generally cannot help but experience their lives in narrative terms. While this may apply to some people, the “Diachronics,” he considers the majority of people to be “Episodics,” whose self-experience has no such narrative quality. It seems to me that Strawson’s way of approaching the question of narrativity from a psychological-naturalist perspective, according to which “the fundamentals of temporal temperament are genetically determined,” prevents him from seeing that the question of the narrativity of human experience is not merely an empirical question, but also a philosophical question concerning ontological assumptions about human existence and what is real in general.

Generally, attacks on narrativity present human meaning-giving processes as secondary or unreal with respect to experience that is given here and now. Different variations of a similar pattern of thought structure the critique of narrative by twentieth-century novelists and theorists, ranging from literary modernism to poststructuralist antinarrativity. A crucial starting point for their skepticism towards storytelling is the ten-
sion between the infinite complexity of the experiences we go through at each moment and the necessarily selective and simplifying narrative account given of these experiences. For Virginia Woolf, what is real is the flux of consciousness as the mind “receives a myriad impressions,” in comparison to which narrative intrigues appear as questionable literary conventions. Similarly, the protagonist of Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* critically analyses people’s need to see their lives as “narrative orders” in which “the overwhelmingly manifold nature of things” is presented as a calming continuity: people “love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a ‘course’ is somehow their refuge from chaos.”

Strawson uses the protagonist of Sartre’s *Nausea*, Roquentin, as an example of those who allegedly endorse the “psychological Narrativity thesis” but reject the “ethical Narrativity thesis” (“we are indeed deeply Narrative in our thinking and . . . it’s not a good thing”). However, it is debatable in what sense Roquentin or Sartre embrace such a “psychological Narrativity thesis.” The novel revolves around the opposition between the simple persistence of things and the human need to order, explain, and narrativize this world of things; Roquentin contends that only the inexplicable, in its mute presence, has real existence, whereas the “world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence.” It is true that the novel explicates the psychological need to narrativize experiences, but at the same time it suggests that these experiences are nonnarrative in themselves and that there is something fundamentally false and dishonest in this tendency: “This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. But you have to choose: to live or to recount.” Hence, *Nausea* suggests that even if we try to make sense of our experiences by recounting them, there is a more primordial level of experience that is nonnarrative. In fact, it seems to me that those whom Strawson puts in this category (endorsing a “psychological Narrativity thesis” while rejecting an “ethical Narrativity thesis”) tend to view the narrating of experience as a secondary, retrospective process which falsifies the true nature of experience.

On the basis of such antinarrative ontological commitments, Sartre champions the way in which Camus’s *The Stranger* rejects narrative as a form that pretends to explain the world by presenting a “causal order.” Indeed, the opposition between the nonnarrative flux of experiences and their retrospective narrativization is salient in Camus’s novel, in which the conventional story told in the court of law, explaining Meursault’s actions by placing them in a reassuring chain of causes and effects, is
contrasted with his own laconic way of recounting the events, leaving
them largely disconnected, contingent, and unexplained. The Prosecu-
tor describes a “series of events which led this man to kill the deceased,
fully aware of what he was doing,” but Meursault is unable to recognize
himself in this story, and the court’s way of endlessly analyzing his “soul,”
and the rest of it” makes him even more confused: “I found that my
mind had gone blurred.”17 Meursault’s insistence on the muteness of a
reality that resists narrativization is crucial in making him a “stranger,”
unable and unwilling to provide socially acceptable explanations for his
action. The novel suggests that he is convicted not so much for killing an
Arab as for his estrangement from society, from customs and moralities
that cloak the essential absurdity of existence. Underlying the novel we
can discern simultaneously an epistemological claim that narratives fail
to provide access to what has happened (reality remains fundamentally
incomprehensible) and an ontological view according to which human
reality lacks meaningful connections and evades attempts at narrative
sense making.

Similarly, underlying Barthes’s analyses of the preterite (le passé simple),
the dominant grammatical tense of the novel and historiography, is not
only the epistemological claim that narratives pretend to explain the
world by using the preterite, thanks to which “the verb implicitly be-
longs with a causal chain,” but also the ontological presupposition that
reality “as such” is “unexplained,” “sent sprawling before us.” Allegedly
narrative, as an “expression of an order,” reduces the “exploded reality
to a slim and pure logos,” and puts the narrator in the position of a
“demiurge, a God or a reciter.”18 Such interplay between the ontological
and epistemological dimensions also characterizes the critique of narra-
tivity presented by the nouveau roman, which radicalizes the existentialist
and Barthesian suspicion towards storytelling. The nouveaux romanciers
themselves stress the epistemological dimension of their project, their
endeavor to display the profound uncertainty of our apprehension
of reality—what Nathalie Sarraute characterizes as a “definitive, total
don’t-understand.”19 Claude Simon notes that what unites the nouveaux romanciers
is the experience of “constantly treading on quicksand,”20 and the driving force behind Alain Robbe-Grillet’s work is the desire to
give expression to the basic inexplicability of reality: “It disturbed me
that literature did not tell about the reality of life, of the way in which
uncertainty and fragmentariness are part of life. In the real world there
are all the time inexplicable factors.”21 The nouveaux romanciers have
adamantly rejected “metaphysical interpretations” of their novels, but it
can be argued that there is a certain ontology underlying every literary
work—a certain view of human existence and reality—just as there is a
certain epistemology, a certain conception of our epistemic situation in the world. Even the claim that reality is not narratively organized—that narratives falsely “impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe”—is an ontological claim. Although the nouveaux romanciers foreground the epistemological position that we cannot know what reality is like, they nevertheless make the ontological claim that reality in fact is a fragmentary, chaotic flux that resists human meanings.

Sarraute, for example, sees storytelling as a convention that masks the way in which reality is in a state of constant transformation, while for Robbe-Grillet it is essential to life that “everything changes, nothing can be relied upon, everything is moving.” Such statements move the nouveaux romanciers beyond defending an indifferent stance towards the nonhuman, fundamentally unknowable world, towards affirming a certain dynamic ontology in the tradition of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze in which reality is seen as a stream of becoming that resists human attempts to impose meaningful order on it. In fact, the epistemological uncertainty that pervades their novels is largely based on such ontological commitments: the reader cannot depend on anything, they suggest, because the world projected by the text is in a state of constant transformation. Their novels convey this view both through their fragmentary, elusive structure and thematically, as in Sarraute’s *Planetarium*: “everything was fluid, vast, without outlines. Everything was in a state of constant movement, changing.” In sum, the nouveaux romanciers reject the form of a linear, coherent narrative because they can no longer share its philosophical underpinnings: the ontological assumption that there is meaningful order in the world and the epistemological claim that we can know this order.

This discussion of the postwar criticism of narrative shows how difficult and arbitrary it is to draw a sharp opposition between the epistemological and the ontological: the epistemological view of the profound limitations of the human ability to cognitively grasp reality is intertwined with the ontological view that both reality in general and human existence in particular are basically chaotic, lacking any inherent meaning and narrative order. The world that is seen to be profoundly nonhuman is at the same time a world that eludes the human capacity to know and understand, such that narrative order then appears as an order falsely projected onto this world. All these critics of narrativity rely on an opposition between the real and human meanings projected onto the real, but there are significant differences in terms of how radically they draw this opposition.

The nouveaux romanciers, in particular, go much further than the existentialists and most modernists in demanding a more radical rejec-
tion of the perspective of human meaning giving, because for them, as Robbe-Grillet’s narrator puts it, “reality begins at the precise moment when meaning becomes uncertain.” Literature, Robbe-Grillet asserts, should describe the world “here and now,” in its “concrete, solid and material presence,” depict how the world “refuses to conform to our habits of apprehension and to our classification,” and reject the anthropomorphic perspective much more radically than Camus’s notion of the absurd allows: “But the world is neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply.” Simon shares this view and reformulates it, for example, in his Nobel Lecture: “I’ve been about the world . . . all, however, without finding any sense to all this, unless it should be the one assigned to it, I believe, by Barthes, following Shakespeare: that ‘if the world signifies anything, it is that it signifies nothing’—except that it exists.”

Underlying such radical views, however, is a positivistic-empiricist tendency to regard as most “real” that which is given in one’s supposedly immediate sense perception. When such immediate perception is assumed to give access to reality in itself, a certain way of relating to reality is identified with the ontological nature of reality per se. Such a mode of thinking has recurred in the debates on narrativity during the past few decades. For example, White’s (simultaneously ontological and normative) claim that “real events should simply be; . . . they should not pose as the tellers of a narrative” could have come from Robbe-Grillet’s pen; underlying it we can see a positivistic view of pure, disparate experiences and events upon which meanings are imposed retrospectively. Although White has since moderated his position, his arguments still depend on the opposition between “structures of meaning” and “factual situations.” Generally, it seems to me, more attention should be paid to the way in which the most radical arguments “against narrativity” tend to depend on ontological assumptions that are characteristic of an empiricist-positivist tradition of thought. The argument according to which narratives impose meaningful order on the real assumes the prior existence of “raw,” disconnected units of experience, such that only whatever is independent of human meaning-giving processes is truly “real.” As we will now see, these assumptions are far from unproblematic.

Narrativity as Constitutive of Human Existence

The attempt to draw a sharp distinction between ontological and epistemological approaches to the narrative dimensions of human existence is particularly problematic from a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective. In this tradition of thought, the basic structure of interpretation, “the hermeneutic understanding-something-as-something [Etwas-
als-Etwas-Verstehen],” is seen to characterize all experience, even the most elementary sense perception, and therefore the process of interpreting experiences is “not an additional procedure of knowing but constitutes the original structure of ‘being-in-the-world.’” Charles Taylor summarizes this view by maintaining that we are “self-interpreting animals,” beings constituted by their ways of interpreting themselves and the world.

Hermeneutics rejects the idea of unmediated, point-like experience, firstly, because the fundamental temporality of experience entails that the horizons of the past and future always already impregnate the present. As Husserl puts it, even an apparently immediate sense perception is constituted “synthetically,” in a temporal process of connecting past and present experiences to each other and orienting oneself to the future in the light of such an ongoing interpretative process. Secondly, hermeneutics emphasizes that experience is always culturally and historically mediated. As Ricœur puts it, hermeneutics discards the Cartesian notion of direct access to oneself and reflects on how subjectivity is always mediated by the “long detour” of “signs, symbols, and texts.” The structure of a hermeneutic circle shapes all processes of experiencing, as not only our historically constituted horizon of interpretation conditions new experiences but also new experiences shed new light on our past experiences, challenging and transforming our preunderstanding and our sense of who we are. Drawing on Heidegger’s, Gadamer’s, and Arendt’s thinking, Ricœur’s Time and Narrative and Oneself as Another fully flesh out a hermeneutic theory of narrative subjectivity which stresses not only the culturally and historically mediated character of (self-) interpretation but also the way in which cultural webs of narratives, of which we are only partly aware, take part in shaping our horizon of interpretation, mediating our relation to the world and to ourselves. If cultural narratives affect how we experience things in the first place, there are no pure, raw, immediately given experiences, the narrative interpretation of which would be necessarily a matter of retrospective distortion. Instead, we are always already entangled in stories, weaving our personal narratives in a dialogical relation to cultural narratives, both of which are objects of constant reinterpretation. Hence, Ricœur asserts, and the plural is important here, “our existence cannot be separated from the stories that we tell of ourselves.”

From the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, the debate as to whether we live or tell narratives is based on a questionable opposition. It is not true that life “in itself” would somehow, as if by nature, follow the structure of a narrative, but neither is it true that we first live and then mold the lived experiences into a story. Rather, living and telling about our lives are interwoven with one another in a complex movement of reciprocal determination. On this account, the narrative interpreta-
tion of experience is not a process of falsifying something true and real, but is instead constitutive of our very being; as Jerome Bruner puts it, “life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.” David Carr elaborates this point by arguing that “Mink and others are right, of course, to believe that narration constitutes something, creates meaning rather than merely reflecting or imitating something that exists independently of it,” but that this does not mean that narrative interpretations falsify experience or are somehow external and secondary with respect to it: “I am the subject of a life-story which is constantly being told and retold in the process of being lived.”

This tradition emphasizes that human existence “in itself” involves a process of constant interpretation and sense making, and that it is therefore problematic to posit an opposition between living and telling by suggesting that only the latter involves interpretation.

However, in arguing that “no elements enter our experience . . . un-storied or unnarrativized,” Carr goes too far, to my mind, in identifying experience with narrative. It is one thing to suggest that narrative interpretation is constitutive of human existence and another to maintain that all experience is narrative. The latter position understands narrativity in such loose terms, identifying it with the temporal structure of experience as such, that the concept risks losing its power to differentiate between phenomena, and it becomes difficult or impossible to evaluate the legitimacy of different interpretations. The former position, in contrast, simply entails that it is a crucial aspect of our being in the world that we engage in narrative interpretation of our experiences. This allows taking critical distance from the idea of a stable core self: “[N]arrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity. Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents (which, thus, should not really be called the same events), so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed plots, about our lives.” To me Crispin Sartwell’s claim that in Ricœurian hermeneutics “the event and the self are constituted (and here that means produced without remainder) in their narration” seems unwarranted; the hermeneutic view entails, rather, that experience is always “in excess” of narrative and new experiences constantly challenge our narrative interpretations. Nevertheless, I think that some of Ricœur’s formulations are not sufficiently attentive to the tensional relation between narrative and experience, for example when he claims that “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode.”

What I would like to suggest is that the relationship between experience and narrative can be clarified in relation to the fundamental phenomenological-hermeneutic notion of interpretation. If experience always has the structure of interpretation, as analyzed in this tradition,
then narratives can be conceived of as having the structure of a “double hermeneutic” in the sense that they are interpretations of experiences which are already interpretations: they weave together experiences by showing how they are related and by creating meaningful connections between them. Ricœur uses the notion of mimesis II to characterize the way in which literary and historical narratives configure first-level, everyday (prefigurative) interpretations of action (mimesis I). His notion of refiguration, or mimesis III, in turn, refers to the process by which people interpret these literary and historical narratives from the horizon of their concrete life situations and thereby reinterpret their experiences in the light of these cultural narratives. This process can be characterized in terms of a “triple hermeneutic.” It articulates the way in which we have always already interpreted our lives on the basis of symbolic systems of meaning, but we are also always engaged in the process of refiguring our self-understanding in a dialogical relation to culturally mediated narrative models. Hence, there is an interpretative continuum that ranges from the basic interpretative structure of sense perception to more complex sense-making practices such as narrative interpretations of experience.

The hermeneutic understanding of this process goes beyond the dichotomy of either finding or imposing meaningful order. What Ricœur characterizes as a process of “emplotment” is not a matter of representing a pregiven narrative order but rather a creative reorganization or reconstruction of reality, “grasping together” experiences and events in a way that brings together the order and disorder—or concordance and discordance—that characterize our experiences. In this process of narrative interpretation we simultaneously articulate meaningful connections between past experiences and reconstruct our identities in the present. Ricœur shows that it is possible to see narrative identity as a “constructive activity” which is not an imposition of order “from without” but a creative process of reinterpretation: “There is always more order in what we narrate than in what we have actually already lived; and this narrative excess (surcroît) of order, coherence and unity, is a prime example of the creative power of narration.” Although Ricœur has elsewhere discussed the tendency of myth to incline towards ideology, in elaborating his theory of narrative identity he pays curiously little attention to the way in which our narrative interpretations are affected by stereotypical narrative schemes that perpetuate the dominant power structures of contemporary society. Instead, he lays emphasis on the way in which “narrative carries us beyond the oppressive order of our existence to a more liberating and refined order.”
However, during recent years the narrative model has become increasingly popular precisely because, in conceptualizing the subject as being constituted in a dialogical process of reinterpreting culturally mediated narratives, it allows us to acknowledge not only the subject’s agency and active sense making but also the way in which our existence as “storytelling animals” is socially conditioned. As Colin Davis writes, such models are attractive in taking into account both the “decentring of the subject (the stories we tell about ourselves are never entirely our own)” and that which “makes it possible to present ourselves as agents, not just victims, of our desires and anxieties.” This explains why even theorists who played a role in what was dubbed the “death of the subject,” such as Julia Kristeva, turned to conceptualizing the subject in narrative terms. Like Ricoeur, she embraces Arendt’s view that “the possibility of narrating grounds human life in what is specific to it” and, like Walter Benjamin and Adriana Cavarero, she links storytelling to the possibility of sharing experiences with others.

It is instructive to notice, however, that before narrative theories of experience and subjectivity were developed, narrative fiction was already rehabilitating storytelling on similar grounds, after the period dominated by literary movements highly critical of storytelling (such as the nouveau roman and textualist strands of postmodernism). Instead of proceeding from the presumption that narratives are a matter of projecting false order onto the real, several novelists began to explore storytelling as something that is constitutive of the human mode of being in the world. There is obviously a long tradition of narrative fiction (the classics of which include Don Quixote, Madame Bovary, etc.) that deals with the impact of stories on the ways people interpret their experiences. But after the twentieth-century crisis of storytelling, literature has discussed this aspect of the human condition with new acuity and self-awareness. This is particularly evident in French fiction, where the crisis, too, was most salient. The French novelist who articulates most clearly the need to rehabilitate storytelling is Michel Tournier, according to whom we are mythical animals: we acquire “a human being’s sexuality and heart and imagination—only by virtue of the murmur of stories and kaleidoscope of images that surround [us] in the cradle and accompany [us] all the way to the grave.” By myths, Tournier means cultural narratives that provide people with models for giving shape and form to their experiences and aspirations; he stands in the Nietzschean tradition which stresses that the modern man, too, needs myths to “interpret his life and his struggles.” From the perspective he delineates and which many of his contemporaries share, narratives are constitutive of human existence: both in the sense that it is an integral aspect of our being in the world
that we engage in narrative interpretation of our experiences and in the sense that this interpretative process takes place in a dialogical relation to cultural models of narrative sense making.

It was partly in response to the trauma of the Second World War and the Holocaust that literature began to reflect, with a new sense of urgency, on how individuals and communities exist and construct their identities in relation to culturally mediated narratives and how the storyworlds that surround us shape what we see and experience. For example, from the Danzig trilogy to the autobiographical Peeling the Onion, Günter Grass has dealt with the ways in which the historical world (in these novels: Nazi Germany) in which children grow up shapes their experiences. His autobiographical narrator confesses that he was “a Young Nazi” who believed in the legitimacy of the war and was an easy target for the heroism and war propaganda promoted by the newsreels played before feature films: “I was a pushover for the prettified black-and-white ‘truth’ they served up. . . . I would see Germany surrounded by enemies . . . : a bulwark against the Red Tide. The German folk in a life-and-death struggle. Fortress Europe standing up to Anglo-American imperialism at great cost.”

Contemporary novels also show, however, how dominant social ideologies do not simply determine the identity and worldview of the individual; there is always the possibility of resistance, embodied in Grass’s novel in the young man “Wedontdothat” who refuses to hold a gun. In fact, the cultural tradition can provide individuals with the means of such resistance and material from which to compile what Tournier’s narrator calls a “culture of one’s own.” In The Midnight Love Feast, the couple of the frame narrative feels that they can avoid breaking up when the stories their friends have told them during the “midnight love feast” provide them with the materials for building a “house of words to live in together.” Tournier’s Friday and The Golden Droplet, in turn, address, in relation to colonialism, and The Erl-King against the historical backdrop of Nazi Germany, the ways in which cultural narratives can serve destructive political ends. But even this is not a mechanical, deterministic process; his novels stress that narratives only exist through individual interpretations, and hence affirm the hermeneutic insight that cultural systems of meaning cannot mechanically determine sense-making processes. Because of its temporality and historical situatedness, narrative interpretation is necessarily characterized by what Gadamer calls the structure of “always-understanding-differently [Immer-anders-Verstehen].”

In showing how both cultural narratives and fragments of individual life-stories are subject to perpetual reinterpretation, contemporary literature demonstrates the point which James Battersby formulates as
follows: “We can make up many narrative accounts of our lives, can tell an unlimited number of stories, long and short, about various large and small parts of our lives, but we cannot really live and experience stories that are uninterrupted, uncongested with irrelevancies.” Saying that storytelling is a constitutive aspect of human existence is one thing and saying that one’s whole life consists of one uninterrupted, coherent story is quite another. The first position has no problem taking into account that the narrative interpretation of experiences is an endless process in which the past is constantly renarrated in relation to the present and future, and that narrative is only one of the many modes in which we make sense of our experiences. Instead of assuming that this interpretative process leads to one coherent narrative, it can envisage it as a dynamic interplay of countless narrative fragments that form ever new constellations, engage in relations of contest, conflict, and dialogue, and are subject to endless revisions. This is one of the advantages of conceptualizing narrative in terms of (re)interpretation: interpretation—at least from a Nietzschean or philosophical-hermeneutic perspective—can never be definitive or exhaustive: “Interpretation is always on the way. . . . [T]he word interpretation points to the finitude of human being and the finitude of human knowing.”

Another related and crucial point for those who insist on the ontological significance of narratives for human existence is that narrative interpretations have a very real effect on our being in the world: they take part in the making of the intersubjective world (such as the world of Nazi Germany in novels by Grass or Tournier) and affect the ways in which we act in the world with others. The hermeneutic way of thinking, which stresses that interpretations have real, material, world-constituting effects, challenges the dichotomous view that we either interpret the world or change it (prevalent in various forms of materialist thinking, from Marxism to variants of new materialism).

In sum, scholars who deny that narratives are constitutive of human existence clearly have a different view of the meaning and role of (self-) interpretation and, in general, a different tacit ontological presupposition of what kind of human reality is properly “real” and fundamental. The view that narrative interpretation necessarily distorts an “original,” “pure” experience is questionable from the perspective of the antipositivistic, hermeneutic tradition of thought. When human existence is understood as a temporal process of interpretation which involves a constant intertwinement of the past, present, and future, it is problematic to conceive an authentic, undistorted level of immediate experience, untainted by self-interpretation or by horizons of past and future. If no such pure experience can be extracted, there is no reason to dismiss narrative interpretations as unreal or necessarily false.
The Ethics of Narrativity and Antinarrativity

In current debates, little attention has been paid to how heavily one’s ethical position on the value of narratives for human existence is influenced by ontological assumptions concerning subjectivity and what one generally considers real. A well-known example of the effort to keep the descriptive and the ethical strictly separate is Strawson’s attempt to attack, on apparently separate fronts, the “psychological Narrativity thesis,” examined above, and the “ethical Narrativity thesis,” according to which “experiencing or conceiving one’s life as a narrative is a good thing; . . . essential to a well-lived life.”63 His own condemnation of the narrativization of experiences, however, is based on a strong, and largely unexamined, ontological presupposition, according to which only that which is nonnarrative is real. Such an ethical position is typical of those committed to the ontological view that narrative interpretations necessarily falsify the real. As we have seen, this view, endorsed by a range of thinkers from Robbe-Grillet to White, is based on the assumption of “pure experience,” immediately given here and now—hence ultimately on the empiricist-positivistic “myth of the given.”

Conversely, those who consider the narrative interpretation of experience to be constitutive of human existence mostly stress the ethical potential of narrative. For example, MacIntyre, Taylor, and Ricoeur suggest that narrative self-interpretation is the condition of possibility for being able to make sense of one’s life as a meaningful continuum for which one can feel responsible.64 Sometimes they seem to suggest that such narrative self-interpretation automatically makes life more ethical. For example, this appears to be the implication of the way in which Ricoeur embraces “the Socratic maxim according to which the unexamined life is not worth living” and identifies “a life examined” with “a life narrated,” which is not lived “immediately given” but through a process of interpretation in which stories play a significant “mediating role.”65 On Ricoeur’s account, without the meaningful continuity created by narrative self-interpretation the subject dissolves into a series of disconnected, point-like experiences which cannot be related to any past or future and thus exclude a sense of responsibility.

To me it seems that Ricoeur and particularly MacIntyre overemphasize the extent to which a responsible and self-reflective life must form a coherent linear narrative.66 Literature abounds in examples of characters, such as Sartre’s Roquentin and Musil’s Ulrich, who display an exceptional capacity for self-reflection without experiencing their lives in narrative terms. The emphasis on the link between self-narration and the capacity for ethically responsible self-reflection also risks ignoring the fact that
it is fully possible to experience one’s life as a coherent narrative and to interpret particular experiences within the framework of this narrative without engaging in any reflection on its nature and justification. Many contemporary novels demonstrate that narrativity in itself does not make the project of identity either ethical or unethical. Novels by Grass and Tournier, for example, explore how the Nazis reified their mythical system, disguising its constructedness and making it a dangerous instrument of power. To take another example, in Julia Franck’s *The Blindness of the Heart* the protagonist, half-Jewish Helene who adopts a false identity in order to survive Nazi persecution, can no longer share her experiences with her son by telling him stories which would integrate her past into the present; this inability leads to a profound sense of loss, culminating in the experience of being no longer able to be a mother. The novel prompts us to reflect on how narratives prevalent in certain historical worlds define a space of possible experience. By telling the story of a woman who eventually experiences motherhood as impossible (the imagined story of her own grandmother), Franck takes part in enlarging our space of experience, helping us imagine what would otherwise be difficult to imagine, and compellingly reflecting on the ethical complexity of the phenomenon of narrative identity.

What many contemporary novelists suggest is that even in the late modern world we need narratives to provide us with models for making sense of our lives, but that we also have to be aware of them as narratives—as cultural constructions which lack any self-evident natural basis. Hence, instead of taking narratives for granted we must subject them to continuous critical reflection, as Ricoeur points out in discussing myth as part of the social imaginary: “Modern man can neither get rid of myth nor take it at its face value. Myth will always be with us, but we must always approach it critically.” Hermeneutic consciousness means remembering that cultural narratives—like all social, symbolic systems—exist only through continuous historical reinterpretations and can thus be changed by new interpretations. When narratives are seen as the reality itself, rather than as interpretations of reality, they are immune to critical discussion and provide a poor basis for an ethically sustainable narrative identity.

I would argue, in the light of the above discussion, that there are strong epistemological, ontological, and ethical grounds why we should not lose sight of the distinction between narrative and experience. It is problematic to draw a sharp opposition between living and telling, but it is equally problematic to simply identify them with each other, since such identification undermines the possibility of ethically evaluating and discussing different narrative interpretations of experience. Only if we
acknowledge the character of narratives as interpretations are we able to distinguish between narratives and that which they interpret or tell about (experience, events) and to recognize that every narrative can be contested and narrated otherwise.

By engaging in such metareflections on the nature and roles of narrative, contemporary literature frequently fosters an awareness in readers of how narratives pervade our existence. The various forms of fiction that have been suspicious of storytelling have played a crucial role in promoting such awareness. For example, Woolf, Sartre, and the *nouveaux romanciers* considered narratives to be ethically questionable insofar as they conceal their own narrative nature and present a certain human-made, historically contingent order as the natural order of things. In the 1950s, this was the crux of Barthes’s theory of myth as “depoliticized speech” that presents a certain historical reality as natural, necessary, and unchangeable; in the two following decades this critical tradition received further impetus as the *nouveau roman* and poststructuralism argued against the “myth of naturalness” and “grand narratives.” After these criticisms, the rehabilitation of narrative in the late twentieth century did not mean a return to naive realism but, rather, was characterized by self-conscious play with narrativity, coupled with an acknowledgment of the complex existential significance of narratives. Contemporary literature suggests that narrative form in itself does not make narratives either ethical or unethical. What is ethically relevant, instead, is precisely the awareness of the role narratives play in organizing our experiences, because such awareness enables critical reflection on how cultural narratives steer our self-understanding and regulate our being in the world with others.

This position, however, is far from self-evident. Strawson, for example, explicitly rejects the Socratic principle which equates the good life with the examined life and regards the whole ideal of self-reflexivity as misguided. According to him, “The aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some—for some, perhaps, it may even be helpful—but in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous. My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good.” This view is linked to a biological determinism, according to which each individual has a genetically determined, natural way of being; if this does not include self-reflexivity, it would be “unnatural” for him or her to strive to be self-reflective. Although Strawson tries to turn the philosophical question of subjectivity into an empirical question, suggesting that our genes determine whether we are “Diachronics” or “Episodics,” his essay is grounded in the conviction that an episodic existence is ethically more valuable. This ethos, in turn, is based on the implicit ontological assumption that
what is real is nonnarrative and that Diachronics have a tendency to falsify their experiences, even if this is something that they cannot help, given their unfortunate genetic disposition. This disposition, it seems, consists of a tendency either to false self-understanding or to dishonest narrativization of one’s “original,” immediately lived experiences.

If, however, human meaning giving in general is not taken to be “unreal,” it is difficult to see why the interpretative process through which we endeavor to establish narrative connections between experiences—interpreting present experiences in relation to the past and future and reinterpreting the past in the light of the present—would be necessarily distortive or ethically dubious. Here we return to my claim that even those theorists who do not see narrativity as an ontological question nonetheless rely on a certain ontological conception of the real and of the nature of human existence. The view of narrative as an epistemologically and ethically dubious retrospective activity that organizes chaotic reality into a meaningful order is in itself based on a problematic ontological presupposition, according to which human existence “in itself” is not defined by a constant process of interpretation and meaning giving. All this does not mean, however, that it is not useful to differentiate between various philosophical dimensions of narrativity, or that we can simply identify human existence or experience with narrative.

It is also important to notice that to a certain degree those arguing for and against narrative are talking about different things. It is one thing to ask whether the unfolding of historical events follows a narrative logic, and another to ask whether our experiences of ourselves or of the world have a narrative dimension in some sense. Nevertheless, there are similar ontological questions at stake in the various, partly overlapping, debates about the relation between narrative and human existence. In this essay, I have argued that while we should be attentive to the difference between experience and narrative, it can be meaningfully said that narrative interpretations of experiences have a constitutive role in our existence. In disentangling these debates, it is worth paying more attention to the way in which both experience and narrative are phenomena constituted by interpretative activity. This shared interpretative structure is a helpful starting point when we begin to explore in greater detail how storytelling on different levels—from small stories through which we exchange everyday experiences to historical narratives that shape cultural self-understanding—takes part in weaving, unraveling, and reconstructing the fragile fabric of our narrative existence.

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NOTES

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3 Strawson, “Against.”


7 White, “The Value,” 23.

8 Strawson, “Against,” 447.

9 Strawson, “Against,” 431.

10 See, for example, Crispin Sartwell’s playful plea for emancipation from the oppressive chains of narrative, meaning, and language in End of Story: Toward an Annihilation of Language and History (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000).


13 Strawson, “Against,” 429.


15 Sartre, Nausea, 61. “C’est ce qui dupe les gens: un homme, c’est toujours un conteur d’histoires, il vit entouré de ses histoires et des histoires d’autrui, il voit tout ce qui lui arrive à travers elles; et il cherche à vivre sa vie comme s’il la racontait. Mais il faut choisir: vivre ou raconter.” Sartre, La Nausée, 61–62.


26 Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel, 19, 21, 39.
34 See, for example, Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke, Band 1, Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 271–74, 359–68.
35 To take an example of the interpretative structure of perception, if one sees, say, a reindeer, the perception has the structure of seeing-as (as a reindeer or as a specific type of reindeer, if one is from the Nordic Sami culture, which has hundreds of words to designate different types of reindeer), but also one’s previous (reindeer-related) experiences and culturally mediated narrative webs take part in constituting the horizon of interpretation that shapes the perception, even if the perception as such only has a prenarrative interpretative structure.
41 Sartwell, End, 44.
43 Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas have argued that the social sciences are characterized, in comparison to the natural sciences, by a “double hermeneutic,” as they


47 Riceur, “Creativity,” 468.


50 Julia Kristeva, Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2001), 8; see also Davis, After, 129–51.

51 For a fuller discussion of the crisis and return of storytelling, in connection to some key ideas of this article, see my forthcoming The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier (Basingstoke: Palgrave). See also Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity (Columbus: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 1996); Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize, French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Simon Kemp, French Fiction into the Twenty-First Century: The Return to the Story (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 2010).


54 Tournier, Wind, 156, 158; Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 108.


59 Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke, Band 2, 8.

60 Battersby, “Narrativity,” 34.


63 Strawson, “Against,” 428.


67 For a discussion of this idea in relation to Reinhart Koselleck’s notion of “space of experience,” see Meretoja, “An Inquiry.”

68 Ricoeur, “Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds,” in *A Ricoeur Reader*, 485.


71 Strawson, “Against,” 447.