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## **Sneaky Stories: Challenges to Moral Contraband**

AJIT MAAN

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTITIONER, EUGENE, OR

### **Abstract**

Temporal and linear sequencing is the dominant form of narrative structure in Western theory and practice. Prominent philosophers and psychologists have made categorical claims about the necessity of this form of narrative order. One of the associated problems with this structure is that while the inference between causality and succession has been called out as a fallacy, it nevertheless operates from common superstition to contemporary theoretical discourse. Further, moral elements are tacitly imported along with temporal and linear narrative association. These moral elements include moral responsibility, blame, normativity, and assumptions about what constitutes “the good life.” I do not address what is silenced, marginalized, or repressed by temporal structure, rather, I focus on what is snuck in, implied, tacitly assumed. This is what I refer to as moral contraband.

**Keywords:** narrative structure, narrative therapy, temporality, Aristotle, autobiography

### **Introduction**

To claim that any form of talk therapy is narrative in nature seems uncontroversial. But consider that assertion in light of The American Psychological Association’s approval of the Policy of Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP). The decision to accept the Presidential Task Force’s recommendation for Evidence-Based Practices has highlighted the tug-of-war being played out between those who want to treat professional psychological practices (methods, procedures, tools of assessment) as a scientific enterprise, and those who regard the assimilation of the natural and human sciences as the conjunction of Aristotelian poiesis and praxis – a categorical mistake. (Smith, 2009).

I begin by asserting and assuming that claims to objectivity are suspicious, and that a commonality between natural and human sciences is that both are narrative in nature. Rather than argue these points, as they have been persuasively argued elsewhere (Mattingly, 1991, 1998; Pollack, 2000; Good, 1994; MacIntyre, 1980, Nash, 1990; Misia 1997; Harre 1994) I simply contextualize my argument within this contemporary debate. My thesis is that both sides in the contemporary tug-of-war overlook an essential feature of Western narrative: Western narrative assumes a temporal structure and that structure brings with it moral implications of several kinds.

These assertions are followed by an argument that proceeds along the following lines:

1. Temporal sequencing is the dominant form of narrative structure in Western thought. Many contemporary Narrative Therapists, Narrative Identity Theorists, and philosophers make categorical claims for temporal structuring including but not limited to Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael White, Dan Dennet, Owen Flanagan, Paul Ricoeur, and Galen Strawson (though the latter would not like to find himself in this category). I will limit my examination to three thinkers who, taken together, represent the breadth of the impact of these claims: I choose developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner because he emphasizes the role of sequential ordering in creating the appearance of legitimacy from partisan narratives, Narrative

Therapist Micheal White because his assumptions about narrative demonstrate its practical impact, and philosopher Galen Strawson because even his absolute denial of narrative reasoning begins by assuming that narrative necessarily requires temporally associated linear structure.

2. While the inference between causality and succession has long been recognized as a fallacy, it nevertheless operates from common superstition to contemporary philosophical and psychological discourse. There are important moral elements that are tacitly imported along with linear temporal association. Those elements include moral responsibility, blame, normativity, a view of “the good life”, to name a few. I intend to address not what is silenced, marginalized, or repressed by temporal narrative structure; but rather, I focus on what is snuck in, implied, tacitly assumed—this is what I refer to as moral contra-band.

3. Alternative structures are possible. Temporality and linearity are features of Western narrative, they are not universally accepted or assumed. While I will gesture toward alternative structures which include spatial, emotional, and conceptual structures, the focus of this paper is simple: to problematize, as it were, temporally structured narratives, theoretically and practically, specifically as concerns unaccounted-for moral baggage.

## Context

There has been a contemporary trend to understand scientific reasoning as a story-telling enterprise (McIntyre, 1980; Harre', 1990; Misia 1997), and to understand illness through narrative (Kleinman, 1988; Frank 1995). There have been empirically-based arguments concerning the narratively constructed nature of medical knowledge (Hunter, 1991; Good, 1994; Good and Good, 2000.), and more specifically the narrative nature and structure of diagnostic reasoning (Mattingly, 1991, 1998). Narrative reasoning, it has been argued, is central to the construction and reconstruction of a problem or pathology. It is central to the formulation of hypotheses, determinations of method, and to the collection, interpretation, and description of data. Narrative reasoning determines the structure and goals of treatment. Even the notion of progress from problem to intervention to alleviation of symptoms assumes an Aristotelian structural model that Levi-Strauss has since attributed to Western myth in general:

Source —> Path —> Goal

Further, narrative determines therapeutic ends and therefore not only has ethical implications, it is ethically motivated, that is, diagnostic reasoning assumes an ethical conception of what Aristotle called “the good life” as its goal. “The good life”, according to those who assume the classical structure, requires narrative unity, temporal association, and wholeness. These are essential features of Aristotelian plot and remain key features of narrative as understood today. And the influence of Western plot structure is dynamic; it not only influences what are perceived as therapeutic ends, it operates in reverse to influence psychological description. Still further, and more consequentially, it is normative. It is a value that makes itself true.

But what is narrative? What is not narrative? What is narrative reasoning and how does chronologically oriented narrative, classical Western narrative structure, import unannounced moral implications?

## **I. Temporal Sequencing, With Unity and Wholeness, are the Dominant Form of Narrative Structure in Western Thought**

Proto-typical narrative structure in Western culture originates in Aristotle's *Poetics* and has itself become a foundational myth. The whole/unified structure has a beginning, a middle, and an end, that make a linear progression through time. This linear progression begins with a harmonious initial situation, then moves to a middle marked by recognitions and reversals, and ends with resolution,

Now a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed Plot, therefore, cannot begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described. (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 50b trans. 1987.)

When applied as a correlative of autobiographical narrative, the function of this structure is to order life events that may be episodic, anomalous, disconnected, or fragmented. Narration becomes a structural operation that synthesizes a variety of incidents into a whole and unified story – one that has a beginning, middle, and end. Narrative is a way of making sense of diverse often unconnected phenomena by telling a story in a way that ties these events together, thereby creating intelligibility out of what may actually be randomness. It seems to me that narrative can concern itself with what happens in between sanctioned “events”, in fact, alternative structures are available that play with the very status of the events of traditional Western narrative. That play involves critical engagement with events and experiences that traditional narratives skip over or even discard.

The requirement of a unified and whole temporally ordered narrative has itself become normative; it operates by silencing experience that does not cohere with the dominant theme. Other narrative practices, other ways of imparting meaning to experience, other ways of being, are silenced.

And yet Aristotle is careful to remind us that temporal association is a fictional device; it is not reflective of experience:

An infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action . . . so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.” (Aristotle. *Poetics*. Chapter 7, lines 25- Chapter 8 line 35)

It is through this re-structuring of multiplicities of life experience into a unified temporally ordered artifice that therapeutic narratives “re-frame” experience often by imparting a significance that the experience may not have had initially. That is to say that there is a transformation of meaning, a reorientation. For example, one may not experience a particular choice or decision to be life-altering when the choice is made, but if re-framed narratively, the same decision or choice may be constructed as a pivotal point in one's life (this would be the middle of an Aristotelian plot) and would provide meaning and significance to surrounding events.

This is the form and function of narrative as understood by theorists in various fields. Medical theorist Donald Pollack argues that diagnostic narratives “require that events or episodes be selected from among

the vast range of all possibilities in the flow of experience and then be presented in an order that itself intentionally or unintentionally conveys significance.” (Pollack 2000. 109-110). Clinical psychologist Donald Polkinghorne insists that, “We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story...Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity...” (Polkinghorne, 1991, 135-53). Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has linked personal ethics to the unity of one’s narrative as has Paul Ricoeur whose “ipse” is an ethical commitment to remain consistent over time. Founder of Narrative Therapy, Michael White, building upon Ricoeur, also insists upon linearity and temporal association, “temporality is a critical dimension in the narrative mode of thought where stories exist by virtue of the plotting of the unfolding of events through time. This sequencing of events in linear fashion through time is necessary to the derivation of any ‘storied sense.’ Stories have a beginning and an ending, and between these points there is the passage of time.” (White, 81).

Genevieve Lloyd traces the connection between temporal orientation and cause and effect back to Hume and his elaboration of habitual rules of association, “But the most usual species of connection among different events which enter into any narrative composition is that of cause and effect.” (1993. 72.) Even Galen Strawson’s all-out assault on narrative (Strawson, 2004, 439) requires this conservative assumption about the form and function of narrative as its foundation. To get his criticism off the ground he first has to adopt the aesthetic position of those he criticizes (MacIntyre, Dennett, Flannigan, et al).<sup>1</sup>

Let’s look briefly at a contemporary theorist who makes categorical claims for temporal structure while positioning himself “Against Narrative” altogether.

### **Against “Against Narrative”**

Galen Strawson (2004) claims:

- 1) He himself does not view himself, his life, his actions in narrative terms.
- 2) None of us should understand our lives in narrative terms.

So, some of us don’t and none of us should. I won’t comment on his subjectivist first claim; my interest is in his second claim—the normative one.

Strawson’s argument proceeds as follows: the “psychological narrativity thesis” (claims about human nature and the nature of human experience) is separated from the “ethical Narrativity thesis” (the idea that narrativity is a good thing.) Strawson defines narrative with a lower case “n” as “developmental and hence temporal unity or coherence to the things to which it is applied like lives, parts of lives, pieces of writing.” He uses Narrative with a capital “N” for the normative claim. And he likens Narrativity to an affliction or bad habit.

The four forms that combining the two claims can take are: accepting the psychological thesis as true and the ethical one as false, the psychological thesis as false and the ethical one as true, or both claims may be true, or both claims may be false. Strawson places himself squarely in the last category.

A further distinction is made between what he calls “Diachronic” and “Episodic” selves (while making the interesting passing suggestion that “time-style” or temporal temperament may be genetically determined). Episodics can experience the past as part of present experience sort of like muscle memory, the

way a musician or athlete incorporates daily practice and rehearsal into present performance without explicitly trying to remember it. So too, in the case of ethical development. Strawson defends his placement in the Episodic camp by insisting that while he is well aware of his past and he has factual knowledge about it he says, "I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future." This seems like a rather pathological or enlightened stance, depending on the readers pre-disposition, but it rests simply on the conviction that pronouns like "I" "me" "oneself" do not refer to a metaphysical inner reality. There is no self inside the body to which "I" refers. If it isn't there now, "I" wasn't there in the past and won't be there in the future. So for Strawson if there is no metaphysical self inside his body, then what can be said about the past or future of "himself" is limited. He seems to think that narrativity rests on mythological metaphysical foundations. Further, he claims that since it is true by definition that if you are Diachronic you are not Episodic it follows that if you're Episodic you are neither narrative nor Narrative. He supposes that being Diachronic is at least necessary for being Narrative but this is because he thinks of narrative in its most conservative form/structure.

Strawson takes issue with why any one should want to give any sort of description of one's life taken as a whole. It is the "whole" that bothers him. And it bothers me as well. That is why I am arguing that: wholeness, unity, and temporal structure are not descriptive features of experience, and as a requirement of narrative, these criteria are troublesome. Troublesome because: too much life experience must be repressed in order to tell a unified/whole/linear narrative, and if the unified/whole requirement were lifted (a requirement that defines classical Western narrative, a requirement that Strawson correctly pins on MacIntyre, Taylor, et al.) the possibilities for narrative agency are extended. In the next section I will address the manner in which the connection between wholeness/unity and cause/effect contributes to the type of narrative deception of the unconscious sort that worries Strawson. What I call moral contraband is one example of precisely this sort of deception.

Strawson's concern is that in narrative theories, MacIntyre's in particular, "there is a strong suggestion that seeking the good life requires taking up a Narrative perspective; in which case narrative unity requires Narrativity." I am as concerned as Strawson about the effects, detrimental I think, of attaching the criterion of unity to the category of narrative with a small "n" in the first place.

We have, in the form of Strawson's paper, an identity performance. We the readers get a pretty clear idea about his inner world. And his account of his inner world is far more telling than any factual recounting of past or future, and he uses a mix of narrative elements. And while he raises the old problem of the reliability of the narrator he does not question his own reliability as he describes his inner world, his habits of thought, his concerns and lack thereof.

If we go along with Ricoeur's claim about the three stages of narrative configuration: (pre-figuration, configuration, and re-figuration) then the part where unconscious yet culturally normative assumptions about story construction come in is at the second stage. At the configurational level, assumptions about what qualifies as narrative structure determine plot. Strawson is in league with MacIntyre, Dennet, Taylor, White, in assuming that temporality is the only associative principle with which the experiences of a life can be connected in narrative form.

Strawson thinks that being narratively prone makes one more susceptible to self deception. Let me counter that even if there were a hypothetically sharp distinction between Episodics and Diachronics, and if he was correct that one cannot be both (a claim I would contest) what makes Strawson think that an Episodic is any less likely to be self-deceptive? One could argue just the opposite—that Episodic accounts

hold less information and experience together, that is, Episodic recounting takes less responsibility for surrounding events. For example, an Episodic individual can give an account that doesn't include change or development or growth. Episodics have fewer checks and balances. Let me provide an example. I know a woman who has children and claims that she never wanted children. When asked why she had children if she didn't want children she says "because no one asked me what I wanted" and "once you have them you can't give them back." But according to her friends, she tried for years to conceive and was even worried that she might not be able to. So in the past she desperately wanted children but in the more recent past she didn't want the children she has, and in the present she says both that she never wanted children and alternatively (depending on the audience) she claims that of course she wants her children, and that she "might have once said" that she didn't want her children. When she can't synthesize her conflict in the first episode she creates another episode which is disconnected from the first. In the new story there is no account of the past. She has "forgotten" that she once wanted children. In her failure of imagination this woman discards parts of her past that don't fit into any "coherent" story she can tell about herself.

True to the Episodic style that Strawson describes, this woman's past does not figure into her present. She is disconnected from, and I would say, has never narratively associated her various and inconsistent ways of being. If there were no other witnesses, with memories, the unreliability of her story may not be suspected. She has "forgotten" her past intentions and interests because she has changed. She doesn't feel the same way in the present as she did in the past and her Episodic style has enabled her to disconnect with parts of herself she no longer identifies with. Strawson insists that his past is significant only to the extent that it has contributed to who he is now, and he doesn't need to consciously or actively try to remember his past because it is with him just as a musician benefits from practice without having to consciously recall it. But what about situations in which considerable change has occurred? Practicing the violin, for example, will be of limited professional benefit to someone who has decided to be an auto mechanic. The Episodic style of the mother who doesn't want to be one, enables her disassociation with her past. She is an example of an Episodic gone wild.

Strawson's self account *is* a narrative as it holds together experiences, ideas, actions of an entity that calls himself "I." His is a narrative account of himself. While temporality enters in, it enters in only as an idea. He is simply using an alternative associative principle—a conceptual one. The mother who doesn't want to be one might benefit from a narrative style (structure) which enables her to admit that she has changed and does not identify with her past self, without disconnecting her past from her present self. She could choose to make change, even the narrative incompatibility of present and past, her central organizing principle (Maan, 2010)

## II. Logics of Association: Temporal Structure And Moral Contraband

The ability to tell a good story has the effect of encouraging the listener to adopt the more abstract principles drawn from the particular story. The narrator chooses a method of description and set of facts that will best serve the purpose, consciously or not. The purpose is usually and initially, the creation of plausibility. A temporally ordered narrative worldview is created to convince others to see a context a certain way so that actions and choices are viewed as naturally following from what preceded them. This is how temporal narrative authorizes certain actions. So, for example, if I want to convince someone that I am not responsible for the results of the actions I have taken, I would alter my representation of the sequence of events. I have often marveled that my children seem to have come equipped with a familiarity with this Aristotelian form of moral argument. Ordering events in narrative form is a type of implicitly conveying causality and negotiating issues of moral responsibility. Temporal succession and causal connection are, of course, not the same thing but as Kant demonstrated, there is a tendency to assume a causal

connection even if there isn't one when events are related in succession. Alternatively, events can be held together in a narrative and not invoke the impression of a causal relationship.

Plausibility, it seems obvious, has to do with more than sequences of action, it has to do with character and context. Linear temporally ordered plot structures restrict the field of moral reasoning to deductive logic. The most advanced stage of moral development, in Kohlberg's view, involves the same kind of moral reasoning that understanding a temporal plot line requires: logical deductions from abstract moral principles. However, attention to what is not being explicitly stated—to the worldview being presented—is a foundational part of moral reasoning, according to Gilligan's (1993) correction of Kohlberg. Within a linear plot, one might make bad judgments but they will be plausible ones.

Disentangling temporal and contextual orientations as organizing principles affects moral reasoning by rendering logical deduction, and its corollary relationship to chronology, less useful to moral reasoning than attention to context and the ways in which power gets played out in terms of what can be said and what is silenced.

Jerome Bruner's interest (1990) in the rules that human beings bring to bear in creating meanings has led him to examine narrative structure and consistent with mainstream commitment he insists, "What gives the story its unity is the manner in which plight, characters, and consciousness interact to yield a structure that has a start, a development, and a sense of an ending." (21)

Narrative, according to Bruner, requires four grammatical constituents:

- 1) Agentivity—the means for emphasizing human action.
- 2) Linearity—that a sequential order be established and maintained, "that events and states be 'linearized' in a standard way."
- 3) Canonicity—"a sensitivity to what violates canonicity in human interaction."
- 4) Perspective (77)

The normative requirements of linear depiction with a precipitating event, a resolution, and sometimes a coda, relatedly and significantly, portrays the narrator in a positive light, "They have rhetorical aims or illocutionary intentions that are not merely expository but rather, partisan." The entanglement of sequential and moral has produced narratives that not only recount but justify.

Developmentally, Bruner shows us, children learn early that "telling the story right" means putting actions and goals in a legitimizing light (what he is calling legitimizing is what I have referred to as normative). By the age of three or four, children learn to use their narratives "to conjoin, to deceive, to flatter, to justify" (1990. 86). They learn that "what you do is drastically effected by how you recount what you are doing, will do, or have done." (87). Achieving more linear and tighter sequencing and reliance upon temporals like "and then" and causals like "because" is viewed as a developmental achievement "the meaning of what happened is strictly determined by the order and form of its sequence." (90)

Michael White maintains that social sciences and social scientists should avoid emulating positivist physical sciences to justify their endeavor and claim legitimacy. And like Bruner he contends that in order to make sense of our lives and express ourselves experience must be "storied." Storying determines the meaning ascribed to experience and in order to make sense of experiences persons face the task of



arranging experience “in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves.” (01)

Michael White’s claim, that all expressions of lived experience engage people in interpretive acts and through these interpretive acts people give meaning to their lives, is based upon the conviction that meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience. These expressions affect the shaping of lives, newly produced expressions are continuous and transformative, expressions are culturally determined, actions will be determined by meanings that are produced by interpretations. Following Foucault, White maintains that we are subject to power through normalizing truths, that is, constructed ideas that are accorded a truth status, “These ‘truths’ are normalizing in the sense that they construct norms around which persons are incited to shape or constitute their lives” (19-20). While White doesn’t see it this way, one of those normalizing truths is classical Western narrative structure.

The place where White becomes problematic is where he insists (along with MacIntyre, Bruner, et al) that “linear causality” is a dominant and necessary feature of narrative structure. For White linearity is an essential requirement of narrative and events are interpreted as unfolding in temporal sequence. Events are put into linear progressions and each event contributes to the plausibility of the next event.

White calls the lived experiences that fall outside the dominant story “unique outcomes,” “Those aspects of lived experience that fall outside of the dominant story provide a rich and fertile source for the generation, or re-generation, of alternative stories.” (15) While the Narrative Therapy of Michael White involves uncovering exceptions to the dominant story line, the alternative story is still structured temporally. So here is the rub: if the newly constructed therapeutic narrative is structured again like the classical model, the name of the story will change, and previously repressed material may emerge and may even be structured as central or pivotal to the new narrative, but the limiting principles of association are again tacitly assumed and applied to the new narrative and re-create the problem with a new title. Temporal chronology is a sense-making function but it is not the only sense-making function available. This point is crucial: There are narrative resources that exceed the requirements of Aristotelian historical composition.

We can have personal identity and we can have narrative and we can have narrative identity without having to center any of the above around causality. Further, causality is difficult to establish and is an odd way to talk about human behavior. Let me provide an example: A spouse abuser may tell a narrative in which he says some variation of “She made me do it.” This would be an example of narrative fabrication of temporal succession of events that create (for the speaker) a sense of significance. A judge hearing this explanation, however, might consider this narration the creation of the fictive impression of causal relations.

Temporality is not a sufficiently complex organizing principle in moral matters, moreover and worse, it is an artifice that functions to create the appearance of moral cause and effect. And there are important elements that are imported in along with temporality. These elements are implied rather than explicit and they include: normativity, perspectives on “the good life”, moral responsibility, blame, justification, etc.

In modern literary theory, Aristotle’s definition of plot had been used to distinguish narrative from other forms of discursion like stream-of-consciousness renderings, or fragments, or descriptions. The difference between Aristotle’s understanding of “histoire” (our contemporary “story”) and his “poetry” (our contemporary understanding of narrative) is in the logic of association. The same story can be told in various narratives as narratives refer to the moral significance of events and causal relationships. My reading of Aristotle suggests that a history is a sequence of actions or events that narrative (the poetry) is about.<sup>2</sup>

The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse. . . one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. (Aristotle, Ch 7)

The tangling up of Aristotle's concepts of historical association with his concept of poetic association and the tacit assumption that unified temporal ordering itself performs the function of meaning-making is not limited to theorists interested in narrative. It is a common assumption in practice as well, as Bruner pointed out by reference to children's representations of actions and consequences. An ordering of events or actions through time is often erroneously implicated in representing events or actions as causally connected. Temporal association creates a story, not a narrative. Temporal association ought to convey sequential relations, not causal relations nor moral significance. This confusion between stories and narratives and between forms and functions is prevalent among theorists in various fields some of whom are mentioned above, nor are lay people immune to its charms, as Rebecca Goldstein reminds us.

There are some general rules we employ in going about making up the stories we tell about ourselves . . . principles of aesthetics . . . for we are, none of us, completely indifferent to the claims of Beauty in the telling of our tales. Take, for example, the profound pleasure we derive in the apprehension of a whole, which is, as Aristotle tell us in the *Poetics*, with staggering simplicity, "what has a beginning, a middle, and an end." (1989, 57).

This distinction between these types of association is crucial and raises the question, what are we after? If one is interested in understanding the sequential relations of events then, of course, temporality is an appropriate organizational principle. For those concerned with causal relationships or moral significance, chronology gets us someplace but it does not get us all the way there. When confronted by the "Scientific Objectivity and Evidence Based Practice camp" or its philosophical equivalent, the "Narrative Truth" camp, narrative theorists retreat to "history" over poetry, to "truth" over metaphor, to "science" over art. I am suggesting that we need not retreat and that we should, rather, question these dichotomies and ask ourselves questions like: What part of science is not creative? What is the relationship between "truth" and metaphor? Can't poetry encompass history? Or, if we want to remain consistently Aristotelian: Is poetry a genus of history?

The narrative truth camp wants to say that narrative should be more like history and less like poetry but it is precisely the configurational operation, to use Ricoeur's term, that makes a narrative account autobiographical. It is not the facts but the recounting of the facts that convey the significance of the facts. And the configurational act is central to Narrative Identity Theory.

Experience can be, and already is, I think, held together without retrospectively placing it chronologically before some experience and after some other experience. If chronology as an organizing structure is not privileged, if we break customary and habitual associations, then alternative associations become possible.

Another problem with confusing historical structural requirements with narrative is that the form limits the function. The inappropriately applied formal requirements of "historie" limit, shape, pre-determine what narrative material is included and what experiential content is edited from a narrative of self. In this way normative assumptions preclude other autobiographical possibilities.

What kind of experience is excluded from a history? Discordant, episodic, or anomalous events are excluded. Episodic or anomalous events are not necessarily excluded from a narrative: they either are or they are not. Either they are synthesized by the temporal narrative or they are not included, for example, Oedipus may have stubbed his toe but this event is not included in the narrative. So events or episodes are sometimes erroneously represented as causally connected and anomalous events or events that don't cohere with the pre-determined story line are omitted,

We trim off and discard into forgetfulness the incoherent bits  
that won't go into any kind of story we can tell ourselves –  
incoherent because they won't go in; that is if we notice them at all.

—Rebecca Goldstein, *The Late Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind*

This editorial procedure omits potentially valuable experiential resources and then psychoanalysis is required to retrieve lost experience that can be used to create an alternative story—a therapeutic narrative that re-frames experience.

### III. Narrative Resources: Alternative Structures

I am calling into question the significance of what is represented as factual. If we believe that language creates our experience as well as reflects it, then linguistic practices will be able to create as well as reflect the experience we intend to create and reflect.

By excluding narrative material that doesn't cohere with the narrative theme chronologically ordered, the possibility for revisions, for re-framing experience, becomes limited. Further, there are types of experience that are more difficult to order chronologically than other types of experience so the structuring activity of contorting those experiences inflicts a sort of interpretive violence. This is Harre's criticism of scientific narratives. He worries that the order of scenes in the research drama are restaged by the "rule of logic" of chronology, for example, the genesis of the hypothesis must be presented as prior to the gathering of results, "to achieve a story line, events must be edited. For example, occasions when the apparatus didn't work or results contrary to those needed to support the hypothesis will be suppressed." (Harre', 1994). Harre' is right but only because he is erroneously assuming the dominant view of narrative: that narrative resources are limited to the classical historical chronological structure and that sequential relations themselves confer meaning and reflect causal relationships. His argument also raises the issue of narrative truth. Those who are committed to the notion of narrative as temporally ordered seem to fear that alternative structuring endangers the truth value of the narrative, but while life events obviously happen before some events and after other events, that before and after is often not the most significant aspect of experience. As in the case of the scientific narratives that Harre' criticizes, the sequence of events in a classical Western history may be altered retrospectively to fit the newly emergent story line if one assumes that histories alone access truth. This can be interpretive violence if one is unable to associate and reassociate more imaginatively, that is, if temporality cannot be displaced by another associative principle. Truth, in the deepest sense, in the Aristotilean sense, may not be available through a historical account.

A therapeutic emphasis on narrative construction is in order because a well-enculturated Western subject is likely to tacitly assume classical historical structure in the telling of his or her tale and a therapist is likely to encourage it. In fact, I think it is relatively safe to claim that the better educated the Western subject, the firmer the grip.

The contemporary Western commitment to chronologically ordered whole and unified narratives make autobiographical accounts more manageable for therapists. What is a therapist trained in Western schools to do with what may be an overwhelming array of client experience in various places and in various tongues? Oftentimes, and unfortunately, the answer is to find common ground. Assimilate the other to the supposed self. Get a grasp of the story by “finding” coherence.

What are some representational possibilities unencumbered by normative structural assumptions? What are examples of non-chronologically ordered association? My personal favorite is spatial orientation. After all, a subject does not exist disembodied in despatialized time. The field of association is enriched by allowing alternative associations, for example, kinesthetic memories, spatial impressions, emotional structuring, conceptual structure (guided by an idea), structure based on moral principle? Choice of narrative style is an important feature of identity and is chosen for a purpose, even if it is not a conscious choice. It may simply be a habit that is deeply constitutive of personality structure. Consciously choosing alternatives is a way to transcend the boundaries of traditional narrative agency. In therapy, for example, people often trace a feeling. They collect from memory all the instances of that feeling and then have a cluster of experiences that have been meaningful in some way. The meaning of the collection of experience does not depend upon temporality as an organizing principle. The feeling is the organizing principle. One thinks of the novels of Virginia Woolf in the same light.

### **Implications**

No one argues that clients present with objective data. The client is a telling a story. And it is commonly understood that stories require interpretation and that human phenomena cannot be extricated from its context in order to view the “facts” in some sort of elemental state. Even an x-ray is not a fact. It is a representation. It is a representation in a slice of time. And it requires interpretation.

But even simple self representation is not so simple. Representation enlists a sort of normative criteria that are themselves products of culture and context and as such are not objectively observed and yet they are powerful and creative and regulatory. Representation is initiated with a set of inherent cultural assumptions firmly in place and those assumptions have ontological consequences. Narrative is an instrument of composition and constitution of subjects. And the analyst is complicit in the construction of self, both selves, if one assumes a symbiosis of subject and object as do Eastern philosophical traditions or as understood in the Greek tradition as *phronesis*. Because re-association is a space of possibility for newly emergent subjectivities, associative rigor is essential. And this raises interesting possibilities. Extending structural resources beyond temporality is a method of extending agency. My thesis broadens the sense in which narrative is self-constitutive.

I am suggesting that the structure of experience would be considerably effected by an alteration in what is assumed about the structure of narrative representation. The client’s “goal” involves some sort of vision of a future good that can be influenced by cultural assumptions about structuring experience. I am not suggesting that experience is not or should not be structured or retrospectively re-ordered. I am suggesting that stories are always necessarily structured and the structure is tacitly assumed and that the tacit assumption affects ones understanding of experience and therefore we ought to re-examine what we assume.

### **Summary**

I have looked beyond Aristotle’s frequently cited ethical distinction, toward his *Poetics*, to uncover structural criteria that have become foundational assumptions about the form and function of narratives and

I have raised fundamental objections to what have become normative principles of association because I am interested in the manner in which those assumptions regulate psychological discourse, self representation, and ultimately ontology. I have argued that Aristotelian principles of historical and poetic association have become entangled, both theoretically and in practice, and I have speculated about the implications of narratively prioritizing other types of association over sequential association. While there has been much attention paid to the unintentional effects of therapists on clients (counter-transference, diagnostic gaze) there has been scant attention paid to the effect of the therapist's narrative assumptions.

To bring the paper full circle, there seems to me to be a parallel between the contemporary concern with evidence based procedures and the emphasis on narrative as history, as praxis, temporally ordered and verifiable. I have questioned the significance or status of what is represented as factual and wondered what theoretical orientations are embedded in the representation of experience temporally ordered. I am also suggesting that the moral engagement of the therapist is not limited to the efficiency of treatment methods, and professional ethics is not limited to the professional obligation to bring about relief of symptoms.

## Notes

1. For a fuller exploration of my response to what Strawson defines as "episodic" and "diachronic" being in time, see *Internarrative Identity*, 2nd edition, pp. 53-65.

2. It should be noted that what has been translated to English as "narrative" from the *Rhetoric* is not the way we use "narrative" today. Aristotle meant something more like oratory. See *Rhetoric*, Book III, Chapter 16.

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**Correspondence:** [ajitmaan@comcast.net](mailto:ajitmaan@comcast.net)





# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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