

Living in Spin

Living in Spin:
Narrative
as a
Distributed Ontology
of Human Action

Andrew P. Porter

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Jim Vendettuoli assigned R. G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* in his Sacred Studies class. It was the beginning of many things, more indeed than just a life-long immunity to the seductions of naturalism. He seemed pleased (and surprised) when I visited him in the suburbs of Detroit in the early 1980s to thank him. He earned it. What follows has come a long way from Collingwood, but Collingwood (and Jim Vendettuoli’s shrewd theological judgement) can take more of the credit than one might expect.

The willingness to acknowledge a socially constructed reality is one of the prerequisites to entertaining many possibilities: an agent intellect (Thomas); an ontology in which the objectivity of objects is constituted within the subjectivity of subjects (Kant); a fusion of horizons (hermeneutics); or just narrative ontologies, redaction ontologies. Peter Berger confronted that problematic in *The Sacred Canopy*, and without Shaun Sullivan’s help, I would never have worked my way through Berger’s early work. That legacy does not appear very much thematically, but it is beneath the surface everywhere there is a redaction ontology, because it is the willingness to confront and take responsibility for the role of the editors in a redaction ontology.

One of the concepts that undergirds the entire enterprise is the embracing of Exposure, Limitation, and Need as bringing blessing, not curse; weal, not woe. Without that confidence, it would be impossible to undertake the risks of a distributed ontology of human action or live with its ambiguities. And the credit for this necessary commitment goes to Edward Hobbs, who found it in the Bible and later theological sources. It is not often mentioned, but it too lies behind everything here. In particular, it supplies the essential prerequisite for dealing with the pains of living in history, as will be seen in what follows.

One of Hobbs's ideas is credited in detail in the body of the book but deserves mention here also: the idea that people suffer for one another, generalized from his observation that in the theology of the Synoptic Gospels, God comes into the world to suffer for other people. This will appear in due course as an "ontological foil," something in the background that transforms the being of human acts in the foreground. It is part of the ontological glue that holds together a coherent way of dealing with the pains of history.

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Introduction

There are two introductions here, this one and the first chapter, “Posing the Problem.” They serve somewhat different purposes. This one tells how the inquiry of the book got started, offers a brief overview of its argument, and gives some hints about where to start. Different readers will bring quite different resources and questions to the book.

The inquiry here began by questioning what it means to be a historical being, what it means to be part of a historical religion. Those questions were posed for me by prior work in which biblical religion (Christianity and rabbinic Judaism) became conspicuous in their focus on history rather than nature or metaphysics. Start with history; nature and philosophy come later. This book is accordingly a tentative and cautious entry into the philosophy of historical religion.

To be a historical being means to act in the larger context of history, and so the inquiry must needs begin with human action. I was dissatisfied with traditional theories of action (in which an intention causes a motion of some sort), and so turned to narrative instead.

The book does more than one thing: It is an inquiry into human action on a non-Aristotelian basis; it is the working out of one Catholic believer’s historical faith in philosophical terms; it is many philosophical quarrels — at least; and it may be more.

Chapter 1 poses the problem; chapter 2 exhibits phenomena that do not fit the Aristotelian model of intention-caused change; chapter 3 is necessary preliminaries before the inquiry can get started; chapter 4 acknowledges many philosophical debts; chapter 5 presents action on the basis of narrative, in some of its plurality and ambiguity; chapter 6 finishes that structure and applies it to the history of biblical religion; chapter 7 applies the narrative structure of human action to the liturgy; and chapter 8 deals with a few philosophical issues bypassed in the main argument. The order developed logically as it appeared to me, but it may not be entirely helpful

for all readers.

Chapter 1 is for those who want a formal posing of the problem of the book. Many will be able to skip it.

Those unpersuaded of the inadequacies of an Aristotelian approach to action should probably start with chapter 2, and then proceed as below. Chapter 2 is also an easy entry into human action on a narrative basis.

Those who live in the Catholic sacramental system with little appetite for technical philosophy should start with the brief remarks here and go directly to chapter 7, coming back to chapters 5–6, and visit the philosophical matter only if it holds any interest.

Those most interested in history should start with chapter 6.

Those most interested in narrative structure (from a philosopher’s perspective, not literary theory, alas), should start with chapter 5.

Those interested in theology coming from physics should probably start here also, for this chapter exhibits differences from a scientist’s instinctive approach. Some preliminaries in chapter 3, especially sections 3.1 and 3.3, may help for those coming from naturalistic habits of thought. Those sections show how the present inquiry goes well beyond naturalism.

I beg the patience and forbearance of those coming from literary theory, for there is no literary or narrative theory here. This is narrative in the hermeneutical perspective of a retread from physics.

Those most interested in the philosophical antecedents should start with chapter 4, which will testify against me how limited is my own background.

Those coming from artificial intelligence, where the term *distributed ontology* has an older home with a slightly different meaning, should start with chapter 3. We belong to different disciplines (computer science and Heideggerian phenomenology), with different disciplinary obligations, and so probably cannot everywhere agree, but the disagreements may well be interesting. AI researchers have preceded me in uncovering some of the phenomena here.

Two features of the preliminaries may be briefly summarized here, for the many who find chapter 3 too dull (chapter 7 is where my own heart is.). The term *distributed ontology* refers to the mode of being of things that get their definition from the larger world around them, things that cannot be conceptually isolated from the larger world. If you can change what something is by changing something else far from it, then it has a distributed ontology.

The term *amended Dasein* is taken from (or in opposition to) Heidegger. *Dasein* is an ordinary German word that Heidegger borrowed to denote the unique mode of being of human beings. He defined it as the sort of being that has a stake in its own being; humans (and other animals) do, rocks and spoons do not. The definition has a serious problem: Human beings are not just the sort of beings that have an interest in their own being and survival, they have interests in the being, survival, opinions, and acts of *other* human beings — as others do in their being also. That is the “amendment” to Heidegger’s definition, and much of this book turns on making this correction.

The central points of the argument may be summarized briefly.

Narratability arises where there is contingency that affects someone’s interests.

Narratability, rather than a told narrative, is what matters: We sometimes spell out an act but more often do not, and don’t need to.

The relation between narrative and action is circular: Narrative gives us what narrative has already shaped, not something that was there before there was a narrative: for narrative selects from all the motions of all the bodies in the world the motions that are part of, relevant to, or illustrative of (because similar to) the act narrated.

What an act is can be changed by changing its circumstances: its motions would be a different act in other circumstances. What an act is depends on what you include, what you leave out, and how you characterize what’s included.

For any motions in view, there are multiple narratives and multiple acts: Many narratives can be told of particular motions, and so many narratives, many acts “pass through” those motions. One true narrative may be used to deflect attention from another, as in cover stories.

Trajectories are not the same thing as motions: A trajectory (e. g.) solves a differential equation, and has no human meaning. A trajectory is framed in the categories of some natural science, and is not a narrative.

Motions are meaning-laden, and abstract from the particulars of trajectories. It is the meaning that enables humans to discriminate which trajectories qualify as a particular motion.

Acts can be transformed after the fact: Inasmuch as acts are defined by larger narratives, later events, events later in those narratives, can change what an act in view is.

Ambiguity of language entails ambiguity of action: It is language that enables us to consider things not immediately present before us now, and language has a *selective* function: it selects some things for consideration, and omits others. That selective function is the root of the ambiguity of language. Language both creates ambiguity (it opens up for us many possible goals for an act) and to some extent enables us to resolve ambiguity (it enables us to say which one was intended).

Language is a prerequisite for actor-narratable action because narrative requires language. Non-linguistic animals exhibit only animal behavior, not actor-narratable action. Acts of nature, of animals, and of God are acts only by analogy to human actor-narratable action.

The ambiguity of language creates an ambiguity in the good, and that ambiguity is one origin of sin, or one root of original sin: Language enables an actor to discriminate between good and evil, to call some things good and others evil, as in Genesis 2.17 and chapter 3.

We judge narratives and acts because we have a stake in them: human beings have stakes in each other, not just in themselves (the amended definition of Dasein, as noted above). We can ask what contributes to human good, and despite a large liberty in answering, the answers are open to responsible criticism. This rescues the circularity of narrative and action from arbitrariness.

What lies beyond the motions of an act in immediate view can tell us what this act is. When we say that what a thing is is constituted by other things beyond it, those other things we call (here, at least) *foils*. They may illuminate it by their similarity or difference (hence borrowing the term *foil* from literary criticism); or they may be directly relevant: consistent with some intentions and not others. When we are not sure what an act is, not sure what someone was doing or intended, we search for ontological foils that will resolve the ambiguity.

The turn to larger contexts is how we resolve the ambiguity of narratives and acts: In the hermeneutical circle, we make sense of texts and their parts as reciprocally related, and iterate between wholes and parts until a stable reading is reached. As with texts, so with actions. We draw on relevant larger contexts in order to make sense of actions. The larger context may be history, nature, or some cosmological construct. It is a confessional choice.

There are problems in the argument, many places where I myself wish there were more detail or more depth, where I remain uneasy. Fully de-

veloped, it would touch every area of the humanities, and doing that is impossible in a single book. It is a cursory exploration at many points, and so it is incomplete even in what it does touch. It is all too often only a start. Yet it seemed better to publish it so that others might improve it where I don't see how to.

Chapter 1

Posing the Problem

Human action happens, we easily think, when someone deliberates, contemplates a goal, intends some changes to bring about that goal, and then effects those changes, achieving the desired goal. Many acts fit that pattern, but many more do not. People act without thinking about what they are doing, or disagree about what someone was doing, or decide later what they were doing earlier, or complain that someone's account is biased or leaves out important parts of the story. And so we try to sort out what was going on, to get the story straight. What happens in an act is not about the mechanics of intentions and motions to bring about intended changes. It is about a *narrative*, and much more belongs in a narrative than just an intention and some motions. There are many questions. What it means to get a story straight is not always obvious.

What matters in a story? And why? What must you include and what can you leave out? What's background and can be taken for granted? What's beyond background and doesn't matter? What makes the parts of a story fit together? How do you fit small events into larger stories?

Looking at larger and larger contexts, what happens when you try to fit all the events of a human life into one coherent whole? What makes a human life *be* a coherent whole? What happens when you try to get your life and other events to fit together, in one story? That may change you. Both the story and the events it recounts can do things to you: but what — and how? What *can* they do to you?

Philosophical thinking about human action usually begins and ends where we began: with an act consisting of intention causing motions to get to a goal. Superficial appearances notwithstanding, this is not what we encounter in casual, colloquial, disputatious, legal, penitential, casuis-

tic, therapeutic, literary, historical, or biographical thinking about human action. In literature and the movies, we are rarely self-conscious in our thinking about action. Intention and cause don't always work as simply as the model of intention-as-cause assumes. The main problem is that the model always already *silently* presupposes some familiarity with the situation, some sense of what needs to be included in the story. In a word, editing, and a narrative, at least in token form, always come *before* we can speak of actions. When the silent presupposition is exposed, that exposure calls for a different philosophical approach. To say narratives are about actions is of limited help. Paradoxically, actions will turn out to be about narratives before narratives are about actions.

So what *are* narratives about? To turn the questioning about action on its head, what does it mean to be a narratable thing, if that's not too strange a question? The present inquiry focuses on these questions. The book will begin with colloquial usage, how ordinary people tell stories, and then note some of the technical resources for the problem. Then it will be possible to assemble the parts of an anatomy of narratable things. Questions will arise as a consequence (though not always with answers) and finally some applications.

Colloquial usage has become somewhat cynical. People know that a story can be changed greatly by what is included or left out and by how the included parts are characterized. The word for this is "spin." It may have originated in cynicism about politics, but it has propagated to all of life, not just politics. We easily think we can tell a story without spin, in the sense that it is possible to include the right stuff and ignore only what doesn't matter. That is true enough, in a manner of speaking, but it is very odd from a philosophical perspective. If spin means choices about what to include, every story has some spin, because every story reflects choices about what to include and what to leave out. We have ways to criticize narratives and can sometimes come to an agreement about whether a story has been well told or not. It is possible to make sense of the disagreements that remain, as we shall see eventually. Colloquial usage is onto something, and onto something more than its cynicism would indicate. In spin, there is a liberty in telling narratives, and though that liberty can be criticized as responsible or not, it won't go away.

Editing choices deal with the background, the "situation," as we might call it, the circumstantial facts. When a story is told economically, the circumstances are left off-stage, not included in the narrative, even though

they do matter. Yet the background can quite transform what's happening on-stage, in the focus of the narrative. When we tell a story, the narrator and the hearers make assumptions about what is off-stage and, in particular, assume that the off-stage supports the characterization of actions on-stage. Though it is left out, the off-stage is essential to the on-stage.

This touches the principal contrast between the present approach and the common approaches in Analytic philosophy,¹ for Analytic philosophy of action instinctively tries to isolate an act from its surroundings, its off-stage. The way to recover the connections to the off-stage is through narrative, by starting with narrative rather than with a few elements of an "act": deliberation, goal, choice, will, intent, etc. The analytic instinct comes from the natural sciences, for there one seeks cleanly to distinguish the phenomenon of interest from the rest of the world — and rightly so: one could not function any other way in the sciences. The sciences think in terms of *systems*, for that is what an isolated portion of reality is. To view the world under the aspect of nature is to construe the world with a systems ontology.

It is because the off-stage matters even when it is unseen that we call the object of the present study a *distributed* ontology of human action. What matters is distributed far beyond the immediate material motions of the actor or what he changes in the world. Narrative is the way to recover connections to the off-stage because it is in the editing of narratives that we decide what to put on-stage and how to evoke what is left out but there nevertheless. Narrative, like poetry and unlike propositions, can evoke the off-stage, an entire world in a few words. The present study is an ontology in this sense: We are asking how acts be what they are, what constitutes them as what they are. This is not a general treatise on Being as such, merely an inquiry into how the concepts of narratable things work. It is also neither narrative theory nor literary criticism. It's just philosophy, and philosophy in the service of goals in theology, as will become apparent in what follows.

Acts are about narratives before narratives are about acts because to think of an act is always already to have at least a token of a narrative in mind, an initial estimate of what was done. That token narrative can be corrected — indeed, the "facts" may well demand that we do so — but

¹ I upper-case "Analytic" because it functions as the proper name of a school of philosophy, not as a generic adjective of method. Likewise "Continental" philosophy, which has nothing to do with geography.

it is impossible to get started without an initial estimate. It is not as if we survey all the circumstances and then, unprejudiced, produce “objectively” an act that takes place in them. To survey all the circumstances leads us to question *which ones* are pertinent. Hopefully, the events themselves, the “facts,” will make a claim on us, making our editing choices easy. That would be “objectivity”: nice, if you can get it. Often, however, which facts are relevant depends on choices *we* make, because the standards of relevance come from us. We know that because people disagree about what counts as relevant. So our inquiry will eventually turn to a quest for responsibility, when objectivity is impossible and subjectivity an unsatisfying substitute for it. In a narrative ontology of human action, editorial liberty and the claims of the facts will always be reciprocally related.

The problem, then, is to start with the narratability of things and explore what that narratability entails. How do narratable things work, how do they be whatever it is that they are? The normal approach, as noted at the beginning, is to start with the apparently basic components of the central examples of human actions. That strategy — call it elementalism — though often tried, is not very promising. Unless the hard cases are clearly treatable at the outset, they may never be reached from the easy cases. It will emerge as the inquiry proceeds that some narratable things are what we normally call human actions, and some others are actions at least by analogy.

Let me say a little bit in a moment about the features of narratability but first indicate something of the motive and larger context of the inquiry, how it got started. Just to tell the story, as I began years ago to sort out biblical criticism, biblical religion among other religions, and the modern predicament in theology, two or three centuries of scholarship, especially the last, have made it clear that biblical religion is a *historical* religion. That leads to a question: If we are to understand historical religion, what then does it mean to be a historical being? What does it mean to put human lives and human actions in a historical context? To understand historical religion (or better, just living in history), we will have to understand how human actions fit into history, how human actions are constituted. The goal is to understand living in history, and the starting point is the constitution of human action. Both are about narrative.

The structure of the argument, then, in brief preview: It is a hypothetical inquiry. In our search beyond analytic approaches, let us place only the most minimal limitations on what can be narrated. Assume merely that

action happens when some contingency affects someone's interests and is narratable. Narratives can be told in many ways, in many styles. The act, the actor, and the events will unfold from the narrative. What would follow from this starting point? The present inquiry is an exploration of that question, asking what its consequences are. More features of human action can be seen on this approach than by starting with an act isolated from the world, typically though not only as an intention causing a change.

New puzzles will arise, largely from the ambiguities and openness inherent in narratability (hence the choice of the title word "spin" as the flag-word for the inquiry). These ambiguities might seem disastrous to those in search of certainty. It will turn out that the ambiguities of narratability that get transferred to the ontology of human action are not so much the problem as the condition for a solution. We live with spin, whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not. The task is to understand how to live well in spin. Some suggestions, however exploratory and preliminary, can be found.

Look at some concrete features of action through the eyes of narrative: Narratives are open and revisable, and so also is anything that depends on narratives. If actions are about narratives as much as narratives are about actions, then actions can, to an extent yet to be explored, be revised. Narratives depend on the off-stage as much as the on-stage. The off-stage is what is left out of the narrative, the "situation," the world that is presupposed by the narrative. When we tell a story, we presuppose that everything off-stage *supports* the characterization of events on-stage; this assumption is quite precarious, as we shall see. The off-stage includes the future of the events in question. An act can get its meaning from what comes after it as much as its own time and what came before it.

An act gets its being from the narratability of its events. We don't always spell out narratives, nor need we. But if you ask about an act, as if the act could get its being merely from the the natural motions of all the particles and bodies in the world, that assumption may be met with questions: *Which ones? Which motions? Which bodies? And Why?* The answers to those questions always already presuppose at least a token of a narrative, often not spelled out. Those tokens can be turned into a real narrative and then examined and corrected. But a proto-narrative is there *before* you can think of an act, because it is present in the first thinking of the act. This inquiry explores what it would mean to make that priority not just incidental but ontological. An act gets its being from its narratability.

Four observations can be made at this point, and they will be repeated as the inquiry unfolds:

- (1) One and the same act can be narrated in multiple
(and possibly conflicting) ways;
- (2) One and the same set of motions
can be fitted into many acts;
many narratives and so many acts
“pass through” somebody’s motions on-stage;
- (3) What is happening on-stage
is constituted in part by what is happening off-stage;
- (4) Some things about an act (but not all)
can be revised after the fact.

To these we may add the observation that if action presupposes narratability, it also presupposes language, or language-capability, at least in principle, in the actor: we are speaking of ζῶον λογικόν, Aristotle’s phrase, usually translated as the rational animal. Better would be the linguistic animal.

One of the core commitments that is not obvious in the brief summary above is that acts get their being from their larger context; this is familiar from the hermeneutical circle. Parts and wholes get their being reciprocally from each other. The whole is ultimately the larger context in history. The problem of larger context, at the scale of human lives, leads to the question of coherence of a human life: what does it take for a human life to be a coherent whole? Coherence of a human life is another way of asking about a person’s basic life orientation (i. e., religion).

This exploration of the concepts of action and history will, accordingly, be a work of the philosophical theology of a historical religion. It is emphatically not a work of literary theory: the author is not a literature scholar. Philosophical theology has known narrative for a long time, but in its own limited way: it occasionally notes biblical narratives (with little interest in narrative for its own sake), and moves quickly to philosophical concerns abstracted from biblical narratives. The present study keeps one foot in that tradition while the other has become self-conscious about narrative. However modest, this is a philosopher’s perspective. It is also not a work in philosophy of history, though it will digress more into philosophy of history than into literary theory. History is the larger context of action, and theologians tend to be more conscious of history than of literature (a purely accidental reason, but it’s the best I can do.).

There are several immediate consequences of a narrative approach. Narratives depend on *choices* that the narrator and hearers (and before them, the actors) make. The openness of choice raises the question of *responsibility*: what is the right way to choose? This will not be solved by either objectivity or subjectivity; some other kind of responsibility is needed. H. Richard Niebuhr's answer was that these are confessional commitments, and Alasdair MacIntyre unraveled how to criticize them in what his readers have called "tradition-bound rationality." Eventually, in an inquiry beyond the limits of this one, narratives and the choices in them would come up against what are called boundary situations, unanswerable questions, or as the problem is more familiarly known, *transcendence*.

With this much attention to ambiguity, uncertainty, and choice, the question of truth will inevitably arise. To deny truth (which some might otherwise suspect) would be performatively incoherent. We do have ways of settling questions about what so-and-so was doing on such-and-such an occasion, at least some of the time, even if we have no single *method* for doing so. (I am not aware of any single general method, and there are arguments against the possibility of one.) One might say that the physical particulars of all the actions are objectively true and useful — if we know them. That is true, I suppose, as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far, and all the interesting questions arise when appeal to material particulars alone is insufficient. The question "which ones?" always arises, and its answers come from editing and human interests, not from naturalistic considerations.

Let me moot here an approximation of truth in narrative. We shall return to it in what follows. It does not solve the problem of truth so much as restate it, though it should ward off objections that there is no truth here, and the restatement will enable further inquiry. A true narrative spells out correctly and fairly the interests of all interested parties, the intended goals of the actions, the effective goals of the actions (not necessarily the same as the intended goals), and the real consequences of the actions, as seen thus far. One could put it another way: a true narrative includes what matters and leaves out what doesn't matter. (But what does it mean to matter, for whom, and why?) We will eventually observe that a true narrative is adjudicated in community, and it can be revised in the light of later events. That, perhaps, is why truth in narrative will cause such anxiety. From this beginning will come some applications. We will be able to contrast this view of action with the mainstream view, which simply takes an act to be

a change caused by an intention.

We will be able to make a few observations about the lives of those who would affirm living in a historical world. In a word, biblical religion is the sort of basic life orientation that takes human life as historical and affirms human life in this historical world, in full view of all its pain and suffering. We shall be interested in biblical religion in its Christian form, which seems to me to have more perplexities than does rabbinic Judaism.

Let me give some idea of how the problem arose in the literature. Biblical scholarship of the last two centuries has made it amply clear that biblical religion is a species of historical religion. The contrast with nature religions appears in Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History* and again in Merold Westphal's *God, Guilt, and Death*. In nature religions, human action in some sense follows from its rootedness in nature. In historical religions, human action is free in the sense that its narration is not determined by nature, and human actors accordingly have a degree of responsibility that they do not on naturalistic considerations alone. The task posed by this literature is one of finding a philosophical account of what it means to live in history, to be a historical being. Martin Heidegger and Søren Kierkegaard offer a starting point but not enough about narrative to get us very far. The philosophical resources that did enable progress were for me accidental and contingent (themes often to be repeated in what follows), and so the present study inherits that contingent character. It engages only selected thinkers. I am painfully aware of the limitations of my own reading, a product of both contemporary fashion and accidents. The present study is accordingly tentative and exploratory. Those with other resources will be able to add more than what is here. The last needs emphasis: What follows is an anatomy, the skeleton, if you will, of a distributed ontology of human action, but there is no claim here that all the bones are present and accounted for. Others, who find missing features of this anatomy of human action, may well have good cause to revise this account of action.

Alasdair MacIntyre, the first of the principal sources, had to deal with narratability in the course of his own thinking about ethics. Herbert Fin-garette found in narratability the key to unraveling the puzzles of self-deception. Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, though not a general organon of the human sciences, gave us essential features of the interpretation of narratives. Paul Ricoeur gave me more philosophical reflection on narratability than any other single source. Other writers appear in supporting roles.

Chapter 2 gives some colloquial and literary evidence for a distributed ontology of human action. Chapter 3 works through a number of essential ideas that need to be amended before they become usable. Chapter 4 reviews the technical breakthroughs that made the present inquiry possible. Chapter 5 outlines the basic features of human action. Chapter 6 expands that initial sketch and focuses on the problem of meaning and motions, with some examples from biblical history. Chapter 7 will develop the notion of foils off-stage that transform acts in focal view, “on-stage.”

Human action touches every area of the humanities and many beyond the humanities, and we shall occasionally trespass into topics adjacent to action, but for the most part, to keep this study manageable, I shall try resolutely to stay within very limited bounds. In particular, action must figure large in any philosophical or theological anthropology, yet there will be no complete anthropology here. That means that narrative, prominent in recent literature on the self, and even in some of our sources, will not be developed into a theory of the self. Only action is here, not a theory of the self, even though we touch the self in questions of coherence of acts and lives (section 7.4).

The project sounds like it is a theory. It isn’t really. The distributed ontology of human action that follows is more like a feature-list than a theory, and doubtless not a complete one, either. It is some of what follows if you approach human action starting from its narratability rather than from a theory about intentions causing changes.

Chapter 2

Phenomena

Humanity has always lived in narratives, but we have become self-conscious about narrative as never before. Above all, the *openness* and liberty of interpretation in narrative have become conspicuous. We know that we have choices in our narratives as no generation before us ever has. It is a nearly ancient proverb that there are two sides to every story, but that insight has acquired in recent years a concrete and practical traction that is unprecedented.

Many still seek refuge in naturalistic ways of explaining man's place in the cosmos: in naturalisms, human affairs are determined by nature, however nature is conceived. But there are many natures, and they don't all work the same way; another attestation of choice where in the past matters were determined. Through all these changes runs an awareness of narrative and its freedoms. Some evidence may help, both new and old. This chapter will explore colloquial and literary phenomena that call for a narrative ontology of human action (and so also for a distributed ontology). Then it will be possible to undertake a philosophical inquiry into human action.

The contrast to the present inquiry is mainstream philosophy of action. It is a broad family of traditions but there tend to be family resemblances and characteristics shared by most members of it. Central is the idea that an act happens when an actor's intention causes some change in the world. Action is intentional, causal, and about change. This is not so much wrong as it is secondary. All judgements of intention, causation, and change come *after* prior judgements made in narrative and the editing of narratives. The mainstream is rich in cogent observations about action, however much it may also accommodate disagreements about the anatomy of action among

its members. What mainstream philosophy of action is *not* about is the prior stage of appraising actions: the stage when we size up what's going on, in some sort of narrative. It is not as if there is no philosophical reflection on such things; there is some. Most, but not all of it, is recent. Aristotle's *Poetics* is an exception in its age. It doesn't get classified as philosophy of action, and its implications for thinking about action are often not noticed.

2.1 Colloquial Usage

The observations that follow are not terribly systematic and do not all get equal attention. They are mostly anecdotal and so don't have the evidence-worthiness of survey research. They do, however, attest that ordinary people can think about actions in terms of narratives in ways that amply precede the logic of intention and cause. They demonstrate that we know intention and cause come later, as a result of editing. We know how to quarrel about the editing of stories. Moreover, we *know* that we know how to edit the pertinent stories. The word *spin* names that knowledge, and much evidence, even if only anecdotal, backs up my claim about our knowledge and skills. Yet we forget that we know about narratives when doing philosophy of action.

2.1.1 When is Intention?

Mainstream philosophy of action tends to think of acts as intentional and of intention as relatively unproblematic. It questions both, but without much progress. Intention is neither necessary nor simple. Oedipus did not intend to kill his father or marry his mother, but that *is* what he did. No theory of action can call itself a success without handling cases like this as genuine action.

A more prosaic example may show us the extent of the phenomenon. In the bathroom, there are usually more interesting things to think about than what one must actually do in the course of normal hygiene. In particular, it happens more often than one would expect that I can't recall whether I remembered to brush my teeth. There is, of course, an easy way to tell: feel the toothbrush, to see whether it is wet or not. Often it *is* wet, though I have no memory of brushing my teeth. There are enough other routine physical motions that I go through without thinking about them, but this

example is sufficient for philosophical purposes.

Consider the brushing of the teeth as an *act*, the sort of act that philosophy of action worries about. Is it intentional? What does intentional mean? In retrospect, it was instinctive. One might as well call it habitual, for it is a habit, after all.¹ The act was not deliberated. Was it conscious? Was consciousness *directed* to it? That's pretty clear: it wasn't. I was conscious of brushing my teeth only in the sense that I am conscious of uncountably many things in my environment. Heidegger's example was about tools: I am not even conscious of the tool I am *using* until it breaks down or malfunctions or surpasses my skill. Other things in the environment are simply taken for granted because they are familiar. Yet I can have intentions about them all that were intended only on other occasions.

Now consider the brushing from the point of view of common sense. Was it intentional? Of course; don't be silly. *When* was the intention? Long ago, as a child, when I was taught to brush my teeth and went to the dentist for the inevitable few cavities that come with childhood, and resolved to have as few cavities in the future as possible. One could equally well say that the intention was *after* the physical motions of brushing, which were, as noted above, instinctive. The intention came with the question that was answered by feeling the brush to see whether it was wet or not.

Is brushing or not a *responsible* act? My dentist thinks it is. When I told the story to a dental hygienist, she told me of her two sons, aged 10 and 14, and her question to them, "did you brush your teeth?" Their answer quoted to me was "I'on't know." The next question follows as night follows day: "Well, the toothbrushes are dry, soooo . . . ?"

How typical the boys' answer is of young men when asked about their actions! In fact, it is how we usually try to weasel out of demands for responsibility. The dry toothbrushes *objectivate* the boys' actions and intentions better than any philosophers' conjectures about the "state" of their minds or intentions.

Something similar happens to me from time to time when I am doing Night Prayer silently. The antiphon, "Guide us waking and guard us sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace," comes both before and after the Nunc Dimittis. What about when I can't remember whether I did the canticle and repeat it after the second

¹ I am not aware of a better word to designate the unconscious familiarity of routine skilled tool-use that Heidegger remarked in *Being and Time*, especially p. 98/69.

instance of the antiphon, concluding with a third instance of the antiphon? What is intentional, what is an act (intentional or not) in this little scene? Are the answers changed after observing that I have structured my pill habits so that I virtually never make an error, taking too many or too few or the wrong pills?

There is no naturalistic criterion I can think of that would detect intention and connect it to the physical motions of an act. The motions in this case were instinctive and the intentions were after or long before the “fact” of the act. Not a pretty sight for Analytic philosophy of action. The way we handle such acts is not Analytic: we tell stories, and we know how to judge stories. In fact, we search for the particulars relevant to a narrative until we find them — in remote childhood, decades in the past and thousands of miles away, if necessary. This is a skill not of analysis but of editing: We know how to criticize stories without even thinking about what we are doing. The particulars of the relevant *motions* are all naturalistic; there is no volokinesis² here, no preternatural, no animism or vitalism, no supernatural to these acts. But the judgement that selects *which* particular motions are relevant is not reducible to naturalistic categories.

Similar to “unintended” or instinctive acts are acts of omission: What can philosophy of action say when I leave my car parked on a busy street with the engine running, thereby incurring a risk of theft? I would be held responsible for such negligence; to invoke philosophy of action in defense of a claim that it was not “really” an act would be laughed out of court. Here, again, the criteria for what counts as an act are narrative in nature, and they demand a certain responsibility in the context of the actions. I don’t see how a philosophy of action starting from intention causing a change can make sense of acts of omission any more than it can make sense of acts out of instinctive but unreflective habit. What goes for omission goes for negligence also.

The Aristotelian definition of action is a motion that is caused from within the actor.³ But what if there is no motion, and we hold the actor responsible? As in acts of omission? We judge acts, including acts of omission, on the basis of larger circumstances. We have standards about what should have happened but in this case did not.

A narrative presents the results of its recounted events (even the Big

² Volokinesis will be discussed further in section 8.2. See also Andrew Porter, *Where, Now, O Biologists, Is Your Theory? Intelligent Design as Naturalism By Other Means* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), section 5.1, p. 108 ff.

³ *On the Soul*, 3.9–10, 432a16 ff.

Bang or evolution) as being of some significance for its audience. The results of narrated events offer possibilities for living. And that is exactly what actions are about. And so the Big Bang and evolution both become sequences of actions. Who or what the actor is need not trouble us at the moment; sometimes that is left unstated in the text of a narrative, and there is only an “implied” actor (if that), and one of quite open and uncertain identity. The acts qualify as acts only by analogy with prototype human acts, a point we shall return to momentarily. There is a long record of such analogical usage in natural histories, and another long record of analogical thinking in theology. People do think this way in narratives.

By contrast, to quote a solution of the general relativity equations for the time-evolution of the cosmos is not the same thing as a narrative. Landau and Lifshitz are not doing the same thing at all as Steven Weinberg’s popularization of cosmology.⁴ In *The First Three Minutes*, Weinberg begins by recalling another, older, narrative cosmogony: “The origin of the universe is explained in the Younger Edda, collection of Norse myths compiled around 1220 by the Icelandic magnate Snorri Sturleson.”⁵ In fact, Weinberg is quite self-conscious and explicit in *The First Three Minutes*: He spells out the consequences of the natural history he depicts for human life, a narrative in which there is at most an implied actor, and one that is not very attractive. Weinberg’s *Gravitation and Cosmology* is of the same genre as Landau and Lifshitz, or Misner-Thorne-Wheeler, another standard text in general relativity.⁶ These books may occasionally lapse into narrative, but any such comments are aberrations in works otherwise devoted to differential equations.

What goes for astrophysical cosmology goes for naturalistic biology also. Even though the circumstances of evolution *can* be taken as fragments of a narrative (they are contingent, and somebody’s interests are at stake), they are not, in their original and naturalistic form, parts of a narrative. Naturalistic thinking is something else, a distinction that may be difficult to appreciate when the naturalistic phenomena can also be viewed in narrative terms. Out of this possibility for confusion grow all the con-

⁴ L. D. Landau and E. F. Lifshitz, *The Classical Theory of Fields* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1962), chapter 12, “Cosmological Problems.” Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books; 2nd/Updated edition, 1993).

⁵ *The First Three Minutes*, p. 3.

⁶ Steven Weinberg, *Gravitation and Cosmology: Principles and Applications of the General Theory of Relativity* (New York: Wiley, 1972).

troversty and problems with its public that evolutionary biology has today.

2.1.2 The Offstage Matters

If action is approached with the assumption that it consists of an intention causing a change, there are problems. Cause, even efficient cause, has many meanings. To equivocate on those meanings courts grave perils for logic. In practice, cause in narrative presupposes narrative commitments and narrative logic. If the chosen meaning of cause is something like natural causation, things get worse. Intention and natural causation have different homes in language. It is not as if we could say there is a cause-center in the brain in the way there is a temperature regulation center in the central nervous system. It may well be possible in some cases to locate interesting parts of the neuroanatomy in subjects who are known on other grounds to be intending something, but this again presupposes a prior narrative. Trying to get behind narrative and narrative judgements doesn't work very well.

If the traditional philosophical accounts of action are not very helpful, perhaps we might attempt a starting point in narrative. The place to begin is to observe that in recounting an act, we assume much that is "off-stage," not included in the narrative. And if we ask questions about what somebody was doing, the answers must come from resort to those other events off-stage. One example is dissected in some detail in the technical literature treated below, and so it gets only mention here: Alasdair MacIntyre imagines a man digging roses in his garden, and then asks what the man is doing. There are many possibilities, and the only way to tell is by knowing much more about the man's life. When I described the scenario to a friend in the narrative end of the movie business (screenplays), she imagined another example in reply: someone misses an important meeting at a studio.⁷ We (who are at the meeting) don't know what he *did* until we know why he missed the meeting. LA traffic? A family emergency? Absent-mindedness? A preference for more interesting things? Having an affair? The context (unknown to us) determines what the act was. The off-stage determines what is going on on-stage. The ontological constitution of the acts we do see is determined, in part, by what we do not see. As matters unfold, it may be far away, or in the past, or even in the future.

⁷ I am indebted to Virginia Aldridge for this story.

That will take some unpacking.

When we tell a story, we assume that everything off-stage supports the tale of what is happening on-stage.⁸ That assumption is precarious. The fragility of the off-stage assumption was demonstrated unwittingly in Analytic philosophy long ago by Edmund Gettier, though his concerns were not about action. We shall come to him with the technical literature. For the moment, a much more robust colloquial phenomenon is all around us.

2.1.3 Changing an Act After the Fact

To take the most unintuitive aspect of the claim first, consider revision of acts after the “fact.” If a motorist hits a pedestrian on Monday, and the pedestrian later dies on Wednesday, the act that was before a mere vehicular assault and battery has been back-transformed into a homicide of some sort, whether negligent or more serious. It is constituted as what it is by its narrative context later on.

Another example is a colloquial saying, when someone is asked what he is doing, and he replies, “I’d like to keep my options open.” He will, in effect, decide tomorrow or next week what he is doing today, because it is tomorrow or next week that he will choose among the paths that the present “acts” keep open. Today’s motions, if we can call them that, will be integrated into whole acts only later. And the actor knows this.

2.1.4 Reinventing the Wheel

The shaping of an act by what has gone before is also well-known and not so counter-intuitive. We speak of “re-inventing the wheel,” but one can re-invent a thing only if it has already been invented. If someone unknowingly re-invents a thing, thinking he is the original inventor, only to discover later that it was already invented long before, we do not say that his action has been changed. It was always a re-invention. A related example is the four-minute mile: To run a mile in less than four minutes is no longer to set a record, nor to break a symbolic psychological barrier. It has been

⁸ This assumption is described in detail in Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, chapter 3, “The Threefold Mimesis,” especially pp. 77–79. Ricoeur’s problematic is different from that of the present study, and for the moment, our problems are much simpler than his. We need merely to get beyond the limits of the Analytic treatments of action. Details come later.

done before. What later athletes *do* is constituted, in part, by what Roger Bannister did in 1954.

2.1.5 Humor

Humor is as old as mankind, and the pivot of a joke is the wrenching of its protagonists from one narrative into another. We thought the story was about one thing, but the punch line puts us in another story entirely. This not only shows the precariousness of the assumption about the off-stage, it hints at something more, to which we will come in due time: we have some legitimate liberty in the editing of our narratives; we can choose what to include and how to characterize it. We determine what an act is when we select the context in which a narrative places it. Comedy often shows us different characters who imagine wildly different contexts for their mutual engagement. One famous example is the case of the priest who asked bank robber Willie Sutton why he robbed banks, thinking to persuade him to give up robbery altogether. Sutton's famous answer, "because that's where the money is," puts the practice in another context with other goals and another morality. The story is apparently an urban legend, and the interlocutor was a reporter, not a priest.⁹ Nevertheless, the apocryphal event has grown beyond its origins and has become a guide for practical reason in some circumstances.¹⁰

We may note at this point a phenomenon that is quite recent: Google and the Wikipedia have given people who do not have time for research or access to major libraries the ability to check events off-stage casually and quickly. This alone has made our culture sensitive to editing and the narrative constitution of acts as no culture before us has ever been. The Wiki is itself precarious and should be treated with caution, but it is better than nothing, and it is transforming our understanding of history concretely and of human action in the abstract.

2.1.6 No Language, No Actions

Now consider some examples that make another point: language and language competence are presupposed in action. The trivial example is

⁹ Wikipedia, "Willie Sutton." Accessed 2008-05-21. Apparently the reporter made up the punch-line. And Sutton's real motive was enjoyment, not the money.

¹⁰ Wikipedia, "Sutton's Law." Accessed 2008-05-21. We shall see more of acts growing beyond their origins when we come to Paul Ricoeur in the technical literature.

movies without sound. If one has ever watched a movie or TV program with the sound turned off, or neglected to get earphones on a long airplane flight, it becomes clear very quickly how much language is necessary to understand the action. It is not *action* without the dialogue; the dialogue gives the acts their meaning, and without that meaning, they are just physical motions, not real acts at all. The motions are incoherent or meaningless without the dialogue. Silent movies are (or were) not quite the same thing: they had captions, and the function of language was present in the captions.

A more extended example: In the beginning of the day, when I get up in the morning and find bird parts on the dining room carpet, I know that my cats have been hunting. They have perpetrated another atrocity underneath the dining room table. Sometimes I am a witness; a mouse is brought in by one of them, with a ferocious growling all the while, and then the mouse is set free, perhaps intact, perhaps already crippled. And then what happens to the mouse does not bear repeating here. Sometimes I can catch the mouse to save it from my cats, sometimes not.

Less spectacular are just the incidents between cats when I wish they would trust each other a little more. Or when a cat is moping, and I wish it could tell me why it feels bad. Clearly, our cats are animate. They are affectionate, they love us, we love them. That's why we could even ask whether their less attractive behavior is sinful or not. Without language, it is not.

Someone once noticed that Americans and the British don't knowingly eat horsemeat or dogflesh or monkey-brains, where some other cultures do eat these animals. The reason is simple and easily overlooked. Americans talk to horses, dogs, cats, and to monkeys in the zoo. We could not eat an animal that we can talk to, even in our imagination.

We speak to our cats and lament that they merely take a message and promise to get back to us. Sometimes they don't return our calls. With dogs, things are a little better; they respond quickly, and they can learn (in some sense) to respond differently to different spoken human commands. Some primates can communicate with a few words or with sign language. Yet none of them can really talk; they can't use language to communicate anything sophisticated.¹¹

¹¹ They know the imperative mood, and maybe a little of the indicative, but the indicative is doubtful. The subjunctive, counter-factuals, complex moods and tenses are to the best of my knowledge not within the reach of even higher primates. We love stories of talking animals because we wish they could express in language what they clearly feel in emotions. Perhaps language will someday be given (or taught) to animals, and on that day, their

Back to the atrocities: we would hold mouse-torture against our cats *if* they could participate in language, *if* they could answer the question, “Just what do you think you are doing?” If they could give reasons for their actions, we would ask for reasons. We would expect reasons. This is not like being housebroken; this is different. Learning not to soil the carpet is fairly easy, and it comes naturally to cats and dogs. What they can’t do is give reasons, characterize actions, make requests or promises, praise or blame, and so on. The defining mark of amorality in humans is refusal to participate in responsibility: the communal activity of asking for and giving reasons. This is not quite the same thing as mere animal behavior, for humans, even sociopaths, are capable of giving reasons, even when they don’t actually do so.

What is given to us in language, what do we have that the cats and dogs do not? What cats and dogs do is natural and so not evil. It may be red in tooth and claw but it is still natural, and TV nature shows rightly depict it in the wild without disapproval. We do not condemn cats as they are for doing things that we would consider unconscionable if they had language.

Language constitutes human actions *as* actions. With language, we can ask and answer the question, “What were you doing?” With language, we can make (and break) promises. With language, we can give orders. With language, we can tell stories, and in stories, we can place human actions. With language, we can place a human action in multiple contexts, intersecting and conflicting contexts (as we’ve seen with humor). With language, we can *re*-tell stories, and so we can re-interpret human actions; an openness that means more than it appears to. With language, we can approve or disapprove of others’ actions, and we can criticize our own. With language, we can be grateful, offer blessings, or grumble, complain, curse, condemn. With language, we can be in awe of the sunset in ways that chimpanzees (who are also in awe of the sunset) cannot.

Without language, we can’t do any of these things. Without language, we would be just emotional animals, capable of animal behavior but not of what we call action. Language makes us what we are. We are dependent on language. It was there before each of us. We come into it, and as each of us learns to speak, we acquire a self and a world. Aristotle’s ζῷον λογικόν would better be translated as the *linguistic* animal than the rational animal.

Language is not voluntary, but attention to narrative certainly is. Once when I remarked to a friend involved in South-Asian meditative prac-

ontological and moral status will change profoundly. But it has not happened yet.

tices that the solution to a problem he had mooted was to get its narrative straight, he replied to me instinctively and instantly, “we think the whole point is to get beyond narrative.” Every culture has narratives, but they vary greatly in texture and style. It is possible to shape stories entirely from archetypes, in which the actors play out roles that are primordial, without much freedom.

2.1.7 Evading Responsibility

We know how to tell stories so that the actors’ responsibility does not appear. In “For Better or For Worse,” a comic strip about the life of a family in Ontario, Elizabeth, the unmarried daughter, returns a day early to her teaching job in an Inuit area in the North, to find her boyfriend with another woman.¹² She has confronted Paul and is leaving.

Paul: Elizabeth! Wait! I was going to tell you! I was going to pick you up in Spruce Narrows and . . .

Elizabeth: And what?!! Tell me you’ve dumped me for the teacher who took my place?

Paul: I didn’t plan this . . . it just happened!

Elizabeth: Lying doesn’t “just happen,” Paul! Cheating and pretending and covering up doesn’t “just happen”!!

Paul: But . . . I didn’t want to hurt you!

Elizabeth: Well, guess what! It just happened.

We know how to say “It just happened” when we need to tell a story without assigning responsibility, which is to say without spelling out who the actor is. The verbs are put in the passive. We say that a marriage “didn’t work out.” That language is so well known that when a couple I know divorced for tax reasons but continued to live together, they told their friends, “we got a divorce, but it didn’t work out.”

2.1.8 Multiple Narratives, Multiple Acts

More features of common knowledge may be observed briefly. There are always multiple possible narratives of an act. Raymond Queneau demonstrated this in his *Exercises in Style*, when he exhibited one hundred different ways to tell the story of an encounter between one passenger and an-

¹² The strip ran on the internet on 2007-01-12. [http:// www.gocomics.com/ forbetterorforworse/](http://www.gocomics.com/forbetterorforworse/)

other on a bus, with the protagonist later observed again as a pedestrian.¹³ The different versions are not equivalent.

The slang term “spin” attests the colloquial awareness of these phenomena: We know that it all depends on what we include in a story and how we characterize it.

Multiple acts can “pass through” the same material motions. This is commonly observed in Analytic action theory, but it usually doesn’t get much attention, because it holds no theoretical interest for Analytic philosophy. The reader can easily produce examples of his or her own. Here is one that I came up with:

Porter rolls into the kitchen, slouches with his arm on the water-cooler, and watches. Tenant is making shfta, Kurdish hamburger, out of ground beef and vegetables. The critical spices have been brought back from free Kurdistan at some cost by another housemate. Is Porter side-walk supervising? Is he helping cook? Is he relaxing? Is he doing isometric exercises against the water-cooler? Is he in the kitchen to get something, or to put away groceries? Is this a substitute for TV cooking shows, but one in which it is possible actually to smell the progress to culinary delight? Soon, after a mis-pronunciation, he is cracking jokes about the difference between citric acid (an ingredient) and stearic acid (hopefully not an ingredient). Then a twenty-pointed fur-bag jumps up on his lap, looking for a handout. She accepts a little raw shfta. Is Porter feeding the cat? Is Porter avoiding work? Is he actually *doing* useful work, by reason of thinking about thinking about watching the making of shfta, and then asking what he is “doing”?

This is not a question that any naturalistic definition can answer. For any naturalistic definition of watching the cook (for only one of the examples above) can be altered or defeated by simply changing the circumstances in other parts of the lives of the people involved. Beyond any feature of this example lie more events, more “connections,” more people, more contexts. To put soap in the food (or even to think about doing that) is to be a part of other occasions when that happened, and it is to be a part of the people in those stories, too.

These examples acquire higher stakes when someone tries to figure out what he was doing on some occasion, what matters, and how to characterize it. Examples are looking back on a life or looking at someone else’s

¹³ Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style*. English translation by Barbara Wright. New York: New Direction Books, 1981.

autobiography. We shall return to this when we come to Herbert Fingarette. For the moment, we have a little more evidence that disputes about action are usually disputes about what to include and how to characterize it. This applies to disputes in ordinary life from the petty to the grand (from children at play to dysfunctional families) as much as it applies to litigation in which human action is at stake.

2.1.9 Journalism, Spin, and Truth

A magazine once defended itself when its reporting was questioned, with “The facts were wrong but the narrative was right.”¹⁴

“Bias complaints against the mainstream press usually involve the stubborn use of a preferred story line when facts are shaky or nonexistent.”

...

Several journalists have tried an “emotional truth” defense when caught concocting stories. Patricia Smith, for instance, fired from her job as a Boston Globe columnist after repeatedly writing about imaginary people and faking interviews, said in her heart she felt her stories were true. Tom Rosenstiel of the Project for Excellence in Journalism said, “You get the sense reading her apology that she has the mentality of an artist who’s talking about truth with a capital T, but journalism is fundamentally about nonfiction.”

We now live in a docudrama world in which techniques of fiction and nonfiction are starting to blur. Many reporters think objectivity is a myth. They see journalism as inherently a subjective exercise in which the feelings and the will of the journalist function to reveal the truth of what has occurred. Two results are the emotional commitment to powerful but untrue story lines, and a further loss of credibility for the press.

We tend to get (or think we get) the meaning of a story right, and then be somewhat casual about the “facts” — the material motions on which the story is based, the motions whose meaning the story tells. Fabrication of

¹⁴ “Brawley Case of the South,” By John Leo Friday, August 10, 2007: [http:// townhall.com/columnists/JohnLeo/2007/08/10/brawley_case_of_the_south?page=1](http://townhall.com/columnists/JohnLeo/2007/08/10/brawley_case_of_the_south?page=1).

“facts” is, one would hope, not common, but lately (2007), confidence in establishment journalism has declined somewhat. Yet in any candid notion of truth in narrative, the facts have to be right, too: a true narrative cannot rest on false facts, there have to be *some* true facts to support it. In the cases in dispute in 2007, that defense was never produced in any convincing way. Even when other facts support a narrative, the erroneous “facts” have to be corrected.

Another example shows that people have become familiar enough with this phenomenon to be weary of it. Glenn Reynolds quotes Arnold Kling,

I am shocked at the behavior of my fellow economists during this crisis. They are claiming to know much more than they do about causes and solutions. Rather than trying to understand and explain what is going on, they are engaged in a fierce battle over narrative.

Glenn Reynolds at Instapundit continues: “It’s always about the narrative.”¹⁵ People know that the narrative selects which facts are deemed relevant, and they know also that incompatible facts are a challenge to any proffered narrative.

The phenomenon of spin in journalism is merely exemplary. It appears in everyday lives all the time, as the old saying “there are two sides to every story” attests. The two sides differ by including different facts in order to fit different narratives.

At a somewhat higher level is a saying attributed to an unnamed Washington insider: “The best lie is the truth edited only by deletion.” The source is unknown to me, and it doesn’t matter: the wisecrack can stand on its own. We shall see more of this when we come to Herbert Fingarette.

I don’t think there is any general or universal method that will get to the truth in all cases, but we have skills where there is no method. It is a matter of taste, tact, judgement, and culture, as Hans-Georg Gadamer labored to show — and more: street-smarts, savvy, skepticism, even cynicism.

It may help to return to the Anglo-Saxon root of the concept that survives in the word “troth,” or interest. The root of *truth* is *troth*. To plight one’s troth is to risk one’s interests, and the true is what one may safely

¹⁵ The referring web-site / URL was <http://pajamasmedia.com/instapundit/>, posted 2008-10-23, and can be found at <http://pajamasmedia.com/instapundit/2008/10/page/5/>. The Kling quotation came from http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2008/10/economists_pretending_to_have_knowledge.html Accessed 2011-05-31.

risk one's interests on. The true is the reliable. Yet troth is the root of truth in a much more basic sense: people include in a story what serves their interests. This puts us in immediate tension, for we say that the true story includes the facts that matter, and skips over those that don't, regardless of interest. The problem is buried in the next question, Which facts matter? What it means for facts to matter will take some work to unravel, and it will never be completely independent of interests, nor independent of the communities in which interests are judged.

2.2 Literary Examples

2.2.1 Frank and Ernest

One comic strip, Frank and Ernest, returns to a theme of considerable interest to us, and it goes beyond mere humor. Thaves, the cartoonist, specializes in the re-characterization of a comic situation, with irony and, if possible, bad puns. The strip attests the human capacity for recharacterization — and so, also, the role of characterization of human acts in the first place.

Frank and Ernest watch a geologist who says, "I can predict earthquakes," and reply, "That makes him a faults prophet."

In a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, the tin woodsman says, "Of course, the downside to having a heart is that now I have to watch my cholesterol."

In one Sunday collection, Frank and Ernest rewrite kids Christmas letters to Santa to get themselves taken off the "Naughty" list:

Kid: I'm very messy! My mom always has to clean up after me.

Ernest: We'll tell Santa you have a record of creating jobs.

Kid: And I flunked history because I was playing video games.

Ernest: Call yourself a "technology expert, not focused on the past."

Kid: Worst of all, I took pennies and nickels from my sister's piggy bank.

Ernest: Just say that you "wanted change."

Frank: Ernie, that won't work — the kid's not running for office! He's going to get coal in his stocking!

Ernest: Coal?! Then we can also say he has an energy plan!

2.2.2 Lady Marchmain's Reproach

In *Brideshead Revisited*, when Charles Ryder has yielded to Sebastian Flyte's importunings for money (so that he can get drunk by wandering away from a fox hunt to a local pub), at the end of the day, Lady Marchmain questions Charles when he comes to her to say goodbye. What follows is from the adaptation for television of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, at the end of episode 4, "A Blow upon a Bruise," at about 45 minutes on the DVD.

She says she does not reproach (only God does that), but her questions cannot be construed as anything but a reproach. She does not resolve the ambiguity of narrative, but she does demand a coherent narrative of Charles Ryder's actions, with the implication that he does not have and cannot supply a coherent narrative of his actions.

Charles: the problem is, I've got a tremendous amount of work to get done before I go back to Paris. Sorry I'm not able to stay as long as I'd hoped, and I hope you'll forgive me for rushing off like this.

Lady M: Well, then, it's goodbye, Charles.

Charles: Goodbye, Lady Marchmain. Thank you very much for having me to stay.

Lady M: Charles: There's something I must ask you.

Did *you* give Sebastian money yesterday?

Charles: Yes.

Lady M: Knowing how he was likely to spend it?

Charles: Yes.

Lady M: I don't understand it. I don't understand how anyone could do something so callously wicked. I'm not going to reproach you. God knows, it's not for me to reproach anyone. Any failure in my children is my failure.

But I don't understand it: I don't understand how you could have been so nice in so many ways and then do something so wantonly cruel; I don't understand how we all liked you so much. Did you hate us *all* the time? I don't understand how we deserved it.

Charles: Goodbye.

She is rewriting the narrative of Charles' friendship with Sebastian and many visits to Brideshead Castle, for the most recent events do not fit coherently with the earlier part of the story. The earlier part of the story has to be retold; what appeared to be virtue turns out to be vice, at least in her appraisal.

2.2.3 Football on the Sabbath

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell runs for Scotland and the United Kingdom in the Olympic games in Paris in 1924.¹⁶ In life, Eric Liddell became a missionary and later died in China during World War II; all Scotland mourned, the movie says. On the screen, we see him as a missionary at home again in Scotland (he was born in China). In France, the qualifying heats are to be held on a Sunday, and in Liddell's interpretation of the sabbath commandment, one may not run on the sabbath. It becomes an issue.

That disagreement is prepared, or foreshadowed, by a brief scene, seconds only, in which a young boy bumps into Liddell with a football, on a Sunday.¹⁷ Liddell chides the boy for playing football on the sabbath. The boy's offense, if it is that, is one only under an extremely strict interpretation: he is not working, nor studying for school, but playing. That could be argued to be rest, precisely what is not just permitted but blessed on the sabbath. But it was not prayer, nor was it worship.

Liddell's dilemma in Paris is constituted, in part, by that earlier scene. The earlier scene is presumably typical, not unique; it shows us what Liddell has done, at least for the most part, in keeping the sabbath. If he now relaxes his rule in Paris, he has been inconsistent with his own earlier practice.

His later act is *constituted* as consistent or inconsistent by the earlier one, and not just by that, but also by the words that have been said in interpreting the sabbath commandment. Those words, of course, allow for some latitude of interpretation. We watch Eric Liddell's unfolding interpretation in action.

¹⁶ *Chariots of Fire*. Enigma Productions, 1981. Hugh Hudson, director, and Colin Welland, writer. DVD by Warner Home Video, 2005.

¹⁷ It occurs at about 22 minutes, 30 seconds on the DVD.

2.2.4 Rabbis and Wives

Consider Chaim Grade's *Rabbis and Wives*, a trio of novelettes about life among the mitnagdim of Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland, in an indeterminate time before World War I but probably late in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ We see domestic relations and the characters in them — life more abundantly indeed. Nowhere in any of the three stories does Grade give the slightest hint of what is to come: the devastations of the twentieth century, and the Shoah in particular. None of the characters know (of course), and the narrator also does not know.

But we the readers know: some things force themselves on-stage, and the Shoah is one. We cannot read the stories of the rabbis, their wives, their congregants and families ignorant of what is to come a short few decades later. Their acts on-stage are transformed for us by what comes after, whether we like it or not. It is like the proverbial elephant in the room, that everybody knows is there but which nobody speaks of.

Why do some things force themselves on-stage, asked or unasked? Is that forcing reader-relative? How should we handle events that force themselves on-stage?

2.2.5 “Through you and your act”

I would like to consider at more leisure a literary example about real events, a play. I was fortunate enough to be invited to watch a performance in Albuquerque of the play *Assassins*, by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman.¹⁹ The play takes the audience through the sequence of the ten people who killed (or tried to kill) American presidents. Each is bitter about some good that life has not given him or her. They think they have not gotten enough attention and recognition from other people. Each feels entitled to take out his (or her) bitterness on the most important figure available. The list:

John Wilkes Booth	shot Abraham Lincoln
Charles Guiteau	shot James A. Garfield
Leon Czolgosz	shot William McKinley
Giuseppe Zangara	tried to shoot Franklin Delano Roosevelt
Samuel Byck	fantasized about shooting Richard Nixon

¹⁸ Chaim Grade, *Rabbis and Wives*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1982.

¹⁹ New York: Theater Communications Group, 1991.

Sarah Jane Moore	tried to shoot Gerald Ford
Squeaky Fromme	tried to shoot Gerald Ford
John Hinckley	shot Ronald Reagan, unsuccessfully
Lee Harvey Oswald	shot John Kennedy

The play takes the assassins out of order, with Lee Harvey Oswald last, after the comic relief of Moore, Fromme, and Hinckley, instead of between Zangara and Byck. As scene 16 starts, Oswald is in the Texas Schoolbook Depository, and he is suicidal. He is depressed about his life, his job, and his marriage, but he is not thinking of killing the president. He takes a gun to his head. John Wilkes Booth steps out from behind a bookshelf and begs to be excused for interrupting Oswald. Then Booth mocks Oswald and, to Oswald's surprise, tells him his life story. Booth claims to be Oswald's friend; Oswald responds with expletives. He thinks Booth is from the FBI.

Then Booth starts to get to Oswald. When Oswald doesn't recognize a quotation, Booth summarizes *Death of a Salesman*, about Willy Loman, a man who tries to succeed in life but never gets a break. "When he realizes his whole life has been a failure built on lies, he kills himself." What his wife says at the grave is "Attention must be paid," a phrase that becomes a refrain in *Assassins*. Booth appeals to Oswald's desire to matter to people.²⁰ Oswald asks what he should do, suggesting all the obvious constructive moves at this point in his life. Booth says, "You tried all that. It doesn't work." He suggests that Oswald should kill the president, who has just landed at Love Field in Dallas. Oswald finally asks, "Who are you?" Booth introduces himself, and then the other assassins appear and introduce themselves. Oswald says, "I don't get this —," as well he might. He moves to leave, and the assassins have to undertake major persuasion to get Oswald to go through with it.

Booth: "Eighteen years from now, when John tries to assassinate President Reagan, they're going to search his room, and you know what they're going to find? Every book about you ever written."

The other assassins join Booth. Zangara speaks in Italian; the others translate:²¹

Moore: Please. I beseech you.

²⁰ John Milton (i. e., the devil), in the movie *The Devil's Advocate*, would call it an appeal to vanity, "his favorite sin." Always, we are in multiple narratives.

²¹ Scene 16, pp. 100–102.

Czolgosz: We are the hopeless ones. The lost ones ...
 Guiteau: We live our lives in exile ...
 Byck: Expatriates in our own country ...
 Hinckley: We drift from birth to death, despairing ...
 Fromme: Inconsolable ...
 Guiteau: But through you and your act,
 we dare to hope ...
 Moore: Through you and your act
 we are revived and given meaning ...
 Czolgosz: Our lives, our acts, are given meaning ...
 Hinckley: Our frustrations fall away ...
 Byck: Our fondest dreams come true ...
 Fromme: Today we are reborn, through you ...

They continue, for themselves:

Booth: We need you, Lee.
 Moore: Without you, we're just footnotes
 in a history book.
 ...
 Zangara: Finally, we belong.
 Moore: To one another.
 Czolgosz: To the nation.
 Guiteau: To the ages.
 Byck: Bring us together, babe.
 Moore: You think you can't connect. Connect to us.
 Czolgosz: You think you're powerless. Empower us.
 ...

I almost fell out of my chair watching this scene unfold. For once one gets past the inverted moral universe, good for evil and evil for good, what stands out with the eerie clarity of a photographic negative is a philosophy of human action that goes well beyond anything I am aware of in Analytic philosophy of action. Past acts transform present acts. Future acts transform past acts. And the assassins (in the play, at least) know this; that is why they plead with Oswald to go through with it. The play gets its grotesque effect from the combination of the assassins' inverted moral sense and their parody of salvation, expressed in philosophical terms that

are rarely if ever spelled out but which, nevertheless, are instantly recognizable by the audience. This dialogue is salvation history expressed in terms of a philosophy of history, a how-it-works of human action, one we know instinctively even if we don't think about it. One may ask, how would this philosophy of history and human action apply in a moral universe that is *not* confused? And how does one tell *which* interpretation of history is right, the photo or its negative? If the choice is voluntary? That, of course, will be one of the chief foci of the inquiry here. We have bumped into both the ontological reach of events and the role of human choice in the ontology of action.

2.2.6 One Movie in Light of Another

If we can see events related across time within one story, we can also see different stories casting light on one another. I trust that consciousness of this is so common in English departments that it would be embarrassing to mention it, but it does not go without saying among philosophers.

Consider a movie, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. Mad Max comes early in the movie to Bartertown, a post-nuclear-catastrophe town in the Australian desert, where barbarism and the fight of each against all have come to rule human life. Interestingly, polytheistic totems in personal adornment have returned to express this. They are expressions of power, of faith in denial, bargaining, and defiance in the face of ultimate destruction of human causes. Eventually, as events turn out, Mad Max is expelled from Bartertown, blind-folded, hands tied behind his back, seated on the back of a horse wandering into the desert and the sun to die. He is found unconscious and nearly dead of thirst by children living in the desert. They are a tribe of teenagers surviving in a canyon oasis far from the world of Bartertown. It happens that they were passengers on a jetliner that crashed in the aftermath of the war; they think he is the pilot, Captain Walker, who left to get help and promised to return. They have preserved their story in an oral tradition. ("Now Listen Up! Here's the Tell!") It is carefully rehearsed and re-told, with much excitement, so that they might not be unprepared when help comes to save them. In effect, they have a *history*, and interestingly, they also are the only people in the movie who have *children* and so are committed to continuing the human race in some context of hope and trust. They take Mad Max out to the wreck of the 747, half-buried by desert sand, and climb all over its tail and say, "Weese ready, Capn Walker, Weese got the wind up our ass, take us away!" But Max just

says, “I’m not Captain Walker.” Still, in the end, some of them do fly out for help, and they do so through Mad Max’s efforts.

One begins to suspect biblical parallels at this point, but that is by no means the only irony here. There is another movie in which a group of young boys from a boarding school are put on a jetliner escaping from nuclear war. The plane crashes, and they are marooned not far from Australia on an island in the South Pacific. What follows is the unfolding — exposure, really — of original sin in the very children who are often thought to be uncorrupted and sinless. These boys turn into savages rather quickly; the irony is emphasized when the worst of them are in the school choir. They arrive from the wreck, marching down the beach, singing, of all things, the Kyrie Eleison. They are eventually rescued by adults who find them as the movie ends. But they are rescued only in the trivial sense that the adults return them to the “normal” world in which their savagery is covered up, and so the problem of the movie goes unsolved. But back to Mad Max. Any one who has seen *Lord of the Flies* can only groan in delight as *Thunderdome* unfolds. Truth at work meets truth at play. Original sin is by no means denied; Bartertown is clear enough. Yet original sin is not the whole of the Christian faith, and as the remedies for it unfold, in faith, they include openness to *need*, a consciousness of *history*, and as a practical matter, *narrative*.

I showed the movie to my students, once at Las Positas College in Livermore and once at Dominican University in San Rafael. Students can be quite tactful and diplomatic in a situation like this, and they told me that it was “very 1980s.” Perhaps some of their perspective can be appreciated from a brief commentary in a retrospective of Mel Gibson’s films as of about 2001.

Bear in mind that I had waxed enthusiastic to them about the differences between Bartertown and the Tribe in the canyon oasis. Bartertown seemed to me to be a paradigm example of the nature religions of early antiquity: no sense of history,²² a dubious outlook on the future (at best), no sense of a community of moral obligation,²³ no interest in procreation, no children, a view of the past as a golden age unrecoverable, and the recent nuclear war as an unmitigated disaster. A struggle to survive, and close to a struggle of each against all. Bartertown remembers the recent past only as

²² We shall see the distinction between religions of nature and religions of history when we come to Merold Westphal, on p. 106.

²³ See Rubenstein, “Covenant, Holocaust, and Intifada,” in *After Auschwitz*.

evil, and the good in the past as hopelessly lost, gone forever. The Tribe, by contrast, has a sense of history and a sense of obligation to history *and obligation to know* history, because they hope to share in its promises. They expect someone to come and save them, they remember the past with gratitude, they are interested in procreation, and they have children. One could go on. The movie is a paradigm in modern cultural terms, if somewhat mythologized, of the differences between nature religions and religions of history. Mad Max plays the role of the christ-figure.²⁴

Now look at a commentary by John McCarty.²⁵ McCarty draws parallels to *Peter Pan* (when the tribe of lost children rescues Mad Max), to Gasim in *Lawrence of Arabia* (when Mad Max is stumbling into the desert sun almost about to die of thirst). The action is described without recognizing any parallels to anything but other movies, certainly none to biblical sources. McCarty sees no parody here, and no typology. And he does not see *Lord of the Flies* or anything about the dynamic of human sin.

So who is right? People just bring context to a narrative, to a work of literature, and interpret on the basis of the context they bring? That, actually, is a fairly safe generalization. But what does it do to meaning, to truth in the narratives so interpreted? This is Gadamer's problem run amok.²⁶ The parts (the narrative in view) are plain enough, but what is the whole? When the interpreter selects the whole?

For me, Mel Gibson's movie was truth at play, meeting truth at work in *Lord of the Flies*. But my students thought I was nuts, just simply nuts. And they are entitled to respect: their cultural sensitivities are almost certainly better than mine. And they had me outvoted, which does matter, as it says in the Bavli, Baba Metzia 59b plus or minus a few pages. They allowed as how one *could* interpret *Thunderdome* as I had, though my take on the movie was not entirely compelling to them. But of course I had been living with the biblical texts for twenty five years, and they had not.

The Mad Max movies have attracted a following that has no interest in Jesus at all, and would be dumbfounded by a claim of parody of the Exodus and the Gospels in *Thunderdome*. My students have the weight of opinion on their side. But then Jesus himself has attracted followings quite other than the "orthodox" Church. Only one of the more picturesque

²⁴ I lower-case "christ" in the generic sense that it has in the beginning of Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribners, 1941), vol. 2, pp. 3–16.

²⁵ John McCarty, *The Films of Mel Gibson*, (Kensington Books, Citadel Press, 2001), pp. 111–112.

²⁶ See the remarks on *Truth and Method* below, section 4.4.

is *The Urantia Book*²⁷ in which the particulars of Jesus's career as a graduate student in mysticism in India are elaborated in great detail. It is a modern instance of ancient "gnostic" Jesuses. The modern hermeneutical phenomena set no precedent.

Given McCarty's comments, I wonder whether Mel Gibson knew what he was doing.²⁸ I took *Thunderdome* as Mel Gibson's *first* Jesus movie, *The Passion of the Christ* being the second. But did Gibson know what he was doing in *Thunderdome*? Did the screenplay writers? I have no idea.

I don't like Passion plays as a genre, in part because they omit the context of the Passion, and because of what can be done with the story without a context.²⁹ *The Passion of the Christ* was no exception. Critics faulted it for antisemitism, but very little if anything in the movie is explicitly antisemitic. There were more serious allegations of antisemitism in people close to the movie than in the movie itself. It is not news in theology that the Passion story gets its meaning only from a context, and the context in the Gospels was missing in the movie. Audiences bring their own context to a movie. I think what the reviewers were really afraid of but dared not say was something akin to the Puritan fear that somewhere, somebody might be having fun: They were afraid people might get the idea from Gibson's movie that the Passion might actually *do* something to and for believers. It was an ontological fear. It, too, was based on bringing a context to the movie — a dispute about what was off-stage, beyond the narrative, for the Passion can't do anything by itself, without a context (cf. p. 228 below). The real issue is ontological, in the being of the acts depicted.

Some reflections on the harvest of these examples: How does one deal with the question of truth in narrative when truth depends on context and the context is provided by the interpreters, not in the text itself? Cross-comparisons between stories are compelling, and they do, in part, constitute what the things we see and read about *are*. Yet cross-comparisons are voluntary; they are also a matter of editing. How can this be? How can the

²⁷ The Urantia Foundation, Chicago, 1955.

²⁸ People have noticed. Googling + "mad max" +jesus gets more than 800,000 hits, and googling + "mad max" +christ gets more than 500,000 hits (as of 2008-05-28).

²⁹ There is something about the texts in the Gospels that does not translate well into dramatic form. The texts are meant to be read or heard. They cannot have the effect I think they intend unless the reader keeps some distance from the events told, and hears about them rather than "sees" them. This is a form of artistic chastity, and it should be respected. Passion plays don't do that.

being of a thing depend on *our* choices? In *Lord of the Flies* and *Thunderdome*, the worlds are fictional; what about when one or both worlds are real? As in biblical typology, or parody such as *Life of Brian*?

These few examples should make it clear that both colloquial and literary usage deal with human action in terms that go far beyond the philosophical model in which action is a matter of an intention causing a change of some sort. The instincts of the traditional model are close to naturalistic explanations, especially in a culture that holds the natural sciences in such high esteem. Nevertheless, we know the off-stage can change what an act is, both in its past and its future. We know how to dispute acts, and we know how to criticize narratives. Attention to narrative appears in many disciplines, confirming these surmises.

Chapter 3

Preliminary Studies

We come shortly to the philosophical literature behind the present inquiry into human action. Before we review the philosophical precedents this inquiry builds on directly, a few distinctions will be useful. Some are well-known, some are not much recognized or named, and some need to be amended before they are usable. The first section explains the difference between things that can be considered in isolation from the rest of the world (having a systems ontology) and those that can be understood only in their involvements with the rest of the world (having a distributed ontology), including human action. The second section clarifies needed concepts from Aristotle. The third focuses on questions that get us beyond the materialism that ignores formal causes, and what we seek in narrative does the work of formal causes for human action. The fourth briefly reviews material we need from Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Edward Hobbs, and H. Richard Niebuhr, making amendments and extensions as needed.

3.1 Systems Ontologies and Distributed Ontologies

Since the central contention of this study will be that human action makes more sense in terms of a distributed ontology than in terms of the usual explanations, we need to look at distributed ontologies for their own sake at the beginning.¹ There are many distributed ontologies, human action is only one of them, and it was not the first to be noticed. In this study, when

¹ Most of this section has been published before, in Andrew P. Porter, "Distributed Ontologies and Systems Ontologies," *Pacific Coast Theological Society Journal*, 2010 October 5, <http://www.pcts.org/journal/porter2010a/index.html>

we speak of *the* distributed ontology, it will mean that of action, not one of the others (e. g., tools).

We are interested in things that are constituted by narrative or, better, by their narratability. A narrative ontology is a species of *distributed* ontology. The pertinent contrast to a distributed ontology would be a *systems* ontology. In a systems ontology, the things we deal with are ontologically “contained,” that is, they can be distinguished from the rest of the world, and the rest of the world doesn’t contribute to their ontological constitution. The ontologies of the modern natural sciences are typical, but the sciences don’t share a common single systems ontology, and they are not exhaustive of systems ontologies.² Much of the Analytic literature on human action disavows reduction to naturalism. Nevertheless, it conceives human action in terms that are contained, as are the systems in natural phenomena. The styles of thinking are similar, even if the philosophy of action cannot be reduced simply to the naturalistic terms of science. In contrast to both is human action as we shall see it in A. C. Danto and Ernst Troeltsch. That approach to human action relies on context for the meaning of actions, and an act gets its being accordingly from things that are distributed far from the center of the stage in the narrative. It is time to look at the difference between distributed ontologies and systems ontologies.

3.1.1 Heidegger’s *Zuhandenheit*

Of the many surprises for newcomers to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, not the least is the difference between the being of the ready-to-hand, the *Zuhanden*, and the merely present, the present-at-hand, the *Vorhanden*. Typical of the ready-to-hand is the being of tools. Typical of the present-at-hand is the familiar ontology of physical presence: what takes up space, has a position and velocity, etc. Readers tend to note the ready-to-hand only in passing, on the way to *Dasein*, the being of human beings, which is the real focus of the book. All the other sorts of being are derived with respect to *Dasein*. Yet there is more than meets the eye in the ready-to-hand. It can be explained easily enough to beginning students by merely showing them a tool whose function they do not know. Even one they do recognize will sometimes work as well: what makes a key be a key? The existence of locks *someplace else*, of a lock that this particular key fits, and beyond those locks, of course, the world of human beings in which keys

² Even in the sciences, some features of the natural world have distributed ontologies, but systems ontologies are more common.

and locks are useful. When students are asked, of an unrecognized tool, “What *is* this?” they know that there is something “out there” someplace that explains it, but what, and where, they do not know. There is more to the thing than the physical object they can hold in their hands. They know they don’t know what the thing *is* until they can say what it is *for*.

When considered under the aspect of tool-being, the being of the key is constituted by things that are “off-stage,” not physically part of the key “itself.” As *vorhanden*, merely present, it has a chemical and physical constitution that may be left to those sciences. That sort of being, the being of just taking up space, can be understood pretty much without existential involvements in the world, and certainly without the messiness of the human world that constitutes tools *as* tools.

The distinction that I would like to elaborate in this section pivots here, at the difference between sorts of being that have their foundation in the wider world and those that are conceptually isolatable from the wider world. The first we may call *distributed* ontologies, for the ontological constitution of the thing involves other things: it is distributed over the world. The “distributed” moniker comes by analogy with distributed computing: the job gets done, but not all on one processor.³ A thing with a distributed ontology gets constituted as whatever it is, but not just by the physical matter in the thing “itself.” The things that make it be whatever it is are distributed over the world.⁴

“Non-local” is a term that might come to mind, but it is already used for other purposes in theoretical physics, and physics, even quantum mechanics, is typical of the contrasting kind of ontology, what we shall call *systems* ontologies. Distributedness is existential, a matter of human involvements; non-locality is about geometry, physical space. In a non-local quantum electronic system, the thing itself (the electron) is spread out over the world. In the distributed ontology of a tool, the tool is not in the least spread out over the world, but the other things that make it be a tool are scattered over the world, and the human involvements that make it be a tool are not spatial concepts at all. It would be highly confusing to import the term “non-locality” here and try to give it a new meaning.

³ The term has appeared in artificial intelligence research and computer science, with a meaning that overlaps ours but is not always the same. Cindy Mason, private communication.

⁴ One occasionally sees the term “distributed system,” meaning a system that is itself distributed over multiple parts, such as a flock of birds. But that is still a system, and it is not distributed in the sense the word is used in this study.

Another set of terms that could come to mind for the contrast we seek would be “closed” and “open,” as in things that are closed to the world or open to the world. It is true that I have often over the years written of the “openness and ambiguity” of human action, but openness here means (and travels with) ambiguity. There is nothing in the least ambiguous about an open *system* in physics, and trying to use the word “open” both in the systems ontology of the sciences and for the non-systems ontology of *Zuhandenheit* won’t work. Speaking of open and closed ontologies would be even more confusing than speaking of the “non-local,” for established usage in mathematical physics (among other sciences) distinguishes between closed and open *systems*. We are trying to distinguish between systems and things that are not systems *at all*.

The second kind of ontology, that of the physical world, we may call a *systems* ontology, elevating to prominence a word that is already instinctive everywhere in the natural sciences, though seldom remarked as interesting in its own right. A system is ontologically constituted without reference to the wider world, in the sense that its state is defined without reference to the wider world. The fact that it may later interact with that wider world (and so change its state because of other systems in the world) does not make its state definable with respect to things in the world. Quantum systems qualify. Even though they are sometimes not localized, they are, conceptually if not instrumentally, distinguishable from the rest of the world.

The easy way to tell the difference between a distributed ontology and a systems ontology is to ask whether one can change what the thing *is* just by changing something else beyond the thing “itself.” If one can, it has a distributed ontology. If one can’t, it has a systems ontology. Of course one and the “same” thing (or better, its focal material substrate) can have both kinds of ontologies for different purposes. As a tool, a key has a distributed ontology. For purposes of classical physics, it has a systems ontology. If one takes away all the locks in the world, the key is no longer a key, since it no longer unlocks anything, though its physical properties (shape, composition, etc.) are unchanged.

Heidegger’s tool-being was the first of the distributed ontologies. Heidegger drew on tools as exemplary of kinds of being other than *Dasein* but related in their constitution to *Dasein*. If *Zuhandenheit* is to refer to everything between *Dasein* and the *Vorhanden*, then there are many kinds of *Zuhandenheit*, not just that of tools. That move strikes me as very risky, since it would be misleading to use a term taken from tool-being to en-

compass so diverse a collection of categories. In any case, we focus on examples other than tools, in order to prepare the way for a distributed ontology of human action.

The distinction between systems ontologies and distributed ontologies appears in the difference between *zuhanden* tools and *vorhanden* bodies in physics, but it is not simply an aspect of that difference, nor is it a generalization of it. Too many things have distributed ontologies for that. Indeed, *Dasein* itself has a distributed ontology, if it is constituted by its own narrability. Its distributed character does not in any way reduce it to *Zuhandenheit*. It does not even reduce *Dasein* to the terms of human action, though the two are intimately related.

3.1.2 Definitions and Distinctions

Some illustrations will help distinguish the two kinds of ontologies. The first difference is in the “location” of the ontological constituents of things in systems and distributed ontologies. About *constituents*, we may note that they are not necessarily components or parts: The constituents of a thing are whatever *constitutes* it as what it is; they may be far from the thing itself, a phenomenon that we shall see a lot more of as this study unfolds. The claim that all the constituents and only the constituents of a thing are its parts is a commitment of materialism, which we come to in a few sections. We begin with the familiar in order to prepare the contrast with distributed ontologies.

In a systems ontology, the thing of interest can be conceived without reference to the world. That, at least, is the appearance, and the appearance is not entirely wrong, though I shall qualify it in what follows. To continue with the appearance, a system is *conceptually* isolatable, even if it interacts with the larger world. A system has a *state*, and its state is a *function of time*. The state of a system can be specified precisely and exhaustively — often by just a few numbers in physics. In other natural sciences, it can be specified in principle. This exhaustive precision of definition is the whole point of conceptually isolating the system from the rest of the world. Systems are subdividable into part-systems, sub-systems. They are combinable: systems interact, in ensembles of systems. There is traffic in matter, energy, momentum, etc., between systems, and in other quantities as appropriate to other natural sciences. The state of the system does not depend on the world, even when its future time-evolution depends very much on interactions with the world. What goes for the state applies, under

some views, to the ontological constitution of the system, a point we shall return to below. In the modern world, the natural sciences are the home and origin of systems ontologies.

In a distributed ontology, things are constituted in a different way. Other things “out there” in the world contribute to the ontological constitution of the thing of interest, part of making it be whatever it is. The world is the world of human concerns, not the world of physics or geometry. The phrase “out there” is potentially misleading. What matters is not geography but human involvements. The things that matter are “out there” because human involvements are not limited or bound by proximity, space, or time, not because they have a crypto-naturalistic spatial relationship to the thing of interest.

It is worth noting in passing a consequence of the fact that distributed ontologies are about human involvement, while systems ontologies abstract from human involvement. Distributed ontologies accordingly attract controversy of a kind that systems ontologies are relatively immune to.

Something with a distributed ontology may not have a state in the sense that the term *state* is used in the natural sciences. The ontological constitution of the thing is distributed over things in the world even if its focal material substrate is quite localized. The physical substrate of the key “itself” fits within a small closed surface, but the physical substrate of the things that constitute it *as* a key can be found all over the place, beginning with locks, but extending to all the artifacts of a culture. The key-lock pair gets its tool-being from its usefulness to human beings. We shall see further differences between systems ontologies and distributed ontologies after working through some examples.

Distributed ontologies extend well beyond mere tool-being. *Vorhandenheit* may extend beyond systems ontologies, but that does not matter for the present study. Systems ontologies are the pertinent contrast for distributed ontologies.

Return briefly to the notion of a state: the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “condition, manner of existing.” The notion of a state is then connected closely to the ontology of the thing; and the initial dictionary meaning is broader than it may seem. In the modern world, the default meaning of *state* was quickly restricted to those aspects of a system that are well-defined at any point in time. The manner of existing of things with distributed ontologies goes well beyond such restrictions.

3.1.3 Examples of Systems Ontologies

The notion of a system emerged and was reshaped in the seventeenth century. The English is from the French, *système*, and Latin, *systema*, and both from the Greek, *σύστημα*, from *συσ* + the *στα*- root of *ἵστημι*: to stand with or stand together.

The pertinent meaning in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: “A set or assemblage of things connected, associated, or interdependent, so as to form a complex unity; a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement according to some scheme or plan; . . . The whole scheme of created things, the universe (1619).” The meanings in physics and astronomy are unsurprising. “The system of a planet (the planet with its attendant satellites) (1690).” In that spirit a century later is Pierre Simon Laplace, 1796, *Exposition du système du monde*. Meanings in biology also appear in the eighteenth century.

As physics progressed, scientists devised new ways of isolating some part of the world in a system and then modeling its future time-evolution. The first example was celestial mechanics. The systems are the sun, planets, and their satellites. Each has a state consisting of its position and momentum. They interact, but each can be conceived in isolation from the others. One has merely to abstract the local potential energy from its sources in distant masses, and then the local system can be forecast without further reference to the distant force generators. They constitute a grand system when taken together and can be further subdivided as the needs of computational physics require.⁵

The instincts of classical mechanics became by stages the model for every other area in physics and then for the other natural sciences as well. The notion of a system did not get much emphasis in classical mechanics, because the bodies of interest could be treated as point masses, and solid bodies could be reduced to nearly the status of point masses by adding moments of inertia and angular motion to the translational motions of a point mass. In chemistry and thermodynamics, the extended character of solid bodies begged for the notion of a system, which came into its own in those sciences. In both, one is dealing with an arbitrarily demarcated

⁵ When JPL did a numerical integration of the solar system for the Apollo project, it was necessary to treat the Moon as an elastic-plastic body, i. e., to divide it into sub-systems but not to subdivide more distant solar-system bodies. (E. Myles Standish, private communication.) How the earth itself was treated in the calculation of the standard ephemerides, I don't recall.

extended body in space. It has a boundary, typically a closed surface. The monitoring of traffic in force, matter, energy, and other thermodynamic quantities across its boundary was spelled out explicitly. Thermodynamics focuses the mind on keeping the system of interest defined and demarcated apart from the rest of the world.

What was generalized from classical mechanics was the idea that the system has a state (measured in the appropriate thermodynamic quantities) and that its state is an unambiguous function of time. The system and its state can be defined without reference to the larger world, even though the future development of the system very much depends on interaction with the world.⁶

By way of illustration, a concrete example from numerical hydrodynamics may help. Consider a shock tube, a fluid system with variation in only one dimension, a tube of gas through which a shock is propagated. The only coordinate of interest is the length-wise position in the tube, which we may call x . The gas at any position x has a pressure, temperature, density, and velocity that change as the shock passes through the tube. The computational task is to calculate the motions of the gas at every point in the tube until the shock has passed. The grand system of the tube as a whole may be divided into sub-systems, “zones,” indexed by an integer variable j , spaced linearly along the shock tube. The state of the ensemble is a function of discrete times t^n . Each zone has a boundary constituted by its left and right edges, x_j^n and x_{j+1}^n , and between them a mass m_j . Each zone has at time t^n a pressure p_j^n , volume V_j^n , temperature T_j^n , and at its boundaries, velocities v_j^n and v_{j+1}^n . There are equations which we shall not review here⁷ for advancing the ensemble of zones from time t^n to time t^{n+1} . The physical system is approximately deterministic, and the mathematical model of it is completely so. Its future is a function of its initial conditions.

Numerical hydrodynamics would be just a digression for us, but some

⁶ Readers will naturally ask about biology, inasmuch as biology is not entirely similar to physics. Biologists have amply found systems appropriate to their own purposes. Organisms, ecosystems, and species are all systems, even though their dynamics is not explained in terms of physics. A species can be defined differently for different purposes, and it is not localized in space, though it has a geographical habitat. Biological concepts probably rest on presuppositions that come from a distributed ontology, but that is not something which can be explored here.

⁷ See e. g. Robert D. Richtmyer and K. W. Morton, *Difference Methods for Initial-Value Problems* (New York: Interscience, 1957, 1967), p. 295, equations (12.10) for a Lagrangian finite-difference system.

features of it illustrate points of philosophical interest for the difference between systems ontologies and distributed ontologies. First, within broad limits, the subdivision of the shock tube into zones is arbitrary, a feature of systems ontologies that bears remark and emphasis: it doesn't matter how one divides the world up into systems. As one moves to smaller and smaller zones and timesteps, the resulting numerical calculation will approximate the real world better and better. Definition of systems is a matter of computational convenience. Second, the system of each zone has a state that is fully determined (constituted) by its mechanical and thermodynamic variables. It would be what it is regardless of the presence or absence or state of any other matter in the universe, in particular, in the neighboring zones.

The word "system" has become quite common in the language of all the sciences, and recognition of pertinent systems is usually half the work of formulating a scientific problem. The word does not always carry this meaning, as the alert reader will eventually discover, but it is nevertheless the usual meaning.

3.1.4 Examples of Distributed Ontologies

Now look at examples of things that have distributed ontologies. We began with Heidegger's tool-being. Other things with distributed ontologies can be found easily: heirlooms and works of art come to mind first, and beyond them, history and narratives, human actions. Heirlooms are a fairly simple extension of tool-being.⁸ The thing handed down may be an artifact or may be only something so simple as a rock (which is not even a tool), but what constitutes it as an heirloom is its history, its past. Somebody cared about it, and people today care about that somebody in the past. What goes for heirlooms can work not just for physical things but for practices and habits of language.

Works of art are not tools, but neither are they Dasein nor merely vorhanden. They also have a distributed ontology. Works of art Heidegger himself saw, and he appraised them as humanly-made "places" that disclose something about human life. In all of these cases, what constitutes

⁸ Heirlooms appear briefly in *Being and Time*, section 73. See also Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time,"* revised edition (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1989), p. 205. Citations to *Being and Time* are to the Macquarrie and Robinson translation unless otherwise noted. They are given as English/German page numbers: p. 215/171 is Macquarrie and Robinson, p. 215, German page 171.

the thing as what it is can be found beyond the thing “itself,” that is, well beyond the focal physical substrate of the thing.

Both language and signs appear in *Being and Time* (sections 17 and 34), and both are instances of something like *Zuhandenheit*, though treating them as tools has never seemed right.⁹ In his later years, he turned to language in depth. “Language speaks us,” not the other way around.¹⁰ Language is the presupposition of important features of human existence, not something added on afterward. “Language is the house of Being” (the *Letter on Humanism*).

The later Wittgenstein did not speak of ontologies at all. Nevertheless, he provides many concrete instances of distributed ontologies beyond mere tools. Games are one example, ostensive definition another.¹¹ Nothing about an ostensive definition makes sense without a great deal of background and prior knowledge about the world. There lies the distributed character of definition, and definition can stand metonymically for ontology. Intelligible definitions presuppose knowledge of the wider world because the things to be defined get their being from their place in the wider world.

George Lakoff opened up the distributed character of many categories in natural language.¹² Some categories can be modeled in set theory and handle things with a systems ontology. Lakoff names his adversary “objectivism,” the thesis that *all* categories are (or should be) reducible to set-theoretical terms. Many natural language categories do not fit that model and require various considerations distributed beyond the things of interest “themselves.” He exhibits many kinds of categories whose competent employment requires considerable knowledge of the human world into which they fit. He provides structure to the distributed character of language categories far beyond Heidegger’s examples.

⁹ Readers have never been entirely happy with the treatment of language and signs in *Being and Time*, but neither were central themes in the book, and so the problem could be bypassed.

¹⁰ See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 463.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations; The English Text of the Third Edition*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1958. See e. g., nos. 28–31. Games appeared also in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.

¹² George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

3.1.5 Observations

The systems instinct will defend itself against distributed ontologies, Continental philosophy, and the humanities in general simply by demonstrating that it can always approach the material substrate of human concerns in terms of systems. Since the material substrate always moves according to naturalistic rules, this can seem very convincing, but that does not succeed in disagreeing with Heidegger's original insight: The *Zuhandenheit* of *zuhanden* things can be abstracted from, leaving only things in their *Vorhandenheit*. The problem with ambitions to reduce all to systems terms is that the material substrate of some system cannot be identified using only systems concepts. It is impossible even to produce a definition of something so simple as a chair without resorting to its useful-to-humans character.¹³ Abstracting from *Zuhandenheit* does not abolish *Zuhandenheit*, nor does it reduce it to the *Vorhandenheit* of any natural science.

The concrete strategy of defense of a systems ontology against recovery of any and all distributed precursors that were abstracted from is fairly simple. The systems advocate merely points to the material substrate, and the obvious fact that for some purposes, it has a systems ontology, and hopes that people won't notice that the answers to the question *which* matter is part of that substrate, and *why* all come from distributed ontologies.¹⁴ Coupled with a widespread instinct that a thing can have only one ontology, this strategy usually works. This is a variation on equating what a thing is with what it is made of. No Aristotelian would ever make that mistake (nor anyone else, as late as the sixteenth century). Actually, what something is made of is a very truncated version of what it is constituted by: all the things "out there" and "off-stage" that contribute to the ontological constitution of the thing "itself" are easily ignored if attention is distracted from them. In any case, they cannot be summoned for inspection or presented for inventory.

This instinct reduces an act to systems terms (causally and intentionally coupled changes of state) simply by tacitly assuming that everything off-stage supports the implied narrative of what's happening on-stage.

¹³ Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do; the limits of artificial intelligence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979), second edition, p. 37.

¹⁴ To moot an example, an organism is a biological system, but can its material substrate be demarcated in purely systems terms, without reference to its mode of being as *privative Dasein*? My suspicion is that it cannot, but that is only a suspicion. We meet this logic generally in section 3.3.1 and with specific reference to biology in section 3.3.4 below.

When events are reduced to mere tokens for narratives, as in names for acts or propositions about them, the narratives and their editing are long forgotten and often cannot be retrieved in any case.

There is perhaps a reason why it is easy to confuse systems ontologies and distributed ontologies: it is not very hard to push a description of something with a distributed ontology in a systems direction. The language of both ontologies leaves out what is “off-stage,” but for very different reasons, reasons that can silently be ignored. In a distributed ontology, we assume that what is left out of the description, off-stage, supports the description of what is on-stage. It is the frailty of that assumption that brings the philosopher back to re-examining distributed ontologies. In a systems ontology, what is outside the system is also left out of the description, (or included only as a potential function in the case of physics). It does not have to support the description of the system; the system is whatever it is, and is in whatever state it is, quite independently of what’s beyond the system. The external world may influence the dynamics of the system, but it cannot be constitutive in its ontological constitution. Indeed, in many cases in the sciences, how to divide the world into systems is arbitrary and a matter of convenience, a liberty that phenomena of a distributed ontology usually do not permit. When the outside or off-stage is silently left out of a description, it can also be silently misconstrued in order to push the ontology in the direction of systems concepts.

3.1.6 Distributedness Beneath Systems Ontologies

As Mircea Eliade remarked in the beginning of *Cosmos and History*, to be is to be a part of a larger reality. In the case of physics, to be an electron or a proton is to be the same thing as all the other electrons and protons. There is a distributed undergirding beneath the ontology of mathematical physics, but it is in the nature of that undergirding that it can be abstracted from without loss for physics. Inasmuch as all particles of one kind have the same nature, the identity with others of the shared nature may be forgotten. One might object that one electron is indistinguishable from any other, they are all interchangeable, and the wave function of any one must in principle reflect that interchangeability without distinguishability. (Fermion wavefunctions are antisymmetric on interchange of particles, Boson wavefunctions are symmetric.) In that sense, the electron is non-local, and its physical location is spread out. That does not mean that it is distributed in the sense that “distributed” is used in the present

inquiry. Landau (and indeed, any physicist, casually) speaks of quantum “systems” and specifically of an electron as exemplary of a quantum system.¹⁵ The electron has different ontologies for different purposes, even within mathematical physics: For some purposes, it can be treated simply as a particle that has a wave function. For other purposes, the systemhood is transferred to a field that is itself quantized (“second quantization”). It can even for some purposes be treated as classical. In all cases, we are still well within the realm of systems ontologies. Any distributed presuppositions have been abstracted from.

3.2 Aristotle, Pro and Con

3.2.1 The Four Causes

It is a commonplace that in the physics of the seventeenth century, two of Aristotle’s four causes were banished from scientific thinking: Natural science was to think only about efficient and material causes, leaving formal and final causes to other disciplines. The commonplace is very rough, but there is enough truth in it to make it useful. Though final causes were indeed banished from physics, the concepts that scientists used to define what they were studying in the natural world filled the role that formal causes had previously played. Only a certain kind of formal causes served to isolate and define what could be studied in the natural sciences. As the modern sciences developed, natural entities became systems demarcated from the world, that have states, and whose states are functions of time, as stipulated in the contrasts above. When one knows the state of a system and its trajectory in time, one knows all that can be known about it in a naturalistic way. Material causes answer questions about what things in nature are made of. Efficient causes provide the intelligible aspect of the change in time of entities conceived in naturalistic terms.¹⁶

The only formal causes acceptable in the natural sciences produce systems that have states that are a function of time. Formal causes define what it is of which one may ascertain the material and efficient causes.

¹⁵ L. D. Landau and E. M. Lifshitz, *Quantum Mechanics: Non-Relativistic Theory*. Translation by J. B. Sykes and J. S. Bell. Third edition. Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1977. See e. g. pp. 1–3.

¹⁶ The definition is crafted to bypass discussions in philosophy of science about whether to think in terms of “causes” or, instead, variational principles and symmetries, a debate that is of no consequence for the present study.

When one set of formal causes ceases to enable progress in physics, it is revised and replaced with other formal causes. Thomas S. Kuhn called this a “paradigm shift” in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹⁷

In effect, nature for the modern scientific world is composed of systems that have states that are a function of time. The kinds of systems vary among different sciences, but this is the pattern in all of them. When philosophy attempts, often unconsciously and instinctively, to imitate the sciences, it thinks in terms of systems, states, and changes of state. This kind of thinking is easily transferred to human concerns, though its success in the humanities is highly questionable. To some extent, the commitment to systems thinking can hide itself in methodological choices or even in the style of argumentation of philosophy. A quest for clear and distinct ideas, for concepts that will hold still for purposes of clarity and scholarly argument, inevitably restricts thinking to things that can be contained conceptually: Hence the analogy with systems, states, and trajectories of the natural sciences. It is a method ideally suited to conceptual control, and Friedrich Nietzsche’s accusation of will-to-power against the whole Western tradition is hardly surprising. Escaping from systems ontologies has required extensive treasuries of counter-examples, phenomena that don’t fit systems ontologies. Existential phenomenology has uncovered such a world — or reminded us of it; it was there all the time.

3.2.2 Substance and Accidents

The distributed ontology of human action is not a substance-and-accidents ontology, and the oddness of our present course needs to be acknowledged candidly. The distinction of substance and accidents is an instinctive move to separate a thing of interest from its logical surroundings, in order to give its conception some clarity and control. The difference between substance and accidents has been fruitful and useful in Western philosophy. It grows out of a distinction between subject and predicate given to us by the grammatical structure of language. This is how language allows us to say something about something.

When we can legitimately distinguish substance and accidents, we do so by observing that the accidents “don’t matter” or that they can be changed without changing what the thing “itself” is. Ordinary language

¹⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. The first edition was published in 1960.

easily delivers us to a systems ontology, in which the thing of interest can be defined independently of the world around it. What applies to accidents applies even more to the context or surroundings of the thing. This is the very definition of a “system”: what can be defined apart from its surroundings, what has its being independently of its surroundings, whether those surroundings are logical (accidents) or physical (neighboring in space-time). When the purposes are of a systems character, this is all fine and good. But what about when *what* the thing in mind *is* can be changed by changing things “outside” it? Then it lies beyond the reach of a substance-and-accidents ontology.

Aristotle’s concepts of form, matter, substance, and accidents turn up as the armature of central distinctions in every science. Yet they can obscure as well as illuminate. Martin Heidegger complained bitterly, calling them “a conceptual machinery which nothing can withstand.”¹⁸ Those who have mastered Aristotle’s tools can easily think that thus equipped they hold conceptual power over all the phenomena in the world, forgetting a common proverb: It is said that the man whose only tool is a hammer sees every problem as a nail. Generalizing, he may have more than just one tool, but the world appears to him only as accessible to those tools. If the world is allowed to show itself apart from tools, there may be more than what his tools disclose.

We have incidentally taken concepts as *tools*, which is to say means of conceptual manipulation and control over the phenomena of the world. Language is richer than that. It is not necessarily manipulative, though it can easily be *interpreted* as manipulation and domination.

It may help to back up from substance and accidents to subject and predicate and look at the language in which these distinctions arise. In particular, look at the verb *to be*, which has several meanings. Among them are existence and predication. Of those, existence is more subtle than it appears, but our problems lie with predication. The distinctions implicit in predication (some thing of interest, something else predicated of it) have been turned into an ontology. Thereby the richness that I have lumped together in “existence” has been reduced to little more than the existential quantifier of modern set theory: $(\exists x)(Fx)$. F and x are not just distinguishable, they are separable, and have their meaning and existence apart from each other. What is more, the operation of joining them in

¹⁸ “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 27.

predication is as vacuous and empty of meaning as the mere concatenation used to represent it.

Heidegger turned to the work of linguists, who tracked the verb *to be* to its several roots and many meanings (very loosely: grow, live, dwell, be present, persist in time).¹⁹ These aspects of being have never entirely died out in Western philosophy, though they are usually eclipsed by the fusing of them all together into one “simple” concept. The problem of Being possessed Martin Heidegger from beginning to end, and our own inquiry must be limited by practical considerations to a few applications, without exploring the concept of being itself.

We may be playing an Aristotelian game, trying to let the phenomena of human action show themselves as they are rather than as some pre-conceived theory requires them to be. We are most definitely not playing by Aristotelian rules. Resistance to blurring the distinction between Aristotelian substance and accidents betrays what is going on: The protest will take the form, “If you blur the distinctions between substance and accidents and between subjects and predicates, then concepts (and the phenomena they represent) will become uncontrollable. Soon, you will be advocating subjectivism, bringing personal choices into the ontology of what things are, and there will be no objectivity left.” Both claims against us are in some sense true, but they are not grounds for abandoning our effort. In a trivial but important sense, the present inquiry is a hypothetical one: it asks what follows if one takes narrative as the starting point for a distributed ontology of human action. Relaxing or ignoring the subject/predicate and substance/accident distinctions is merely one feature that follows from a distributed ontology. In a non-trivial sense, the alleged hazards are not telling. Many phenomena are not entirely under control. It would nevertheless be nice to know how they work, and it would be false to pretend they are exhaustively controllable. What is subjective is not necessarily caprice and whimsy, nor is it beyond the reach of criticism or responsibility. The charge of *subjectivism*, at least as it is intended, is false. Moreover, the resulting ontology of human action can explain many phenomena that the competing concepts of action cannot. Aristotelian, Analytic, and systems-based thinking about action (typically intention causing changes of some sort) cannot make much of the phenomena we have already seen

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 70–71. See also the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, at “be,” for essentially the same explanation.

above.

About “subjectivism”: we have spoken many times of some “thing of interest,” on the way to considering how it is conceived, usually with questions about whether it can be cleanly separated from the world around it. Overlooked are the words “of interest,” but they are the entry into the pertinent ontology. To consider a “thing of interest” is not just a circumlocution for “consider some arbitrary thing,” with resultant generality in the conclusions drawn about it. To be a thing of interest invites questioning into the humans for whom the thing is “of interest.”

Oftentimes, features that are very much “of interest” are assigned by Aristotelian instincts to accidents, but to change them would utterly transform or nullify the reasons for our interest, rendering the thing not of much interest at all or else of some completely different interest. For example, that a particular chalice belonged to Jacques Marquette, SJ, is of great interest to the Detroit Jesuit province, as it is to a congregation rededicating a parish whose roots go back to Fr. Marquette. Its history, its misplacements and recovery, are all of great interest. Beyond its peregrinations lie the lives of those around it and, beyond them, an entire world. For Aristotelians, all this is accidental. For us, they are what the chalice *is*. Christian Aristotelians have had to bootleg important features of things and the world outside of the official Aristotelian ontology.

We can find examples of how the off-stage transforms something of interest in the associations that collect around works of art. What *Clockwork Orange* did to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony strikes me as an attempt to assassinate a work of art. The attempt failed, but in the case of Haydn’s tune “Austria,” to which Psalm 87 was set in the hymn “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God,” the assassination (by historical events in the middle of the twentieth century) may have been successful. One can multiply examples with any music simply by noting how the original composition has acquired the freight of human involvements in its later uses.

The protest will be that for *some* people, the music has new freight, but not for those who have not seen the movie. Since the freight is “subjective,” it can’t really be real. Thus does Platonism defend itself, even in its better Aristotelian variety. Platonism assumes that real being is the same for everybody, as Peter Pevenzie says to Professor Kirk: “if things are real, they are there all the time,” in the same way for everybody. It follows that it is very difficult to know *all* of what something is. Knowledge is not under

control. The protest is especially outraged when changing things off-stage changes things on-stage, yet we know this instinctively when we deal with human actions and ask for the “whole story,” waiting for precisely those things at first off-stage that determine what the actions on-stage really are. We shall see more of this phenomenon; indeed, it is the pivot of our inquiry. It is not an accident (in another sense) that distinctions of substance and accidents in their Aristotelian home are tailored to nature, which *is* objective in some sense. By contrast, human choices figure everywhere in history, responsibility, and narrative, and so substance and accident do not work so well in regard to human action.

3.2.3 Nominalism and Moderate Realism

There have been several ways to distinguish nominalism from two other positions, extreme (or Platonist) realism and moderate (or Aristotelian) realism. We focus on nominalism because our age is largely nominalist in color, and Platonist realism, though available, is largely a reaction to the dominant nominalism.

The traditional way to draw the distinction turns on the “reality” (or not) of universals. For Platonism, they exist as Ideal Forms, and they exist independently of any particular instantiations of them. For moderate realism (the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas), universals exist, but only as instantiated in particulars. For nominalism, universals don’t exist but are merely “nominal.” They aren’t really real but are only ascribed to particulars in language by human beings. The present inquiry follows the moderate realist tradition in the twentieth century.

I would conjecture that the seeds of modern systems ontologies were sowed in late medieval Nominalism. It eventually gave us the temperament necessary for seventeenth-century physics, though its benefits for the humanities were dubious. The way this instinct was realized was in the spirit of “divide and conquer”: a problem is to be divided into subproblems, which can be solved separately. The sub-solutions can then be combined simply into a grand solution for the whole problem.

The pertinent guide to nominalism is a short article in which Anthony Kenny articulated parallel differences between Aquinas and Wittgenstein and their respective contemporaries.²⁰ He found four. The differences may

²⁰ Anthony Kenny, “Aquinas and Wittgenstein.” *Downside Review* 77 (1959) 217.

be denominated somewhat loosely as (1) the analogical character of universals; (2) the priority of universals to particulars; (3) the agent intellect; and (4) whether form and matter are aspects or parts of a thing. The fourth will generalize to something much more than a dispute about the relation of form and matter when we come to it. What goes for Wittgenstein often applies, if in different ways, also to the early Heidegger.

The first difference is the analogical character of universals. For moderate realism, universals do not generally have the same meaning in their instantiations in different particulars, though for nominalism, which takes them as univocal, they do. In opposition to the univocal theory, Wittgenstein observed that different members of a category (games was his example) bear family resemblances to one another, but few if any characteristics are shared by all and only games. As much goes for most categories. John Ellis observed that the primary function of language is categorization, and the function of a category is to group together things that are different.²¹ In truth, I would say, categories group together things that have some similarities and some differences. That, of course is the hallmark of analogy. Narratives characterize actions in terms that function analogically.

The second difference is the priority of universals to particulars. In the Scholastic treatment of the problem, for Aquinas, we know particulars through universals that we already know. The universals come first. For nominalism, we know particulars directly, and universals are added on later, if at all. The application for a narrative ontology of human action lies in the observation that (1) narratives function in the role of universals, and (2) there is always already at least a token narrative in mind when an action is contemplated; we do not start with *just* material trajectories. The evidence consists in a question, one we shall return to (see section 3.3.1). One can attempt to equate an action with its material motions. But which ones? How are the motions pertinent to this act selected out from all the motions in the world? Which ones matter? To answer that question requires some *prior* idea of what was going on; in other words, a preliminary narrative.

In the third of Kenny's differences, Aquinas made knowledge an active process, that is, a process in which the intellect takes an active role. The problem as it came to him cannot detain us here, but something like Thomas's solution will run through narrative approaches to human action. His adversaries took knowledge to be simply passive, on the model of look-

²¹ John M. Ellis, *Language, Thought, and Logic*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

ing at bodies “out there”: The one who looks is passive; what is out there is out there no matter whether anyone looks at it or not. The appearance of bodies “out there” is not obviously a product of interpretation. That claim, as it would turn out were we to examine it closely, is highly dubious. We shall not examine it closely, but it *is* the appearance, and it has afforded an easy prototype for models that take knowledge as passive and objective.

Taking knowledge as active always elicits resistance. There is a reason why the agent intellect is so offensive: it keeps the knower from being in control. Complete conceptual control is achievable only if the thing to be known exists and is constituted in total independence from the knower. If the knower is involved in the constitution of the thing, knowledge is at risk, and possibly the knower as well. Complete objectivity is impossible, though subjectivism can sometimes be invoked as a fright-monster to corral readers back into objectivism. (This does not work if responsibility is visible as a way out of the dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism.) We shall see the agent intellect again when we come to Herbert Fingarette. Understanding action presupposes the ability to tell stories, and stories can be told in many ways. The application of the third difference will come when we observe, following Herbert Fingarette, that knowing actions requires telling stories, and telling stories is itself an act, not something passive.

The fourth difference now seems obscure: whether form and matter can exist apart from each other or only in conjunction. Are they *parts* or *aspects* of a thing? If they are parts, they can be separated and treated separately; if they are aspects, they can be distinguished but not separated without damage to the integrity of the thing they are aspects of. The nominalist choice (for parts, not aspects) is a case of a particular approach to solving problems, in which one assumes that a problem can be broken up into sub-problems, which can be solved separately, and the sub-solutions can then be combined into a grand solution.

The move from aspects to parts can be made surreptitiously, even unknowingly, because in language it is easy to mistake aspects for parts. One can *speak* of form apart from matter and matter apart from form and then consider them separately, but that doesn’t mean they *are* in fact separable.

The contrast to what the historians of Scholastic philosophy call hylo-morphism (form and matter as aspects, not parts) may be called atomism,²²

²² Kenny, p. 228. Atomism is available everywhere in culture today. One more well-documented place where it is deflated is in the presuppositions of what goes by the name of “artificial intelligence.” See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can’t Do; A Critique*

the idea that all things can be analyzed into parts. Wittgenstein derided the idea that complex entities are always composed of parts that are initially separate and only conjoined later. His example is famous, a broom in the corner:²³ is it just a broom, whose parts are assumed and irrelevant, or is it first a broomstick and a brush? In ordinary life, we don't think of it as parts, though we know that, if necessary, it has parts. We think of it as a whole.²⁴

In § 47, Wittgenstein considers that most things are composite, in a manner of speaking, but that does not mean there are any absolute simples out of which they are made.

To the *philosophical* question: Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts?" the correct answer is: "That depends on what you understand by 'composite'." (And that is of course not an answer but a rejection of the question.)

In mathematics, problem-solving by parts is called linearity when it works. Problems it doesn't solve are non-linear. The moderate realist position is that while some things are linear, not all are. The attempt to linearize is also an attempt to separate one problem from the rest of the world: in other words, to define a system, apart from the world, and then seek to comprehend the workings of the system insofar as possible without reference to the rest of the world.

Clearly, the instinct of atomism is the road to linearity and mathematical physics. Not even in physics is everything linear in the mathematical sense, but in physics it is possible to break complicated phenomena into systems, parts. The success of physics and then the other sciences that came after it led to attempts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to address questions in the humanities on a natural-scientific, i. e., systems, basis. The results were disappointing. Out of that disappointment came twentieth-century phenomenology and hermeneutics and the later Wittgenstein.

of *Artificial Reason*. Third edition. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

²³ *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 39–64. The broom is in § 60.

²⁴ It is, of course, possible to imagine scenarios in which the parts really *are* separate. The broom has been in the shop to get the brush overhauled, because the brush makes it stall at high altitudes and high-speed turns in quidditch games. This is an example of the distributed ontology: what things are depends on the larger context, and that context is usually not under total control.

Anthony Kenny locates the origin of the term *nominales* (nominalists) in the assumption that words are just names for objects: "From Scotus in direct descent come the 'nominales' who derived their name from the fact that they considered all words as names for objects."²⁵ Kenny opposes Wittgenstein to that nominalist instinct, and he has not been alone. John Ellis also has drawn on Wittgenstein in order to remedy confusions in contemporary linguistics, specifically the notion that words are just names for things, and that the relation of names to things is a simple one. For Wittgenstein, words "can only have meaning in the context of a language."²⁶ Skill in language means more than just matching words to things. It means observing (and sometimes creatively breaking) rules of syntax and semantics, and it means relating speech to living. Central value terms are older than most names.

John Ellis further describes Wittgenstein's adversary as an instinct to start with easy simple cases and leave complexity for later.²⁷ The trouble is that simple cases often cannot be generalized, and so the complex ones never get handled. By contrast, a theory that succeeds with complex cases at the outset can then handle the simple as special cases. Theory can get from special relativity to Newtonian mechanics easily, but it cannot get to relativity from Newtonian mechanics at all. Complex cases that a theory cannot handle often call for a new theory, not an extension of the old.

There is another difference between moderate realism and nominalism. It appeared in the opening pages of Doris T. Myers' *C. S. Lewis in Context*.

As philosopher Wilbur M. Urban has pointed out, each turning point in Occidental history has been marked by intense concern about the nature of language. Every time such a period occurs, there are what he calls high and low evaluations of language. The high evaluation involves a belief in the reality of universals and connects the word closely with the thing it designates. It identifies reason with the Word, the Logos, and is therefore closely connected with the Greek-Christian tradition. The low evaluation of language involves some form of nominalism and detaches the word from the thing. It is the

²⁵ Kenny, p. 230.

²⁶ Kenny, p. 231.

²⁷ *Language, Thought, and Logic*, p. 20.

characteristic underlying assumption of all periods of empiricism, and Urban calls it the “beginning of skepticism.”²⁸

John Ellis also sees a low evaluation of language in those whom Ludwig Wittgenstein sought to deflate in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

What is common to the logical positivist and the intentionalist is a fairly low opinion of language; both see it as an intermediary having no substantive effect on the situations or experiences which it communicates.²⁹

The function of language in the nominalist view is to report things that exist independently of any linguistic expression, rather than to create things that can come to being only in their linguistic expression. The position Wittgenstein argues against “assumes that the world is full of facts and things, and that language gives names to the things and records the facts in propositions.”³⁰ If nominalism comes from distrust of language, that distrust itself comes from a disappointed naive trust in language: nominalism and Platonism feed upon each other. Ironically, nominalism usually replaces one form of naive trust with another.

Ellis describes the phenomenon:

Just as in any election hotly contested by too many parties, the winner is the candidate that is most familiar. The beneficiary of this state of affairs in the case of linguistic theory is the theory with which we all start, the one that is virtually there in the language we speak. It is the default condition of linguistic theory to which everything reverts when all else fails, . . . The relation between the world and language is then simply stated. The world has a structure, and language adjusts itself to that structure. It does so imperfectly and untidily, largely because we are an imperfect and untidy species. This is the commonsense point to which we return, over and over again,

²⁸ Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context*. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), pp. 21–24. She cites Wilbur Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939). I found her own explanation more helpful.

²⁹ John M. Ellis, “Wittgensteinian Thinking in Theory of Criticism,” *New Literary History*, 12 (1981) 437–452; see p. 444.

³⁰ Ellis, “Wittgensteinian Thinking,” p. 441.

whenever any attempt to depart from it finally fails. And yet it never works very well either.³¹

I would only add that Platonism and nominalism are *both* beneficiaries of this naive trust in the default appearances of language.

Moderate realism entails a sort of critical trust. We want neither the uncritical trust of naive Platonism nor the radical distrust of nominalism that plays on the failure of Platonist realism. Moderate realism inevitably results in a certain tension: We trust something that constitutes us, but which we cannot fully understand or comprehend. We cannot stand outside of language to understand language. We are always in the uncomfortable position of the self in *Sickness Unto Death*, asked to accept itself as constituted by an Other, and first by much that is other.

It is no part of my project to demonize nominalism, not least because it was the start of a long road to mathematical physics, of which I have some love. In the perspective of time, though, nominalism seems to have been the dominant school from the fifteenth century on. It contributed greatly to the shaping of the modern world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The troubles we inherit come from the philosophy we have, and that was nominalism. If Thomism had been the dominant school, our troubles would have been otherwise, but original sin being what it is, doubtless no less real. Nominalism and its alter-ego, Platonism, have been pretty good for the sciences, even if they were often disastrous for the humanities. And even in the humanities, nominalism has provided just the right sort of errors from which truth might eventually emerge — by a construction of new forms of moderate realism.

Systems ontologies come from nominalism, distributed ontologies from moderate realism. Extreme realism (i. e. Platonism, especially naive Platonism) tends to oversimplify the reality of things that have a distributed ontology, to hide their distributed character, and so to invite nominalism in revenge when it malfunctions, as it always does eventually.

One way to look at the project of a distributed ontology is to look at how it reads the verb “to be” in language of the form “this is the clock that my grandmother used.” For nominalism, the “is” is merely predication and says nothing about the ontology of the clock. The “is” can be taken as merely a sort of punctuation mark. In Russian it is always omitted, without loss. For moderate realism of the sort under exploration here, the

³¹ Ellis, *Language, Thought, and Logic*, p. 9.

“is” is all about ontology and is far more than mere predication. The clock bees what it is by having sat on my grandparents’ mantle for many years, long ago. The distinctions between substance and accidents, subject and predicate, tend to blur here. Those distinctions are the acids that dissolve everything for the right sort of Aristotelians. Universal acids, however, don’t really dissolve everything (contrary to their promotional literature), they just hide everything that they do not dissolve. What they cannot make sense of they declare unreal or uninteresting.

Another way to look at a distributed ontology is to observe that in it, we take seriously the ways we normally talk about human actions, instead of pruning the category of acts to something that can be comprehended in the terms of a systems ontology. We trust ordinary language and then ask how it works. It would be easy to take actions displaying deliberated intention and causation as the prototype and insist that all other cases be reducible to these or not qualify as real acts. Many do. The trouble is, this doesn’t ever get to the actions that are not deliberated causation of motions. The other cases then have to be dismissed as analogical or metaphorical and so not “really” real. Naive trust of ordinary language, when disappointed, leads to distrust when language strays beyond this simple model of human action.

3.3 Redaction Ontologies

3.3.1 “Yes, But Which Ones?”

There is a pattern in the present inquiry, one that appears often enough that it is worth notice and emphasis. It consists in asking “yes, but which ones?” of the component material particulars of some thing of interest. Presumably we know, at least in a rough way, what the thing is. It has a relevant material substrate composed of some part of all the material things in the world. It is possible to ask of those material things *which* ones are relevant to the thing of interest, how, and why.³² These questions will receive quite different kinds of answers in the cases of physics, biology, tools, and human action. In human action, to ask the question is to expose

³² “How” and “why” are additional questions, not simply reducible to “which ones.” The material motions will turn out to be more subtle than matter in the sciences, but that is still ahead of us. We return to it on p. 180 below. That is, “matter” will sometimes have its Aristotelian meaning, not its modern physical meaning. But neither is a case of “subtle energies” or the like.

the fact that there is always already a token narrative before one can think about an action. Yes, we can approach a situation without knowing much of what is happening, but in order to get any idea at all of what is going on, the first step is a proposed narrative. That narrative can be corrected, but it is there as a guess, at the beginning. We shall see this phenomenon again in a brief summary of Gadamer's exposition of the hermeneutical circle. Before even a conjectured narrative, there is a presupposed familiarity with the world, which means here the cultural and social world of the context.

In general, when the "yes, but which ones?" question depends on human involvements, we are dealing with hermeneutical phenomena.³³ The results will be a matter of taste, culture, judgement, and style, but not of method, algorithms, or mathematics. The phenomena will depend on a contribution by the interpreters and so will not be what is quaintly called "objective," though they may very well be open to criticism as responsible or not.

The "yes, but which ones?" question uncovers the human interpreter's hand in the identification and constitution of things. It also uncovers the close connection between matter and form. When we point to a thing, what we point "to" is its matter, and we simply assume that everybody understands why the thing is composed of such-and-such matter and no more. To ask "yes, but which matter?" is to ask why this matter and not more or less or some other matter. What holds this matter together ontologically as the thing of interest? Aristotelians would reply with a formal cause. Heideggerians would locate the answer (without using the term "form" at all) in human involvements with the thing. In the background lies *world*: Involvements with things in the world all presuppose the world in which they make sense, a world of human involvements and human interpretations.

3.3.2 Materialism

The "yes, but which ones?" question exposes an instinctive and pervasive materialism of our time. There are other senses of materialism than ours; we take it to mean the rejection of formal causes and all that would do the work of formal causes, on the assumption that material causes are

³³ The "yes, but which ones," "how," and "why" questions reappear in several places below: on p. 144, on p. 135, on meaning and motions in section 5.2.1; in section 6.1.1 in detail. But more than just these; they underlie the entire inquiry into a distributed ontology.

sufficient by themselves.³⁴ Nominalism travels with this materialism, a reflexive tendency to reject as “unreal” anything but the material substrates of things in view. This is a convenient tool with which to fend off uncomfortable ontologies of things that are not amenable to simple conceptual control. In effect, the materialist takes material causes as more “real” than formal causes or anything else that would give the matter of a thing its cohesiveness and coherence *as* a thing. This is how materialism parallels nominalism: nominalism rejects or misunderstands universals, where materialism rejects formal causes and anything that would do their work. There is a great deal more here than just Aristotelian formal causes. The involvement of Dasein in the world and in *zuhanden* things constitutes those *zuhanden* things as whatever they are. Dasein’s involvements do the work of formal causes, even if it would be very strange to call them formal causes.³⁵ “Generalized” formal causes would still be misleading, because it would suggest that Aristotelian formal causes are the prototype for the category, when *Zuhandenheit* comes first. We ask about the form of things we use only after we know them well enough to use them. Thus *familiarity* with things (and differently, with people) comes even before what we know of them. A formal cause is presumably inherent in its bearer, but familiarity originates in human beings, not with things in the world.

Materialism is endemic because it’s so easy to dismiss formal causes: I don’t need formal causes for this or that thing, because I’m looking right at it, I can see it, I know what it is, I know how to use it. Materialism is so pervasive because it is so hard to dislodge: people don’t need (or don’t think they need) anything that might do the work of formal causes. It is like a nightmare that moves from brief shots in one movie to another. Materialist bandits from the Sierra Madre show up. They just taunt, “We

³⁴ Among the other meanings of materialism: Materialism is good, as when biblical religion is materialistic, affirming life in this material world, in contrast to other religions that deprecate this material world; see e. g. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 478. Or materialism is bad, being a synonym for greed, gluttony, and lust. Yet another meaning of materialism is denial of spirit. But these are not the meanings of materialism we are interested in.

³⁵ An Aristotelian might reply to my exploration here that what I am offering is not formal causes but final causes, the human purposes that are inherent in human involvements with things in the world. Almost, but not quite: the final cause (sitting) does not by itself explain why equipment for sitting (chairs) is suitable for sitting. But neither does any conventional specification of form or shape identify all and only chairs. *Zuhandenheit* does the work of formal causes, not final causes, and it does it in a way different from Aristotelian formal causes.

don't got no stinkin' formal causes!" Nothing can stop them. Then they fade away, and the dream shifts to Pink Floyd. We hear a chant:

We don't got no formal causes

We don't read no Heidegger

We don't need no education;

...

All in all, you're just another brick in the Wall.

The Wall, I suppose would be a cosmic Cauchy surface on which are specified initial conditions that get advanced in time according to the solution of the cosmic initial value problem; it's all just physics.³⁶ Or it looks like it's all just physics. But where does one brick end and another begin? And why? The "yes, but which ones" question is everywhere.

Collingwood would say that "Yes, but which ones," asked of the parts or boundaries of a thing, is a question that does not *arise* for materialists. They don't need to mess with it. They can see what a thing is made of. The materialist can think he doesn't need formal causes because he already *has* what does the work of formal causes, and he admits as much when he says he knows how to use the thing. *Zuhandenheit*, handiness, is not something we would ordinarily call a formal cause, but it does the work of formal causes nonetheless. To ignore it is a form of materialism.

The "yes but which ones" question can occur in a conjugate form, with material causes (what the thing is made of) given. The question then appears: "why are these parts of *one* whole?" What is the ontological constitution that holds them together? The materialist again has an easy response: "I can see the thing, I know what it is, why do I need to worry about what holds its parts together in *one* thing?" For materialists, its ontological constitution is not a problem. Heidegger would say that we have a pre-understanding of the thing, usually meaning its uses, always meaning how it fits into human lives. Materialists resist any who would force that pre-understanding out into the light where it can be examined. The pre-understanding varies, depending on whether the "thing" is *vorhanden*, *zuhanden*, an organism or a person. The *Zuhanden* we know how to use; the *Vorhanden* we know how to live with; organisms we know as in part like ourselves; other people we know can challenge and know us.

³⁶ A Cauchy surface is a space-time manifold on which one can specify initial conditions for a time-evolution problem. The Cauchy surface has to be consistent with the limitations imposed by relativity. A snapshot of the universe as it is simultaneously for some observer will satisfy the requirements.

A partial reply to the materialist objection is to note that mathematics traffics heavily in things that have a material substrate set and a structure imposed on that set (groups are the obvious first example), and the imposed structure is imposed by mathematicians. It is not immanent in the substrate set. The structure (that which does the work of a formal cause) comes from human beings and human involvements in the world, a feature that seems particularly unattractive to those who prefer materialism. It brings the frights of idealism, and it puts humans at risk, leaving vast parts of the world accessible only through hermeneutics.³⁷

I suppose the instincts of materialism and nominalism can reject hermeneutics for its own sake, but they cannot reject it merely because it involves composite structures. The materialist rejection in view is allied with a nominalist distrust of language: Many things of human concern have composite ontologies, and they appear in our language frequently. Nominalism is uncomfortable with them. In its distrust, it restricts the ontologies that it will accept in order not to have to confront the offending composite ontologies. Distributed ontologies, of course, are the prime example of offensiveness: When the being of a thing is constituted in part by other things far beyond the thing “itself,” there is no possibility of conceptually isolating it from the rest of the world, and so no possibility of getting complete conceptual control over it (will-to-power, as Nietzsche saw).

The finest example of materialism that I am aware of is Alicia Juarero’s *Dynamics in Action*, a claim that the material substrate of human action can be explained by chaotic/complex systems theory.³⁸ She solves many of the problems of Analytic action theory, and she stays mostly within the problematic of that theory. Only in the end does she show that, because chaotic systems are radically unpredictable, the only real explanations of human behavior come from narrative. Her insights on freedom in the last chapter are remarkable. What she does not see, earlier in the book, is that narrative is silently presupposed in many places in her arguments and her examples. It is not at the limit of her investigation, it is there from the beginning, even if unseen. Demonstrating that, of course, is one of the prime goals of the present study. Her claim is approximately that given an action in view and its initiating intention (i. e., given the formal

³⁷ We shall return to this issue and both instantiate and greatly deepen the present defense against materialism, on p. 185 below, in section 6.1.1, when we have removed a persistent equivocation on the difference between motions and material trajectories.

³⁸ Alicia Juarero, *Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behavior as a Complex System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

cause of the act and intention in narrative form), one can legitimately posit brain dynamics as a complex chaotic system that underlies the intention and action. This is a plausible analogy for the material substrate and its trajectories, though I hasten to add that I don't follow the literature in either chaos theory or neurophysiology. Yet the problem of formal causes, though seen, never quite gets to allowing formal causes (known from other sources) to pick out *which* chaotic subsystems in the brain are part of the intention and action in view.

3.3.3 Psychologism

There is another common strategy for dismissing aspects of reality that naturalism, nominalism, and materialism are uncomfortable with. Because generalized formal causes are always grasped by the mind as much as they are "in" the material substrates of things, they can be banished to the mind — i. e., to psychology. And some day, real soon now, psychology, a natural science, will explain how these constructs of the mind work. Then they will be "nothing but" natural phenomena. This is a kind of promissory naturalism as much as it is materialism, and it travels with them.

Ernst Troeltsch and R. G. Collingwood both defended history against psychologism. Collingwood drew the distinction clearly when faced with attempts to reduce logic and ethics to psychological terms. He took psychology to be the study of sense and appetite, with physiology on one side and logic and ethics, sciences of mind, as neighbors on the other. Trouble arose only when "the dogma got about that reason and will were only concretions of sense and appetite." What follows logically is the abolition of mind and any sciences of mind, leaving only psyche:³⁹

That is what underlies the modern pretence that psychology can deal with what once were called the problems of logic and ethics, and the modern claim of psychology to be a science of mind. People who make or admit that claim ought to know what it implies. It implies the systematic abolition of all those distinctions which, being valid for reason and will but not for sensation and appetite, constitute the special subject-matter of logic and ethics: distinctions like that between truth

³⁹ Usage, both colloquial and technical, has pretty much assimilated mind and psyche. Collingwood's concept of logic as a science of mind but not psyche is difficult for our concept of mind.

and error, knowledge and ignorance, science and sophistry, right and wrong, good and bad, expedient and inexpedient. Distinctions of this kind form the armature of every science; no one can abolish them and remain a scientist; psychology, therefore, regarded as the science of mind, is not a science. It is what 'phrenology' was in the early nineteenth century, and astrology and alchemy in the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century: the fashionable scientific fraud of the age.⁴⁰

The way the error gets going is precisely a case of ignoring the "yes, but which ones" question. There are two steps to the error: The first ignores all questions about what are the parts of such "concretions," why they are concreted together. The second, a corollary, deprives any reasons for such concretions of ontological citizenship. Thus does materialism enable naturalism and nominalism. People would laugh if you tried to reduce arithmetic to an effect of psychology: " $2 + 2 = 4$ because that's how the psychology of arithmetic works." You could not get away with saying that the psychology of arithmetic is real, but arithmetic itself is unreal, just an epiphenomenon. On the contrary, Peano's axioms etc. are full ontological citizens, and any who would deprive them of citizenship would simply be wrong. Yet human involvements in the world are messy and unattractive, and when people can get away with it, they are easily dismissed or hidden. The justification for this kind of ontological discrimination is "everybody does it."

From another perspective, the shift occurs in the move from mind, with the ontology of the rational animal (the Aristotelians did not read Heidegger and could not have seen the ontology of Dasein) to psychology, with a naturalistic ontology. Both mind and nature can be studied, but the study of mind makes a certain kind of demands on the student that the study of nature does not. Nature, qua nature, does not have the being of rational animals (or, for us, Dasein), and so studying it cannot impose demands of responsibility on, or expose irresponsibility in, the student. Study of mind does both.

As a practical matter of academic culture, many have accepted this materialism and its accompanying psychologism and yet still desired to study the phenomena that were dismissed to psychology. They have done so in psychology departments, even if what they were doing was really philos-

⁴⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 94-95.

ophy and not just psychology. Apropos of our own inquiry, some quite interesting work on narratives and how people judge narratives has been done in psychology departments, especially for educational psychology.

An example that bears on our own inquiry is not far to seek. “Attribution theory” in psychology is the study of how people attribute motives to others’ actions when the motives are not entirely clear or spelled out. This is a process of supposition: the brief account of some action carries with it default presuppositions about why the actor would do such a thing. So far, we are within the realm of an empirical science, and the results have been fairly rich.⁴¹ Indeed, what the psychologists have found provides much material for philosophical reflection. But as long as the problem remains within the horizons of an empirical science, the philosophical questions cannot be addressed: Of all the possible attributions of motives and reasons, attributions which determine what the act in view *was*, which attributions are the *right* ones? And what does it mean to be correct, in this context? These are questions about being and truth in regard to human action, and they lie beyond the reach of any empirical science. This is not to say that psychologists cannot answer them, but it does say that they cease to function as empirical scientists and become philosophers when they address questions of being and truth.

To foist the answers off onto the “intention” of the actor is both to evade the problem and at the same time to refer it to a narrative, the one “in the actor’s mind.” But we shall see when we come to Herbert Fingarette that actors’ narratives of their actions are frequently wrong. In any case, the question that was hidden by sweeping it under the rug of the actor’s mind remains the question in the central focus of this inquiry: if the act in view is constituted by its place in its context, some of it in the narrative, some of it presupposed or taken for granted, how does one truthfully decide what to include and what to leave out? What matters, and what does it mean to matter? To invoke the actor’s “state of mind” is explicitly to move to a systems ontology, hiding the world of narrative, and thereby protecting the concept of action from any distributed ontology.

Another way to see the confusions of psychologism is to distinguish

⁴¹ See for example Bernard Weiner, “Reflections on the History of Attribution Theory and Research; People, Personalities, Publications, Problems.” *Social Psychology* 39(3) (2008) 151–156. And see Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. I am indebted to Susan Ebbers for calling my attention to them. We meet these considerations again on p. 133.

four quite different questions:

- (1) How do people think about X?

This first question is legitimately empirical, fair game for psychology.

- (2) What is the *right* way to think about X?

This is a normative question, and so philosophical and not psychological. It requires answers to two more questions:

- (3) How does X work, conceptually?
(4) How does X *be*?

These are undeniably philosophical. The two questions (3) and (4) are in some sense parts of one inquiry. One can learn, philosophically, from the answers to question (1), because the mind is right in its thinking often enough to do that. (On the other hand, answering (1) may presuppose prior answers to (2).) But it doesn't help to confuse these four questions.

It would be unfair to fault psychologists for not being philosophers, and I do not do that; indeed, I am grateful to the psychologists for the help they offer to philosophy. I do fault philosophers who dismiss real philosophical problems to psychology because they don't want to deal with them in philosophy. The psychologists are left tacitly to assume that the philosophical problems have solutions, and get on with their own empirical work in psychology, or else they have to do for themselves what should have been provided by philosophy as a service organization.

Psychologism seems to be an all-purpose tool for undermining phenomena whose ontology brings discomfort, anxiety, and uncanniness to naturalists, nominalists, and materialists. The offending phenomenon is dismissed to psychology, which is presumably a real science, and can proceed by empirical methods rather than undertaking philosophical obligations that require reasoned analysis. If a phenomenon is discussable only in social psychology, it isn't "really" real. It is just an artifact of people's minds or of folk psychology.

Implicit in the turn to empirical methods is also a turn to systems ontologies and away from distributed ontologies. It is usually a distributed ontology at the root of the offensiveness. In Aristotelian terms, naturalism wants to evade final causes, materialism wants to evade formal causes, and nominalism wants to evade the messy features of universals. When

philosophers in the last two centuries explored beyond formal and final causes, they found a great deal more than the Aristotelian tradition had countenanced. Universals benefited in much the same way, as Anthony Kenny's comparison of Aquinas and Wittgenstein makes clear. Why this recent flowering of what used to be just formal and final causes? I think the reason probably starts with Aristotle. He was himself a kind of naturalist: his model for all phenomena was biology. That biology doesn't work very well as a model for physics was the fruit of the new seventeenth century sciences. We have not finished learning that biology as root model is still a kind of naturalism, even if one far richer than the naturalism of physics. The naturalism of physics didn't work very well when turned into an organon for the humanities, and the resulting failures undermined the Aristotelian naturalism as well. Modern hermeneutics and phenomenology were born in this crisis.

Naturalists, nominalists, and materialists can all respond to ontologically noxious language by redescribing the objectionable phenomenon in their own terms. In effect, however, what they have done is merely to point out that the material substrates have motions that can be brought to language in naturalistic, nominalist or materialist terms. Of course they can: material substrates are by definition materialistic and have naturalistic motions.⁴² To say that is not a concession, because it is asserted by the distributed ontology as much as by its systems-ontological naturalistic and materialistic adversaries. Yet the fact that the substrate motions are naturalistic does not touch the objections to naturalism, nominalism, and materialism. The "yes, but which ones?" question appears here also: One can develop a highly sophisticated sense of how to language phenomena in naturalistic terms without really facing the challenge of answering why they are brought to language in one way and not another. In the best case, where the naturalism is developed from Aristotelian biology, i. e., Thomistic philosophy, the results can be impressive indeed. It is a tribute to Thomas's genius that he could meet the challenge of Aristotelian philosophy in his time and articulate a philosophical theology both faithful to the biblical tradition, not just in its details but its instincts, and also intelligible in basically Aristotelian terms. Aristotle's horizons did not extend to history, and while Thomas knew some history in the Bible, historiography was not for him the problem it has become for us. Our theological and

⁴² The issues with Nominalism and its conjugate, Platonism, are probably more complex but not essentially different.

philosophical problems all arise from engagement with the phenomena of history as they became manifest in the nineteenth century. One reason why Aristotelian naturalism works better in the humanities than modern physics-based naturalism does is that Aristotelian naturalism has room for final causes, and so many of the elements of the humanities are built in, so to speak.

3.3.4 The Sciences

The “yes, but which ones?” question has a different sort of answer in the grounding of biology. One can ask this question of the material particulars of an organism, and again there is a pre-understanding, but it is of a different kind. What is presupposed is not a narrative but what may be called, for lack of a better term, “privative Dasein.” The organism is constituted by its relationship to itself among its conspecifics, and to its own survival and reproduction. The term “privative Dasein” comes from the Heidegger literature and is not common even there. Heidegger didn’t give much thought to the being of non-human animals, and his few comments are not always consistent.⁴³ Yet higher animals have most of what we are, save for language. Plants have less, but still some of what we are. We know privative Dasein because we are ourselves Dasein. We recognize what we are in other living organisms. To study the phenomenon we call “life,” living organisms, is to study the sort of being that bears a certain kind of analogy to human being: hence privative Dasein. The organism has a stake in its own survival and reproduction, even if the organism itself knows nothing of this stake. One can abstract from the grounding of our biological knowledge in our own living nature, I suppose, as biologists usually do. It isn’t very conspicuous even to philosophers. Biologists haven’t worried much about these things (they don’t read Heidegger, much to their greater happiness), and they have gotten on with their own business quite well without Heideggerian phenomenology.

In physics, things are quite different. A system is defined to contain certain matter, or is defined by a certain boundary surface, as may be convenient. The question “yes, but which matter?” doesn’t really arise, because in physics one can define systems any way one likes, but the physics always works the same way. The laws of physics are invariant under

⁴³ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) may be an exception; Heidegger considers animals at some length there.

changes of definition of systems. The trajectories of the material substrates are the same. The result is that one can subdivide in whatever way is computationally convenient. That usually means whatever way makes the equations simplest and easiest to solve.⁴⁴

3.3.5 Editing Made Visible

The role of editing is easy to see. Consider a somewhat abstract example to illustrate the problem with naturalistically motivated theories of action. Imagine a temporal series of events which we may label

$$a_1, b_2, x_3, a_4, x_5, x_6, c_7, a_8, x_9, c_{10}, b_{11}, \dots$$

The a series are physical events pertinent to one act, A ; the b series to another act, B , and the c series to yet a third act, C . The x 's are not a series at all, just irrelevant background in temporal order. The parts of the several acts are interleaved with one another. (The problem has already been greatly simplified, in a narrative form, but come to that in a moment.) The point to observe here is that they are distinguished and apportioned to their respective actions only by an act of editing on the part of the one who narrates them. That narrator is a supposedly competent human judge of such actions. Nothing in a physical or any other purely naturalistic description of these events can tell us anything about the acts they belong to. For naturalism, they are related as a simple sequence of causes and effects:

$$x_1, x_2, x_3, x_4, x_5, x_6, x_7, x_8, x_9, \dots$$

Nature knows nothing of a, b, c, A, B, C . The second series could be tokens for a mere naturalistic set of material trajectories. The first series is what you get after *editing*. There are several acts in view here, a, b, c, d , and possibly more. To see such a thing in real life, watch yourself in the kitchen, as your hands reaching for the material ingredients in various

⁴⁴ These observations are quite general and apply to all of physics. Nevertheless, they may be unfamiliar to those outside the sciences and both instinctive and tacit to those within. At the risk of pedantry, we may cite one particular example in which the claim is articulated in rigorous detail. The principle of uniform boundedness allows one to subdivide the world almost any way one likes, subject to very loose conditions. It undergirds finite-difference approximations to partial differential equations. See Robert D. Richtmyer and K. W. Morton, *Difference Methods for Initial-Value Problems* (New York: Interscience, 1967), p. 34 ff.

dishes. The components of several acts are interleaved, but no naturalistic line of reasoning could tell you which motions are parts of which acts. Some motions may be parts of *several* acts (which the series above do not indicate for us). To relabel x_1 as a_1 , x_2 as b_1 , and so on, is tacitly to envisage a , b , etc. in narrative: in terms of goals and progress toward goals. The reader is invited to devise even a simple example by which a naturalistic formula could pick out a particular kind of act, given only naturalistic material trajectories. Other readers will then have the pleasure of devising surrounding circumstances that render the proffered naturalistic diagnosis of an act invalid, inapt, inappropriate, or ambiguous.

In fact, of course, the “unedited” x_i series was already edited for purposes of the example; nothing less than the material trajectories of every particle in the universe would qualify as truly naturalistic, truly unedited. The x_i series was arbitrarily (from a naturalistic point of view) limited to the motions of some human being, the possible actor. The above series already bear the marks of editing. In place of each x_n , there should be an entire Cauchy surface; but that is still not enough. For present exemplary purposes, a Cauchy surface may be taken as a space-time manifold given at one time, on which state conditions are specified. The state of the system at one time evolves according to the given dynamics into the states of the system at successive times. Picking out “events” at a given time, or equivalently, dividing the Cauchy surface into sub-systems that represent events, is a matter of editing. There is no naturalistic way to do that in general. What is more, in human practical terms, we often do not know the physical state of the relevant past systems and can only suppose what we do not know.

3.4 Anthropological Resources

In quest of action, we will eventually touch what it means to be a human self. I have no intention of constructing a general theory of what it means to be a human self, but some features of selfhood are needed for our inquiry into human action. Some of the classic sources are in Heidegger and Kierkegaard, and their self-structures need to be amended before they are fully usable. Heidegger took human existence to be ontologically peculiar unto itself, “Da-sein,” there-being, the sort of being that has a “there,” i. e., a world and involvements in the world. It is the sort of being whose being is at issue for itself: it has a stake in its own being, as rocks and tools do

not. Behind Heidegger stands Kierkegaard, who defined a self as a relationship that relates itself to itself, but is constituted as such by an Other. And Edward Hobbs, in brief instructional materials, observed that in the Synoptic Gospels, the God comes into the world and suffers for other people. All three are missing important features that need to be supplied, at least in outline, before they are usable.

3.4.1 Heidegger's Dasein and Other People

Many readers have grumbled about Heidegger's structure of Dasein in *Being and Time*, complaining that it doesn't handle social being adequately. Defenders of Heidegger have usually cited his notion of *Mitsein*, being-with other people, and let it go at that. I think more radical surgery is needed, and though it can only be conjectured here, a sketch, at least, is possible. These misgivings are not mine alone; others have been dissatisfied also and have sought to patch the argument in Section 26, where the issue of other people is concentrated. Heidegger's remarks on Dasein's relations to other people in section 26 can be summoned to support opposing conceptions of Dasein. In places we shall see in a moment, Dasein is an entity in which other people are always already both present and essential. By contrast, in at least one place it sounds as if Dasein is an entity that exists in and for itself before its relations to other people, in direct denial of the reading that I am about to make:

The presupposition which this argument demands — that Dasein's Being towards itself is Being towards an Other — fails to hold.⁴⁵

Hubert L. Dreyfus has noted the incoherence also.⁴⁶ Section 26, on *Mitsein*, has a summary towards its end, p. 160/123, that could sound like the amended Dasein we seek here — if one already knew the present project. My claim is that *Mitsein* in the sense of being with other people presupposes an existential having-a-stake in other people. I cannot be a human self without other people, whether they are in competition or cooperation, whether they are physically present or far away. The stakes are often ambiguous: both competition and cooperation at the same time; and these

⁴⁵ *Being and Time*, p. 162/125.

⁴⁶ *Being in the World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 144: "This is not only confusing, it prevents the chapter from having the centrality it should have in an understanding of *Being and Time*."

two superficial words are only the most visible face of a phenomenon that is much more subtle than they hint. The word *competition* does not quite capture all of the phenomenon: *exploitation* is another aspect of it. One organism exploits another for its own benefit. Mutual exploitation of convenience is possible, and this may even be a form of cooperation. When language is added, the possibilities for ambiguity and interpretation become much greater.

Human existence in total isolation is impossible. Hubert Dreyfus, a patient and persevering reader, found much of this in Heidegger, but our emphasis and our applications will be slightly different from his.⁴⁷

Begin with Heidegger's analysis. Looking over the history of ontology, a discipline with no shortage of perplexities, Heidegger suggested turning the questioning about being from the being of things in the world back reflexively to the questioner, that is, to human beings and human existence. The argument of the first half of *Being and Time* notes the roots of tool-being in human being and progresses through human involvements in mere things to "Being-in-the-World," understanding and interpretation of things in the world, care as a level in the structure of Dasein, anxiety as a feature of care, and beneath them all, temporality, Dasein's present relation to its own past and future, to the *finitude* of that future: mortality. The definitions of Dasein come early, in the first introduction: Dasein is the sort of being that asks about Being.⁴⁸ It is also the sort of being that is itself at issue for itself. It has a stake in its own being.

Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being — a relationship which is itself one of Being.⁴⁹

From this will follow in due course the possibility of its own non-being and of anxiety and care as features of that kind of being.

All this is unobjectionable, and to overlook it is to miss features of both human existence and of things in the world without which they cannot

⁴⁷ Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, chapter 8, commenting on *Being and Time*, chapter I.4, where *Mitsein* appears.

⁴⁸ *Being and Time*, p. 27/7.

⁴⁹ *Being and Time*, p. 32/12. The theme gets developed in the section 9, the beginning of Chapter I, where Dasein's relations to itself appear, without relations to other Dasein.

really make sense.⁵⁰ Dasein is, in effect, what Kierkegaard (to whom we come momentarily) earlier called a relationship that relates itself to itself. Heidegger speaks of what we may call individuals, selves, ordinary human beings, as “particular Dasein.” Following Kierkegaard, he focuses on the individual’s relating to itself, leaving aside any constructive relations to other people.

Heidegger leaves something important out of the introductory definition, and the result is to make it seem like an inessential or secondary modification of Dasein when it appears later, in Section 26. American readers have been variously skittish or sloppy about treating Dasein as a count-noun or a stuff-noun, a kind of thing that occurs *simply* in particular instances or continuously just as a kind of being.⁵¹ That skittishness betrays the issue that was not explored. My contention, shifting Heidegger’s emphasis, is that Dasein is not just the sort of being that is at issue for itself (care, anxiety, etc.). It is also, and “equiprimordially,” as Heidegger would say, the sort of being that is at issue for *other* Dasein.⁵² In what follows, I shall accordingly speak of the “amended Dasein.” A particular instance of Dasein is not the only Dasein that has a stake in its own existence. Its parents do, most obviously, but also every other Dasein that it has rela-

⁵⁰ It is possible to take it for granted (in some circles in philosophy) because it has been assimilated. Yet it was shocking at the time, and it is for this reason that *Being and Time* has often been called the most important book in philosophy in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, many in philosophy continue as if Heidegger had not written. His breakthrough has been widely ignored. Cf. Bruce Wilshire, “Fifty Years of Academic Philosophy in the United States: Why the Failure of Nerve?”, *Soundings* 67 (1984/Winter) 411–419. This is, I think, fair despite the recognition of serious problems in his work.

⁵¹ Dreyfus notes that John Haugeland sought to resolve the problems in Section 26 by taking Dasein as a stuff-noun. Dreyfus demurred, as I do, and my remedy is different from both of theirs. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, p. 14. In effect, I take Dasein to have a distributed ontology unique unto itself (i.e., different from that of tool-being), in opposition to the incompletely purged features of a systems ontology that remain even in Heidegger (who generally opposed such a traditional approach).

⁵² I am told by Mary Ashley that feminist theology for the last two or three decades has come to consider human existence as “fundamentally relational.” African philosophy and African culture have apparently known about this for a long time. Many witnesses could testify, but a few online comments will have to do for now: A BBC story credits to Desmond Tutu a definition of *ubuntu*, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours.” [Http:// news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5388182.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5388182.stm), accessed 2011-06-29. I am indebted to William Stoeger, SJ, for notice of the concept of *ubuntu*; he cited Augustine Shutte to me as another source. Heidegger’s readers have come to this point late. Better late than never.

tionships with. Any particular instance of Dasein understands⁵³ this and relates to itself accordingly. Needless to say, it has a stake in the existence of other Dasein also. Heidegger almost says as much:

According to the analysis which we have now completed, Being with Others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an issue for Dasein in its very Being. Thus as Being-with, Dasein 'is' essentially for the sake of Others. This must be understood as an existential statement as to its essence. Even if the particular factual Dasein does *not* turn to Others, and supposes that it has no need of them or manages to get along without them, it *is* in the way of Being-with. In Being-with, as the existential "for-the-sake-of" of Others, these have already been disclosed in their Dasein.⁵⁴

These remarks should have appeared or at least been forecast in the initial definition of Dasein in the introduction, quoted above.

My quarrel with Heidegger can be put in another way. Whatever may be said of the German, in the English translations, "being-with" has an ambiguity that needs to be resolved; beneath it will lie another ambiguity that cannot simply be resolved. The first (and resolvable) ambiguity is that the "with" in being-with can in colloquial English mean both proximity to and existential relevance to. The meaning we want is existential relevance. Accordingly, Heidegger's chosen term (being-with) for the phenomenon in view may not have been the best. Existential relevance to, Dasein's primordial having a stake in other Dasein, has another ambiguity, and this one cannot simply be resolved: The mutual involvements of multiple Daseins can appear as cooperation or competition, as noted above. A particular Dasein has interests in other Dasein — but in the colloquial phrase from social ethics, Dasein always also has a conflict of interests.

Dasein's interrelatedness with other Dasein is the ontological precondition of many things, love and hate prominent among them. It is only a precondition; as Heidegger could have said, trust, love, and hate themselves are "existentiell modifications"⁵⁵ of the underlying ontological

⁵³ "Understands" in Heidegger means something more like "is familiar with" or "knows how to deal with" than "has a theory of."

⁵⁴ *Being and Time*, p. 160/123.

⁵⁵ Spelling of the terms *existentiell*, *existentiale*, *existentialia*: I follow the spelling in Macquarrie and Robinson, chiefly because none of these spellings are normal in English, and the differences from the spelling of related English words serve to mark these words in

mutual-at-stake-ness. Other existentiell expressions of the underlying mutual ontological involvements of human beings in each other happen when one person identifies with another, takes an interest in another, or stands as a representative of another. Leviticus 19.18, that one should love one's neighbor as oneself, also stands on this mutual at-stake-ness that philosophers so often ignore. Heidegger names the phenomenon in the phrase "transpose oneself into an other" in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.⁵⁶

A particular instance of Dasein is always *ontologically* at issue for Dasein — both its own and others' — with a relationship to its own and others' living being that rocks and hammers cannot have and non-linguistic animals can have only privatively. *Ontically*, an instance of Dasein learns to care for itself (in the colloquial meaning of "care") only because other Dasein, i. e., other human beings, usually its parents, already care for it. It learns that it is lovable because it is loved. It learns to care for itself physically because it is cared for physically. It learns that it is *not* lovable if it is not loved; love and being loved are existentiell modifications, not the primordial underlying ontology. But even if it learns that it is not lovable, that learning can happen at all only because it is always already the sort of being for which this is a possibility. Indeed, it's not just a possibility, but an existentiale that is necessarily and inevitably expressed in some sort of existentiell modification, whether happy or unhappy, whether recognized and languaged or not. If it is not loved, it may not know what it is missing, but it will be unhappy nonetheless. It may know that it is missing something without knowing *what* it is missing. Rocks and plants are not capable of this, and non-human animals are only partially capable of it.⁵⁷ Some of

their technical meanings, preventing colloquial misunderstandings. "Existentiell" pertains to Dasein's understanding of itself and other beings (*Being and Time*, p. 33/12). "Existentiale," singular (German *Existenzial*); "existentialia," plural, are features or phenomena or structures of being that are pertinent to Dasein, in distinction from categories, a traditional Aristotelian term, pertinent to kinds of being other than Dasein. Cf. the glossary in Macquarrie and Robinson, pp. 537, and *Being and Time*, p. 70/44. Much of the Heidegger literature in English does not follow Macquarrie and Robinson's spelling.

⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), Section 49, p. 201, "The methodological question concerning the ability to transpose oneself into other beings (animal, stone, man) as a substantive question concerning the specific manner of being that belongs to such beings."

⁵⁷ Other primates are capable only in a much diminished way, and marine mammals are not well understood. If language can be given to non-human primates, they will become capable of full Dasein to the extent that they can acquire language. Indeed, they will be

this can happen without the presence of human parents, though not without any human upbringing at all, as in the rare cases of feral children, humans who through circumstance are raised from infancy by animals. Typically, language acquisition and social skills are severely compromised.⁵⁸ Feral children are failed human beings, even if through no fault of their own, in an ontological way that ordinary animals of other species are not: dogs and chimpanzees are not failed human beings. That is not in their ontology.

People have a stake in each other's existence: The other can help, hurt, love, hate, support, compete with, approve, or disapprove of me. The other can provide for me. The other is both solace and strength for me. The other can be encouraging or insidiously destructive. One could go on for a long time and not exhaust the possibilities for human involvement in other human beings. Human existence is constituted in these possibilities. Heidegger mostly passed them by, but they matter for us. Human involvements in each other undergird human involvements in the stories we tell. It is these mutual human involvements that will enable us to criticize narratives as apt or not, as true or false, as misleading or illuminating. Because we have stakes in other people, because one can transpose oneself into other people, there is a limit to the liberty in narrating human actions. Some interpretations of human actions are defensible; others are not.

I think there is more than just what other people can do *for* me or *to* me. We are, in a sense, a part of one another. I have a stake in others' being that goes well beyond my benefit or harm from any other's behavior. This stake is well-attested. If we had no such stake in each other, we would not go to funerals. In physical anthropology, one question always asked of any hominid remains is whether they buried their dead, i. e., whether they cared about their dead. The import of asking whether they buried their dead is to ask to what degree they shared a common humanity with us: Did they understand themselves as part-of-one-another? This is not, by the way, what Arthur C. Clarke imagined in *Childhood's End*, a story in which pre-linguistic infants move directly to telepathy, skipping language, and thereby become parts of a collective single organism. In real life,

ontologically transformed in that language acquisition. It has not happened yet, though there are efforts to that end. But even non-linguistic animals in their capacity for love and suffering make a demand on human beings; the privative Dasein of animals and the full Dasein of humans have deep involvements in each other.

⁵⁸ The Wikipedia article "Feral child" (as it was 2009 August 11) indicates that the notion of feral children attracts hoaxes and a technical literature that is not notably rigorous. So my inferences are cautious and minimal.

by contrast, we are individuals (with primordial ontological ties to one another), not parts a single common organism. It is easy to miss or ignore our common ties.

Another attestation of the depth of our mutual involvement can be imagined simply. If astronomers witnessed the death of a distant civilization (complex and apparently intelligent radio transmissions go silent after a supernova occurs close by), we would be deeply touched by the observations, even though they had no practical consequences for us. It would be more than “the same thing could happen to us.” That “more” is not well understood, and it is easily overlooked. Yet this is undeniable: human being is the sort of being that is capable of pity. Pity can be either compassion, that is, co-suffering, or it can be a form of contempt. Pity as contempt is a rejection of co-suffering, but the rejection attests the possibility of what is rejected. In the possibility of co-suffering, people, simply by being there, constitute claims on other people. This possibility is attested by the discomfort of “normals” in the presence of people with disabilities, by their efforts to limit the degree to which they have to accept the disabled.⁵⁹ Those efforts often take the form of “help,” especially when “help” is not helpful or is imposed involuntarily on the disabled. Even more difficult for “normals” than co-suffering (which is often not needed or wanted) is willingness to see themselves in the disabled.⁶⁰ The claims of common humanity are unbearable, and they are attested by the attempts of “normals” to evade them, by “helping” the disabled and thereby taking control.

Without other people, I have no self, no world, no meaning. Without the world, and animals in it, I could not be the sort of self that I am. Sociologists have discovered this on their own, without help from philosophers.⁶¹ Their term for the presence of others is the “generalized other.” Society and meaning are a project in the face of death and suffering. The project of meaning is always intersubjective, a matter of shared subjectivity, depending on others even when it is conflicted. We bump into this

⁵⁹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), pp. 114–123.

⁶⁰ Recall Heidegger’s language of “transposing oneself into another.” That is what normals are unwilling to do with respect to those stigmatized.

⁶¹ One whom I am aware of is Thomas J. Scheff, in *Microsociology: Discourse, Emotion, and Social Structure* (University of Chicago Press, 1990). His position is that inadequate *Mitsein* (to borrow Heidegger’s term) is experienced as shame, and the possibility of shame is at the hub of all interpersonal relations.

dependency on others when we deal with its more superficial aspects, its existentiell modifications in love, hate, cooperation, competition, etc. But we have been living with it already just in the acquisition of language. It is true that “language, self, and a world are a package, and language is the carrier of the package.”⁶² But language carries more than that: it engages and expresses and indeed brings to being this mutual inter-involvement of human selves. Among the meanings of “other” as in *an* Other is carrier-of-meaning, one who challenges and enables me. Heidegger remarks⁶³ that even in encountering tools, one encounters also (unnoticed) the presence of other people for whom also the things are useful tools. It is the same with language: meaning is sharable, or it isn’t meaning. It doesn’t have to be shared, but it does have to be *sharable*. The others are tacitly present as critics; without them, language would be arbitrary. Without some intersubjective criticism, language couldn’t carry anything we could call *meaning*. We shall return to this when we come to the criticism of narratives in chapter 5. The ontological presence of others in all meaning is both acute and elusive in our mortality: If an other dies, I am involved, whether I like it or not. There is more here than I understand, but this is a start.

Dasein’s inter-involvements include the feature that what is in one Dasein’s interest may not be in another’s. We have laid the groundwork for deep ambiguities, and that ground is watered in language. Language is ambiguous. What is the good for someone, “life more abundantly,” can mean many things, because pasts and futures can be told many ways, not all consistent or equivalent. People don’t agree on what “life more abundantly is.” Conflict of interest between individuals appears already with the most primitive life forms. Ambiguity of interests and conflict of interpretations come with language, because it is only in language that we can project multiple possibilities for living for one and the same individual. Language both creates and sometimes resolves ambiguity; out of that will come original sin in ethics and pluralism in culture.

The possibility of love appears with other animals, who certainly demonstrate it. The possibilities of both affirmation and denial appear only with language. We can deny mutual involvements with other human life easily enough. “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her?” What we cannot deny is the *possibility* of such involvements. That possibility is what we are made of. Rocks and tools are not

⁶² Cf. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 133.

⁶³ *Being and Time*, p. 153/117.

this sort of being and non-linguistic animals are only privatively so. We shall meet these themes again. We have bumped into them here.

3.4.2 Kierkegaard's Self-Relating Self

Søren Kierkegaard opened *The Sickness Unto Death* with a definition of human selfhood: "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself ..." A few lines later, he speaks of it as "established by another" and as "a relationship that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."⁶⁴ The 'other' that Kierkegaard has in mind is God, and the rest of the book proceeds to explore the relationship of the self to itself in its relationship also to God.

The emendation of Kierkegaard necessary for the present inquiry parallels that of Heidegger. The relationship that relates itself to itself is constituted by much other, long before it is constituted by an Other. We are constituted as such self-relating relationships by much that is merely in the world around us, and prominently, as with the emended Heidegger above, by other people. We learn to be self-relating selves from other such selves, and we learn to be-in-the-world by taking over a world that has been socially constructed out of natural and social material by other selves in community. Yet there is more than mere learning here, or better, there is something more *beneath* the learning: The self that relates itself to itself is, as with the emended Heidegger, always a self that others also relate to. It learns to relate itself to itself *as* one constituted in and by its relations to other selves because it *is* one constituted in and by its relations to other selves, even already before it is born.⁶⁵

The challenge for such a Kierkegaardian self that is constituted from outside of itself is whether it will accept this constitution, one that is not under its own control. Will it consent to be a self that has been constituted by others? Will it not even try (the despair of apathy)? Will it instead try to be a self of its own devising (the despair of defiance)? These two despairs are usually opposed to the virtue of hope, but Kierkegaard opposes

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Sickness Unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Understanding and Awakening*. (Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 13–14.

⁶⁵ Ample testimony to this constitution comes from the sociology of knowledge, of which Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* is exemplary: see Part I, Systematic Elements. Berger deals with the consequences reflected in the essential sociality of human beings without inquiring into the underlying ontology, and so, while the theoretical sociology is quite rich, it probably does not discharge all the obligations of a rigorous ontology.

them instead to faith, and for Christians, faith is about history, a point that Kierkegaard does not make much of in *Sickness Unto Death*, though he is aware of history in other places. In that book, Kierkegaard leaps over history and other people directly to God, a move that we are not yet ready for here. Without giving up the classical remedy for despair in hope, the remedy in faith is directly germane to the present inquiry, for history is about narratives. The self is constituted by the narratives it lives in, history being the matrix for those narratives.

Kierkegaard's central concern in *Sickness Unto Death* enables a comment on one of the acknowledged problems in *Being and Time*. Heidegger's larger project was to begin a "fundamental ontology," that is, find a starting point in ontology from which the being of all other things could be derived. Dasein, human being, was to be that starting point. He gave up the project, declaring it a failure when only the first third of the envisioned *Being and Time* was published. Such projects he later called "ontotheologies," ontologies in which one kind of being (typically the deity) would explain all other kinds of being. In starting with human existence I think he was right, but he was also right in his misgivings that there has to be some room left for a larger reality that is not dependent in *every* respect on human existence. That tension he did not resolve, nor can I, but it lies in the background of the present inquiry. Serious problems became manifest in Heidegger's own work when he wanted to recover an appreciation that there is world out there independent of Dasein, and that such world needs respect, not least in its mysterious aspects. But the emended Kierkegaard might have predicted the problems in advance, for he knew that a self is itself constituted by much that is other. One can't *just* start with selves or Dasein. They do not get their being from themselves; they are not self-explanatory. In a sense, that merely restates the problem, but it is an important restatement. Many kinds of beings in the world make sense only after Dasein, the being of the questioner, has been interrogated, but Dasein itself gets its being from sources that are not at all obvious. That puzzle we leave unsolved.

3.4.3 Hobbs on Suffering for Others

Edward Hobbs, in the course of other business, counted among the theological commitments of the Synoptic Gospels the thesis that the God comes into the world and "suffers for other people ... both for the sake of and

because of other people.”⁶⁶ The necessary gloss parallels the ones above for Heidegger and Kierkegaard: The God manifest in the world can suffer for other people because human beings already themselves suffer for each other, in both senses of “for.” Hobbs would not disagree, I think. The point needed in the present inquiry was not necessary for his own. That humans suffer for other people is an implication of the emendation of Heidegger’s Daseinanalytik: human Dasein is at issue not only for itself but for other Dasein. From that mutual at-issue-ness, together with the other features of Dasein (care, mortality) comes suffering for other people.

We are now in a position to give some context to another of Edward Hobbs’s observations about the pains of life. They come, he said, in three chief forms: exposure, limitation, and need.⁶⁷ These pains and their claim on people have their roots in the amended Dasein of mutual human involvements. To be exposed is to be put in a “situation which exposed or revealed the discrepancy between one’s pretensions and one’s actual life-as-lived.” Limitation is intuitive enough: limits on what we can do. Need is an “encounter with others in their need for help.”⁶⁸ These situations make a demand on us at all only because we are Dasein constituted as human involvement with other human beings. If we were not involved in other people, who could care about what they think? Or need? Limitation seems in the intuitive abstract not to be about other people, but all its original occasions, the experiences in which we learn to meet limitation, are limitations imposed by other people. We are provided for by parents, and limits are placed on our behavior simply in the course of primary socialization. We shall meet the series exposure, limitation, and need again in what follows, sometimes under other names.

⁶⁶ Unpublished instructional materials.

⁶⁷ The thesis first appeared in Edward Craig Hobbs, “An Alternate Model from a Theological Perspective.” In Herbert A. Otto, *The Family in Search of a Future*. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 32–33. The thesis was elaborated in Andrew Porter and Edward C. Hobbs, “The Trinity and the Indo-European Tripartite World-view,” *Budhi* (Manila) Vol. 3, nos. 2&3 (1999) 1–28. Available on the internet at <http://www.jedp.com/trinity.html>. It was further developed in Porter, *Unwelcome Good News*.

⁶⁸ Edward C. Hobbs, “An Alternate Model,” pp. 32–33.

3.4.4 Niebuhr on Meaning in History

H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* is still assigned to theology students, but it never attracted much attention from historians.⁶⁹ The candidly confessional title, associating the book and its problem with a concept that is widely suspect where it is not simply dismissed as incredible, insured that the book was ignored outside of theology. That is odd, because in his definition, revelation is that history which we use to make sense of the rest of history, that history that makes sense of our life in community. It ought to have had a reading beyond just theology. But this definition restates the book's unattractiveness, for it makes its object, already odious, subjective and sectarian. The history people use to make sense of their lives is their choice, and history, in full flower of physics envy and quest of "scientific" status, wanted nothing to do with anything interpreter-relative that could be heckled as "subjective." And that was not the only problem; there was a deeper one, rarely seen. Niebuhr worked in a style of thinking taken from Neokantian metaphysics, unlabeled. Neokantian metaphysics has never sold very well in North America. Rather than try to debug Niebuhr's Neokantian explanations, it is simpler just to present an amended version.

He sought to distinguish what he called "external" from "internal" history. They have different logics, both constructed on Neokantian lines. Instead of following Niebuhr in detail, I would like merely to observe that internal and external history answer different questions and answer *to* different communities of responsibility.⁷⁰

Internal history, the life of a community, has fared somewhat better than external history. External history became the "scientific" history of the nineteenth century, the history of historicism that we shall meet in section 6.2. Yet beneath external history there always lurked internal history. It is not just that the people the historian studies have their own internal history; that history can be bracketed. Problems arise when the historians themselves have their own internal history, or when the historian's interest in those he studies arises from analogies with his own interests. At that point, the ambitions of historicism became suspect.

What, then, are the differences between external and internal history? In external history, time is chronological, the time that is counted and mea-

⁶⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1940). Third edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

⁷⁰ We meet the communal dimension of responsibility in section 5.4.4.

sured in calendars. In internal history, time is kairological. Time and events are in us rather than we in time. Subjectivity is not subjectivism, caprice, whimsy, or something arbitrary: It is “not equivalent to isolation, non-verifiability and ineffability; our history can be communicated and persons can refresh as well as criticize each other’s memories of what has happened to them in the common life; on the basis of a common past they can think together about the common future.”⁷¹

In external history, value, if it can be called value at all, is merely the magnitude of one event in its effects on others. In internal history, it is meaning and worth for human selves.

The relation of selves and society (in external history) is different from selves in community (in internal history). External history sees only external relations between human beings. For internal history, “we do not only live *among* other selves but they live *in* us and we *in* them.”⁷²

Many others have dealt with these issues, not always with Niebuhr’s clarity. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob have secular American history in mind, but they end in almost Niebuhrian terms: “A comprehensive national history is not now an educational option for this country; it is a cultural imperative.” “Fragments — whether of research findings or of tangential groups — do not exist independent of the whole that makes them fragments. The full story of the American past can make that evident.” They see the reciprocal relationship between wholes and parts in history to which we shall come in Gadamer’s work, but they think it can be stopped at some whole (American history) smaller than the whole history of mankind.⁷³ The relations between parts and wholes and between internal and external history have not been fully explored. We see some of these issues again in section 5.4.3, where Niebuhr appears also.

⁷¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 3rd ed., p. 38.

⁷² *The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 37. Emphasis added. Niebuhr has in his own way made the same correction to Heidegger’s Dasein as we have, above.

⁷³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), p. 295.

Chapter 4

The Philosophical Literature

4.1 The Problem, Unsolved: Troeltsch

Ernst Troeltsch, especially in the Formal Logic of History in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, foresaw much of what came later. He has been neglected. His major work on the philosophy of history has not (yet) been translated, which may explain some of the neglect.¹ It was written “in a complicated process from 1915 to 1922.”² Even R. G. Collingwood passed over Troeltsch in silence in *The Idea of History*, a lapse that is unexplainable, since Troeltsch could have enormously strengthened Collingwood’s case against naturalizing history. *Der Historismus* is also a catena of reviews of other historians and philosophers of history, somewhat episodic rather than a unified argument, which may explain some of its neglect. There is some commentary in English.³

Troeltsch confessed himself defeated by what he discovered, because he inherited — he unconsciously assumed — an obligation to preserve the

¹ There is an informal translation, a xerox of a carbon-copy of a typescript, available only in a few theological libraries. I have used that as a guide to the German text. A translation is expected from Fortress Press. *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* was published circa 1922. It is volume 3 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, pub. Scientia Aalen, 1961. There is a more recent edition in the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, from Walter de Gruyter, to be published in October 2008. Citations are to the *Gesammelte Schriften* edition, vol. 3, as in “GS 3:33,” i. e., GS-3, p. 33. The English quotations are from the anonymous translation, sometimes silently altered.

² From the de Gruyter web-site, 2008-10-16.

³ Benjamin A. Reist, *Toward A Theology of Involvement; the thought of Ernst Troeltsch*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966. Robert J. Rubanowice, *Crisis in Consciousness; the Thought of Ernst Troeltsch*. Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1982.

“absoluteness” of Christianity, and in that task he knew he failed. The idea that historical relativity might be built into historical religion in a way that solves problems rather than creates them he apparently did not see. Yet he was never far from it. Along the way, he lays out many of the features of historical thinking. His problems began to get solutions a half-century later with Alasdair MacIntyre among many others.

There are eleven features of the formal logic of history (page references are to GS 3, pp. 27–67):

1. individual totality (32)
2. originality and uniqueness (38)
3. narrow selection (39)
4. representation (40)
5. unity of value or meaning (42)
6. tension of General Spirit and Particular Spirits (44)
7. the unconscious (46)
8. the creative (48)
9. freedom in the sense of choice (50)
10. chance (Zufall) (51)
11. development (54)

Troeltsch wrote much about other aspects of history (concretely, in the *Social Teachings*) and about abstract issues of method (e. g. the essay on criticism, analogy, and correlation, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology”). Those efforts dealt with important matters but not the central relation between history, the historian, and the narratives the historian crafts. For that, the Formal Logic is the focal text. The categories at the beginning and the end comprehend all the others: individual totality and development. The categories in between (2)–(10) are all features of the concepts of individuality and development. Numbers (2)–(7) expand the concept of individual totality, of which they are all aspects. Numbers (8)–(10), the creative, freedom, and chance, are all aspects of change in preparation for number (11), development.

All eleven trade in narratives, though that might not be noticed. The knowing of things in history depends on the skills of narration, and the being of the things themselves is in some sense proportionate to their knowing, else we could not really know them. Knowing and the means of knowing are an access to being. Their ontology depends on their narration, though Troeltsch didn’t entirely see that and perhaps could not have.

He may well have thought himself a nominalist; I don't know. The comments here must of necessity be limited to brief observations in aid of only one point: Troeltsch saw some of the features of the distributed ontology, features which are yet to emerge in the present study. This is in no way a commentary on the Formal Logic section, much less on the whole of *Der Historismus*.

1. The category of *individual totality* is the beginning: history has nothing like the elements of the natural sciences, elements that can be understood without their larger context, elements from which more complex things can be built. History deals always already with combinations, composite beings, conglomerations, historically significant totalities — totalities of life (GS 3:32). Important features of a distributed ontology are present here already, for nothing in history can be defined (i. e., ontologically constituted) without reference to the larger world around it, and its definition is not something that can be controlled in the way definitions can be in a systems ontology (cf. section 3.1). Probably better than “individual totality” would be something like historical individual or just the object of a question, “What is a thing of interest in history?” Development is about its life and changes over the course of history. Examples are “collective individualities, nations, states, classes, castes, cultural epochs, cultural tendencies, religious associations, complex occurrences of all kinds, like wars, revolutions, etc.” (GS 3:33). There is a great deal more here than just people, states, wars, and armies.⁴ That this is an expanding class of categories is attested in the discourse of the social sciences and the history of ideas, a twentieth-century academic phenomenon. It is not a coincidence that Troeltsch lived in Max Weber's house for some years.⁵ Though they are not the thematic focus of our inquiry, these historical categories are the larger context for human action and so are involved in its being.

2. The notion of individual totality contains the notion of *originality and uniqueness*. Reasoning in history is not like deduction in the natural sciences according to law. Troeltsch speaks of the historian's *Einfühlen* into the events of history (GS 3:38), a word that is usually translated as *empathy*. Empathy is true enough, I suppose: it means the kind of understanding of other human beings that is possible only because one is oneself

⁴ One thinks of the presumptive differences between merely the Annals of the Kings of Judah and Israel (now lost) and the Deuteronomistic History that they became in the Former Prophets.

⁵ Hans-Georg Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch: His Life and Work* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 122–123.

a human being.⁶ To say that one “feels one’s way into” the history is an apt if over-literal translation. Troeltsch here continues his polemic against reducing history to the terms of nature; he had many allies, from his contemporary historians to the philosophers Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and our own contemporaries. Because every historical individual is unique, it is impossible to make the sort of generalizations that naturalistic reasoning requires. Yet the temptation to naturalize will always be with us; everywhere it besets the ideas of the present study.

3. *Narrow selection*: The skill of the historian is in picking out what is typical, evocative, that from which the reader can see by analogy what a historical phenomenon was like.

Only by selection and emphasis can one say anything about history. The intuitive opposed position today is that, since we have so much storage capacity, why can’t we just keep it all (hard-disk space is cheap)? That is to mistake an archive for history. They are not the same thing. Archives are treasures, and their loss is an impoverishment, but they are not histories. This is akin to the naturalistic fallacy that material motions alone, by themselves (here archive contents) determine the significance of the actions to which they are pertinent. They do not. Pertinence is human-relative, editorial, and about human involvements. It is more than just material motions. And even archivists must select: they cannot keep literally everything, they have to make choices about what matters even if they keep more than historians include.

4. *Representation*: historical description represents numerous details by the characteristics contained in a few, aptly selected. The reader’s ability to understand history, to think historically, and actively and substantively to fill in more than what is in the mere representative details is always assumed (GS 3:40, quite paraphrased and extended). This will reappear with Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, chapter 3, in mimesis-1 and mimesis-3.⁷ Troeltsch speaks of the historian’s “tact,” a word that will reappear with Hans-Georg Gadamer early in *Truth and Method*.

5. *Unity of value and meaning*: this is the central problem that appeared in the beginning: What is a historical individual? What holds it together? This thread will run through the present study to the end, ultimately in the form of asking what constitutes coherence of a human life.

⁶ To be fussy, this is a consequence of the amended Dasein: human beings can have empathy for other human beings because they are a part of each other.

⁷ Cf. p. 120 below.

6. *Tension between General Spirit and Particular Spirits.* Troeltsch's exposition, though helpful, is nevertheless quite puzzling. This tension, he says, is "the most difficult problem of history" (GS 3:44). We are assuredly dealing with the problem of relating wholes and parts, and he rejects the easy solutions readily available, importing whole-part relations from psychology, sociology, or from unnamed mystical sources of hypostatization. This, in a word, is our problem, "yes, but which ones," which we saw in section 3.3.1. For the present, it is enough to credit Troeltsch for seeing the problem and for intuiting that it does not have a *systematic* solution. We are in the land of hermeneutics, not the natural sciences. In hermeneutics there is no method, and the divide-and-conquer approach of a systems ontology would cover up rather than disclose the real phenomena before us. The fruit of the tension between the general and the particular is negative but nonetheless important.

7. *The unconscious:* Troeltsch here anticipates R. G. Collingwood, A. C. Danto, Herbert Fingarette, and others after them. This unconscious is not a Freudian concept; it is the fact that our actions, emotions, intentions, etc. carry more than we know. Up close, we are not good judges of the significance of events. We cannot know now what is in process of consummation. One has to look to the future of an event to see what its hidden assumptions and presuppositions are.

8. *The creative:* this is more than individual originality; it is the great transforming impulses of history. This does not mean suspension of causality. It is simply the appearance of the new in history under the aspect of its fruits in later development. Neokantians on one side and psychological reductionists on the other are Troeltsch's adversaries. The term *causality* usually means naturalistic efficient causality, but causation in history works in other ways, as Troeltsch notes, GS 3:55.

9. *Freedom in the sense of the arbitrary:* In Troeltsch's language, perhaps not as clear as it might be, the creative is the inexplicable-by-law, and the free has an intentional structure reflexively directed toward itself. Troeltsch does not say it, but the free is the self-production of the self. He has mirrored Kierkegaard and anticipated Heidegger in his understanding of human selves, and he sees that this alone puts history in a world apart from nature, one that is not reducible to calculations. There are no laws of history as there are in nature.

10. *Chance (Zufall):* Accident is "something produced by intersection

of different heterogeneous systems of laws that do not possess a common root" (GS 3:51). Troeltsch is not as clear as one could wish, but here, I think, is the problem. He speaks, for instance, of the man walking who is hit on the head by a brick and says (GS 3:53), "Taken alone, a walking person and a brick belong to different systems." But do they? Not from any naturalistic perspective, and the only way to separate them into "different systems" depends on a *narrative* constitution of those different "causal chains," in a commonly used phrase.

Another important issue appears in the discussion of chance. There is a temptation to attribute interventions of "different systems" to providence, whether from the providence of a biblical deity or some other. This is to be resisted by the historian; Troeltsch is ever jealous of the logical integrity of historical reason, and rightly so. There is nevertheless more here than meets the eye, and more than he saw. He was a believing Christian and presumably did believe in divine providence, and so the problem remains unsolved. It can be re-posed if a distinction is imported from one of his readers, H. Richard Niebuhr. The logic and categories of "external history" are not the same as those of "internal history," the past as told from the inside of a confessional community in history. External history knows nothing of providence, but providence is a category very much at home in internal history.

Out of the individual and its historical constitution (only partially recognized as a narrative constitution) grows the question of development.

11. *Development* (*Entwicklung*, GS 3:54). This gets disproportionate space (more than a third of the total for all eleven categories). The motive, apparently, was to ward off the notion that individuals are static things. They develop, and in that development, we shall claim that the individual at any point of its history is shaped by what it was and by what it will become. How much of the transtemporal constitution of individuality Troeltsch spelled out, I do not know; he certainly wrestled with it.

He saw some of the differences between the naturalistic and subdividable time of physics and the human time of history:

This differentiation finally leads into the depths of a different concept of time, one that is the foundation of becoming as understood by natural science and by history. The first refers to space and spatial movement (and therewith to the concept of causality); the second refers to the inner sense and to memory, which possesses both spatial and non-spatial contents. The

second thus puts spatial movement in the service of orienting past, present, and future. The first concept of time cuts up time into accurately limited single sections and into single facts standing in these sections, which is finally possible only by reducing time to spatial happenings. Historical time, on the other hand, means a stream in which nothing is limited and isolated, but where all things flow into each other, where past and future are put into each other, where each present time carries, in a productive manner, at once past and future, where a measuring is not possible but only caesuras, which are more or less arbitrarily put in according to connections of meaning and great changes of meaning. The chronological reduction of these proceedings to spatial solar time is only a very crude and superficial means of orientation, which has nothing to do with the inner division, with the inner slowness or rapidity.⁸

Here he anticipates Ricoeur's questioning that we will see when we come to *Time and Narrative*. From the differences between time in physics and history naturally come questions about what to include in a narrative and how to arrange the parts of a narrative. Troeltsch was concerned that the arrangement of a historical narrative not be dictated by categories or values introduced from outside but should emerge from the events themselves.⁹ He saw the texture of the phenomena the agent intellect deals with, in concrete ways peculiar to history. What Troeltsch saw will only begin to make sense after we have acquired other more recent resources. Eventually, the crisis of historicism of which he was a part will find its place in the larger story of Western culture and biblical religion and their changing understanding of history.

4.2 Scattered Resources for a Distributed Ontology

Philosophy has come a long way since Troeltsch, and more resources than he had are available now. There were a few initial clues to concepts of action that go well beyond anything naturalistic. No one of them alone is enough to unsettle the philosophy of action, although MacIntyre's discussion comes close. Yet taken together, they open up a new world. Each

⁸ GS 3:56–57, anonymous translation altered.

⁹ Cf. Rubanowice's comments as a guide to the dialogue with Rickert in *Der Historismus*; Rubanowice, p. 86 ff.

contributes some feature of action that goes well beyond what naturalism can account for. It is worth noting, since the word *naturalism* is so vexed, that the proper contrast to nature is not the supernatural but rather history — or for our purposes, historical narrative.¹⁰ The most concentrated exposition is in *After Virtue*, and we shall give central attention to MacIntyre, though not the longest treatment, which falls to Paul Ricoeur on narrative. First let me say a little bit here about what what is to follow. We ascribe virtues to human actions or human beings, but the criticism of the virtues depends on assessment of narratives and of narratable lives. This study will reverse the proportions of MacIntyre's interests: for him, narrative was worth a digression in a work otherwise devoted to the history of virtue ethics. We shall slip into ethics only occasionally, concentrating on the narrative faculties that underpin ethics and practical reason.

Arthur C. Danto stands as a witness that the transtemporal character of historical action was visible even within the terms of Analytic philosophy. Edmund Gettier in Analytic philosophy was interested in epistemology, not ontology or action at all. In the course of business in epistemology he demonstrated that, by changing things left out of a narrative, it is possible to transform things within the narrative. H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Responsible Self* located human acts within larger sequences of actions in a structure akin to conversations. Paul Ricoeur, in "The Model of Text," showed how acts grow over time, "after the fact." Herbert Fingarette, in *Self Deception*, exposed our skills in narrating (and in *not* narrating) and the pivotal role they play in structuring our lives. H. L. A. Hart reminds us that action and its consequences have their roots in language and, more specifically, language in community. Mircea Eliade, in *Cosmos and History*, opened up the differences between naturalistic and historical thinking about human action and human lives, and Merold Westphal greatly expanded and deepened Eliade's distinctions. In particular, he showed that the differences go as deep as basic life orientation (or as it is more familiarly known and misunderstood, "religion"). Joseph Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* can stand both as corroboration of Westphal and as another witness that acts can grow and be changed over time. Hans-Georg Gadamer consolidated a revolution in thinking in hermeneutics and the humanities

¹⁰ The distinction is hardly original with me; it was widespread in nineteenth century German thought. See e. g. Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* or Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*. I probably first saw it in R. G. Collingwood, but I don't have a citation or a source. We shall return to the problems of naturalism often in the course of this study.

that had been in preparation for two centuries, making it impossible ever after to confuse the habits of thought in the natural sciences with those in the humanities.

We shall come to the work of Paul Ricoeur, centrally the opening arguments of *Time and Narrative*, which is sufficient to get the present inquiry started. In that book, he documents in detail his contention that, though there is an existential phenomenology of human existence at a deeper level (Heidegger's *Daseinanalytik*) and a naturalistic understanding of time and temporality in the sciences (at a shallower level), in between, so to speak, there is a realm in which we make sense of life in time by means of narrative, emplotment. Much of that argument illuminates human action as well as life in time.

After taking the shorter works at the beginning, we shall give MacIntyre, Gadamer, and Ricoeur extended treatment.

4.2.1 Danto and Anscombe

A. C. Danto in *Analytical Philosophy of History* saw that history and narrative have a transtemporal character, that acts and events in history get their being only from the larger narratives they fit into and so can be revised after the fact.¹¹ The book on history is more helpful than his later *Analytical Philosophy of Action*, in which the approach is more typical of Analytic philosophy.¹² Many of Danto's arguments are with figures we need not deal with, and his relevant insights may be summarized briefly. It is in the nature of narrative that it is about at least two times, that of the events and that of the narrator, and its transtemporal character originates in this logic: "Narrative sentences refer to at least two time-separated events, and describe the earlier event" (159). He sees as well that to describe historical events as they are (or were) is not just about their past. It is always to situate them with regard to their future also, a future that lies in the narrator's past. There is considerable discussion by way of an example of the claim that a man "is planting roses" (160 ff.). It would be of less interest were it not that Alasdair MacIntyre took it up later in *After Virtue* as his own prime example of the logic that relates actions to their larger context. Danto sees the importance of editing: "Not to have a criterion for picking

¹¹ A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹² A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

out some happenings as relevant and others as irrelevant is simply not to be in a position to write history at all" (167). He speaks of a "retroactive re-alignment of the Past" (168). The meaning of past events changes as their future changes. The significance of present events is often contained in the unknown future (169). We argue that events get their being from their meaning, because it is the meaning that picks out what the events *are*. Danto has seen a cross-temporal character of acts that quite transcends any kind of systems thinking.

Elizabeth Anscombe in *Intention* saw some features of action in common with Danto and Gettier, both of whom came after her and wrote more or less independently. In trying to answer the question when and how an act might be intentional, she concluded that an act is intentional "under a description" — and that many descriptions of an act are possible. "The very same proceedings are intentional under one description and unintentional under another."¹³ Much of her style of inquiry consists of varying what is included in a description in order to inspect the philosophical consequences. This exemplifies the observation in the present study that all the important questions about action depend on what is included and what is left out of its narratives. What she did not break through to was a focus on narrative as such, nor did she spell out the circular relationship between narratives and actions that we shall come to shortly.

4.2.2 Gettier Problems

Analytic philosophy has little interest in narrative, yet it has occasionally found significant evidence for those who are interested in narrative. Edmund Gettier's name is associated with a collection of phenomena that resist treatment by Analytic means. The problems arose in epistemology, yet they touch ontology unrecognized. The question then under debate was whether justified true belief is an adequate definition of knowledge. Gettier proposed a scenario in which a knower appeared to have reasonable justification for believing something, where the philosopher could easily undermine that justification by changing things unknown and "off-stage," things heretofore unknown and left out of the narrative.¹⁴ The things changed were not actions but just propositions compounded of circumstances, and so the problems stayed safely within the ambit of epistemology, or ap-

¹³ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, 1963), par. 19, p. 28.

¹⁴ Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", *Analysis* 23 (1963) 121–3.

peared to. Epistemology is not our interest, but Gettier phenomena (for that is what they have come to be called) bear on ontology also. The things to be known turned out to be changeable, and they usually involve human actions in one form or another. Gettier explored a technique for constructing counter-examples to rules, and others followed where he led. Some observations are possible.

Apparently the problem, when posed in Analytic terms, is difficult. Recent summaries, at least as of a dozen or more years ago, report no solution.¹⁵ The Wikipedia follows the problem and says much the same thing.

The Analytic instinct reduces examples of the problem to propositions that can be known, believed, and justified. The present inquiry will proceed on another level, before any propositions. Propositions abstract, and what they abstract from is a narratable situation. The process of abstraction is a process of selection: some things are included, others are left out as irrelevant, and what is included is usually further reduced to a few tokens standing for the events in view.

The Analytic discussion sets little store by the difference between the on-stage and the off-stage, the difference between what is included and what is omitted from the summarized story. It merely seeks something off-stage in a clever and perhaps contrived way in order to change the propositional analysis of what is in focal view. Gettier's method is not spelled out in terms of the off-stage, the on-stage, and their relation. It was not necessary to spell it out in order to imitate it. Along the way, it was not noticed that the propositions about what is visible in a situation do not determine everything that is left out of the story of that situation.

The obvious remedy was tried early, a form of qualifying knowledge by the claim that everything off-stage must support the characterization of the on-stage, but it was not framed in those terms. Put in those terms, of course, certain knowledge is never possible, because the off-stage is never wholly specified by what we do see, and we never know all the off-stage in any case. But the remedy was not posed that way. The Wikipedia¹⁶ says Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson

proposed another attractive response, by adding a defeasibility condition to the JTB analysis. On their account, knowledge

¹⁵ Louis P. Pojman, *What can we know?; An introduction to the theory of knowledge*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995.

¹⁶ "Gettier Problem." Accessed 2008-09-11.

is **undefeated** *justified true belief* — which is to say that a justified true belief counts as knowledge if and only if it is also the case that there is no further truth that, had the subject known it, would have defeated her present justification for the belief.¹⁷

Posed as it was, in terms of possible other facts rather than in terms of narratives and what they include or leave out, progress was unlikely. Lehrer and Paxson did not challenge the basic Analytic assumption, in which the world is decomposable into facts reportable in propositions that can each be true independently of the rest of the world. The Analytic assumption is an instinct rather than something spelled out, which makes it especially hard to confront or question. Needless to say, it is based on the systems-ontological habits of mind of the natural sciences.

Taken by itself, the Gettier problematic could not have opened up the doorway to a narrative ontology of human actions, but it is evidence of a problem that the Analytic tradition has so far been unable to solve happily. A narrative ontology will, I think, do better. And the Analytic discussion has amply demonstrated that changing things off-stage also changes things on-stage, though it could never harvest its own fruit in that regard, because to use the terms “off-stage” and “on-stage” would take it in an unanalytic direction, namely, into narrative.

4.2.3 Fingarette’s *Self Deception*

The beginnings of a real breakthrough come with Herbert Fingarette’s analysis in *Self Deception*. Dissatisfied with trying to understand self-deception by reducing it to a case of believing something one knows to be false, Fingarette turned, in effect, to narrative for a solution. He did not call it narrative, but his description is nonetheless about narratives, and all his examples are taken from real narratives, not from artificially constructed examples reduced to propositions, as in Analytic approaches to action. And as with Gettier, his problem was knowing, not acting, but beneath knowing lies acting nonetheless.

Self-deception as it appeared in the literature was a phenomenon seen through a family of terms of cognition and perception, yet refractory and

¹⁷ Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, “Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief.” *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969) 1–22. The degrees of emphasis are in the Wiki article.

paradoxical when seen in those terms.¹⁸ For cognition and perception terms he substituted volition and action terms, and he moved the concept of consciousness from the first family, cognition and perception, to the second, volition and action. He also turned to narrative. We are conscious of what we *can* spell out, but we are, in a sense, unconscious of what we are not *willing* to spell out to ourselves.

Self-deception happens, he said, when a person does not spell out correctly a failed engagement in his own life. He has a policy of not spelling out, a policy of not spelling out even that policy, and he usually also has a “cover story.” The cover story is “true,” but only in the sense that it includes no false-to-fact claims; it is “the truth, edited only by deletion” (cf. p. 24 above) — but presented in such a way as to deflect attention from the relevant particulars of the failed engagement.

What is at stake in the spelling-out or not of self-deception is the correct narration of some problematic or failed engagement with life. Spelling out correctly means telling all of what has been done and characterizing it correctly. This is a matter of what to include and how to include it, the central theme of the present inquiry. It is also the pivot of the preliminary definition of truth in narrative that we saw on p. 7 above. Fingarette recognized that the issue is what to include in a story, and how. He may not have been the first to see this, but he gave it more emphasis than most do. Paul Ricoeur and his readers were among the first to notice the importance of narrative. In recent years, turning to narrative has become quite popular. Fingarette’s move was enabled by a turn from thinking of knowledge as passive to knowledge as an active process (cf. p. 55 above: the agent intellect). Fingarette took self-knowledge to be a skill rather than something passive.

One difference is worth noting between Fingarette’s approach and that of the Analytic literature on self-deception. Fingarette deals with narratives taken from fiction, whereas the Analytic philosophers reduce everything to a few propositions. The narrative situations are not just lost; they never really existed for Analytic philosophy. Fingarette, by contrast, has to deal with life as we encounter it: We know some things, but we don’t know all we would like to know about a situation. The narratives don’t necessarily answer all our questions. While they tell us the bare bones of

¹⁸ Herbert Fingarette, *Self Deception*. Second edition. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. The first edition was published in 1969. This part of his argument starts in chapter 3 of the book.

the actions they depict, they don't tell us *simply* whether the protagonist is self-deceived or not. It is as in real life: The character before us doesn't spell out for us, we don't know whether he does for himself, and indeed, it is not always obvious what the character is doing even when we can watch it before us. This is not the propositional sort of thing it has been forced into being by the Procrustean logic of the Analytic philosophers.

Sometimes we don't know how to spell out, for lack of skill. Integration of a self and the skill of handling more sophisticated engagements are both learned in the early years of life.¹⁹ The means of spelling out, the necessary concepts, are a social construction, and a society's skills change over time (cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann; and Michel Foucault). Skills of narration are shared in common, else they wouldn't mean very much, to generalize from Wittgenstein. Skill of narration comes (legally) with majority. Yet even wise and mature adults sometimes are not sure how to proceed.

We often don't spell out, and it is not necessarily self-deception; we don't need to spell out.²⁰ We may spell out only when we think we might like to repeat an action. And absent self-deception, we spell out when there is a problem. We can spell out much more than we do, and we don't deliberate in depth about most of our actions, but they can be spelled out, and they get their being, as we shall see, from their narratability.

There is more to responsibility, by the way, than merely spelling out: The amoral sociopath may cheerfully spell out — and yet not care. To be responsible is also to care. To have problems with a failed engagement in life is to care, and so self-deception presupposes a certain degree of moral maturity, the ability to find a problematic engagement unacceptable and so unacknowledgeable.

Fingarette touches briefly on something presupposed in the present inquiry, the worldhood of the world, a concept from Heidegger. From his description in illustration of the concept of engagements with life: "... how an individual finds and/or takes the world, including himself ... the projects he takes on ... the way the world presents itself to him to be seen, heard, felt, enjoyed, feared, or otherwise 'experienced' by him." And this:

It is logically necessary that it should be typical of our de-

¹⁹ *Self Deception*, chapter 4.

²⁰ This is about spelling out one's own actions. I pass by spelling out other people's actions, noting only that out of tact, forbearance, kindness, and compassion, it is sometimes *better* not to spell out to another what he is doing.

scription of an individual's engagement in the world that the description be cast in terms of such categories as aims, reasons, motives, attitudes and feelings, of understanding and "perception" of the world and himself.

And in definitional summary,

Rather than stringing together uncompleted sequences like "an individual's conduct, aims, hopes, fears, perceptions, memories, etc., etc." I propose "his engagement in the world" as shorthand. One might have said "*his world*."²¹

This is a token summary of the phenomenon that Heidegger in *Being and Time* called Being-in-the-World. It is a central feature of Dasein, the kind of being that is human being (cf. section 3.4.1 above). This lies beneath narrativity. Heidegger found the sort of being that is Dasein as the entry into time and temporality. Narrative is the way we *organize* our experience of time and temporality, as we shall see when we come to Paul Ricoeur. Narratability presupposes Dasein and Dasein's world.

4.2.4 H. L. A. Hart and Ascription

H. L. A. Hart published "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights" in 1948 or 1949, and it has had some commentary since, but action theory has largely bypassed it.²² In narratives, especially disputed narratives, we ascribe roles and acts to actors. Hart did not use the term *narrative*, and so he avoided the observation that all the terms in which acts are treated are abstractions of narratives. Nevertheless, the features of judgement that he does present are all features of disputes about narratives: what to include, what can be left out, and how to characterize what is included. He showed how events off-stage can defeat a contested narrative of events on-stage; extenuating circumstances are only one example. In legal practice, there are stock examples of how this may be done. Indeed, one of the major theses of the paper is that claims about action are "defeasible," and the term *defeasible* means that things off-stage (left out of a narrative) can change what is happening on-stage once they are brought on-stage — but it also hides the narrative and on/off-stage issues.

²¹ *Self-Deception*, pp. 39–40.

²² H. L. A. Hart, "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (1948-49) 171-194. Reprinted in A. G. N. Flew, ed., *Logic and Language, First Series*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978. Citations are to *Logic and Language*.

Hart's primary interest was in legal disputes about actions and liability, but the observations that he made have more general application. The phenomenon he depicts is the communal judgement of narratives, albeit one from which members of the community may dissent. This may be the point that so galled his critics: that action concepts are *inherently* and *essentially* about judgements, not simple descriptions of interpretation-independent "facts." The only interpreter-independent "facts" would be the material trajectories of the pertinent bodies, which are utterly naturalistic; but their *pertinence* is not interpreter-independent. It depends on an editorial selection in narration. There are rules of thumb but no general method, and the problems are not reducible to methodical terms.

I would say that editorial selection is what Hart called ascription. The natural instinct is to reply that there is no liberty in selection much of the time; the selection is forced, and therefore objective. To which I would say that sometimes there is a consensus about proper selection, but it does not make the editorial selection any less the result of a collective human judgement. To think that it does is to confuse responsibility with objectivity.

The Analytic literature has ignored his stipulation on one point: It has an "obstinate loyalty to the persuasive but misleading logical ideal that all concepts must be capable of definition through a set of necessary and sufficient conditions."²³ Narrative is forgotten before the Analytic literature on action even gets started. Once abstracted from, the narrative context of an act (its "circumstances") is unrecoverable. All we have are tokens for or fragments of narratives, but the narratives themselves are gone. Analytic critics test their theories and seek counter-examples by imagining possible circumstances off-stage that could transform acts on-stage. They don't spell out their method or its context in narrativity, because narrative does not occur to them as relevant. We saw this with Gettier problems. That there is no method in narrative guarantees that the search for off-stage circumstances that work as counter-examples to rules or method in philosophy of action will always succeed in the end. That narrative is unthinkable as the natural home for concepts of action means that the Analytic game will never be seen for what it is.

²³ Hart, p. 152. See for one example of the quest for necessary and sufficient conditions, Andrew Sneddon's retrospective on Hart, *Actions and Responsibility* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), pp. 13–16. George Lakoff in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* has amply confirmed that many categories in natural language do not have defining necessary and sufficient conditions. See the summary in chapter 10.

4.2.5 Niebuhr: Acts in Conversation

More elements of a distributed ontology of human action appear in H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self*.²⁴ Along the way to his larger goals in ethics, he observes that actions make sense only in a context that is analogous to a conversation: in response to prior acts and expecting further acts in return. He promises four features of this anatomy of action-in-context, but in true biblical fashion, there are five. (1) An act responds to prior acts and expects further acts in reply, (2) in interpretation of them and of itself, (3) in ways that are "life-giving and death-dealing," (4) in responsibility, the ability to ask and give reasons, and (5) in social solidarity.

(1) An act makes sense only as part of a sequence of actions. Other acts came before it, and more will follow, and the context gives the act its meaning. An act embodies within itself reference to acts before and after it.

(2) That reference is *interpretation*, both of prior acts and of the situation in which they take place. It is the answer to "what is going on here?" This is a narrative structure, and it entails editorial choices about what to include and how to construe what is included.

(3) Acts are directed toward living — whether positively or negatively. An Aristotelian would say they have final causes, goals and purposes. That somewhat dry terminology is not entirely wrong. Nevertheless, the biblical language, "life more abundantly," is closer to an existential reality in which we project a texture of living without enumerating its features or possibilities. We can spell out a great deal more than we do spell out, though we cannot ever spell out *all* of what living means.

(4) Silently presupposed always, and sometimes explicitly invoked, is the ability of all the actors to give reasons for their actions and to ask reasons of other actors. A human action makes sense *as an act* only if the actor can, in principle at least, supply on demand a narrative in which his actions make sense.

(5) Social solidarity means that the several actors share a common humanity, common existential stakes, common participation in the interpretation of their actions. That does not rule out social conflict; it undergirds social conflict as much as it does cooperation. Social solidarity is another face of the being a part of one another that we saw in amending Heidegger's *Dasein*.

²⁴ New York: Harper and Row, 1963. See pp. 59–65.

4.2.6 Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*

Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993) trained many in American Orthodox Judaism but published only modestly. His short book *Halakhic Man* offers a window on halakhic life. Along the way through too many disputes and distinctions to detain us here, some features of a halakhic perspective are pertinent to an interest in the relation of narrative, action, and human lives. There is not enough to bear the weight that I would like to put on it, and so we shall eventually have to proceed on our own in the present study, but Soloveitchik's remarks are nevertheless quite striking and suggestive. He sees repentance as a creative process:

Repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation — self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I," and the creation of a new "I," possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals — this is the meaning of repentance compounded of regret for the past and resolve for the future.²⁵

The faithful man informed by halakha surveys his own life and changes in it what needs to be changed.

Soloveitchik's dissent from the pervasive world-view in which the past is unchangeable (and usually determinative of the future as well) is candid enough, but the details are not as clear as one might wish. Many issues and many controversies appear in and behind the text: Mitnagdim versus Hasidim, Orthodox versus Conservative and Reformed, Jew versus Christian, historical-covenantal religion as radical monotheism versus biblical religion compromised by gnosticism, deism versus other conceptions of divine action; possibly more. To make things more difficult, Soloveitchik's positions appear all together, entangled and often implicit, not explicitly distinguishable and separable from one another. Caution is needed.

Unsurprising is the re-narrating of a self's past that happens in confession and with repentance. That the sinner is restored in this process is also unsurprising. What does surprise, however, is the claim that in this process, he is transformed, his identity is changed, he becomes a different person. This goes well beyond the explanatory reach of the concepts of time and causality as they appear in the natural world. Something quite other is intended.

²⁵ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983. See section III of Part Two, p. 110.

Instead of the unchangeable past ruling the future, “[t]he main principle of repentance is that the future dominate the past and there reign over it in unbounded fashion.”²⁶ How this comes to pass is a matter of revising one’s narrative, both of the past and of the future. Thereby changed are also the things narrated, both acts and actor, not just the narratives.²⁷ The present study is an inquiry into how that might be possible. Briefly, a past without a future is meaningless. We shall see that acts are constituted by their meaning and so are constituted by the futures envisioned for them — even past acts, with revised futures. What Soloveitchik says is, “When the future participates in the clarification and elucidation of the past — points out the way it is to take, defines its goals, and indicates the direction of its development — then man becomes a creator of worlds.”²⁸ The meaning of “creates” for Soloveitchik is quite ontological, though he does not use that term.

4.2.7 Eliade and Westphal

Mircea Eliade’s *Cosmos and History* marked a significant distinction in the history and philosophy of religions, that between religions of nature and religions of history.²⁹ Religions of nature and of history shape narratives very differently.

In a nature religion, nature shapes what people do, and there are a few life-patterns, called archetypes. In a historical religion, actions (and lives) are open, and telling the story both requires more careful editing and also entails a degree of responsibility for the actors that does not arise in nature religions. In a nature religion, it is nature that acts in the human actors. One can consult a shaman to get help with any problems that arise.

In a nature religion, success in life is defined as fitting into nature naturally, in harmony with nature’s natural rhythms. One wants to disturb nature as little as possible, and religious ritual is devoted to restoring the

²⁶ *Halakhic Man*, p. 115.

²⁷ Soloveitchik repudiates divine grace in this, ascribing it all to the creative power given to human beings by the deity (*Halakhic Man*, p. 113.) I have been told this is a consequence of deistic presuppositions, but it invokes by name a host of other issues. Threading through controversies about grace and works in their Christian form is difficult enough, and I don’t know how to handle the Jewish version of the issues. Fortunately, it is not necessary for our purposes.

²⁸ *Halakhic Man*, pp. 116–117.

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History; or The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Harper, 1959.

balance of nature, since human happiness flows directly from that balance. Evil and terror arise from disturbances to the natural order, and inasmuch as history is always to some extent unpredictable and often disturbing, history itself is an offense against nature. And so what we call history presents the major problems for any nature religion. In the second half of the book, Eliade allowed that only faith in God can make history tolerable, but he didn't give enough detail to understand historical religions very well. Eliade's archetypes have an enduring appeal as romance and as sure-fire money-making plots for books and movies today. Joseph Campbell is the spokesman for this instinct.

Eliade perplexed his students and colleagues greatly; I believe they couldn't figure out what he was doing. He was Eastern Orthodox and had an instinctive feel for the biblical religion he lived in even if he spent his academic life in love with the nature religions he studied. In practice, historical religion has usually preserved remnants of nature religion, and nature religions have often included the beginnings of historical religion. The distinctions are easily muddled instead of clarified. For that, we turn to Merold Westphal, who expanded the typology and filled in missing details in some of its members.

Merold Westphal took over Eliade's distinction between nature religions and historical religions and added a third category, exilic religions, from Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, to hold the gnosticisms of the West and much of South Asian religion.³⁰ That typology could be expanded further, but Westphal's distinctions are enough to get us further on our way in a phenomenology of action and narrative.

In a historical religion, there is a covenant with ultimate reality, and the covenant people travels through history in company with a transcendent Other. The terms of the covenant are loyalty by the covenant people to the one God and blessing and providence for the covenant people in return. The salient difference from nature religions is that, in history, the future is unpredictable and uncontrollable — just as Mircea Eliade said. The difference is that the contingencies of the unfolding future are interpreted as the providence of the covenant god. This means much of life that is disappointing has to be reinterpreted as bearing blessings of some sort. The ambition of historical religion is to interpret all of life, in full view of its pains, as in some sense good. Not an easy kind of religion.

³⁰ Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Human behavior is open to criticism, as it is in all religions, but the standard of behavior is quite different from that of nature religions. In a nature religion, the standard is nature itself, which is in some sense objectively open to inspection, making criticism of human behavior fairly easy. In history, where nothing is entirely predictable, things are neither so easy nor so obvious. How to interpret events requires a good deal more thought. The believers are held responsible to the covenant and to the transcendent Other, which may be how the openness of narrative in historical religions got started.

One familiar with Westphal's distinctions can easily see in the history from Genesis through the Prophets a gradual progression from the nature religions of the ancient Near East, transforming them into a historical religion. For only one aspect of the change, the institutions of a nature religion (as in shamanism and prediction) gradually become prophecy and social criticism.

4.3 The Distributed Ontology Emerges: MacIntyre

The most concentrated source for a distributed ontology of human action appears in chapter 15 of *After Virtue*: "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition." He opposes a "tendency to think atomistically about human action and to analyze complex actions and transactions in terms of simple components," reduction to "basic actions," and instead spends the chapter showing some of the many ways in which actions get their being from the larger wholes of which they are part.³¹ The paradigm example is a tableau in which a man is digging roses in his garden. We are asked what he is doing. Is he "gardening? Digging? Taking exercise? Preparing for winter? Pleasing his wife?" To answer, we would need to know the answers to many other questions. Among them, "what if he didn't think exercise did him any good? Or if he thought his wife didn't care?"³² The reader can fill in more possibilities easily. The example works out the constitution of an apparently simple act by things beyond what we see directly before us, and even by things that *would* be if the facts were different.

Some other features noted along the way: MacIntyre sees the impor-

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. Second edition. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 204.

³² *After Virtue*, p. 206, somewhat paraphrased.

tance of an ability to give an account of one's actions (p. 209), the relation of intelligibility and narratability (209–210), and the suffering character of actions unintelligible even to their agent. The idea that acts have an existence prior to any narratives of them is dispatched with the observation that "... the characterization of actions allegedly prior to any narrative form being imposed upon them will always turn out to be the presentation of what are plainly the disjointed parts of some possible narrative" (215).³³ As Fingarette saw, we know how to spell out, and we can spell out more than we do spell out. Fragments of narratives are often all that is needed. They have to be classified as fragments of narratives, not as "objective" facts or motions because they are already *selected* as pertinent.

He notes in passing the relation of one's own to other people's narratives: I am the protagonist in my own story, but only a bit part or an extra in other people's stories (213). This might seem a commonplace, but it bumps into bigger things. One narrative is related to others; the stories of different people are mutually involved; personal narratives have a common context-narrative; and the question of truth in multiple narratives will take on a new dimension. Paul Ricoeur explored narrativity in much greater depth than MacIntyre, but even MacIntyre had to deal with it in order to get on with his own work in ethics. He notes the problem of the integration of a life into a coherent whole: this grows out of the relation of the virtues to particular acts, but it has grown beyond that modest beginning. It is an instance of the relation of parts to wholes that we shall see again with Hans-Georg Gadamer.

The role of the common context into which fit the stories of individual members of a society appears when there is no consensus on that common context. The problem appears as an epistemological bewilderment. Interpretation presupposes shared culture and cultural schemata, and a crisis happens when there are "rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on." The problem is not treated in the philosophical literature, but it does appear in *Hamlet*.³⁴ Hamlet is notorious among critics and students for his inability to make up his mind, but the reason why is generally taken as a character flaw in the individual rather than something created by Hamlet's larger social situation. Some of Hamlet's available schemata: "There is the revenge schema of the Norse sagas;

³³ MacIntyre has seen a little of a circularity of narrative and action that was spelled out by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, to which we come shortly.

³⁴ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science." *Monist* 60 no. 4 (1977/10) 453–472. See p. 453.

there is the renaissance courtier's schema; there is a Machiavellian schema about competition for power." Choice among schemata determines whom he should believe. "His mother? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? His father's ghost? Until he has adopted some schema he does not know what to treat as evidence, until he knows what to treat as evidence he cannot tell which schema to adopt. Trapped in this epistemological circularity the general form of his problem is 'what is going on here?'"³⁵ Literary critics ask the same question, as do directors, who must decide what to cut and what to keep in the play. There is nothing "objective" about any of these possible contexts. They are choices, and social constructions, and yet they are ontologically constitutive of the acts embedded within them. They cannot be dismissed as merely subjective any more than they are objective. The charge of subjectivism is effectively a charge of irresponsibility, and one of the goals of the distributed ontology is to demonstrate responsibility in the narration of human actions. Denying ontological status to all that follows about actions from narrative choices that are visible *as* choices is a common way of evading the problem, but it doesn't work in real life. We are faced with a world in which there exist "alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on."³⁶ These few pages of *After Virtue* are pregnant with a new view of action, and our own study is devoted to unpacking them as much as any of the other resources noted in this chapter. We shall repeat these ideas from MacIntyre as need arises, in particular in section 5.2.4, where the case of Hamlet will again be exemplary.

MacIntyre's own approach to the problem has come to be known as "tradition-bound rationality," of which we shall see more in section 5.4. In disputes between rival traditions, there is usually no neutral ground from which to judge between them, but it is often the case that one tradition can explain the other's successes and failures better than the other itself can. That is rational warrant enough for choosing one over the other.

4.4 Gadamer's Hermeneutical Circle

The purpose of the present chapter is limited to brief citation of the precedents in the literature that give us parts of a distributed ontology of human action. With that in mind, we here pass over most of the riches of

³⁵ P. 454.

³⁶ P. 454.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, noting only a few features of interpretation that appear in human action.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger laid out the shape of interpretation, of which the phenomena of fore-having, fore-conception, and fore-sight are of interest here.³⁷ Rudolf Bultmann collected them together in one term, *Vorverständnis*, pre-understanding.³⁸ Gadamer develops this in the notion of prejudice, the initial assumption in approaching a thing in the world, the means by which interpretation can get started. Pre-understanding appears in the present inquiry into human action in the observation that whenever we consider a human action, we always already have at least a token of a notion of what it is about. This we saw with Fingarette and again with MacIntyre: to speak or think of an act is already to have at least fragments of a narrative in mind (cf. p. 108 above). They may be assembled later, spelled out if need be, rearranged if problematic, but a narrative is present at the beginning, at least in seed form. This is the role of the “yes, but which ones?” question, asked of all the material motions of the universe: which motions are pertinent to this action? Closer to home are mundane disputes about actions, whether in law courts or everyday life. The context for the act is familiar, and is more restricted than the whole cosmos. The form of inquiry in such disputes is the question of what to include and what to leave out. But that question always starts with a preliminary estimate, albeit one that can be corrected. The little word “familiar,” by the way, conceals a great deal that Heidegger meditates on in detail.³⁹ To be in the world is for the world to show itself as possibilities within a horizon. Beyond that horizon, things are unknown, can be taken for granted, or don't matter. Within it, the self to which things are apparent has an orientation to the world: within it, things are familiar.

Truth and Method is the source of the hermeneutical circle, an approach in which the parts of a text are to be construed in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of the parts. Gadamer took the interpretation of texts as paradigmatic, but the principle applies beyond texts. We shall apply it to action. The interpreter enters a text with some assumption about the genre of the text and proceeds to make sense of the parts. That

³⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 191/150.

³⁸ Cf. *Elementary Monotheism* (two volumes. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), section 5.2, and Rudolf Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 315 ff., and *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (London: Collins, 1987), p. 141 ff.

³⁹ *Being and Time*, sections 31–32.

may not work: the parts may not make sense on the initial assumption, in which case the initial assumption needs to be revised. The appraisal of the parts will be revised in turn, on a new genre-assumption that is hopefully an improvement. The process may or may not converge — to import the obvious term from mathematical iterative processes, to which the hermeneutical circle bears a superficial resemblance.⁴⁰

Heidegger already was concerned lest it be dismissed as logically circular, but on Gadamer's detailed descriptions, that worry is unnecessary. Neither Heidegger nor Gadamer notes the similarities between the hermeneutical circle and mathematical iterative processes, perhaps because there are greater and deeper differences. The similarity, nonetheless, can lay to rest most concerns about logical circularity.

The most familiar example of iterative processes in mathematics is finding roots of functions. The process cannot get started without some initial guess as to the whereabouts of the root. That guess will usually be wrong, but it can be refined. As with iterative processes, so also the hermeneutical circle may or may not converge to a stable reading.⁴¹ But they are different inasmuch as mathematics is completely extensional and human interpretation is intensional; it is a product of human involvements, and so it is human-relative. (Put in Continental terms, mathematics is about the *Vorhanden*, but interpretation is always about the *Zuhanden* or *Dasein* itself.) Well before Heidegger, already with Schleiermacher, it is clear that the meaning of a part of the text can be discovered only from the context, ultimately from the whole. "It has always been known that this is a logically circular argument, insofar as the whole, in terms of which the part is to be understood, is not given before the part, unless in the manner of a dogmatic canon."⁴² Because they short-circuit the hermeneutical circle, dogmatic limitations cannot really claim a prior validity: "Fundamentally, understanding is always a *movement* in this kind of circle, which is why the *repeated return from the whole to the parts, and vice versa*, is essential."⁴³ The iterative nature of the hermeneutical circle is declared plainly in the italicized words. He speaks of an "oscillating movement between

⁴⁰ I am indebted to Timothy Axelrod for this observation.

⁴¹ There are hilarious examples where it does converge, but not to a root: Peter W. Horton, "No Fooling! Newton's Method Can Be Fooled," *Mathematics Magazine* 80 no. 5 (2007/12) 383–387. $f(x) = \pi - 2x \sin(\pi/x)$ for $x \neq 0$; $f(0) = \pi$.

⁴² Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised translation, (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 190.

⁴³ TM, p. 190. Emphasis added.

whole and part”; “The circular movement is necessary because ‘nothing that needs interpretation can be understood at once.’”⁴⁴

As Gadamer goes on, he presents both the criterion of convergence and also the key to one limit on the analogy with mathematics: “Moreover, this circle is constantly expanding, since the concept of the whole is relative, and being integrated in ever larger contexts always affects the understanding of the individual part.”⁴⁵ The presuppositions necessary to get a hermeneutical circle started are supplied by a tradition. The weight of Gadamer’s argument is directed to rehabilitating tradition as the way into interpretation and knowledge and to showing how tradition may be appropriated critically rather than uncritically. The circle can be vicious — if it is cut short too soon. But it need not be. His extended explanation traverses the circle of interpretation and understanding:

Let us next consider how hermeneutics goes about its work. What consequences for understanding follow from the fact that belonging to a tradition is a condition of hermeneutics? We recall the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole. This principle stems from ancient rhetoric, and modern hermeneutics has transferred it to the art of understanding. It is a circular relationship in both cases. The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole.

We know this from learning ancient languages. We learn that we must “construe” a sentence before we attempt to understand the linguistic meaning of the individual parts of the sentence. But the process of construal is itself already governed by an expectation of meaning that follows from the context of what has gone before. It is of course necessary for this expectation to be adjusted if the text calls for it. This means, then, that the expectation changes and that the text unifies its meaning around another expectation. Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood

⁴⁴ TM, pp. 191–192. Gadamer cites Schleiermacher, *Werke*, I, part 7, 13.

⁴⁵ TM, p. 190.

meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.⁴⁶

Gadamer supplies a convergence test at the end of his description. The question of convergence appears plainly in both the mathematical and hermeneutical iterative processes, though it appears in different forms, not obviously analogous: a point which will be of considerable interest. For Newton's method, the computer focuses on an ever narrower domain of the function, within which the root is ever better located. The test of convergence can ignore the behavior of the function at distances, as convergence proceeds to refine the root. But in hermeneutics, iteration (and hopefully convergence) proceed in ever *widening* circles, ever wider horizons, until, ultimately, the whole world is within the purview of the interpretation of one small text. The disanalogy is interesting rather than fatal, but it does need some emphasis: mathematics is wholly extensional,⁴⁷ whereas the human sciences can never be reduced to extensional concepts. This is once again the difference between the *Vorhanden* and the *Zuhanden*: mathematics is about the *Vorhanden* and about systems that have states. Human interpretation and human concerns are about things that depend on the wider world in existential ways.

The problem of convergence in hermeneutics can be restated or renamed as a problem of *responsibility*: is this interpretation responsible? Does it take reasonable account of all that is relevant?⁴⁸ The interpretation of the text must be consistent in its findings as to the whole and the parts, and it must remain consistent as the horizon is widened. We cannot say that the interpretation is stable in the sense of being unchanging, like a Platonic absolute or ideal form. We would do better to say that the interpretation must change "stably," that is, in ways that discharge the present requirements of responsibility and grow and change over time in ways that are not so violent as to produce ontological whiplash. On the other hand, when it does happen that in later hindsight, a story needs grave or discontinuous revision, this, too, is not a disaster. We trust that when we are found wrong,

⁴⁶ TM, p. 291.

⁴⁷ Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica* to *56. Cambridge University Press, 1910, 1927; reprint 1997. See e. g. p. 8, "...mathematics is always concerned with extensions rather than intensions."

⁴⁸ The question seeks convergence. We shall see this again when Ricoeur shows us the circular relation between narrativity and action, a circularity that is tested in the claims the events make on us.

that finding is good and brings a blessing, rather than confounding us.⁴⁹

What I would like to generalize to the anatomy of human action is the whole-part structure of hermeneutics. The parts get their being from the whole and vice versa, reciprocally. We have already seen some of this in the observation that what an act on-stage is depends often on much that is (for the moment) off-stage. The present inquiry will pursue this further than is normally done; the larger and larger contexts of an act deeply color what an act in focal view is. This means that the constitution of ordinary everyday acts is to be found, in part, in the humanly meaningful cosmos into which they are embedded. “Small” acts get their being from their place in the larger narratives of lives, and lives get their meaning from their place in the larger narrative of history. The hard work will begin when it is noticed that people don’t agree on the shape of that larger cosmos, and the editing of the story of an act thus depends to a great extent on human choices.

4.5 Ricoeur on Narrative

Ricoeur is probably the richest source of material for the relating of action and narrative, and not all of it is focused in one place. We shall consider here only two texts. One short essay, “The Model of Text,” several times reprinted, likens the interpretation of texts to the interpretation of actions and gives us important insight into how actions grow and change after the “fact.” *Time and Narrative* is Ricoeur’s extended argument for the centrality and importance of narrative itself, narrative as how we organize human experience in time. It works at a level distinct both from that of existential phenomenology (e. g. *Being and Time*) and also from that of physics and the natural. The beginning is sufficient to get the present inquiry going.

4.5.1 Texts and Actions

“The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text” confirms what we have already seen in H. Richard Niebuhr about the conversational structure of sequences of actions, each responding to its predecessors in turn.⁵⁰ Indeed, it will extend that beginning, for Niebuhr did not emphasize

⁴⁹ See sections 3.4.3 and 5.4.3 and the literature there cited.

⁵⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text.” *Social Research* 38 no. 3 (Autumn 1971) 529–555. Reprinted in Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*;

the possibility that acts can be determined after the fact by what happens in response to them.

It is a commonplace but significant nonetheless, though often unexamined, that “real” actions differ from involuntary motions. Involuntary motions are usually cited as the contrast to real acts, but they may not be the best contrast. I would like to amend the commonplace from involuntary motions to simply things or motions that don’t matter or don’t qualify as acts because they don’t qualify as interesting acts. Involuntary motions may seem irrelevant, but without them, there is not much of an actor left to act (without his autonomic nervous system and all that it does involuntarily, there is no actor). In some situations and some narratives, involuntary motions may matter greatly. The difference between interesting and uninteresting motions lies elsewhere.

In “The Model of Text” Ricoeur’s quarry is nothing less than a hermeneutic of the humanities and social sciences, far more than we need at present for the beginning of an anatomy of human action. Along the way, he asks what changes motions from something that may or may not matter into real acts.⁵¹ What *saves* them for later narrative and later consequences? The model lies in how written language saves spoken discourse and fixes it for later readers. If text saves spoken discourse for the future, what is the parallel for actions? One might well ask what happens to save casual motions that don’t yet qualify as acts, or as noticeable acts, or as articulated acts. Acts get saved, or better, fixed, when they leave their imprint on the “surrounding” course of events. They become determinate in their meaning and structure, and their determinateness comes from the acts to which they respond and the acts that respond to them in turn. If an act has consequences, it can be saved by those consequences. (Not surprisingly, Ricoeur has little to say about acts that are inconsequential.)

An act gets “fixed” when it “leaves its mark on its time,” by being detached from its agent and developing consequences of its own, when its relevance grows beyond its own original context, and as it becomes an open work, accessible to anyone.⁵² The process of fixing and determining an act is akin to how text saves conversation: What text saves is the es-

Essays in Hermeneutics, II (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991). Citations are to the pagination in *From Text to Action*.

⁵¹ We are, in a sense, asking the same question as the Analytic literature in action theory: What is the difference between an act and other events? The answers and methods of approach, however, will be quite different.

⁵² *From Text to Action*, pp. 150–155.

sential meaning, not the stutters, gestures, ungrammatical and incomplete sentences and so on of the original conversational situation.⁵³ In a parallel way, later acts in response interpret the act in question, determining its meaning and resolving its ambiguities. Responding actors commit *their* resources in response to it, sedimenting its meaning and consequences. The act in question thus becomes detached from its original actor. An act can serve as a paradigm, and its significance grows beyond its context. We saw this in the assassins' pleas to Oswald, for they took his act as a paradigm of the meaning in their lives. Equally clearly, such interpretations are subject to dispute. This is a feature of action that becomes conspicuous when action is grounded in narrative but gets hidden when action is stripped to its "elements": intentions, motions, reasons, causes. The meaning of the act can grow well beyond the intent of its actor, acquiring a universal address.

What Ricoeur does not say but could well have is that the process of fixing a conversation in a text and, in parallel, the process of fixing and determining the meaning of an act are both processes of editing: Those concerned decide what to keep and how to characterize it. Their decisions are tied to the act's consequences, if there are any, and certainly to other acts before and afterward. Determining what an act is or was is a matter of selection, separating the relevant from the irrelevant. That is what gives the act a narrative structure.

4.5.2 Time and Narrative

The largest of Paul Ricoeur's pertinent major works, *Time and Narrative*, is an inquiry into the structure of narrative that stays fairly close to its goal of understanding time. Our goal is different: not time but action. We can pass by much of his argument, the puzzles of time in particular, taking only the features of narrative that we need for our own study. Interestingly, both Ricoeur's inquiry and ours will move from their respective starting points to questions about human selves and human selfhood. Narratives imply actors as well as acts, which is further than we shall go in this inquiry. Narratives place acts within larger and larger contexts that eventually encompass acting human selves and place those selves in the context of history.

Ricoeur opens with Augustine's meditation on time in Book 11 of the *Confessions*. Augustine was at pains to escape being sucked into a natural-

⁵³ *From Text to Action*, p. 146.

istic time that bends all questioning back into its own terms. He did open the way for others to follow, exploring first subjective and then existential time. There are puzzles enough that come with existential time. Yet Augustine was never far from physical time. His subjective examples can all be pushed in the direction of physical concepts.⁵⁴ His success was a close thing.

For Augustine, the past and the future are present to the reflecting mind in the present, and that mutual co-presence is exemplified in the ontological involvements of actions and their larger temporal contexts. The past and the future are ontologically present in the present, not just objects of thought for the mind. Things in the present are related in their being to the past and the future. In his way, Augustine belabored these puzzles, and those who have followed him (notably Heidegger) are indebted to the breakthrough that he opened up. This feature of the problem of time directly supports the approach here: the time we are interested in is not the time of physics (which is subdividable in a systems-ontological sense) but an existential/historical/narrative time in which the past and future flow into the present.⁵⁵ This character of existential time was the major fruit of Augustine's reflections on time, expanded by those who came after him fifteen centuries later, and it is easily overlooked.

A more robust idea of what time is existentially in contrast to its physical meanings can be had in colloquial usage. Time is something one has or doesn't have:

I have time for that.
 I don't have time for that.
 We've run out of time.
 Can you give me some time, at your convenience?
 "Quality time" — a cover for time begrudged?
 So many books, so little time!

Augustine certainly sees the past no longer existent and the future not yet existent, but he also sees them as simultaneously existent and present

⁵⁴ Augustine's physical insights (if recognized) are quite sophisticated even today, and that is surprising for one so constitutionally averse to "numbering, measuring, or weighing" anything, anything at all. The scientifically informed reader will find it a pleasant exercise to identify the presuppositions that Augustine shares with physics but does not see. They are not without puzzles, bewilderingments even, but that is not our problem.

⁵⁵ Cf. Troeltsch, *Der Historismus*, GS 3:56–57, and the brief quotation on p. 92 above.

in the present to the relating and involved soul or mind. In his language, the soul is “distended”; he speaks of a “*distentio animi*,” some of whose meaning is present already in “*intentio*.” The word *intentio* in Latin has meanings a lot broader than its English cognate (“to put in tension” is only one), and *distentio* in some ways merely selects and emphasizes the meanings that English has lost.

Paul Ricoeur, who presumably knew Heidegger’s work well, showed great restraint in not mentioning Heidegger’s *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* at this point. Heidegger there begins with a phenomenology of boredom as *Langeweile*, to be bored as *sich langweilen mit/bei*. Boredom is a kind of temporal distending of the soul, stretching out of the soul, in a painful sense of stretching out.⁵⁶ The German roots *lang* and *Weile* mean *long* and *a while*: a stretched time. This painful stretching out has nothing to do with metrical time or measuring time beyond the “Are we there yet? Are we there yet? No. Be patient.” When we are bored, time passes slowly. Time passes quickly when we’re having fun. Colloquial usage is utterly opaque to metrical concepts, which it invokes in an analogy that gets its meaning from its irony. It is not part of the discourse of any natural science. One could dismiss it as just psychology, but that is, after all, a dismissal, a refusal of an ontology of existential time. Could Augustine have explored this? That’s hard to say. Those who followed after him clearly did.

Richard Schenk takes his hearers through existential time in the fiction of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Sound and the Fury*.⁵⁷ Those who survive in the Gulag do so by postponing the future until the future. They endure (or even savor) the present, pacing themselves, lest they wear themselves out by haste. The past they let go, lest it drag them down. Why is it we speak of life in prison as “serving time”? Even when the prisoner is innocent, as most in the Gulag were, the time is still to be served. In Faulkner’s tale of a decaying Southern family, we see mostly dysfunctional relations to time, but we also see that people don’t relate to time in the abstract (whatever that would be) but rather to things in time, family members (and family history) in time. The past and the future are not just present to the soul in the present in some abstract or quasi-physical sense, as Augustine well saw; they are present to the soul in the human

⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. The German was published in 1983.

⁵⁷ Richard Schenk, OP, “Time as Gift and Task. Literary and Philosophical Reflections.” Academy, Kiev, 14 December 2005.

living of the past and the future.

The primary text that Ricoeur puts in dialogue with Augustine is Aristotle's *Poetics*, which says little about time. Aristotle on time can be found in the *Physics*, and there he sees only naturalistic time. The *Poetics* focuses on emplotment, the arrangement of events and actions in temporal sequence, which is our problem exactly: what to include in a narrative, and how to characterize it.

Aristotle's *Poetics* lists six parts of a drama: plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody. The *Poetics* is still read as a guide to the well-constructed drama today, as both literature departments and the practical business of screenplay writing can attest.

Of Aristotle's six features, our interest lies in plot or emplotment, and to a lesser extent, characters. To conceive and execute a drama, one must have a plot, which is to say that one must *arrange* the events. (I suppose one must first have some events to arrange, but the work is all in the arranging.) William Gibson, a modern lover of Shakespeare, explains it thus:

A play begins when a world in some state of equipoise, always uneasy, is broken into by a happening. Since it is not equipoise we have paid to see, but the loosing and binding of an evening's disorder, the sooner the happening, the better; these plays open fast.⁵⁸

From Aristotle, Ricoeur draws a dynamic of discordance and concordance: the plot begins in a discordance, and in the end, some sort of concordance is reached — or restored, if on some new basis. The playwright musing on a playwright continues on the same page,

It is each of these happenings which precipitates the play. . . . A play is an energy system, and the business of the precipitating event is to introduce a disequilibrium, that is, to release energy. Characterization, language, mood and tempo, meaning, all the other attributes which will give the play its identity, wait upon that release; it animates them, they cannot begin to exist without it. And once begun, the "play" is that of contradictory energies working to arrive at a new equilibrium, if it kills everybody.

⁵⁸ William Gibson, *Shakespeare's Game* (New York: Athenaeum, 1978), pp. 6–7.

If it does not, it is a comedy; but we need not foresee this in the beginning.

The pivot is emplotment: there is no plot without a problem to be solved, and that problem is not timeless; it happens. Problem and solution (if there is one) stand in relation to each other as discord and concord, I suppose. Notice that Gibson lists four out of the remaining five of Aristotle's parts of drama; music he omits, as do most today.

The poet's task, as Aristotle has it, is *mimesis*, the imitation or presentation or representation of action. It could thus seem as if the acts were given, before any dramatic presentation of them. The problem, as Ricoeur sees clearly and the Stagyrite may or may not have seen clearly, is that the acts get their being only in their narration. Narrative gives us what narrative has shaped; the logic is circular. Ricoeur well knows that this is circular, and the circularity is not vicious, it is an instance of the hermeneutical circle. In the present study, acts will get their being from their narratability. The problem Ricoeur has seen will be with us in depth.

Ricoeur distinguishes three senses of mimesis. Mimesis-1 is the reader's or viewer's apriori ability to comprehend a narrative. Mimesis-2 is the actual telling of a story, with an actual arrangement of events. Mimesis-3 is the effects on the reader or hearer or viewer: catharsis, pity and terror, in Aristotle's account of tragedy. In effect, mimesis-1 is about the narratability of things and the root of that narratability in human understanding.

The intelligibility engendered by emplotment finds a first anchorage in our competence to utilize in a significant manner the conceptual network that structurally distinguishes the domain of action from that of physical movement. . . . I say "conceptual network" rather than "concept of action" in order to emphasize the fact that the very term "action," taken in the narrow sense of what someone does, gets its distinctive meaning from its capacity for being used in conjunction with the other terms of the whole network. . . . To master the conceptual network as a whole, and each term as one member of the set, is to have that competence we can call practical understanding.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, pp. 54–55.

Some of the items in Ricoeur's list of the network of concepts necessary to understand action are goals, anticipation, commitment, motives, explanation, agents, works and deeds, responsibility, consequences, why-questions, the practical, an act's social context, help and hindrance, fortune, happiness and unhappiness, and suffering.⁶⁰ One could add quite a bit more than just these to Ricoeur's list, prominently the sensitivity to a narrative's plausibility and well-toldness. It is harder to pin down than these basic concepts, for it is a skill in the structuring of narratives, whether heard or told.

We have claimed in the introduction that at least a token narrative is always already present before it is possible to think about an action, because it is the token narrative that selects from all the human motions of the world the ones that are pertinent to the action contemplated. It appeared again with Alasdair MacIntyre, p. 108 above. The narrative may or may not ever be told, (or told correctly, cf. Fingarette), but some form of it is there, present already in any concept of an action. Ricoeur deepens the claim both in the details of mimesis and in his questioning about the circularity of the structuring of action by mimesis. This is a claim that narrative, or better, narratability, is ontologically constitutive of action.

As noticed already, Ricoeur is sensitive to a charge that this conceptual structure is circular: narrative only gives us what narrative has already shaped.⁶¹ Circularity is more obvious for us than it was for Ricoeur. We instinctively think that acts precede their narration, and indeed Aristotle is typical: he speaks of narrative as a *mimesis* of acts; the acts are given beforehand, whether in actual fact or in the fictional world. The narrative is supposed to be like the acts, not to create them. But of course, in fiction, the narrative does create the acts, yet even here Aristotle asks that the narrative be believable, plausible — and so have a likeness to actual human experience. The central claim of the present study is that acts are about narratives before narratives are about acts: It is the narratability of an act, whether a narrative is spelled out or not, that constitutes the act *as* an act. Hence the worry, which is more or less explicit in Ricoeur, that narratives gives us only what narratives have already shaped — in a logic that is circular. The problem of ontological circularity (usually unnamed)

⁶⁰ The terms in the list appear on the same pages of *Time and Narrative*. The list would be an instance of Fillmore and Lakoff's notion of frames.

⁶¹ Circularity appears often in Vol. 1 of *Time and Narrative*, but it is focally addressed on pp. 71–72.

will occupy us through much of chapter 5, where we assemble resources for it. Suffice it to say for the present that Paul Ricoeur has seen it and identified it as an instance of the hermeneutical circle.

Ricoeur's thesis is that narrative is how we organize human experience in time. I would claim that what it is about human experience in time that is narratable is contingency plus interest, which we shall develop on p. 147 below. Interest appears at a more fundamental phenomenological level in Dasein's involvements in the world, itself, and other Dasein. Ricoeur demonstrates its narratability even in historians who attempted to write "non-narrative" history, as in the *Annales* School. Writing without plot or characters nevertheless produces "quasi-plot," "quasi-characters," and so on.

Ricoeur usually presupposes a narrative as told satisfactorily. He sees but doesn't do much about a problem that we have to deal with: narratives can be told and told truthfully in many ways, not all of which are mutually consistent. What is truth, and what is the being of the thing narratable when multiple and inconsistent narratives of it are possible?

In the first place, narrative 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.⁶²

For Ricoeur, this openness was peripheral; for us, it will be central. Indeed, most of the features of human action will unfold from this openness and ambiguity.

Troeltsch's problems in the formal logic of history continue in Ricoeur's account. In the retrospective summary of Part II of *Time and Narrative*, the problem becomes a little clearer. Historians' experience coming into the twentieth century was one of uncertainty how to recount history even in the traditional way, merely in terms of individual actors, institutions, wars, diplomacy, etc. They sought objectivity of the kind the natural sciences enjoyed, and not finding it, were perplexed. Narratives can be told in many ways, and they didn't have convincing grounds for deciding among competing narratives. What history *is* and how it can be *known* were both at stake — and both in doubt.

⁶² *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, p. 248.

Two remedies were tried. The first attempted to subsume historical events under historical “laws” of the same kind as found in the sciences. This was to flee the problem, seeking refuge in imitation of the natural sciences. Ricoeur gives them more respect than I would, probably because they were an active voice in the debates in the mid-twentieth century.⁶³ Working historians were not convinced, and they successfully demonstrated that the narrative character of history defies any imitation of natural laws. Others, notably the *Annales* School, tried “non-narrative” history, often fused with other disciplines, prominently economics and sociology. They still ended up writing narratives, as Ricoeur demonstrates, though the results were often subtle and complex. Both the subsumptionist and *Annales* projects were evasions of the problems of narrative. The problem, rooted in multiplicity and revisability of possible narratives, was not entirely solved. We shall come to it again, in section 5.2.5.

For what it is worth, R. G. Collingwood would laugh, for Ricoeur and the twentieth-century historians whose story he tells have worked at the distinction that Collingwood called the difference between “scissors-and-paste” history and critical history: “Scissors-and-paste” history just puts events in sequence, without much criticism of sources or their credibility. The narrative history inherited early in the twentieth century did criticize sources, but it paid less philosophical attention to the “things” themselves that history tells of. Ricoeur and his protagonists have added criticism of what the things, characters, and events of history are, how they be, of their ontology. Troeltsch, too, would rejoice; for he saw the problem and could not solve it.

⁶³ I dismiss them in part because they pretended to be like scientists, and as a scientist, I am not fooled. More seriously, the subsumptionists tried to give the form of law to generalizations in history. But generalizations in history always relate essentially singular events by means of a degree of analogy that would horrify scientists. The truth at the core of the error of the subsumptionists’ program was the structure of analogy between events in history, and that analogy, though striking, is not wholly understood.

Chapter 5

Some Features of Human Action

5.1 Taking Stock

5.1.1 Initial Features of Action

With these beginnings in common experience and the available philosophy, let us see what can be done. The way to understand the being of acts and make sense of the phenomena is to begin with narratability. Narratability is logically primordial, and it is constitutive of the being of acts. In this section are some of the problems and tentative starting points for addressing them. The rest of the chapter unfolds the features of action starting from narrativity.

(1) The phenomenon of spin demonstrates the openness of narrative, touching most questions about human actions. Most disputes about human actions are about what to include and how to characterize it. This is the focus of editing. People quarrel about what matters because they have a stake in the action, sometimes directly, sometimes because the acts in view, while not touching their interests directly, nevertheless reflect on their affairs.

(2) We saw a tentative definition of truth in narrative on p. 7 in the introduction:¹

A true narrative

¹ We return to it again in retrospect in section 8.3.

spells out
 correctly and fairly
 the interests of all interested parties,
 the intended goals of the actions,
 the effective goals of the actions
 (which may not be the same as the intended goals;
 cf. Herbert Fingarette on self-deception), and
 the real consequences of the actions,
 as seen thus far.

A true narrative is adjudicated in community, and it can be revised in the light of later events.

This is very much like R. G. Collingwood's anatomy of truth in his autobiography — the logic of question and answer, truth subsists in a sequence of questions and answers, not in isolated propositions. One implication of Collingwood's analysis in chapter V of the *Autobiography* is that truth is question-relative. This is known under other terms in hermeneutics, for as Hans-Georg Gadamer observes in detail in *Truth and Method*, interpretation of texts always has an application in mind and so is application-relative. Questions about truth in action and narrative do not admit of unique answers.

To the requirements above could be added the questions

What do you have to include in a narrative?
 What can you leave out?

The answers to those questions, effectively a restatement of them, are

Include what matters.
 Leave out what doesn't matter.

But what matters? What does it mean to matter? The answers will come out of the demands other people make on me, simply by being there.

(3) The pivotal choice that will open the way to a solution to these problems lies in moving away from an ontology of systems, states, and trajectories. Systems ontologies think in terms of material and efficient causes without final causes and with only restricted formal causes. They can introduce final causes and purposes only by defining final causes as the desired states of some pertinent systems. This appears very attractive.

The preferred systems ontology is quietly abandoned in the necessary assumption that the off-stage supports the resulting narratives, for then we are not really dealing with systems conceptually isolated or cleanly distinguishable from the rest of the world. The tacit narrative has been called an intention, purposes have been called the state of a desired end-system, and the off-stage support assumption has been hidden. The result is almost inevitably incoherent — but it looks very nice, if you don't look too closely.

Existentialia need to be present at the beginning rather than derived from systems or built up from systems. The needed move is to an ontology in which the constitution of acts is in their narratability, with roots in the *Daseinanalytik*. Narratability is not quite the same thing as particular narratives, but particular narratives are representative of it. This means that the parts of an act are more than just the pertinent motions; they include also the editorial acts that tell which material motions are pertinent. This is an ontology of human involvements, not of systems, states, and trajectories, and the narratives and narratability are necessary parts of those human interests. One could not say “essential” parts without risking confusion, because the ontology of essences, etc. was devised for nature, not history. Essences are not supposed to be observer-relative; human interests and human involvements can be.

(4) Now it becomes possible to look at the phenomena and forecast some observations; we have seen them before (p. 7 above):

- (a) One and (apparently) the same act can be narrated
in multiple (and possibly conflicting) ways;
- (b) one and the same set of motions
can be fitted into many acts;
many narratives and so many acts
“pass through” somebody's motions on-stage;
- (c) what is happening on-stage
is constituted in part by what is happening off-stage;
- (d) some things about an act (but not all)
can be revised after the fact.

There will be more than these, but these are a start, and they are the most important features. Item (d) is at the cusp between phenomena and confessional choices. (d) will inevitably be disputed. (a)–(c) will also be disputed, but less easily so. They are all arguably real phenomena; you can point to them. They happen. One can claim they “don't matter,” or that the

“real” ontology “has to be” constructed on naturalistic (systems) lines, but that’s not an argument. It’s a demand. The objection so described is a confessional disagreement, not something that could be argued on the basis of some common commitment. What follows immediately below, (5)–(7), will be the start of major choices that were hinted at in the opening and which will be expanded in section 5.4.2.

They already presuppose ontological status for the things we are interested in — and which some others are not interested in — and so they are choices and the subject of disagreements. Many people will not, for confessional reasons, come this far. And there are many ways of shaping narratives already in (1) and (4a) just above. Some are naturalistic; some are not. Among those that are, there are still many ways of understanding nature, a point that tends to be invisible to the proponents of the various ways of naturalistic thinking. Naturalistic styles of narration will deny (4a), ignore (4b), hide (4c) and deny or ignore (4d). Narrative and historical thinking are open to all of them.

Items (4a)–(4d) presuppose human involvements in the being of acts: all four are about editing on the basis of what is humanly significant. The editing choices are not and cannot be naturalistic, based on motions and efficient causes alone. Final causes are infinitely various.² The real texture of what gets called “final causes” lies in the openness of series (4).

(5) Further, There are always choices about how to tell narratives: in particular, whether or not to engage in a discourse of responsibility: the asking and giving of reasons, the avowing of intentions, and the acceptance of moral consequences. Even if one did ascribe all causes to natural phenomena, there are many ways to do that, and one must choose between them. Editing and choice remain. There are many styles in historical thinking also, and they are all different from naturalistic narratives. There are differences between Christian, Jewish, and Marxist historical styles. And there are ahistorical ways of making sense of life: the perennial philosophy, exilic living, ways to get beyond narrative entirely.

(6) Inasmuch as human actions are about final causes, goals, purposes, choices are forced upon us about what large-scale goals to ascribe to acts, choices that will take us to questions about basic life orientation. This will mean some chosen standards by which to criticize small-scale goals

² Indeed, the Aristotelian term “final cause” seems to me to be a vast rug under which have been swept all existentialia, involvements, things accessible to phenomenology, conditions (one dare not say “states” here) of Dasein, and so on. The term “final cause” makes appear systematic what is not in the least systematic.

of acts. How do you want to order goals?

(7) That will open questions about whether and how goals are achieved: questions about “success” in life. What does it mean to be a historical being? How do human lives fit into history? What does it mean for a human life to be a coherent whole? We cannot answer these questions, but they need to be acknowledged, and to the extent possible here, we can say a little about them. This is not an outline sufficient to answer all questions about human action, but it should be enough to get started, and more will become apparent in the course of the inquiry.

We begin with the mode of being of action as a redaction ontology.

5.1.2 A Redaction Ontology

Questions about action turn on what gets included in the act’s narrative. They are accordingly a matter of editing. In section 3.2.3, we surveyed some features of redaction ontologies in general. They will appear again in narratives and action. Beneath them lies editing (and editors), of interest for their own sake.

The choices about what to include in a narrative are all editorial, even if the choices are forced by the demands of the acts themselves. They constitute the narrated act as whatever it is. An act is composed of or constituted by (at least) its material particulars (which, by themselves, may well have a systems ontology), its constituents in the world around it (below, we shall call them ontological foils), the acts of selection by which these constituents and not some others were chosen and characterized.³

Take first the agent intellect: in regard to human actions and their constitutive narratives, the agency is twofold. It is in the editing, and it is in the human interests of the actors and bystanders. We focus for the moment on the editing. It is an active process, not one of passive observation. Giving agency an ontological role may push matters well beyond the philosophy of mind that was Kenny’s original focus. The editors who tell and criticize narratives of acts have a say in what those acts are. That “say” is active, but it is not simply a declarative speech act. John Ellis cites Charles Sanders Peirce in opposition to a hardy weed in philosophy of mind that takes cognition as prior to action and language simply as a transcript of cognition in reference and denotation: “Peirce understood the enormously important point that to know something is not to have a direct intuition of

³ Cf. p. 41 above.

it but to classify it and relate it to other things.”⁴ It follows that knowledge is active before it is cognitive. To deal with an act is to select some features of the motions and respond to those, whether in spelled-out narratives or in other acts in response. (Selection of motions construes the act in terms of opportunities for living, and those opportunities are themselves selected from among many more that are possible.) One act is constituted by active narratives and acts in response to it, and so one act is always constituted by other acts;⁵ it is not possible conceptually to isolate one act from all the others — the others are always constitutively present, even when they are not named. Sometimes the opportunities for living are so limited that the editorial choices in narrating an act and practical choices in responding to it are forced; but that in no way contradicts the fact that responses in narrative and action presuppose a selection (in a mathematical sense) of the motions that they respond to.

The priority of universals appears next. It is universals that pick out the motions that are a part of or relevant to the act being narrated. For moderate realism in general, universals pick out the particulars and provide access to them. Paul Ricoeur picked up Elizabeth Anscombe’s language of “desirability character” as what allows us to categorize acts.⁶ We have already seen that narratives pick out the motions that are relevant to and a part of an act. It is not as if the act is given to us before all narratives. The narratives give us what the narratives have already shaped. The relationship is circular. This does not license caprice or whimsy or undermine responsibility in narrative. For both acts and their narratives have a claim on us that narrative choices have to answer to. We say that we have to include some elements of the story, and the claims of the act direct our choices.

Universals are analogical: The ability to categorize (John Ellis) rests not just in putting universals first but also in the analogical character of universals (Anthony Kenny). In analogy, things that are different are put together in order to deal with them in similar ways.⁷ They are put together because we experience them as life-giving or life-denying in similar ways. I know of no other way to describe the similarity than to say that it is

⁴ John Ellis, *Language, Thought and Logic*, p. 41–42. See also the remarks on p. 41 in opposition to Austin and Searle.

⁵ Cf. the remarks on H. Richard Niebuhr and *The Responsible Self*, section 4.2.5 above.

⁶ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, p. 145, and Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention*, § 38, p. 72, and *passim*.

⁷ John Ellis, cf. p. 55 above.

existential, which is in part to say that it is not well understood and in part to say that it is not reducible to naturalistic or material particulars. We shall see more of it in section 5.3.1 below, when we return to the claims that acts and narratives make on participants and bystanders.

The last feature of moderate realism that Kenny identified appears originally as a question about the relationship between form and matter: whether they are separable or merely distinguishable. In the land of narrative, form and matter are meaning and motions. The tradition has often taken motions uncritically, that is, assimilating motions to material trajectories in the sense they have in physics. We shall not resolve this equivocation until chapter 6, but it needs to be noted here. Motions have something that material trajectories do not: motions already incorporate some degree of meaning, because they pick out the trajectories as fitting the meaning, often without saving the physical particulars of the trajectories. In chapter 6, we shall see that meaning and motions are relative terms, and, in an ordered sequence of many narrative characterizations of an act, each can stand as meaning to those that come before it and as motions to those that come after. This is possible because an act can have many meanings.

I don't know whether moderate realism was originally a theory of being or an explanation of mind, but we have pushed it in the direction of being, the consequences for the mode of being of human acts. By conventional standards today, it is probably odd that the editors of narratives who may be far from the acts narrated have an ontological role in the constitution of the things they narrate. Sometimes one hears of philosophers who think that things known are changed by the knowers who know them, but seldom is the role of the knowers alleged to be so active or so effective as it is here. Yet we are not claiming the absurd, that acts are made up wholly by their narrators rather than their actors. (In the first place, their actors are among the narrators.) To say that an act makes claims on those involved and on bystanders for its meaning is possible because human beings share life and meaning. Indeed, meaning is possible at all only to the extent that it is shareable. This is not to say that it is identical and interchangeable for all knowers. Rather what is claimed is that it is intelligible to all human knowers, and if we experience the possibilities for life differently, we do so because we share something in common: the amended *Dasein*. We have a stake in each other.

This is the root of a communal basis for judging acts and narratives of acts. Narratives are not arbitrary, and though there is a liberty in the

construction of narratives, it is a responsible liberty. It has to answer to the claims acts make on common humanity. With these preliminaries, the next step is to start with the features of human actions that come from their narratability.

5.2 Narrativity

5.2.1 Presuppositions in Narratives

We have already run into the presupposition that the off-stage supports the on-stage. To put it another way, any narrative can tell only a part of what was happening. It is impossible to include every detail of every person, place, and thing involved in the story, and so a few details will have to stand for the rest. Ernst Troeltsch included this in the formal logic of history. The historian must make a narrow selection of the typical, in depicting the particulars of historical events.⁸ The readers or hearers fill in details from their own knowledge of the world. The result is to some extent different for every reader. A good poet is good precisely because he or she can select and present details that evoke the most with the least: as few words as possible to summon and depict a most vivid picture of the world.

The presuppositions in speaking of an act are not far to seek. Often the act is summarized in a few words, even only one: a token for a longer narrative. The first presupposition is that everything left out of the narrative, everything “off-stage,” supports the narrative as told or summarized. The second is more nebulous: that everything left out of the narrative conforms to some conventional or default idea of what such an action entails. Thus if we speak of buying a pack of gum at a convenience store, the readers and hearers fill in the parts of the scene that are not included in the nine words “buying a pack of gum at a convenience store.” This presupposes some knowledge of a default world and of a culture. One consequence is that Analytic (and Aristotelian/Thomistic) considerations of action silently trade on these presuppositions in their examples.

Presuppositions can be demonstrated easily. It is virtually always possible to add some detail to the narrative that violates presuppositions and changes everything. The hearer will protest, “You didn’t tell me that!” Both the first presupposition, off-stage support, and the second, cultural background, can be flushed out by proposing an act to a conversation part-

⁸ Cf. p. 88 above.

ner and then asking another person questions about it. To each answer, one can then add something to the narrative that changes things. Eventually, he will protest in exasperation, “You have to make some assumptions.”

The presuppositions that travel with a narrative are in a sense all correlates of the skill of narrating: we know how to imagine missing details. This is what Ricoeur called *mimesis-1*, the ability in the reader or viewer that is presupposed in any narrative, the ability that the narrative plays to. We could not write unless others could read; we cannot narrate unless others have the skill of understanding narratives, a basic part of language skills.

The phenomenon in narratives is grounded in basic semantics. Words themselves carry the assumptions that readers and hearers make. Charles J. Fillmore called it “framing” inasmuch as every word carries with it relations to other, related words that travel in a “frame” or typical example of their usage together.⁹ George Lakoff took it up in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. There is a good summary on the Net:

The basic idea is that one cannot understand the meaning of a single word without access to all the essential knowledge that relates to that word. For example, one would not be able to understand the word “sell” without knowing anything about the situation of commercial transfer, which also involves, among other things, a seller, a buyer, goods, money, the relation between the money and the goods, the relations between the seller and the goods and the money, the relation between the buyer and the goods and the money and so on.

Thus, a word activates, or evokes, a frame of semantic knowledge relating to the specific concept it refers to . . .¹⁰

How does framing become a philosophical problem for the historian and philosopher of history? And so also for philosophy of action? Frames are one aspect of presupposed narrative standards, what needs explanation and what does not. Those presuppositions are a matter of psychology (see p. 68 above). Psychology asks how and why people come to suppositions of background information, but not (if it is still psychology, a natural or even a social science) what it means for those suppositions to be correct,

⁹ Charles J. Fillmore, “Frames and the Semantics of Understanding.” *Quaderni di Semantica* VI no. 2 (1985 December) 222–254.

¹⁰ Wikipedia, “Frame Semantics (linguistics),” 2008-12-18.

to be *about* an act in view, for the act to be whatever it is, in relation to all the possible suppositions about its context and background. Those are philosophical questions, no matter where they are asked. Sociology of knowledge must bracket questions of truth when it studies the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge. Social psychology likewise, I assume, must bracket questions of truth when it studies how people think about action.

But the question of truth does not go away; indeed, psychology, rather than abolishing it or substituting empirical questions for it, makes it stand out in garish clarity. What is the *right* way to select the most evocative details for a history? What can we *rightly* say about the missing details? And if these questions are wrongly posed, what other questions would be better? Out of this comes a questioning after *what* it is that we remember or construct in narratives. What is the thing, what is the being of the thing, that narratives tell us? That narratives are about? And here we find ourselves again in the circularity of action and narrative: the act was to be about an intent, but the intent was itself a token for a narrative of an intended future. We judge intent in the same way we construct and judge narratives: by criticizing the editorial decisions that tell us of the intent and actions.

As always, naturalism lies couched at the door, waiting to draw unwary minds into its restricted world. In this case, temptation takes the form of looking for some invariant properties that are true of all the narratives of an act or event. I think the only such invariants are the (quite naturalistic) trajectories of the material substrates. But narrative doesn't work the way naturalism works. It is true that narrative has to respect the pertinent substrate trajectories, but that minimal constraint doesn't tell us which motions are pertinent, nor why, nor how.

I think the solution lies in observing that narrative must save the meaning, but it may or may not save the motions. Many motions could be compatible with a told narrative, "he went into the store to get a pack of gum." Some are not, but those compatible and incompatible with a narrative cannot neatly be separated according to whether they fit or flout our presupposed stereotypes. The narrative that saves the events and the act in view doesn't nail down the material motions. It saves chiefly the meaning, the goal (a purchase) and possibly its achievement. Even then, it is not so much *the* meaning as it is such meanings as answer questions that the narrator and hearers have in mind: questions that *arise*, as Collingwood

said.

Unsolved parts of the problem remain. If the motions are not sufficiently “nailed down,” others can come later, suppose other motions within the limits of the narrative, and quite transform the meaning (and so the being) of the acts in view.¹¹ Motions are not quite the same thing as trajectories, at least in the usage here: trajectories are naturalistic or within the grasp of naturalistic concepts. Motions are to trajectories as the *Zuhandenheit* of a brick is to its *Vorhandenheit*: motions are constituted in their relationship to humans who have an interest in them. Trajectories abstract from that and are specified with a kind of precision that gets in the way of talking about motions.

5.2.2 The Priority of Language

Common sense and common usage treat both humans and acts as things that exist before language, to which language is added on later. As for selves and human actions, so also for history and morality. I think common sense is wrong, and this is not particularly new or original with me, but it does need some emphasis and detail in view of the weight of common sense. Common sense knows also, whether it admits it or not, that without language there is no action: all the examples from colloquial phenomena are well known, as we saw in section 2.1.6 above. The major thesis of the present study is that action is not something that happens, to which narrative is added on afterward. Action arises within narratability, whether or not a narrative is ever told. A developed human self is not a pre-linguistic entity, it arises only within the medium of language.¹² Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* in effect say that “language, self, and a world are acquired as a package, and the carrier of the package is language.”¹³

The formation within consciousness of the generalized other marks a decisive phase in socialization. It implies the internalization of society as such and of the objective reality established therein, and, at the same time, the subjective establish-

¹¹ Rather than develop the relation of meaning and motions here, within the preliminary sketch of human action, we shall return to it in chapter 6. Other features of action need to be explored first.

¹² See Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) Kerby provides considerable philosophical context.

¹³ I think this is a verbatim quotation, but I don’t know where they said it.

ment of a coherent and continuous identity. Society, identity, *and* reality are subjectively crystallized in the same process of internalization. This crystallization is concurrent with the internalization of language. Indeed, for reasons evident from the foregoing observations on language, language constitutes both the most important content and the most important instrument of socialization.¹⁴

Language is inevitable; there is no alternative. And language carries “nomic elements” of the world, what it is about the world that makes it all right, or not all right, and what makes some actions commendable and others reproachable.

By contrast, one instinctive characterization of language is that language is merely instrumental.¹⁵ A companion instinct is that what is said in language is about things that exist before language and are known before they are articulated in language. These assumptions are often re-asserted by presupposition, unconsciously. They are insidious. The structure of language appears to imply that what is spoken of exists before language rather than arising in language. And if the things spoken of exist before language, then language naturally is assimilated to tool-being, a way of dealing with things that already exist. It is certainly true, as Wachterhauser says, that we can sometimes use words on analogy with tools, but that function is by no means the only or the primordial role of language. Earlier, Heidegger found cases or instances of language that fit all three of the ready-to-hand, the present-at-hand, and Dasein’s own mode of being.¹⁶ I would add to Gelven’s and Dreyfus’s readings that many things arise and get their being within language, and for some purposes, Dasein itself is one of them. Human action clearly is another.

Berger and Luckmann observed that language enables *detachability*.¹⁷ Language enables features of the world to be present existentially when they are not present physically or temporally. Our relations to things in

¹⁴ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality; A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 133.

¹⁵ As Brice Wachterhauser notes, *Beyond Being: Gadamer’s Post-Platonic Hermeneutic Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), pp. 160–161.

¹⁶ *Being and Time*, p. 209/166. See also Michael Gelven, *Heidegger’s “Being and Time”* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 104, and Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 217–218.

¹⁷ *Social Construction*, pp. 34–46. The section is on objectivation in language, but part of objectivation is detachability, pp. 39–40.

the world are by no means exhaustively linguistic, but language extends the grasp of our concepts immeasurably further than the reach of non-linguistic animals. Other animals have only an environment.¹⁸ They can become familiar with a territory, and associate good or ill with other animals, but the degree of world that is available to them this way would seem impoverished to a human being. To say that animals are “world-poor” is one consequence of not having language.¹⁹

Language elevates our involvements beyond the inarticulate skills of dogs and primates to the detachability that makes our world as rich and mysterious as it is. With detachability comes also a certain elusiveness: Things will *sometimes* come to mind and intention when called and depart when dismissed, but not always. (Calling and dismissing are essentially linguistic, not mere analogies.) And there are always more involvements in the world than those that are summoned.

The word for a thing in the world can refer to the thing whether the thing is present and in view or not, in the past or the envisioned future. This is the most basic kind of detachability, but there is more. For with language all of Dasein’s engagements with the world acquire a degree of involvement that they cannot have for dumb animals. It is not just places and tools and even events that are present to mind in language. Being-in-the-world itself arises within language. It is *world*, not just things in it, that is available to Dasein in language. Some of that comes from the skills of presupposition, or “framing,” as we have seen. The language that summons one thing to mind brings with it a context for that thing. Haiku are the poetic example of how to evoke the most world with the least language, and thereby they attest the power of language to invoke world, not just things in the world.

5.2.3 Acts in General and Performative Speech Acts

It was noticed a half-century ago that people do more with language than make statements. Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin, and John Searle were the principals. From their work, consider Searle’s categories of commissives, directives, declaratives, and expressives: the use of language to commit the speaker, to direct the hearer, to constitute social facts, and to ex-

¹⁸ An *Umwelt* in the terminology of Heidegger and Gadamer: See *Truth and Method*, p. 443–445, and *Being and Time*, Division I, chapter 3, sections a and c (sections 15–18, 22–24).

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, especially Part Two.

press emotions and attunements to the world. What I would like to propose here is that acts, simply as acts, do many of these things, whether or not they spell out their performative function as John Searle analyzed.²⁰ A performative *speech* act *says* on its face what it does. Acts, simply as acts, commit their actors, direct their bystanders, constitute social facts for both, and express a relatedness to the world. Narratives, a subdivision of constatives, have overtones of the other kinds of speech acts, because acts by implication carry the force of commissives, directives, declaratives, and expressives.

The ability of action to do this arises from the mutual involvement of Dasein with other Dasein. An act is intelligible only because of this mutual involvement of Dasein: what is worthy for one instance of Dasein makes sense for others only because it can be asserted (or commended in action) as worthy for them also. It is to say, in effect, “if you were standing in my circumstances, you would (or should) do as I am doing now.” That is possible only if they share a common humanity. To engage in an activity for some goal is to assert the worthiness of that goal (a directive function) whether the assertion is spelled out or not. Indeed, the goal and its worthiness could be spelled out in multiple ways, an ambiguity that runs through the structure of action.

An act commits its actor to the goals in view both by displaying his commitment in the bystanding social context and also by devoting time and resources to one goal instead of another when both are not simultaneously possible. The act becomes a social fact and thereby constitutes the context in which others may act in reply. And lastly, the act expresses a relating to the world, something more than mere emotion. Heidegger’s *Befindlichkeit*, hard to translate but in some translations rendered as attunement to the world, is expressed in ordinary action as much as in expressive speech acts.²¹

5.2.4 Ontological Foils

Our inquiry turns on the role of the off-stage in the constitution of the acts on-stage. To be fussy, the factors of interest are not always strictly off-stage. Sometimes they appear in secondary plots, in the story some-

²⁰ John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

²¹ Taken by parts, it is “finding-oneself-ness,” which doesn’t help. Macquarrie and Robinson translated it as “state of mind,” which is probably too cerebral. “Attunement” seems to be a good solution.

place, but not at center stage. They appear in a supporting role, or they are assumed and implicit but not actually included in the story. This phenomenon appeared at the beginning, in Alasdair MacIntyre's depiction of a man digging roses, to name only the "motions" before us there (section 4.3 above). To say anything more significant about what he was doing required looking beyond the immediate scene, into the life of the man we saw there.

Literature has dealt with something like this phenomenon from the earliest texts we have. What's on-stage but peripheral tells us something about actions at center-stage. In effect, one subplot is a foil for another. I would like to call the less central of the two subplots an *ontological foil* for the more central. In general, the off-stage functions as ontological foils for the on-stage; it is assumed even though it may not be spelled out. Sometimes the foil is known to the readers but not to the characters, as with Oedipus, who does not know some parts of his own background and parentage. The foil may have a direct relation to the central action. If the foil were different, the central action would also appear differently. Sometimes the foil merely "comments" on the central action, because of its similarities or differences from that action. If the comic relief in a tragedy were removed, we would view the central action differently, for the comic relief tells us something about the larger world in which the tragedy before us unfolds.²² In general, anything other than the main plot can work as a foil, because the peripheral or off-stage constitutes the world in which the main action happens, and this world is presupposed in the main action. The foils we see are given to us as a sample of that larger world.

Focus for the moment on the conventional literary meaning of foil, a subplot that comments on the main plot. In the far on-stage, we see other examples of what's happening at center-stage: Gloucester and his sons, in comparison to Lear and his daughters. The sons tell us what is going on with the daughters. Moreover, they tell the other characters in the play what is going on. The other characters should know, and they don't.

The foil appears to be only illustrative or analogical, but it may also in an indirect sense be ontological: by its presence, it constitutes the genus of the acts at center-stage, whether or not the center-stage relates directly to this particular foil. If all the other members of the genus were removed,

²² Conversely, what would it do to *Oedipus at Colonus* to add comic relief? One shudders. An example of such a comparison is afforded by the differences between *Lord of the Rings* as book and as movie. Peter Jackson added comic relief that was largely missing in the book. An improvement? That's for readers to say.

there would be no genus, and so no assignment of the acts in focus to such a genus. The foils illustrate the genus, but they are not just illustrations. Any other members of the genus would do. For example, if the story is to focus on some virtue or vice, any secondary example of the virtue or the vice will do. The particular foil we see is merely convenient, but some foil is necessary.

The foil thus disambiguates the action at center-stage. In the foil, we see what's really going on with the lead actors, and it is in this sense that the illustrative foil is also ontological in the constitution of the action at center-stage. We don't really know what's happening at center-stage until we see the "same thing" happening someplace else. We may not even be able to see what matters and what doesn't in the scenes right in front of us until we see off-stage or at some distance the same thing as what matters before us. In a real sense, it is the foils in the distance that do the work of answering the question "yes, but which ones," asked of all the motions before us. Which ones matter? What matters is what's analogous to the foil off-stage or marginally on-stage.

The phenomenon frequently occurs in the Bible unlabeled, as typology or as stories that silently comment on each other. It occurs explicitly in Nathan's fictitious story told to David to elicit David's judgement on his own behavior with regard to Uriah and Bathsheba, a theme that is repeated later with Ahab, Jezebel, and Naboth's vineyard.

Return to MacIntyre's example of *Hamlet* that we saw in section 4.3. The foil of the players bears closer examination.²³ The troop of players is simply available to the plot, but Hamlet makes of them far more than mere visiting entertainers. As Act II, scene ii ends, Hamlet intends their play to work much as Nathan's story with David: "the play's the thing / wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king," but there's a difference. Hamlet doesn't know whether the ghost was real or a phantasm created by the devil (line 525), a concern that speaks real wisdom of its age and its spiritual caution. The play will do more than Nathan's parable did; Nathan knew, where Hamlet is not certain. The foil is not just a formal cause, it's a very efficient formal cause. It won't just determine what the king, Claudius, has done; it will push the play on toward its conclusion.

Hamlet in his perplexity touches another aspect of our problem when he marvels at the players' evocative and emotional power and laments his

²³ I am citing *Hamlet* in the Barnes and Noble Shakespeare, edited by Jeff Dolven (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007). The text is provided with line numbers.

own apathy:

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
 That he should weep for her? What would he do,
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech;
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
 The very faculties of eyes and ears.
 Yet I,
 A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
 Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
 And can say nothing!²⁴

Hamlet asks why the foil should make any claim on him or on Claudius — or on anyone else, for that matter. And Hamlet bewails his own inability to respond to the real claims he faces in his own life. “What’s Hecuba to him?” This is the question we encountered in the amended Dasein. Without it, no foils could ever work. One event or act could do nothing to or for the being of another. They could be neither foils nor ontological. Yet the phenomenon is not simple, as Hamlet knows: Foils can work in many ways, and they can fail to work in their existential hold, even on those who welcome them. And as with the existential claims of other Dasein, foils also can be ignored or denied with impunity.²⁵

There is another story of a prince whose father was murdered by his now-reigning uncle: Caspian, later Caspian X, son of Caspian IX, and nephew of Miraz, the Telmarine king of Narnia. Caspian, unlike Hamlet, takes matters in hand and corrects them — without, it may be noted, killing Miraz; that is done by two of Miraz’s own lords. What is the difference? The principal difference lies in minor characters: his tutor, Doctor Cornelius, and before him, Caspian’s nurse. They told him the true history of Narnia. Caspian later gets help, but help would not have been possible without the Doctor’s preparatory instruction. C. S. Lewis has many

²⁴ Lines 485–495. The text above has been altered in two places as in one of the Folio editions from www.Gutenberg.org (lws2610.txt); Barnes and Noble follow the second Quarto edition of 1604 (p. 39). The Folio edition is clearer. I am indebted to Dennis Roby for teasing my own dull and muddy engineer’s pate with this speech.

²⁵ Foils are *chosen*, a feature we return to in due time. Ontological foils are essential in history, where choice can be handled. We would generally like to avoid choice in ontology in questions of nature.

other fish to fry than simply ringing changes on Hamlet, but the contrasts with Hamlet are instructive for us.²⁶ What Caspian learns from Doctor Cornelius is nothing less than a cosmological context for his actions and his life, from the beginning in creation to Aslan, the history of the Telmarine dynasty, and the true nature of the original population of Narnia. The contrast is remarked (without recourse to C. S. Lewis) when Alasdair MacIntyre observes that Hamlet has no sense of what is going on in his life (p. 108 above), and without such a sense, he is helpless. Without foils, he cannot answer the question “yes, but which ones matter, and how?,” asked of the events around him. That question determines what is going on: it is ontological.

In general, we use fiction to tell us what is going on in our lives: it illustrates the virtues and vices, gives us figures to identify with, gives us a start on plots that we can vary as needed. We use fiction (or even better, fact, when we can get it) as a repertoire that does the work of formal causes in acts. As Alasdair MacIntyre has it, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”²⁷ Caspian knows, but Hamlet is confused. (This is entirely compatible with Caspian being naive and Hamlet sophisticated, as they certainly are.) Caspian is rich with a few foils, but Hamlet has too many and is paralyzed. Hamlet knows he is missing something but has no idea what. MacIntyre:

Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.²⁸

Caspian has many stories — from Dr. Cornelius and from his nurse. We count *Caspian* as good literature, but it is a children’s story. We count *Hamlet* as great literature because it mirrors our own bewildered age. We,

²⁶ The book, of course, is *Prince Caspian*. See also Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994. Lewis’s larger business is heavily into illustrating the virtues — and incidentally a few vices.

²⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 216. Note the similarity to H. Richard Niebuhr’s analysis in *The Responsible Self*, pp. 61–65.

²⁸ *After Virtue*, p. 216. Herbert Fingarette, in chapter 3 of *Self Deception* also notes that spelling out what is going on is a skill, one acquired with learning and maturity.

too, have many stories, but we don't know which of them matter, which are true, and which are a waste of time — or worse. That is almost as bad as having too few stories.

It is *because* Caspian is naive and Hamlet sophisticated that Caspian can solve his problems and Hamlet cannot. That is also the reason why *Hamlet* is so rich for our own time. For Hamlet has to live with the ambiguity and openness both of narrative and of all things narratable. His problem is something more than an accidental condition of social change in sixteenth-century Denmark (or England); it is a part of life in history as such. Hamlet tells us something about the world of history, of which Mircea Eliade said "history is terror." With ambiguity and openness comes something more: a *responsibility* that is a central feature of living in *history*, even when we do not entirely understand the history we are a part of.

Return to the case of the assassins, in their pleas with Lee Harvey Oswald to go through with it. The event of Oswald's assassination of Kennedy is for them the disclosure of ultimate reality. *Is*: it is ontological. *For them*: this raises problems, invites charges of "subjectivism," etc. *The disclosure of*: it does the work of a formal cause, and we might suspect more than that; but what more? *Ultimate reality*: The meaning of (human) life? The meaning and purpose and place of human life in the universe? It is more than just a "passive" formal cause. If we said it is an *active* formal cause, or an *effective* formal cause (God forbid we should call it an *efficient* formal cause), we would also have to say, "Toto, I don't think we're in Aristotle any more!"²⁹ Ever since the 17th century, when formal causes were restricted or just hidden and final causes banished or abolished, we have been searching in vain for formal causes and final causes among material and efficient causes, or we have been trying to make final causes more efficient (while usually ignoring formal causes).

Consider another kind of example, from the reading of a biblical text in a non-Western culture: the story of Lot's Wife as it is read by Koreans, who know the story of Janjanup, a generous and open-hearted woman. Like Lot's wife, she is fleeing a natural disaster and, looking back, is turned to stone.³⁰ Where the implied reader in Western culture sees Lot's wife as

²⁹ More precisely, if a tad pedantically, we are trying to escape Aristotle the better Platonist and recover Aristotle the moderate realist.

³⁰ Paul S. Chung, *Martin Luther and Buddhism; Aesthetics of Suffering*. Second edition. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), pp. 327–328.

faithless and disobedient, in Korean culture, she appears unfairly treated by events because of the background of the story of Janjanup. The question of ontological foils has here bumped into another question, one about choices in narrative. We come to that below.

There are always more foils than we know, or can know, so we can never know entirely what an act is. There is speculation that Shakespeare intended more than meets the eye in the contrast of Hamlet's apathy with the players' animated empathy.³¹

We see one act in the light of another. This exemplifies the general definition of analogy, to which we come in section 5.3.1.

5.2.5 Multiple Narratives, Multiple Acts

There are virtually always multiple true narratives of any action. It's not just that they tell different things about the action. They may not agree. This is a commonplace in Analytic philosophy of action, but it usually rises to view only to disappear, never becoming thematic. Ambiguity of narratives is not a naturalistic phenomenon. All accounts of a naturalistic phenomenon are reconcilable, interconvertible, derivable from one another. One consequence follows immediately. If acts get their being from the narratives that can be told of them, in the hypothesis of this study, then an actor is virtually always doing many things at one time, in one and the same set of material motions. There are many acts "passing through" the motions we see on stage. Ambiguity arises not just about what this or that act is, but about what act is going on before us.

Imagine some possibilities that grow from a mere summary, "he went into the store to buy a pack of gum." Here are some of the other things that may be happening at the same time:

flirting with the checkout clerk
 flirting with the stocking clerk
 flirting with another customer
 planned ahead of time
 unplanned, accidental coincidence
 casing the joint

³¹ The foil is in a story told "of Alexander, the cruel tyrant of Pherae in Thessaly, who seeing a famous tragedian act in the Troades of Euripides, was so sensibly touched that he left the theater before the play was ended; being ashamed, as he owned, that he who never pitied those he murdered, should weep at the sufferings of Hecuba and Andromache." Edmond Malone, *The Life and Poems of William Shakespeare* (London: 1821), p. 313.

for a robbery
 for purchasing, buying the store
 for a place to conduct other business surreptitiously,
 legal or not
 for a regular supply of favorite blank bound notebooks
 (the purchase of gum was incidental)
 for hiring away talented employees
 avoiding work
 avoiding the heat outdoors
 avoiding the cold outdoors
 avoiding certain people seen on the street
 hoping to meet certain people
 discovering — meeting — his future spouse
 savoring the aroma of coffee brewing in the store
 justifying legal parking in the store's lot,
 on the way to a sublime seafood restaurant nearby
 arguing with a friend met by coincidence

Few require that the actor in this diorama consciously *intend* to do these things. Indeed, it is still to miss the point to claim that if he did any of these, he must have *unconsciously* intended them. In some of these acts, intention ahead of time is impossible; in many, it is not necessary. The phenomenon is a corollary of the worldhood of the world and the place of zuhanden things in the world. We have relationships to and involvements in all the things around us, even when we don't think about them consciously (or unconsciously, for that matter).³² Any one of those involvements can become the pivot of an act, even after the "fact" of the act, as a function of what the actor does later on.

When we try to *settle* disputed questions about narratives, we do so only because we have some particular application in view. Which narrative is the correct one, relative to the questions in our present context? The application will be context-relative for the critics who appraise the acts in view; judges and legal hermeneutics, if the proceedings are formal.³³ But ordinary people trying to make sense of their lives and their neighbors'

³² Perhaps the problem is that we intuitively construe the unconscious as like the conscious mind, only not "conscious," available to waking experience. That is probably a mistake: the unconscious is, if anything, more like an ill-defined repertoire of skills, potentials for thinking and acting, than it is like told narratives or deliberated plans.

³³ See e. g. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 308.

lives are in the same situation logically. They get answers only to questions asked, even if the questions are (for them) so obvious as to be difficult to retrieve and spell out explicitly.³⁴ Questions arise when expectations are not met.³⁵

Gadamer's notion of fusion of horizons is an instance of the rubric that we get answers only to questions asked. The historical narrative we have in the present is a fusion of the horizons of the past and the present. We have questions about the past — and, sometimes, answers. It is possible to ask whether our answers are responsible: probable and correct, the best answers to our questions that we can get, or that anyone standing in our place could get. In this sense, narratives about history are relative to questions asked about history. Other people may have other questions. These are ours. Two hundred years of experience and several decades of theory have noticed that new language games can be invented, in effect raising to ontological status things in history that before were not seen as real at all. In other words, people learn (or invent) how to ask new questions, and the narratives that result are accordingly new in proportion to the new concepts they have invented. People after us will have questions we did not see.

Ambiguity arises also from the choice of larger context in which to situate the acts before us. This is part of the hermeneutical circle, and we saw an instance of it in the case of Lot's wife against the background of the story of Janjanup above. The relation of acts to larger contexts will figure prominently in the inquiry as it unfolds from here. We saw ontological ambiguity driving Paul Ricoeur's questions on p. 122 above, and it will be with us to the end.

Ambiguity is one of the most important features of human action. We crave to have it resolved; hence the idea of Judgement Day, when it *will* be resolved. We may never entirely get what we want, but responsibility is possible without it.

5.2.6 Narratability

One might think, on hearing that acts are about narratives, that acts get their ontology from the narratives actually told of them. We know this

³⁴ Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 39.

³⁵ See Bertram F. Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c2004). Things that are obvious or uninteresting don't get spelled out; things that are not obvious and unknown get handled by presuppositions, default assumptions about behavior.

is not true, both from common experience and from reading Fingarette, but it goes further than Fingarette elaborated for his limited purposes. If it were claimed that acts get their being from told narratives, we would rightly complain that this makes the being and truth of acts relative to the knowledge and honesty of the tellers; little better than caprice and whimsy, and in any case, not credible as an *ontology*. It is inherent in the logic of the concepts that what things *are* has to be distinguishable from what we *say* they are; otherwise, we could not say that someone is mistaken. Fingarette showed that beneath the common sense is a phenomenon of more richness and complexity than common sense allows. What we know of acts is more a matter of telling than of seeing. To make sense, however, the being of acts has to be about possible narratives, not told narratives. Self-deception is about mis-told narratives.

If acts are about narratives, then we may well ask, what is narratability? My conjecture is that where there are contingency, interest, and time, there is narratability. One will find acts and actors implied in the narratives.³⁶ This is a broader definition than what the *Cambridge Companion* gives, that narrative is about “problem solving, conflict, interpersonal relations, human experience,” and “the temporality of existence.”³⁷ It does not matter for present purposes whether the story is told in the words of the actors (as in stage-drama), or in a conventional “narrative,” as in a novel or a newspaper story, or in a movie, where we see as well as read and hear. If the narrative is textual, the actor, if one is specified, will be the subject of the pivotal verbs. (In movies, the actors are the characters we see.) The actor may be left out, implied but unspecified, or left open, as when the verbs are in the passive voice. The actor’s interests may not be the same as the readers’ or the bystanders’, and the story may concern them more than the actors. How it all gets arranged is the *plot* in the story.

We assume a larger taken-for-granted world as context, and then we inquire about the arrangement of things within that presupposed world. Some happenstances were not what was expected, or were not necessary, and might have been different: they are contingent. Contingency is relative. Expectations are defined within some horizon or context. We make

³⁶ There are certainly non-narrative ways to specify contingencies that affect interests. Cf. David Herman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), which distinguishes narratives from mere lists of events, recipes, and instructions. One could doubtless find many more.

³⁷ Cf. p. 24 of the *Companion*. We shall need the broader definition for reasons that will come out in the course of the inquiry.

assumptions about what needs explanation and what does not.³⁸ Acts of omission and acts of negligence, no less than acts of commission, may need explanation. And acts of negligence don't require any intent (or even knowledge) by the actor at all; he was supposed to know the law, and ignorance is no excuse. The larger narrative and its standards, not what was going on in the actor's head, define what counts as an act. (Many things were going on in the actor's head; the larger narrative picks out which of them matter, and how.) What goes for commission and omission goes also for motion and non-motion; both are relative to presupposed narrative standards.

The presupposed context can be different for different purposes. In other words, the status of contingencies *as* contingent is redactional, chosen, rather than given in nature, even when the material particulars are totally determined by naturalistic considerations. Material trajectories may be determined, but expectation is editorial and human-relative. Contingency depends on designating what in the world is both interesting and could have been different. Other editors, with other interests, could just as well ascribe our contingencies to chance or irrelevance or taken-for-granted background without narrative interest (to them) at all. Narration is thus an editing process, a process of selection and arrangement, one that presupposes prior choices about the problem to be solved in and by the narrative.

If contingencies are at the disposal of story-tellers, so are interests. People do not agree about what's in someone's interest, and individuals themselves are easily perplexed about their own interests. Nevertheless, most of the time there is agreement about how interests will be served: what various members' interests are, whose will take precedence, how resources will be allocated, and so forth. There is a social equilibrium of sorts. When that equilibrium is disturbed, the interests at stake may be revised. A story ensues.³⁹ Looking backward instead of forward, we often answer questions about how a contingent social equilibrium arose in the first place with "thereby hangs a tale."

A story can be told in many ways, which brings us to two central features of human action viewed as a function of narrative: (1) an act is in

³⁸ Often paradigm shifts in the sciences turn on changed ideas of what needs explanation: for Aristotelian physics, rest is taken as normal but motion needs explanation. Things were transformed with Galilean inertial motion, in which acceleration needed explanation. The same applies to narrative contexts.

³⁹ Cf. the notice of William Gibson above, p. 119.

some sense beyond any particular narrative of it, and (2) what it is has a built-in ambiguity that will keep us busy for the rest of this study. The first is narrativity, and the second is the “spin” of our title. We have to live with ambiguity.

How shall we say that the being of an act lies beyond any particular narrative of it, even though it is constituted by the narratives that can be told of it? It is clearly not a simple Aristotelian motion or modern intentionally caused change of state. It is a narrative complex, or better, a complex of narratives, actual and potential, told and tellable, and with them, claims on us, claims of truth. The stories that can be told are all in some sense about the “same thing,” or nearly the same thing, or variations on the same thing.

The suggestion that an act is constituted not by a single narrative but by a complex of tellable narratives is analogous to a certain instinct in mathematics. Some things in mathematics are not simple objects but properties of infinite sets, even though they appear to be simple objects and get treated on a par with other things that really are simple objects.⁴⁰ If that kind of thinking is permitted in mathematics, analogs of it cannot be forbidden here.

We have remarked above (p. 65) that many things are constituted as a substrate set plus structure conceptually imposed on that substrate. Again, the examples were mathematical. Here, the substrate is all the motions of the world,⁴¹ and the structure is imposed by narrative. In a systems ontology, things are crisp and separated from the rest of the world, at least in their being, if not always in their interactions.⁴² In a distributed ontology, things are deeply involved in the rest of the world. In both, we see substrate plus structure.

⁴⁰ In the example closest to hand, real numbers are defined as the limits of series or of Cauchy sequences. A *real* number is then not simple but rather a complex of possible mathematical operations on *rational* numbers. Yet for many purposes, real and rational numbers get treated on a par, as “simple” objects. Arithmetic operations do not distinguish between them. Mathematical details may be left to those interested.

⁴¹ As noted above, we equivocate on the meanings of “motion.” For the present, it does not matter whether we are talking about Aristotelian motions or naturalistic material trajectories. They are different, and confusing them conceals issues of great interest to us. We come to this below, in section 6.1.1.

⁴² In the case of the number system, one might say that the real numbers are constituted by their relations to things around them, and this sounds like a distributed ontology. It isn’t really; it’s a way to keep the real numbers within a systems ontology and prevent all the openness of distributed ontologies from flooding in and swamping the character of mathematics.

A kind of ontological panic rises naturally at this point.⁴³ It is easy to want a Platonist solution to the ontological problem, in which an act pre-exists any narratives of it. The modern Platonist wants things simple, cleanly separated from the rest of the world (“clear and distinct ideas”), and methodological naturalism in the sciences follows this instinct, with a large measure of success. Platonists, including Aristotelians reading the *de Anima* instead of the *Poetics*, take an action as a motion, preferably one visible before us (“on-stage”). This, however, dodges the question, “why *these* motions?” The answers come from the surrounding context, “off-stage,” and from editorial decisions by narrators. There are too many counter-examples to the Platonist concept of action, showing that narratives are always there at the beginning or before. Narrative has a constitutive role inasmuch as it picks out what the act is. Narrative, or better, narratability, has to be there at the beginning.

Let me take stock. We said that an act is not just a complex of tellable narratives; it is also truth-claims that allow us to criticize those narratives. The truth-claims lie in other events, both on-stage and off-stage, and in the ontological involvements of human beings in each other that underwrite all interpersonal claims. Those claims come next in the logic of the inquiry. The initial basic features of a distributed ontology of human action are here. Among them, after the priority of language and narrative, ambiguity stands out. It runs through all the major problems with human action, whether in thinking about it philosophically or in dealing with it practically. Ambiguity gets resolved, to the extent it can be, in the claims others make on us.

5.3 Claims of Acts and Narratives

5.3.1 Criticizing Narratives: the Faculty of Analogy

In the previous section, we have watched openness and ambiguity move from narrative to the actions that get their being from narrative.⁴⁴ The problem that arises naturally is how to criticize narratives. To criticize narratives is to say one is better than another, one tells it like it is, one includes

⁴³ It is motivated both by a fear of conceptual chaos and irresponsibility and also by a desire for control. This openness is an instance of the very ambiguity we study.

⁴⁴ One who did not welcome this ambiguity might say it has “metastasized” from narratives to actions.

what's necessary, leaves out what doesn't matter, one is self-deception, another is honest and gets right what matters. To criticize narratives is to begin to answer the questions implicit in the restatement of the problem of truth in narrative, as it was on p. 7. In Paul Ricoeur's analysis, action and narrative have a circular relationship: narrative picks out the motions that are relevant to an act and then gives us an act that it has already shaped. Why, then, do we naturally protest that the act was there before the narrative? An act makes a claim on us, and the narrative has to answer to that claim. Yet the circularity persists, on the arguments so far, for only narrative can answer the "yes, but which ones" question, asked of all the motions of the world: which ones are part of or pertinent to *this* act? What rescues Ricoeur's (and our) circularity from arbitrariness? Circularity is rendered hermeneutical instead of vicious because both acts and narratives make a claim on us. But why? And how? The answers, I contend, have two roots pertinent here.

The hermeneutical circle is one of wholes and parts, as we have seen already and shall explore more in what follows. Just as texts and their parts were to be fitted into larger wholes, acts are to be fitted into larger narrative wholes. The circle consists in iterating from parts to wholes and back again, checking to see if the interpretation that develops is consistent. This is akin to iterative processes in mathematics, and in both places the question is whether the iteration *converges* to a stable reading, or here, a stable understanding of the act in view. We saw this in detail in section 4.4. The question of convergence is settled in different ways in mathematics and hermeneutics. In mathematics, the iteration takes place in a metric space, and where there is no metric, the problem cannot be approached mathematically. In the hermeneutics of action, there is no metric, and assessment of convergence takes an entirely different form. As said just above, it has two roots. One is the interrelatedness of human beings with each other, the "amended Dasein" as I called it in section 3.4.1 above. The other is analogy, analogy between acts and analogy between persons. The two are related. It will take some work to get from the structure of Dasein to the faculty of analogy and the criticism of narratives. The ability to draw analogies in narratives enables us to tell what needs to be included, what can be left out; what matters, and how. (This is precisely the question of truth in narrative as we have defined it more than once.)

Begin in the structure of Dasein with understanding, the focus of Section 31 of *Being and Time*. We shall come by stages to analogy and the

criticism of narratives. Heidegger said that to understand something is to construe it *as* something.⁴⁵ Understanding is both the grounding of what Heidegger called interpretation and we shall gloss as categorization, and it is also itself grounded in a relation to oneself in the world. Being-in-the-world is the basic structure in which Dasein relates to itself, things in the world, and other people. Understanding and Being-in-the-world are correlates. Edward Hobbs defines understanding with respect to its grounding in a way that may be more helpful, certainly more clear, than Heidegger's own text.

By an *understanding*, I mean a relationship one takes up toward one's existence; or a construction of the meaning-significance of one's universe as it is engaged with the self and the self with it, in terms of which every decision is made; or a relationship between the self and its universe in terms of which all decisions are made. In other words, I am using the word in its primordial sense — that which *stands under* — stands under choice and action. . . . An understanding is not an opinion, but rather the basis for action. It is at stake whenever one comes to a decision about anything affecting the self and its relationships, for to make a decision based on another understanding is to assume or take up that other understanding. And it is not a question of what theories one holds, but of the core of one's choices. It is the question of one mode of selfhood rather than another.⁴⁶

Some things to note: Interpretation and categorization are yet to come, based on understanding, and understanding itself admits of disagreements, which we shall return to in section 5.3.5 below, the ambiguity of the good. Heidegger emphasizes that understanding is the ability to discern what things are for. The SOED gives first among the meanings the ability to gauge "the meaning or import" of something: i. e., to know the practical consequences of the thing. This is superficial and inclusive but nonetheless helpful. Interpretation is built upon understanding in a special sense.

⁴⁵ *Being and Time*, p. 189/149. It is not first apprehended as something present-at-hand and then, later, construed as ready-to-hand, by a projection onto its presence-at-hand (p. 190/149–150).

⁴⁶ Edward C. Hobbs, "Recognition of Conceptuality as a Hermeneutical Tool," F. L. Cross, ed., *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, Band 88 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964), pp. 464–477. Available online at the Pacific Coast Theological Society *Journal*, <http://www.pcts.org/journal/hobbs2010a/index.html>

To understand oneself in a situation is to know the possibilities and uses of what one encounters in that situation, but without spelling out or focusing attention on any of the many things ready-to-hand there. To spell out is always to interpret a thing *as* something, meaning to pick out one among several things it could be interpreted as. The tool on the cover of my *Where, Now, O Biologists Is Your Theory* was not designed as a philosophy instruction device, but it may legitimately be interpreted in that way.

John Ellis makes similar distinctions when he explains categorization as the primordial function of language (coming well before naming or denotation). Among the currently fashionable missteps about language, one is “the assumption that the verbal categories of language serve to group like things together. . . . the exact reverse is the important truth for linguistic theory: verbal categories group *unlike* things.”⁴⁷ There is, as Ellis concedes, a kind of truth in the error that categories group together like things, but it is a truth that will not withstand careful inspection. What emerges on closer examination of any category is how unlike its members are, at least when viewed from any physical perspective. They are grouped together because for human purposes, they function alike, and grouping them together enables language users to treat them as equivalent. “We grasp the essence of the process of categorization only when we see it as the grouping together of things that are not the same in order that they will count as the same.”⁴⁸ If we were limited to physical characteristics of things we would find the “yes but which ones?” question unanswerable. There are so many similarities between members and non-members of any category, and differences among members, that similarity can’t explain why some things are members and others are not. It is, as Heidegger hammers the point, human involvements that enable us to understand (and so categorize) them together. Ellis speaks not of human involvements but of function — in the lives of humans, which amounts to the same thing.

Another pervasive misstep about language is the assumption that language merely reflects what is in the world: that language has a passive relation to things in the world. On the contrary, it is quite active.⁴⁹ Cat-

⁴⁷ John M. Ellis, *Language, Thought, and Logic* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993) pp. 15–16.

⁴⁸ Ellis, p. 24.

⁴⁹ This was one of Anthony Kenny’s points as we saw above, p. 56, where he ascribed to nominalists the position that the intellect is passive and to moderate realism an understanding of an agent intellect.

egorization can happen in many ways, and categories can be drawn for different purposes within one language.⁵⁰ There are more differences between languages.⁵¹

Analogy and categorization appear only with language, for it is only with language that understanding can “call together” the parts of a phenomenon or summon different phenomena for comparison; though perhaps by the time we get to languaging a phenomenon, we are beyond understanding and into interpretation, in Heidegger’s distinction of them. Liddell and Scott give as the first meaning for ἀνάλογος, “according to a due λόγος.”⁵² Ellis would gloss “due *logos*” in terms of categories of language, categories *created* by language.

Language embodies understanding and so embodies the ability to gauge interests. Words and language use are always already interest-laden, and abstracting from interests, to the extent that it can be done, comes later. In embodying interests, language embodies also the presence of other language-speakers. This is part of the amended Dasein. The ability to appraise what’s in one’s own interest depends on or expresses or presupposes an ability also to gauge *other* Dasein’s interests. Interests are judged in community, and that intersubjective judgement presupposes the amended Dasein: Dasein is at stake for other Dasein, not just itself, and it knows this.

The faculty of analogy underwrites ontological foils: foils work as a kind of comparison, whether for similarities or differences, and it is analogy that picks these out.

Analogy accordingly enables us to tell which physical trajectories qualify as the motions relevant to some act. It is based on the ability to say how motions affect Dasein’s interests. Analogy relates meaning (at a very low level) to physical trajectories. Dasein was defined, after all, as having an interest both in its own self and in things (including other people) in the world. To be Dasein is to know how things in the world affect one’s own interests. For example, it is by the faculty we are calling analogy that one can tell whether an arm rising is an arm-raising, whether as a bid at an auction, as a wave of greeting, as a salute, as a manipulation of a tool, or as one of these but also as a distraction aimed at someone else in

⁵⁰ Biologists define *species* differently for different purposes.

⁵¹ There are many examples in George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵² Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Sir Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

the vicinity. One could go on for a long time.

The faculty of analogy gets expressed more specifically in a narrative context. Herbert Fingarette called it a skill, the ability to spell out, to tell what belongs in a story and what can be left out. This is a skill acquired with maturity, with coming of age, approximately at legal majority. We learn to tell when one act is like another, when an act is an instance of one category or several, and not other categories. The faculty of analogy underwrites what Heidegger called *Wiederholen*, the retrieval of possibilities from the past. It is an ability to interpret a narrative and retrieve from it how the narrated events affect the interests of those involved, bystanders, spectators, and those who come long after.

We have not reduced analogy to other more basic skills. I do not know whether that can be done. But analogy does seem to be the ability to put unlikes together, to count as alike; here, among motions and actions.

5.3.2 Acts of Nature, Acts of God

We said above that any contingency that affects someone's interests is *narratable* and that the central prototype of the concept of action occurs when the events are narratable by the implied actor, the subject of the principal verbs in the narrative. Action is thus a Lakovian radial category. Such a concept has multiple sub-classes, and there is no logical rule relating them all, certainly not a set-theoretical structure so attractive to systems-ontological instincts. Instead, one of the meanings is the prototype, and the others are derived from it by analogy.⁵³ The analogies are humanly meaningful, but they are not predictable in advance. In natural languages, they simply have to be learned.

My conjecture, at home in philosophy rather than linguistics, is that human action stands as the prototype for acts of nature and acts of God. Any other kinds of action are derived by analogy. There is a simple difference. Narratability *by the actor* is essential to the prototype case of *human* actions. The ability of the actor to narrate the act is the essential condition for ascribing both intent and responsibility to the actor. Here language is literally response-ability, the ability to respond. Morality, the ability to criticize, to approve or disapprove, presupposes competence for language and more particularly for narrative, in both the actors and the critics. Without language, all we have is animal behavior, not real action.⁵⁴

⁵³ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, especially chapter 6.

⁵⁴ See section 7.1.1.

The *extended* category of action includes any happening that is contingent and affects someone's interests, as it is brought to language in narrative. Acts by analogy are no less acts than the prototype case of human action, though they may well not be acts in exactly the same way. The narrower prototype category of action is limited to those contingent and interested happenings that *could* be narrated by the actors in the narrative. Acts of nature and acts of God fit into the broader category but not in the narrower prototype. Yet we live by the consequences of acts of nature and acts of God — as is appropriate to the character of nature and of God, neither of which are simply like human actors.

The definition of the prototype action category is noticeably different from that of the Aristotelian tradition (intentionally caused change). We have learned from the phenomena surveyed that actors often do not spell out what they are doing, even to themselves. We have learned that acts are not always intentional, that actors sometimes do not know what they are nevertheless doing, that acts of omission are as much acts as acts of commission, and so on. The rubric of potential narratability by the actor is generous enough to capture what we need. What contingency plus interest plus narratability by the actor picks out is human action, including the hard cases, the cases that really matter and cause grief, heartache, agony, and puzzlement, not just the toy cases of the action theories that focus on intention and causation.

Acts of nature and acts of God need to be handled differently from acts by potentially responsible human actors. Neither nature nor God give narratives on demand.⁵⁵ The status of acts of nature varies greatly, depending on one's appraisal of nature itself. To speak of God as narrating, intending, speaking, or acting always works by analogy.⁵⁶ The character of the analogies in the case of God will be different from the analogies in the case of nature.

The constitution of acts of God appears in New Testament theology in trying to make sense of the typological relationship between the Exodus and the Gospels. Many explanations for the typology have been proposed. Edward Hobbs simply accepted the typology as it is present in the Gospel texts and asked how events (especially acts of God) come to language *as* events. "The languaging of it is not an interpretation of

⁵⁵ The case of nature is obvious. For God, see Job.

⁵⁶ I take sides in disputes on the character of religious language here. See David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 17.

the event-already-there, but the coming-to-be of the event.”⁵⁷ When questioned, Hobbs named Heidegger’s concept of *Wiederholung* as what he had in mind: *Wiederholung* means the retrieval from the past of possibilities for the present and future. That can be done in many ways and allows more creativity and liberty than Heidegger ever let on. Rather than focus on *Wiederholung*, it would be better to observe that Hobbs’s remarks locate the constitution of events and actions in language, that is, in narrative. His words are closer to the distributed ontology than to Heidegger. The acts in view (here, acts of God) get their being from their narratability and in part from narratives that are actually told of them.

What does such act-of-God language do? Some things can be said even within the limits of the present study; most of the problem lies beyond the resources we have here. Act-of-God language indicates obligations of gratitude that go beyond what we owe others in past history. We speak of those obligations (and other relationships to God, but gratitude is the first) by analogy with inter-personal relationships with other human beings. We have bumped into several problems. One is transcendence, how to speak of realities that go beyond the merely intramundane. Another is the problem of criticizing act-of-God language: All ascription of action to God works by analogy, but why are some ascriptions of action to God better than others? We have not the means to answer these questions in the present study. The most that we can do here is observe that acts of God get their being, in part, from their narratability, from how they are brought to language.

5.3.3 The Agent Patient

A consequence follows fairly simply from the amendments to Heidegger. One person’s being has effects in the lives of others. In this sense, the first may be said to act in the lives of the others: The first person, who may not “act” at all, nevertheless acts, simply by being there — literally, *Da-sein*, in German.

Some examples may help. In the movie *Lorenzo’s Oil*, a young boy, Lorenzo Odone, develops a metabolic disorder through inability to synthesize a necessary fatty acid. The father, researching the matter in libraries and with doctors and chemists, manages to get some of the requisite oil and reverse the disability, but only with some years of intensive effort. The

⁵⁷ Edward C. Hobbs, instructional materials, “Eight Interpretations of the Significance of the Evangelists’ Use of Old Testament Models in Interpreting Jesus,” from about 1976. The context is quoted at greater length on p. 232 below.

movie is based on real people. What we *see*, though it is not narrated as action, are the effects of Lorenzo in his extremity on the people around him, first his mother and father, but others also. He transforms their lives. They suffer because of his disability, whether they want to or not. It is not something voluntary, it's ontological.

In another example, also true, a young graduate student suffered disabling head injuries when he rolled his truck at night in order to avoid hitting a pedestrian. I shall call him simply Jay, since I don't believe I am at liberty to use real names. I met him when I was in Kaiser Rehab in Vallejo, recuperating from my own spinal cord injury, one rather mild as disabilities go. Jay was mostly blind, from damage to his occipital lobes. Previously a promising student in a very challenging engineering school, he now could barely count to two hundred. Many muscles were uncooperative, spastic, or paralyzed. The prescribed therapy included ice baths. In his blindness, he called the nurses bastards and the orderlies bitches.

What was astonishing to one unfamiliar with such cases was that in many ways, of all the patients in rehab, he handled his difficulties with the most grace. The physical therapists told me this was common: those with head injuries were quite candid in expressing their feelings, but they were also uncommonly positive in handling their disabilities. Stroke victims, by contrast, were often full of self-pity, bitterness, resentment, exhaustion, and just apathy. Jay had no such problems, though he complained candidly in his pains.

He demonstrated aspects of being human that are mildly terrifying: the ability to handle a disability that most of us would consider appalling, demonstrating that cognitive deficits are quite compatible with extreme grace. Of all disabilities, major cognitive deficits are the ones we fear most. No, it would be more honest to say we find them repugnant.⁵⁸

Psychologically, a bystander could ignore him and thus evade the demands he made on common humanity. He nevertheless transformed the lives of those around him, and I would like to put it ontologically rather than psychologically. Ontologically, his common humanity constituted a possibility in the lives of bystanders, simply because he *was there*: again, we come to there-being in its depths and breadth. To admire him would be to aspire to the grace given to him in difficulty, but that aspiration almost inevitably is a form of "shooting the mouth off," promising more than

⁵⁸ This repugnance is one focus of Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

one can deliver. That goes with the saccharine side of admiration of the disabled, something Dana Carvey as The Church Lady on Saturday Night Live articulated in the words, “Now isn’t that just the special!!”

The problem with grace is that it is given and received, not achieved. It cannot be controlled. Resoluteness is of no avail (contrary to Heidegger), and probably worse than useless. One can admire, but if one is honest, one can admire only in fear and trembling. The there-being of one such as Jay puts bystanders in debt, not particularly to him, but to their own possibilities for being in a way they have not the means to realize or perform. They are put in debt not just to their own possibilities, but before other people: human relating to oneself always has a social context. One is exposed not just to oneself but before other people; one is constrained not in the abstract but in relation to other people; one is needed by other people. This, too, is part of the ontological entanglements of people with each other.

To admire is to make promises one cannot deliver. The bystander’s predicament can be handled gracefully in the present only by trusting in grace: if major pains in life come, the grace to handle them, not possessed now, will be offered then. It may be painful, difficult, and very costly to accept. This does not get the bystander out of indebtedness, nor out of shooting his mouth off, nor out of fear and trembling, but it is sufficient.

These examples were subtle, perhaps surprising, maybe not even convincing. The agent patient appears in another form that is familiar, at least from literature. It is the phenomenon of suffering, when suffering is imposed and the one who suffers witnesses to some commitment by his suffering: martyrdom. The martyr makes an almost palpable claim on other people, even when his claim is rejected as wrong, even when he died for something misguided or wicked; more so when we acknowledge his claim as valid. The claim of his commitments is greatly enhanced by the claim of his suffering. That claim arises in the ontological interrelatedness of human beings.

Consider an example, the members of the White Rose, an informal group of students in resistance under the Nazis, 1942–1943.⁵⁹ Their only offense was to write and distribute leaflets in opposition to the government, but it was enough to get several of them beheaded. In their dying, they made a claim and a witness well beyond the text of the anti-Nazi

⁵⁹ My source is the Wikipedia article “White Rose,” which has abundant further bibliography.

leaflets they distributed. They are remembered as heroes because of what was done to them as much as because of what they said and did, though the saying and doing constituted the meaning of their eventual suffering. In effect, what they suffered converted the events of their resistance *and the acts of the Gestapo against them* into something more than they would have been otherwise.⁶⁰ In a comparison, there were many who saved Jews, were not caught by the Nazis, and so were not martyred. They are remembered with gratitude as heroes, but they are mostly collected among the holy men and women of Sirach 44.9, now lost and forgotten, remembered anonymously. Those who were caught and killed are more likely to be remembered by name, though there were so many that even for them, anonymity overwhelms memory.

Closer to home, Martin Luther King acted in what he suffered when he was assassinated as much as in what he said and did in the civil rights movement. Many others were part of that movement, but few of them were martyrs. His dying was his act, though it was imposed on him by an other. History gives us a man who was not immaculately conceived, but those acts and political stands for which he was criticized, perhaps rightly, have faded ontologically, and what is left is his leadership in the fight for racial equality. Some acts were rendered immaterial after the fact, and others amplified in their very being. Can we do that? In a distributed ontology — and in real life — we can.

5.3.4 Ethics in Narrative

Questions of ethics arise, obligations of the narrator: what has to be remembered, what has to be told. What can we forget, what are we required to remember? The answers grow out of the considerations of the last sections, on the good. There are obligations of truth and obligations of gratitude.

We have hazarded a guess about truth in narrative several times (pp. 7 and 125). It is a matter of getting the story straight, including what matters in a narrative. So far, the ethical obligations are not new. Their answers are implicit in the questioning about what “matters” in a narrative.

⁶⁰ This idea is not new. Cyprian says of the martyrdom of Pontian and Hippolytus, “it was not you that yielded to the torments but rather the torments that yielded to you.” Epist. 10,2-3.5: CSEL 3, 491–492, 494–495, Breviary reading for Pontian and Hippolytus, August 13. “Tortured men stood there stronger than their torturers, battered and lacerated limbs triumphed over clubs and claws that tore them.”

The question of gratitude can be answered simply enough: We are obliged to remember what has bestowed life upon us.⁶¹ There are many answers to that question, and to some extent, they are the result of continuing conversations of communities in history. Nature religions may very well pass over the contingencies of history. Historical religions focus precisely on those contingencies.

Consider the example of the Short Historical Creed, enjoined as an obligation in Deuteronomy 26 (p. 188 below). The obligation is incurred at an annual harvest festival, when the surrounding culture was preoccupied with nature gods as the bestowers of life. The source of this text was concerned instead with a relationship to an Other transcendent to and active within history.

The ethical obligation arises as a form of enjoined gratitude: to forget is to be ungrateful and inattentive to the sources of one's own life and the life of one's own people. To look beneath that obligation is to find again the ontological inter-involvements of Dasein that were missing in Division I of *Being and Time*. I (whoever the "I" may be here) am a part of others, as they are of me, in history and community. I owe my life to them. That is what I am, and to forget that is to forget who I am.

Alas, to say that is probably the beginning of controversy rather than the settling of it, as anyone knows who has seen the revisionist historians and curriculum quarrels in regard to American history in higher education today. Perhaps it is pertinent to observe that contesting versions of American history generally advance the interests of contesting parties in American culture today. This is to raise again the question how to criticize truth of narratives in a way that rescues truth from charges of being just narrative self-interest.

5.3.5 The Ambiguity of The Good

Ambiguity in action arises in many ways, all in some sense growing out of the ambiguity of narratives. As with actions, so with the goods they are directed toward or result in. Acts are directed at possible future states of affairs, and those are open. In the actual world as it eventually unfolds, the choice of which parts and features ("facts") are pertinent gives another kind of ambiguity. How the story can be continued is ambiguous: present

⁶¹ This is an instance of "what matters" in the definition of truth. Not to remember the sources of one's life may be just mere folly, but it is folly that offends against the truth.

acts can lead (or be led) to many future conditions, and people disagree on which of them are good, which are evil, and how.

Ambiguity arises because of multiple consequences of an act: All of them may in some sense be intended. An act can lead to many goals at once, with various degrees of desirability, some commendable, some deplorable. We are quite skilled at choosing the goal of convenience when called to answer for our actions. That would be the goal that the critic has to concede is worthy. Yet other possible goals, not so worthy, may also be desirable to the actor, even though he doesn't spell them out.

Disagreement about the ultimate meaning of "life more abundantly" gives rise to a deeper level of ambiguity. The ambiguities in the notion of life more abundantly arise because people can't agree on what it is. The choices here are eventually religious. We see the choices in section 5.4.

Lastly, there is ambiguity in what counts as an act: Conditions of the world can be presented in language as things that "just are," or they can be presented as things we relate to as to the consequences of human acts. The pains of life qualify as contingent, and they certainly involve human interests and so can be narrated as the result of acts. They may in fact also be the result of acts by particular human beings. Their ambiguity arises because they can also be taken simply as part of the world, part of reality, beyond any merely human actors that may have caused them. Also, not all pains are caused by humans: disease and natural disasters are familiar examples.

The problem surfaced long ago in the voice that cries out to God, "why do you allow ...?" That voice takes the pains as the result of acts and then adds *blame* or *disapproval* to the mere dislike of the pains that it suffers or beholds. The complaint can be denied, as in saying "These things just happen," insisting on treating the outcome without construing it as the result of an act. Yet we complain anyway. Another denial says, "Oh, your construal of the pains as the result of an act is just an analogy; it's not how things *really* are." The voice of complaint cannot be silenced that way either. The dismissal is the voice of nominalism, but it won't wash, and we know it. There is something ontological here, and analogy is the voice of that ontology, against its denial.

It is not that these ambiguities are unresolvable. Clearly, we do in fact resolve most of them for the limited purposes necessary to get on with life in whatever situation we find ourselves. It is the necessity of resolving them that attests to their presence. And some of them will be

resolvable only after choices have been made, for example, about what the good in human life really is. What the ambiguity of action and the good undermines is the possibility that an act has one being independent of all narrative choices and applications. What an act *is* depends on the questions we ask about it. This is a matter of editing narratives. So an act is many things in response to many questions; this is in the nature of its being. It is not something so simple as a change of state of a few systems (Aristotelian action as a “motion”). There are many questions we could ask of any act, and they tend to probe how it fits into its larger context. It comes down to asking the actor, “What story do you want to be a part of? What do you want included in your story?” Those are questions of interpretation, and the answers are criticized in the characteristic ways we criticize interpretations.

Choices and interpretations also come with a heavy emotional coloring. The goods and blessings of life we know more in their emotional flavor than in theory. Theory is pale and colorless in comparison. Decisions about actions often turn on questions of loyalty to persons, questions of whom to be like. This was the issue in *The Abolition of Man*, properly cultivated feelings and emotions.⁶² Tolkien was as conscious of it as Lewis. Rationalized choices may seem to be rational enough, but in the end, loyalty to another person is the deciding factor. When loyalty clarifies matters, the apparent rationality of calculation evaporates and cost and benefit analysis looks morally rather shabby.⁶³ The role of the emotions is corroborated from neurophysiology by Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*.⁶⁴ He demonstrated the role of the emotions from research showing that brain injuries affecting the emotions also impair practical reasoning. Human action touches every area of the humanities, and it is not practical to follow it everywhere it leads, but at least we can acknowledge Damasio's work in passing.

⁶² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

⁶³ The example in “The Choices of Master Samwise” in volume III of *The Lord of the Rings* is apropos. Also Frodo's choices in the “Fog on the Barrow Downs” in volume I when he decides out of loyalty to Merry, Pippin, and Sam.

⁶⁴ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1995).

5.4 Action in the World

5.4.1 Larger Contexts

In Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* we saw the hermeneutical circle, a reciprocal relationship of wholes and parts. It is unsurprising that wholes depend for their being on the parts they are composed of. What parts are depends equally on the wholes they are part of. The question arises in regard to narrative inasmuch as the action on-stage eventually needs to be fitted into the larger world, most of which is off-stage. By now we are accustomed to the role of the off-stage in the on-stage. What about when the off-stage is the historical background?

The task is to fit human lives into a larger symbolic universe; that cosmos may or may not be historical, a choice that appeared in the typology of basic religious options in Merold Westphal's *God, Guilt, and Death*.⁶⁵ The problem of placing lives in symbolic universes appears in sociology also; it is not specific to the structure of narrative, action, or historical religion.⁶⁶

This is a good place to notice an objection to reckoning with larger contexts at all. It will be said by some, those with Analytic instincts in particular, that the right way to proceed is to start with atomic acts and postpone until later how larger things are constructed out of atomic acts, basic acts. That is what it means to ignore the larger world, the larger context. Indeed, that's what defines a system *as* a system: the conceptual ability to ignore the larger world. In contrast, to take into account larger contexts is the essence of a narrative ontology, a distributed ontology. Those who choose a systems ontology are entitled to their choices, but they are not entitled to an appearance of necessity in those choices. The move to a systems ontology of human action is interested and motivated, and the goal is scientism or naturalism. This is a basic life orientation, or in vulgar language, a "religion." The present study is motivated by other choices, ones which bring to light many phenomena that are invisible or refractory to a systems approach.

We hope to understand living in history, and so we specialize early to the task of fitting lives into historical universes. The problem has three parts. The first asks how acts fit into history. The second is a phenomenon that has already appeared: acts can be transformed after the "fact."⁶⁷ The

⁶⁵ See above, section 4.2.7.

⁶⁶ Cf. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pp. 92–104.

⁶⁷ A. C. Danto saw as much, and Paul Ricoeur developed the idea in some depth in "The

third asks how a human life can be integrated in a coherent whole. This is to fit not just acts but whole lives into history.

To fit a human act into larger contexts in history is to ask how it relates to other parts of the actor's life and context. What are the actor's several engagements with life? How do they fit together? The argument hinges on part/whole relationships. The act in view is a part of larger things, and we see those larger contexts only slowly. Often we can take them for granted.

It is easy enough to say that acts we consider in the present are constituted as parts of larger wholes, but a problem emerges at this point. What to include in the larger whole is not obvious. There are many possible wholes. Which one is the right one?

In nature and naturalistic thinking, the whole includes literally everything, and there are ways of integrating the larger natural contexts harmoniously. Somewhat ironically, naturalistic thinking usually devises ways to ignore the larger natural world, and so the problem of the off-stage does not arise. That's how systems ontologies work.

History is not like that. In a narrative ontology, the placing of an act has to make some assumptions about the world beyond the narrative as told. Some things can be taken for granted, but not all. Sooner or later, the narrator has to make editorial choices, and in choosing what matters off-stage, he shapes what is happening on-stage. Some choices have great substantive consequences, and so editorial choice may not simply be dismissed as unimportant. The challenge is to make choices responsibly. That problem, fortunately, has received some attention, and a workable solution is available.

Nevertheless, there will come times when Why questions have no apparent answer at all, at least not in intramundane terms. At this point, we have come to what Karl Jaspers called "boundary situations." Conventionally, this is called transcendence. The phenomenon is beyond the scope of this study. Misunderstanding arises when answers to questions arising in boundary situations are treated as just like answers to ordinary intra-mundane questions. In effect, this is to take what lies "beyond" the boundary as invisible extensions of the intra-mundane, something whose conception works in the same way.

The problem appears in the question of larger contexts for human action. How are human lives to be integrated into coherent wholes, and how

Model of Text." This claim is developed further as the argument proceeds, and will be collected together in section 7.4.4.

are human acts “in the small” transformed by their larger historical contexts? History as the source of ontological foils can begin to make sense. Coherence of a life will be an instance of the hermeneutical circle that we saw with Gadamer above. A reading of a human life may converge to something stable (p. 113 above), but it will always depend on choices about how to relate it to the larger history.

5.4.2 Choices

Again and again, we have come upon acts that get their being only from editorial choices made in narrating them. One might try to avoid such choices and to reach some kind of “objectivity” in the material trajectories themselves, which, being naturalistic, are objective. Such a strategy always runs up against the fact that to even get started thinking about an act presupposes a narrative, and it is the narrative that selects which motions are relevant. There are always already choices in that narrative, even though we are quite capable of correcting both the narrative and its underlying choices.

The phenomenon may also be viewed in the perspective of the hermeneutical circle and its role in the ontology of human action. Acts are parts of larger wholes, and the parts and wholes are reciprocally constituted by each other. The problem appears as a question:

But *which* larger wholes?

This is not a question that can be answered in the way systems ontologies handle it. There, subdivision of systems into subsystems doesn’t change what things are, nor does combination into larger “super-systems,” the physical universe. Subdivision and combination are arbitrary, admitting a liberty of choice, and so at the discretion of the theoretician or calculator for reasons of convenience. Actions at center-stage, of concern now, can be placed in many larger narrative contexts, and those contexts are not equivalent; choice among them is one determinant of what the acts in focal view *are*.

We saw this with the play *Assassins*. In the final scenes, they think the event in view about to happen constitutes meaning and vindication for their lives. It does the work of a formal cause for their basic life orientation (one of taking offense at life, society, and the world), though calling it a formal cause might confuse more than help. It would be better to say this is where ultimate reality (*their* view of ultimate reality) *shows itself in the*

world, thereby constituting their own acts as vindicated. That the assassins are wrong is (I hope) not in dispute.⁶⁸ *Why* they are wrong and *how* we can say they are wrong is much less obvious.

If we allow narrative and editing into the ontological constitution of human acts, many questions arise.

Which story do you *want* to be a part of?

Which larger story *are* you a part of?

Out of these grow two more:

How do we criticize candidate stories,
and call one better than another?

What has to happen for me truly to *be* a part of
the story that I *want* to be a part of?

Note that the question “what has to happen?” is not quite the same as “what must I do?” The answer may lie in foils beyond the life of the believer, places where ultimate reality shows itself in the world as much as it is in anything the believer has to do.

It would be performatively incoherent to claim that the narrative constitution of human acts is arbitrary, that acts can be changed arbitrarily by changing the stories told of them. Yet the circular constitution of narrative and action persists, not yet understood. The narrative picks out the motions that underly the act, and so narrative is there always already before we can think of an act, yet we still say that some narratives are right and others are wrong.

What is at stake can be called a basic life orientation, and here it is the choice of a larger context into which human lives and actions are fitted. The upshot will be that we can coherently criticize claimed larger contexts and basic life orientations, but such criticism has a peculiar logic of its own. There will be no neutral standpoint from which to criticize *before* choosing a larger frame of reference, yet criticism is still quite possible.

⁶⁸ It is in more dispute than might appear. That it is wrong to assassinate presidents will not be disputed in present company. That *other* expressions of taking offense at the pains of life are wrong is very much in dispute, because whether it is right to take offense at the pains of life is itself disputed.

What unfolds will be the logic of confessional commitments in tradition-bound rationality.

We inquire about the *being* of things that depend on human *choices*. We are no longer in the land of Platonisms; Platonisms want above all to separate the being of things from human involvements, because that is the only way to get conceptual control over things. If they are constituted by human involvements, they could change in the process of coming to know them, or our involvements are beyond total comprehension, making total knowledge of things impossible. But the things of interest *are* constituted by human involvements: Acts are inescapably about human involvements; without human involvements, human stakes, risks, vested interests, they are not acts. Moreover, an act has meaning only to the extent that it has shared meaning, whether that shared meaning is one agreed upon or in dispute; to mean is to mean “toward” other people; aboriginally and ultimately private meanings are impossible or just incoherent.⁶⁹ To mean is to participate in shared meaning, even when it is contested meaning. In particular, vested interests are a case of shared meaning. Even when they involve only *other* people’s interests, those other people are people like me, whoever the “me” is, and I have involvements with them on that basis even if on no other. The proper response to the discomfort with making being depend on human involvements, choices, interpretations, is neither reactionary Platonism nor giving up (nominalism, giving up retail; or nihilism, wholesale), but to ask how to make choices responsibly. Giving up is a form of despair, but Platonisms are also a form of despair, as will-to-power; cf. Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*. The problem of responsibility will soon be upon us.

What choices are made in the inquiry of this book? In the first place, the assassins’ underlying question is answered in the negative: we do not take offense at the pains of life simply as part of life (though we may very well take offense at the human actors who wrongfully bring about pain and suffering). This is to embrace the world and human life in it as good, in full view of its pains. In particular, we look for the goods that come in Exposure, Limitation, and Need.⁷⁰ We take critical History, historical and cultural Relativity, and religious Pluralism as instances respectively of exposure, limitation, and need. And we take human life as essentially historical: nature is included in history as the stage on which history plays

⁶⁹ This was one of the theses of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.

⁷⁰ See p. 84 above and the literature there cited.

out, but history (and human action) are more than just their natural substrate. We have a start on a solution to the problem of truth: “the truth will out,” or, exposure will come, eventually, and it will show the truth. Events themselves will expose, disclose, uncover what has been going on.

This embracing of the pains of life, exposure in particular at this point, affords a way to bypass Platonist absolute truths. Truth is given to us day by day. It is the truth of exposure or disclosure in events, not some truth in a referential theory of language. We trust that the truth will emerge, eventually, whether we live to see it or not, and that is enough.

We said that “the truth will out,” we trusted that exposure will come, eventually, and it will show the truth. We are not home yet. What about when events *don’t* expose the wrongdoing, when the bad guys get away with it, or when events don’t expose soon enough, — and people just suffer and die? The suffering can mount from affliction to atrocities and large numbers, as in the Shoah.

Too much of the time, we are left in discomfort. Give us this day our daily truth? Give us such truth as we can handle, and then be gentle with us? Sufficient unto the day is the truth thereof? And what about when the day’s truth is not sufficient? Too much of the time, all we have is the truth of suffering, whether our own, or other people’s. So how do we embrace *that* truth? How does one *live* by that truth? Is it a pre-understanding (cf. mimesis-1), which shapes a general stance toward life? With applications in practice for particular events? This truth of suffering should not pretend there is meaning in meaningless suffering, and I do not.⁷¹ We return to suffering in section 7.4.

5.4.3 Tradition-Bound Rationality

There are some resources with which to address the problem, and the best of them were not available a century ago. H. Richard Niebuhr, whom we met in section 3.4.4, saw that the proper method in theology is a confessional one. He avoided apologetics of the kind that seeks to justify one’s religious starting point. The Bible itself is exemplary of this logic. Alasdair MacIntyre in tradition-bound rationality has found a way out of dilemmas that would otherwise simply have been impasses. And the biblical and patristic texts offer examples aplenty of a responsible liberty of interpretation in the conduct of a covenant.

⁷¹ See e. g. the cautions in chapter 7 of *Unwelcome Good News*.

Niebuhr in his methodological remarks in the preface to *The Meaning of Revelation* expressed his “conviction that self-defense is the most prevalent source of error in all thinking and perhaps especially in theology and ethics.”⁷² Apologetics originally meant simply answering questions from outsiders. It can also mean challenge and evangelism, both of which are commendable enough. Niebuhr notes that apologetics easily becomes something more than just evangelism or clearing up confusion, and then it causes problems rather than solves them. In *Radical Monotheism*, he touches the issue again. He speaks of the possibility of faith in the God of radical monotheism, and implicitly he touches the question of proof and the reason why proof (i. e., disputation) is impossible:

It has happened in our human history and it does happen in personal histories. Men may dispute endlessly about the worth of that happening, though when they do they always do so on the basis of another faith than faith in this God. But there can be no doubt of the fact that it has happened and that it does happen.⁷³

Niebuhr was content simply to articulate the faith of the community he lived in, and he inquired no further into the logic of choosing between one faith and another, though he had a great deal to say about the logic of narrative within a community.

I would state the pathology of quests for proof this way: To demand proof is to demand proof of a starting point, and such a proof, if found, would render the former starting point no longer a starting point at all, replacing it by the premises of the alleged proof. This logic can be exposed by confronting the one demanding proofs with a question: “What would you *accept* as a starting point?” With a little reflection, it is virtually always possible to find people somewhere who would not accept the proffered starting point, and we are thrown back into a situation of contesting confessional commitments. The one claiming proof will usually then engage in cognitive nihilation⁷⁴ of the opposition, concealing the circularity of his own chosen starting point; but with enough effort, that circularity

⁷² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. xxxiv.

⁷³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Faith in Gods and in God,” in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 124.

⁷⁴ Cf. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 114.

can be unpacked and exposed.

Yet we are left with the question asked of a confessional starting point, why this one and not some other? The question arises even if the meaning of “why” is not a request to derive the starting point from some other, “more basic” starting point. Indeed, when the fallacy of trying to derive a starting point is seen and avoided, the question is sharpened and clarified.

When the fallacy and its remedies are not understood correctly, two options seem open: construct a proof, or give up justification entirely. The second gets called “fideism,” and the charge is an accusation of irresponsibility. Yet the first is just as irresponsible, for it refuses to acknowledge its own confessional commitments, seeking instead to prove them. When the meaning of “why?” in “why this confessional commitment and not some other?” is not mistaken for a request for proof, it can be understood as a request for explanation. Fideism refuses explanation; anti-fideism (sometimes appearing as rationalism) disavows choice. Both are irresponsible. Responsible explanation of tradition and candor in confessional commitments emerged in the course of Alasdair MacIntyre’s probing the history of ethics, but that inquiry has roots long before MacIntyre. The same issue is named in other terms when David Tracy dismisses the ideas that one cannot really understand a religious tradition from the outside or criticize it honestly from the inside.⁷⁵ Taken together (and they are compatible), they protect both insiders and outsiders from each others’ critiques. It is possible to know traditions well enough to criticize, both from the inside and the outside. To observe that there is no neutral standpoint merely insists that there is an element of choice always present that may not be decided or criticized on principles broader than the religious differences themselves.

The problem of justification and proof appeared, garbled, in the quest for absoluteness in the nineteenth century, and in that task, Ernst Troeltsch knew he was beaten. By a little after the middle of the twentieth century, a solution had emerged from work in the history of science (Thomas Kuhn and others). Alasdair MacIntyre in the later part of the century was trying to make sense of confusion in ethics and turned to the history of science for a model for progress. Out of his reflections came several things: an amended version of Kuhn’s theses, some help in ethics, and a general model for what happens when people choose in an informed way between

⁷⁵ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 99/140, note 49.

competing traditions. As he told the history of ethics, new problems arose from time to time, conceptual resources were added or devised, and sometimes garbled, rendered incoherent, or just lost. To understand the present, it is necessary to understand how we got to the present. Understanding choices between traditions without a neutral standpoint for criticism came out along the way.

It is the last that I would like to begin with, and it most of all is what people mean by “tradition-bound rationality.”⁷⁶ Suppose two traditions, A and B. Each has a history of its own internal conversations and choices, problems faced and problems solved. Each defines its own problems on its own terms. They are not entirely unintelligible to each other, in the minimal sense that one and the same person can become well enough informed about both to understand how each one thinks, “from the inside.” Even if it is sometimes impossible to translate well from one to the other, it will be possible to show how they treat a common problem differently. It will usually be possible even from within either tradition to see that the other is handling the same problem, if differently. They are not totally incommensurable to each other. Suppose further that A is at an impasse, and has been for some time, but B can make sense of A’s problems, successes, and failures better than A itself can. Indeed, B can see a way forward in A’s situation better than A itself can. It is then rational, MacIntyre concluded, to choose B over A. No neutral standpoint is required, no absolute truth is presupposed. What *is* presupposed is a historical context of inquiry, that the problems are themselves historical rather than absolute.⁷⁷

Joining this logic with Niebuhr’s, we can see the form of confessional commitments in a historical religion. Because of “our limited standpoint in history and faith,” we can merely tell “what happened to us in our com-

⁷⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” *Monist* 60 no. 4 (1977/10) 453–472; “Relativism, Power, and Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59 no. 1 (1985/September) 5; reprinted in K. Baynes, J. Bohman and T. McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy*, MIT Press, 1987, pp. 385–411.

⁷⁷ This is in part an empirical claim. MacIntyre went to some trouble in both *Whose Justice* and *After Virtue* to show that the attempt to be a non-tradition (liberal ethics) has ended up as a tradition with a history like any other. Every tradition *has* a history (empirically), but it does not follow without additional commitments that historicity should be intrinsic to every tradition’s concepts. Some traditions deny, repudiate, or just ignore history entirely. I suppose they would see their own histories as irrelevant.

munity, how we came to believe, how we reason about things, what we see from our point of view.”⁷⁸ Such a confession is not a way of getting control but of putting oneself in debt. The book is nominally about revelation, but in fact it is revelation construed as a way of living in history. He defines revelation as “that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible.”⁷⁹ The functions of revelation correspond to limitation, exposure, and need: Limitation appears when the “revelatory moment makes our past intelligible.”⁸⁰ Revelation saves the past from senselessness: it makes the past, and through the past the present and future, practicable and usable. It addresses limitation because it tells what the past offers and what limits it sets. It is emplotment, bringing coherence and order to a narrative, out of incoherence and disorganization. Exposure appears also in events that function as revelation. They work as ontological foils in a second way, for they demand a recasting of the communal history, spelling out its failed engagements.⁸¹ Need appears when history so told creates community: those entering the community appropriate its history, and it shapes the life of the community, working as ontological foils in a third way.⁸²

Along the way from the definition of revelation on p. 50 to the functions of revelation on pp. 58–62, Niebuhr considers several other options. Meaning can be sought in other places, and Niebuhr’s comparison of historical religion with other options fits MacIntyre’s rubrics for comparison of traditions without a neutral standpoint or polemics.⁸³ Niebuhr also considers the theses that either nature or history alone by themselves could give meaning to human life, and he rejects these possibilities: He has run into the circularity of action and narrative, though he doesn’t call it that. He knows quite well that nothing comes from “motions” alone, without some meaning, some narrative. That the circle is hermeneutical and so not vicious was not much appreciated when he wrote (after Heidegger, before Gadamer). Its hermeneutical character means that it is quite open to criticism, just as mathematical iterative processes provide correction to their initial starting points (sec. 4.4 above).

Niebuhr spoke of conversion of memory, occasions when the history

⁷⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, third edition, p. 21.

⁷⁹ *The Meaning of Revelation*, third edition, p. 50.

⁸⁰ *The Meaning of Revelation*, third edition, pp. 58–59, and section 3.4.4 above.

⁸¹ We return to this theme below, on pp. 211 and 235.

⁸² *The Meaning of Revelation*, third edition, pp. 60–61.

⁸³ I made the same point in *Unwelcome Good News*, p. 39.

needs to be rewritten. Alasdair MacIntyre has given us a sketch of how such a process works. It begins with a diagnosis of the problems in the received tradition and its history, but from the perspective of some new possibility seen for the first time. In more than one place, he lays out the features of a successful diagnostic narrative: It will be able to show how each stage in the conversation grew from the prior stages. It will be able to criticize and show how each stage embodied and propagated problems (or introduced new problems). And it will be able to show, at least in part, not how to return to a now-lost and happy past but rather how to refashion a present and future that return to the course the past should have taken.⁸⁴ An epistemological crisis happens when a tradition comes upon problems that it cannot, on its own terms, solve. If it produces a new approach to its problems, that approach will be successful if it satisfies three conditions:

First, this in some ways radically new and conceptually enriched scheme, if it is to put an end to epistemological crisis, must furnish a solution to the problems which had previously proved intractable in a systematic and coherent way.

Second, it must also provide an explanation of just what it was which rendered the tradition, before it had acquired these new resources, sterile or incoherent or both.

And third, these first two tasks must be carried out in a way which exhibits some fundamental continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared beliefs in terms of which the tradition of enquiry had been defined up to this point.

He continues on p. 363, with

... an epistemological crisis may only be recognized for what it was in retrospect,

and

To have passed through an epistemological crisis successfully enables the adherents of a tradition of enquiry to rewrite its history in a more insightful way.

⁸⁴ What follows is taken from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 362–363. MacIntyre speaks of an *epistemological* crisis, but the problems are practical as much as epistemological. The epistemological crisis arises when practical progress stalls, and people are forced to ask themselves how they know what they think they know.

I take it this means that before the new paradigm (Kuhn's word is standard at this point), it was not clear that a new paradigm could solve the refractory problems. In terms of the distributed ontology, the new paradigm not only demonstrates but constitutes the possibility of progress of a certain kind (the kind offered by that paradigm). And any action in carrying on the tradition is at this point itself reconstituted by the existence of the new paradigm. Those who would deny the proposed new paradigm (they are not always wrong) are engaged in a refusal, not in ignorance. Those who take it up are not reinventing it. It is in this sense that the new paradigm is ontologically constitutive of all that follows in its wake.

Let me comment briefly on the third and last of MacIntyre's rubrics for a successful paradigm shift, that the revised history should exhibit the "fundamental continuity" of the tradition, even after "rewrit[ing] its history in a more insightful way." This is to vindicate the tradition: until that has been done, the tasks of a paradigm shift are not discharged. At the same time, those unconvinced by the proposed shift will not be happy with being "vindicated" in terms of the new paradigm; it usually undermines what they hold dear. And some elements in a troubled tradition may be impossible to vindicate: Christian anti-Jewish theology is the salient example to which we come in section 7.2.3. For the most part, vindication of the tradition is possible, and what cannot be vindicated can be repented and redeemed.

5.4.4 Responsibility in Community and Narrative

It would be a mere definition to say responsibility consists in doing what one is obliged to do, were it not that obligations are themselves tradition-bound. Before responsibility is any kind of doing, it is an answering, a willingness and ability to answer to a community of judgement. Responsibility is a phenomenon that is better viewed first as an activity than as a state or condition or virtue: it is the asking for and giving of reasons, accounting for human actions, proposing narratives and adjudicating their consequences. It appears in communities in history; it is not something abstracted from all contexts, all communities, all historical situations. It could appear that one is responsible only to members of one's own tradition, but things are not as simple as that. For a rubric of responsibility only to one's own tradition would be a recipe for tribalism and tribal warfare. The solution, I think, is to notice that people are members of many communities for many purposes, and so there are many kinds and degrees

of responsibility. Community for some purposes extends all the way to language-capable life, a category broader in principle than *Homo sapiens*. Juggling all these responsibilities can be quite complex, especially given the ambiguities of human action, both individual and corporate, that we have seen already in this study.

Tribalism (of a sort) was what the Enlightenment reacted against, but it chose to take *all* responsibility as with respect to “the universal community,” thereby trying to dodge history, relativity, and pluralism. Its solution to pluralism was often to gratify the nature-religious, exilic, and Platonist elements in its own culture, at the expense of covenantal religion. The results were incoherent and eventually no less destructive than the religious wars that it reacted against.

Membership in a historical community is a matter of voluntary affiliation for some purposes, but not for all. For other purposes, I can be involved in some communities whether I like it or not. Their demands are ontological. The universal community is defined by virtue simply of language capability, shared mortality, shared participation in the sort of being that understands Being, and so on. The other is part of me simply by being there, and it makes demands accordingly. The community of historical religion is different from the universal community. It was voluntary at the beginning in history, as John Courtney Murray and Merold Westphal have observed, and it is voluntary for individuals entering it lately. But after that, it’s not voluntary, it’s irrevocable: The one who has been a member cannot make that past unhappen, even though he may apostatize. His past loyalty testifies against him, should he leave. Responsibility, once assumed, cannot thereafter be abandoned. A promise made can be broken, but it cannot be made to unhappen. It is in that sense that covenantal religion is irrevocable.

An observation about responsibility is possible at this point. It is relative, as we have said, not just to history and culture but also to communities. From this it follows that a demand to answer to a community other than the one relevant in context is a kind of category error. It is also more than that. It is uncandidly and implicitly a demand to shift one’s order of communal commitments and thus also one’s confessional commitments. Concretely, the error takes the form of invoking the universal community or an allegedly neutral standpoint in a demand for justification. The appropriate community of responsibility is the pertinent confessional community, and to seek a neutral or universal starting point is to lapse back

into the errors that Alasdair MacIntyre exposed. In practice, the demander usually wants allegiance to his own confessional community, and the pretence of universality or neutrality is just a ruse. There are obligations owed to the universal community of linguistic beings, but distinguishing them from community-relative obligations can be quite tricky.

Narratives are then told in community and undertake a responsibility in community. The other members of the community are existentially present whether or not they are physically and temporally present. That presence means that stories I tell myself in the privacy of my own heart are nevertheless, in some existential sense, told with a community in mind. What the stories are *about* in some sense includes the community that they are told for.

Once action is taken to be constituted by its narratability rather than given before narrative, it could appear that we are betrayed into narrative caprice and whimsy, without any means of responsibility. But we know this is not so: events and actions *do* make demands on us, and narratives are not arbitrary. The paradox is resolved when the circularity of narrative and action is grounded in a simple form of responsibility. Responsibility grows from the demands that narrated events and acts make upon their narrators, hearers, readers, others involved, and bystanders. The claim of persons and events itself grows from the amended Dasein: that human beings are a part of one another, that Dasein is always at stake for other Dasein, not only for itself. We know what matters, what has to be included and how, simply because we are (or have taken the trouble to become) familiar with the events. The demands of events and actions grow out of our common humanity, as we have argued in section 5.3.1.

Chapter 6

Developing the Distributed Ontology

6.1 Narrative, Meaning, and Motions

Chapter 5 exhibited many features of human action. I would like to develop two, one in this chapter and one in the next. The first is the relation of meaning and motions in acts, and the second is the relation of parts and wholes in acts. We said that narrative picks out which motions are relevant to or part of a human action, but there was more there than met the eye. This chapter develops the relation of meaning and motions. The ontology of human action also inherited a parts-and-wholes relationship from hermeneutics. That will occupy us in the next chapter.

The relation of meaning and motions will eventually take us to some of the problems of history. This chapter and the next will explore a little of what history does to and for us. History is the larger whole into which present acts fit as parts. The question of meaning and motions will thus rejoin the question of parts and wholes.

6.1.1 The Problem of Meaning and Motions

If we may return from the largest off-stage contexts for human acts to their narratives in the small, look again at the distinction of meaning and motions in human acts. It was deferred from the initial sketch of the anatomy of human action, p. 135 in chapter 5. It is time to re-examine and extend

the notion of material motions,¹ the motions that constitute the pertinent material facts in a narrative. The phenomenon appeared explicitly on p. 61, when we considered the question “yes, but which ones,” asked of the particulars relevant to a human act. There we said that there is more to the problem than merely inventorying which material motions are relevant to a human act; we also have to explain how and why. We noticed on p. 135 that narratives save the meaning of an act and often don’t help much with the motions. I am not at all confident that ‘meaning’ and ‘motions’ are even the right way to approach the problem, but they are a residual legacy of an Aristotelian approach to human action. To be fussy, we have already modified one of Aristotle’s starting points, for he saw an act as a change of some sort *caused* by an intention of some sort;² we have bypassed intention and turned to meaning instead, and in meaning, to narrative, before there can be any causation. The other starting point is also within Aristotelian physics, and to the modern mind, it is bizarre: motion, even natural motion, is defined and constituted with respect to some final cause.³ *That* assumption in modified form we shall recover, though it is not final causes we seek but just meaning. Defining motion with respect to final causes renders physics impossible (which is why it was abandoned in the seventeenth century), but suitably modified, it makes human action intelligible. (Meaning is messy; final causes give a false sense of order.) We shall see that meaning and motions themselves presuppose a narrative appraisal of the situation. And so, since narratives can be told in many ways, meaning and motions are not simply given.

When the character of meaning and motions has been further explored, several other problems will become solvable. We will be able to understand a little about historicism, a stage in modern history-writing of the last two or three centuries. Historicism was a major battle-site at the center of historical religion’s self-understanding.

We have said that an act is a synthesis of meaning and motions. Meaning comes only in language, with narrative or at least tokens for a narrative.

¹ For the moment, I equivocate on the meanings of “material motions”: the phrase has both Aristotelian and naturalistic meanings. A good part of our work will be to expose the ambiguity in the concept of motions and to remove the equivocations.

² Analytic philosophy of action has taken this Aristotelian instinct as its starting presupposition.

³ Thomas A. Spragens, *The Politics of Motion; the World of Thomas Hobbes*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), p. 64. Spragens provides an account of the changes from Aristotelian motion to the natural motion of modern mathematical physics, with guidance to Aristotle’s texts.

We have said more than once that meaning selects *which* material motions are relevant, and how. It would be convenient if that would solve all problems simply, but it does not. Usually, when we can analyze a narrative of an act into meaning and motions, what we have for motions is not really motions in a naturalistic sense (i. e., material trajectories), it is just more meanings, at a “lower” level. What is going on? (And what does “lower” mean?) In the end, we shall see that what action language tells us about “motions” has the character of human involvements, not naturalistic concepts. An example can illustrate. Here is a material trajectory, in some suitable coordinate system:

$$\begin{aligned}x &= v_x t \\ y &= v_{y0} t - \frac{1}{2} g t^2\end{aligned}$$

These are parametric equations for an inverted parabola, the trajectory of a moving body in a gravitational field. So far, we know nothing of the significance of this trajectory, and we do not have an *act*.⁴ If I tell you that the moving body was a baseball and the point $(2v_{y0}v_x/g, 0)$ is in the center of one of your windows, the scenario assumes an entirely different complexion. We now have minimal meaning, and the formulas are no longer of much interest. That minimal meaning gives us motions that can then be integrated into other narratives as desired; your natural response is to ask for a story, *how* the baseball came to be on its way toward your window. With a story, these motions may play a role in many acts.

Returning from the example, we may say that motions are to material trajectories as *Zuhandenheit* is to *Vorhandenheit*. Yet even here, things are not altogether simple. The problem is that the term ‘motions’ has roles — very different roles — in two different discourses: that of human action (where it seems to be *zuhanden*) and the naturalistic discourse of physics (where its character is strictly *vorhanden*). In other words, ‘motions’ can mean material trajectories in some contexts, though not in others. It is for that reason that I have usually written “material trajectories” when the naturalistic meaning is intended, keeping “motions” for significance-laden changes. There is sometimes a relation between the discourses of action and physical motion, but it is a diagnostic relation, not something with

⁴ Strictly speaking, by giving formulas with named constants (initial velocities, the acceleration of gravity), and a coordinate system of convenience (the *z*-coordinate does not appear), there is residual meaning not yet abstracted from in this trajectory. I should have given a table of positions as bare numbers, which would disclose even less meaning — though not strictly none..

the precision of a mathematical function that could be used to calculate or derive conclusions in one discourse from premises in the other. The relationship, if any, is diagnosed from the side of the discourse of human action, not that of physical (or even biological) motions.⁵

In a story, we typically specify the goals of an act with some suggestion of motions (“he went into the store to buy a pack of gum”). The hearer or reader is left to fill in as much more of the motions as he is interested in. That may be a great deal or not much at all. How is the reader to fill in? The terms used to specify the goals and context carry a default context, what George Lakoff and before him Charles Fillmore (cf. p. 133 above) called “frames.”

A problem arises for philosophy when the narrative saves the meaning of actions but not their motions in any detail. We then, later on, when the motions have been forgotten, try to reconstruct those motions by inference, as in what “must have” happened.⁶ Those reconstructions are often wide of the mark; the original motions may be lost and unrecoverable. Not always, however: the reconstructions may be sloppy and irresponsible but still within the reach of fact-checking.

We reconstruct the motions from default presuppositions. Sometimes, the narrative tries to suggest precisely those default presuppositions about what the pertinent motions of the act were, but not always. Sometimes a narrative will make it clear that the motions deviated from default assumptions. And sometimes the default assumptions have changed between the times of the events, the writer, and the present. The last case raises the trickiest problems, for it is often unseen. The problems are aggravated when the reader has reason to suspect that his own appraisal of the meaning may differ from that of the historical witness whose testimony is being criticized. The biblical editor is candidly sympathetic to Hezekiah and Josiah but hostile to Manasseh, and scholars take the texts with a grain of salt accordingly. The ancient writer should not be taken as the last word in answer to modern questions.

In the example of p. 144, we saw many meanings (and so many acts)

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: the Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966. For a short and pithy explanation, see also Charles E. Reagan, “Ricoeur’s Diagnostic Relation.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1968) 586–592.

⁶ We saw the problem with sloppy journalism, sec. 2.1.9. It appeared in another form on p. 135 above.

that can “pass through” motions visible to a narrative, “he went into the store to buy a pack of gum.” It is also possible to imagine many motions that can fit into a narrative. Possibilities are left as an exercise for the reader.

What is going on with the distinction between meaning and motions here? In a naturalistic culture such as our own, the first instinct is to move “toward” the material trajectories, on the suppositions that we could actually get to just the material trajectories, and that the meanings are built up out of those basic material trajectories. I do not think that move will work, but since it is intuitive, it needs to be met first.

The naturalistic style of thinking “descends” to a “lower” level in the description and specifies the route through the store, past the writing instruments, past the notebooks, past the stationery, and so on, to the display of gum and from there to the cashier. To specify motions at an even “lower” level would entail the trajectories of all the body parts, arm motions, leg motions, and so on. Descending further, we come to muscle contractions in sequence, breathing, sneezes (if any), wandering eyes. Would we include what the wandering eyes looked at? (What they saw might matter greatly.) The question “yes, but which ones” dogs us at every stage. Most of this is, of course, absurdly irrelevant.⁷ Material trajectories are not really what we are interested in, even though they are always there someplace. It is enough to specify the meaning in the act and rely on the reader’s familiarity with stores, gum, walking, commerce — and indeed, simply being-in-the-world of twentieth-century America — to fill in anything more that might be necessary.

So if naturalistic instincts are disappointing, let us attempt a different approach to the distinction between meaning and motions. We have a skill of retelling narratives, of embroidering stories, of filling in details plausibly. In particular, we have a skill of retelling a story (call it version *B*) *without* the meaning of its former telling (as it was in version *A*). To do that, version *B* gives us some other version of what the actor did without telling that version *B* also accomplishes the goals (and so the meaning) of version *A*. This is distantly akin to the distinction in speech-act theory

⁷ It is irrelevant in the default frames of the words “he went into the store and bought a pack of gum.” But if the scenario is to be a part of a movie, some of this gets filled in, whether consciously or not, by the movie maker.

More importantly, the relevant is not contained within the “motions” of the actor, as the question about what the eyes saw along the way betrays to us: Much that is relevant has no simple natural connection to the “motions” of the actor.

between illocutionary meaning and perlocutionary meaning: For present purposes, version *B* tells what the actor did, while version *A* tells what the actor did *by* the acts in version *B*. In this sense, version *B* gives us the motions, while version *A* gives us the meaning. The problem with any easy analogy to speech act theory is that there is no single account of what the act was (cf. locution/illocution), and there is no single account of what was done *by* the act (cf. perlocution). Versions *A* and *B* stand in relationship to each other as meaning and motions — in the context of some larger conversation; but *A* is not *the* meaning, and *B* is not *the* motions. Meaning and motions are relative terms. *A* is meaning in relation to *B*, and *B* is “motions” only in relation to *A*. There may be other meanings and other motions in the same act, narratable in other versions. Indeed, once one has made the move from *A* to *B*, simple narrative skills allow the reader to imagine many meanings, A_2, A_3, \dots , etc., exactly as we saw in section 5.2.5. More than one may be true, and those that are true may not all be consistent.

We have the skill of recasting a narrative both to distinguish and to spell out what was done and what was attempted or accomplished in the doing.⁸ Version *B* (only “motions”) is only one of many that will do the job of retelling the story without including the goals of version *A*. The “motions” we see in version *B* have their own meanings implicit in them, even if we are not interested in those meanings. It will usually turn out that version *B* was edited with version *A* in mind, though that does not mean either version can reliably be reconstructed from the other. In a sense, version *B* is an answer (one of possibly many) to the question, “*how* did the actor accomplish the goals of version *A*?” A universal human cognitive skill (after Ricoeur, we might call it part of mimesis-1) is the ability to construct narratives as needed to answer these questions.

In effect, every narrative is an answer to a question or an answer in a line of questioning.⁹ The presupposed questions are usually left out. They may be obvious and so not spelled out because they don’t need to be. They may not be at all obvious, in which case the narrators are themselves engaged in acts of editing before they themselves really know what they are doing. In any case, the narrative tells us something about the motions

⁸ Indeed, we have many skills of retelling stories, for many purposes, not always consciously or deliberately, as Herbert Fingarette noticed, but he remarked only a little of the phenomenon. Parody and satire are examples of the skill.

⁹ Cf. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, chapter 5, “Question and Answer.” We return to this on p. 278.

of the acts it depicts, but often only insofar as the motions are needed to settle questions of meaning. Using that narrative later, to answer other questions, is both hazardous and tricky.

Whether a narrative is about meaning or motions is a matter of application. Which is the intended interpretation is a matter of context in conversation. It is easy to slide between meaning and motions of an act. We can take meaning verbs as indicating motion, whether or not that was the narrator's intent. Once they have been taken to indicate motions, they can then be used as premises to infer some *other* meaning.

We easily forget that "the" motions already include meaning, because it was a meaning, some meaning, that picked *these* motions out from all the motions of all the people within the local historical horizon. If that act of selection is forgotten, it then becomes easy to mistake motions *in and of themselves* as "objective" proof of the meaning.

This ambiguity in narratives arises because acts lead to complex futures: they result in many things, they have many consequences. We can always interpret the acts narrated as for some consequence other than the one told in the narrative or for some one of many beyond the one given with the narrative in hand. That's why a narrative can be taken as about meaning or about motions: It tells its own meanings, but because it is on the way to other and further goals and meanings, it is, with respect to those goals, just motions.

Now that we have removed the equivocation on the meanings of "motion," we are in a position to clear up an objection to the distributed ontology that must have occurred to some. Suppose someone were to say,

since an act consists of a selection of some motions from the set of all the motions of the world, and since the motions are determinate in the past and, though indeterminate in the future, are nevertheless eventually determined (when the future becomes past), acts are just epiphenomena, wholly determined (eventually) as elements of the power-set of the set of all the motions in the world.

The power set of a set A is the set of all subsets of A , or in this case, the set of all sets of motions in the world. Each selection corresponds to or determines an act, and it would seem that all we have done in the distributed ontology is to dignify those selections with ontological pretensions. When the equivocation on the meaning of "motions" is removed,

the phenomenon appears differently, and we can see some more of what the distributed ontology really involves. Restate the objection, without equivocation:

since an act consists of a selection of some from all the *physical trajectories* of material bodies in the world, and since the trajectories are determinate in the past and, though indeterminate in the future, are nevertheless eventually determined (when the future becomes past), acts are just epiphenomena, wholly determined (eventually) as elements of the power-set of the set of all the trajectories in the world.

There genuinely is, from a methodologically naturalistic perspective, a set of all the trajectories of all the bodies in the world; that's just physics. But the objection loses its bite when it is noted that an act is not just a selection of trajectories (contrary to the premise in the objection, even when it is restated), it is both more and less than that. To select motions is to lose most of the information contained in trajectories and to gain the meanings *by* which those trajectories were categorized *as* relevant motions. Thus an act is indeed, as we said above (on p. 65), composed of a substrate and significance imposed on that substrate, but the significance is a human existential, not something that could be expressed in naturalistic (or set-theoretical) terms. Meaning is not an *epiphenomenon* of eventually determinate trajectories; meaning is an *interpretation* of motions, with all the hermeneutical character that comes with interpretation.¹⁰ Motions are not determinate at all, neither in the past nor eventually in the future, because motions are always meaning-laden interpretations. They presuppose human being-in-the-world and all the possibilities for living that come with Dasein.

6.1.2 Meaning and Motions in the Exodus

The case of the Exodus illustrates how meaning and motions can be interwoven. Its motions were forgotten and then reconstructed. Its historicity has been questioned, not least because scholars have had difficulty settling on a time for the Exodus and on a route through the Sinai and because the numbers of people are dubiously plausible. A sense of caution begins by noting that the texts were written much later. They were shaped

¹⁰ Interpretation is based on prior *understanding*, in the faculty of *analogy*, as we saw in section 5.3.1.

by what was known of the area during the Monarchy when the texts took a fixed form. The resulting minimalist appraisal comes from Finkelstein and Silberman, who conclude that the Exodus was neither “literary fiction” (which does occur elsewhere in the Bible), nor “historical truth,” meaning the sort of history we would accept as conforming to our standards of *external* history, in the distinctions of H. Richard Niebuhr.¹¹ They do not say what it was, only what it was not. The example of the Exodus illustrates exactly the dilemma of a historian trying to recover the pertinent motions from an account of the meaning, one crafted much later, when the meaning had grown greatly. The question of motions is not exactly the same as an inquiry into material trajectories. The parting of the Sea of Reeds has been modeled in shallow-water hydrodynamics, and that is just a matter of physics.¹² The inquiry into motions is about an emigration whose later human significance the texts build on. A considerable chain of reasoning is presupposed *before* the description of the parting of the Sea can be taken “literally”: e. g., as the starting point for questions in numerical hydrodynamics, simulating the parting of the Sea of Reeds.

In somewhat different words, the modern historian is faced with the task of recovering an external history from an internal history. There are places in biblical texts (as when the opening of Luke situates his narrative with respect to well-known figures in Roman Palestine) where a writer of internal history is evidently aware of criticisms that might come later on grounds of external history. We do not have that in the case of the Exodus, yet in the case of the New Testament “internal” history, what we have is not all that different from what we get in the Exodus texts.

What would a minimalist account look like, one within the limits set by Finkelstein and Silberman? Their objections to a “literal” reading of the texts are not to be dismissed. Not least is that a million or two people trekking through the Sinai would leave traces still recoverable today. They did not. So what might plausibly have happened?

A few dozen families escaped from Egypt under disagreeable circumstances and were grateful to get out, a claim that is so commonplace as to be unexceptionable. Non-Egyptians entered and left Egypt, the metropoli-

¹¹ Israel Finkelstein, and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*. (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 70. For Niebuhr's distinctions, see the summary in section 3.4.4 above.

¹² Doron Nof and Nathan Paldor, “Are There Oceanographic Explanations for the Israelites' Crossing of the Red Sea?” *Bull. Amer. Meteorological Soc.* 73 no. 3 (1992/March) 305–314.

tan imperial power, all the time, usually under disagreeable circumstances. Egypt was the nominal master of Canaan and the near parts of Asia.

What happened to the escapees and what they did with it apparently grew in the telling, and their literary executors, saving their oral traditions centuries later, reconstructed what happened. But the reconstructions in the texts we have (several traditions, in fact; J, E, and P material at least) are shaped by their later editors' problems and assumptions and knowledge of the pertinent geography.

More interesting is what the Exodus, whenever and however it happened, became. The "events" are unrecoverable as anything more than the vaguest generalities. What the unrecoverable events *became* has its ontology not in the events themselves but in the *later* events (cf. Ricoeur on text as the model for action), the story of the Monarchy. That story is quite recoverable. What we would call solid history begins with the Monarchy, the reigns of David and Solomon, whose historical existence cannot responsibly be doubted. The story we have in the Former Prophets is more than just the history of a people, however. It is the transformation of a world-affirming nature religion into a world-affirming historical religion, in a people who credit the roots of that transformation to their own *earlier* departure from Egypt. It is in that sense that the Exodus has become historical. It is recoverable in its after-effects, though not in the details or motions of whatever happened "at the time."

The meaning is encapsulated in the Short Historical Creed, in Deuteronomy 26, a one-paragraph recital of the sojourn in and departure from Egypt, ending in the entry into the promised land.¹³ That brief summary has an important place in the annual liturgical cycle of the covenant people:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried out to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with

¹³ Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1966). Von Rad's thesis was that this short creed shaped the many retellings of the story in the Old Testament. It clearly shapes some in the New: cf. Stephen's apologia in Acts 7.

great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.¹⁴

The obligation of recital is incurred at an annual harvest festival, when the surrounding culture was preoccupied with nature gods as the bestowers of life. The source of this text was concerned instead with a relationship to an Other transcendent to and active within history. The obligation to remember was taken over from non-biblical sources and transformed. The covenant with the God of the Israelites was modeled on Hittite suzerainty treaties, which typically included an obligation on the part of the vassal city to remember and recite from time to time the benefits bestowed by the sovereign. That literary genre of diplomacy and law taken from a society shaped by nature religions was transformed into the heart of historical religion: an obligation to remember the transcendent Other's acts for the covenant people in history. This obligation to remember grew by stages from Israelite religion through biblical history on the way to Christian philosophy and its children in the modern world. It has become a question about what should we remember, what can we know, and how. And it is at the heart of the distributed ontology, for it sets the larger stage on which human action plays out today, the ontological foils that transform the ordinary lives of believers.

The obligation to remember history has played a number of roles in the career of historical religion, and some distinctions may help. In the perspective of covenantal religion, to forget what matters is both a form of suffering and also an act of ingratitude, even if the forgetters' self-experience is not one of suffering at all. (They would probably say things are so much easier without the pains of history.) That forgetting is suffering is not superficially obvious, but it is nevertheless clear enough on a little reflection. To be in the position of the covenant people is to be blessed by its inheritance from history, and that inheritance conditions and constitutes everything the people and its members do. It provides the ontological foils that constitute their lives. Consider the position of one who has forgotten that constitution: he does not know what he is doing; his actions are hidden from their actor. To act and not know what one is doing is a form of suffering. In this case, it is also a form of ingratitude, for it presupposes a forgetting of the covenant history, the events by which the covenant was established. Even forgetting by negligence is a dereliction of a covenantal

¹⁴ Gerhard von Rad, quoting Deuteronomy 26, altered in the divine name.

duty, and this forgetting is seldom entirely negligent. Turning from history to nature can be very comforting, as it gets one out of the anxieties of history.

Covenantal memory can be abused for apologetic purposes, though that was not obvious in the beginning. In the medieval problematic and to some extent already in the Greco-Roman world, Christianity felt obliged to justify itself to non-Christian outsiders, as if it could prove the correctness of Christianity — both to outsiders and to its own. History was supposed to provide the desired proofs. This is pathological, both logically and morally. Logically, it is an attempt to prove what can be underwritten only by faith. What was to be based *on* faith was twisted into a basis *for* faith. The Jerusalem Bible translators do about as well as one can at Hebrews 11.1: “only faith can guarantee the blessing that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen,” though they elaborate some on the Greek text.¹⁵ Morally and existentially, history-as-proof is an attempt to pass off a basic religious choice as necessity, and that, as Peter Berger observed in *The Sacred Canopy*, is a form of bad faith. To put it in concrete terms, consider the case of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds again, taken in the perspective of shallow-water hydrodynamics. That the sea was parted is alleged to be an objective fact (and, ignoring textual questions, it could have been, which is enough for philosophical purposes at present). That the objective facts of the weather and hydrodynamics were the *result of an act of God* is not objective in the same way, and it cannot be. This is what Hebrews 11.1 has in mind: its character as an *act of God* is underwritten only through faith;¹⁶ the objective facts of hydrodynamics cannot do that. The temptation that leads in the modern world to historicism is a form of this abuse of logic and of faith: it would treat the alleged “facts” of covenantal history as a proof of faith rather than as proven by faith. The problem by the time we meet it in the nineteenth century has become much more complicated, and the complications arise, in a way, from confusions about meaning and motions.

¹⁵ See the article by Friedrich Büchsel, ἔλεγχος, in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:476. In the TDNT’s exegesis, it is God who is the real guarantor, not faith itself. In any case, there is nothing objective that could enable faith to evade its responsibilities.

¹⁶ Through faith but not simply (and subjectively) *by* faith; God is the guarantor, as the TDNT has it. But God is accessible only through faith.

6.2 The Problem of Historicism

The nineteenth century saw the transformation of history-writing from an amateur's undisciplined leisure activity into a professional discipline located in universities. The German historians who occupied the first history chairs were characterized by an optimism that has acquired the name "historicism." The term has many meanings. The principal one that concerns us in theology is the idea that history is capable of providing objective proof of the validity of Christianity, exactly the abuse of history whose possibility we saw a moment ago.¹⁷ One way to understand the fallacy is to see it as claiming that motions entail meaning, all by themselves: that motions confer their own objectivity on the meaning that they allegedly entail. The quest for objective proof was one of the applications of nineteenth-century historiography, both religious and secular. The discipline of history arose in the nineteenth century in quest of a historical knowledge that would have the objectivity and certainty of the new knowledge of the natural sciences. The *objectivity* of the sciences was the model, even as the German historians well knew that the *method* of the natural sciences could *not* serve as a model: historical thinking is quite different from scientific thinking. Historicism assumes that objective knowledge of history is possible. The present study takes another position, as the reader by now knows. In the event, historicism foundered, and out of it came modern hermeneutics and a very revised sense of what we can know of history, and how. The sense of what history *is* was changed, and the crisis of historicism eventuated in a revised ontology. It will take us some work to follow the thread of these issues through the history of historical religion and modern historiography.

There is another meaning of "historicism" that peripherally concerns us: the idea that since all is relative to history, we are betrayed into nihilistic relativism. That fallacy was dismantled (at the latest) in Alasdair MacIntyre's tradition-bound rationality (section 5.4.3 above). The conclusion (nihilistic relativism) does not follow from the premises (that all is relative to history) without a silent presupposition that the only real being, truth, morals, etc., are the timeless ahistorical Platonist versions thereof — hence the despair and nihilism when Platonism is not available.¹⁸

¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr agreed and dismantled the fallacy and several more like it in *The Meaning of Revelation*, in the course of section II.i, "The Historical Method of Christian Faith."

¹⁸ MacIntyre considers the problem in some subtlety in "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy." It is handled by an openness to being corrected and an openness to learning

The role and limits of this section in our larger inquiry need to be stipulated. Though I am a philosophical theologian thinking about life in history, I am not a historian, and I depend on the work of historians, in this case reflecting on the history of their own discipline. They do not agree among themselves, which means the present study to some extent gives hostages to the future course of historical research. (But that, after all, is one of the central theses of this study.) A philosopher necessarily operates at a level of abstraction that would make historians uncomfortable. The sources in the last three centuries are vast, and the recent theoretical literature is also quite large, as even the technical secondary literature attests. My knowledge of primary sources is limited to a little of the early Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Alasdair MacIntyre, and related material, so the present study must be fairly modest in its claims and candid in its limitations. Nevertheless, perhaps we can say why the changing self-conception of historiography is relevant to an inquiry into the narrative constitution of human action and to life ultimately oriented toward history. It is a matter of the logical structure of the concepts as much as of the historical details.

6.2.1 The Beginnings of Historical Religion

Back up some, to the beginnings of biblical religion. The roots of the modern crisis of historicism go back to features that appeared early in historical religion, and they can be traced briefly through its career. The first solid history is in Samuel and Kings, the story of the Monarchy, though the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges tell us something of the period before, at least of how it was remembered. Religion began everywhere as nature religion, of which the Fertile Crescent was exemplary.¹⁹ In a nature religion, the believer aspires to fit into nature naturally, disturbing it as little as possible, since its natural cycles provide life. When it is disturbed, its order is to be restored. For a nature religion, action is action by nature more than it is by human actors. The notions of fate and destiny have a home in nature religions; responsibility does not. When in a quandary about what to do,

from other times and cultures, something that Rémi Brague has traced to the origins of the Christian West in *Eccentric Culture* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 10, provides a summary. Mircea Eliade's *Cosmos and History* explains the rationale for nature religion, and much of his other work provides its detailed features. This has become standard material in many textbooks on shamanism.

one consults a shaman or a seer, to find out what *nature* will do, for it is nature that acts in all things and all people, and nature is to some extent predictable.

All this left traces in the early history of Israelite culture and religion, traces amply attested in the Bible. When Saul suppressed the witches and then himself consults the Witch of Endor, we see a stage on the way out of nature religion, albeit with hesitation. As the transformation progressed, seers and shamans became prophets — still consulted about the future, but in another spirit than that of the surrounding Canaanite religions. Forecasting nature became criticism of acts in history. Reliance on nature and submission to fate became reliance on a transcendent Other. Worship of the fertility of nature was replaced by a focus on the blessings given in history. This appears in commands to remember, and especially in the Short Historical Creed in Deuteronomy 26, a recitation of the minimal facts of the Exodus that has shaped the entire narrative of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History, as we have seen. Human governments no longer spoke with the authority of a divinized nature but were subject to the transcendent Other, and they could be criticized. (This is more than just chafing at Egyptian rule, nominal and sometimes real, during the period that shaped the texts, but it grew out of that chafing.)

An important theme appears early, in the anxiety of dealing with an Other who is truly transcendent: One whose immanent presence is not subject to human conceptual control. Moses speaks from this anxiety at the Burning Bush, when he asks for the divine name. The answer is not reassuring: “I shall be with you as who I am,” or in the more familiar, leaner, and more literal translation, “I shall be who I shall be.” The anxiety runs deep, and it reappears with the Golden Calf: the people want something visible for their God.²⁰ This reflects a questioning of the form, “where is God when I need him? I can’t see him.”²¹ Western philosophy has often taken the available translations of God’s reply at the Burning Bush as a license to assimilate God to Being itself, thereby providing an entry into Greek philosophy.²² Philosophy has ever after been devising ways to “see”

²⁰ It is not often noted but clear from the texts that the statue was *not* worship of some other god; it was very much a statue of the One God. Making the statue was not apostasy but rather a theological anxietytic and one forbidden because addictive.

²¹ For one extended discussion, see John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

²² For some survey and comments on the assimilation of God to Being itself, see Owen C. Thomas, “Being and Some Theologians,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70:1–2 (1977),

what it cannot see.

The roots of many things are here. Probably the greatest was simply the move into history, which is unpredictable and uncontrollable and beyond the conceptual categories of nature. Israel saw itself and its God as set apart from the surrounding peoples and gods and, in some sense, of another character. When things went badly, the neighbors heckled: “Where now, O Israel, is your God?” No answer could be given to the taunts, which is why they stung so much. The texts know that their religion was a choice, not something that could be proven. Joshua 23–24, the great covenant renewal assembly at the entry into the promised land, understands: You have a choice of religion and of gods; what is your pleasure? It is not a deduction. This has left a problem for biblical religion ever since: the neighbors have demanded proofs, and partisans of biblical religion sometimes tried to give proofs, sometimes had to suffer insults in silence. Therein lies another major feature of historical religion: in historical religion, the covenant community is responsible for its own religion. It is not just delivered from on high, and to read the revelatory texts as a delivery from God without any participation of the believers is to misread the texts. Human religion is a human social construction, even biblical religion. (Which leads not to nihilistic relativism, but to asking why some social constructions are better than others.)

In the hindsight of our own time, the problem stands out in the crisis of the first century. In the disasters of that century, Second Temple Judaism came to an end with the loss of the Temple; it was succeeded by its two surviving daughters, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. Many things happened in the course of that debacle, but one bears on our problem. There are passages in both the New Testament and the Talmuds attesting the liberty of the covenant community to regulate its own affairs. Typical from the New Testament is the phrase “the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.” We have the authority to structure our own communal life.²³

In the Bavli, the problem gets extended treatment in a picturesque dispute about how to clean an oven, the Oven of Achnai, which I will summa-

137–160. Reprinted in his *What is it that Theologians Do, How do they do it, and Why? Anglican Essays*. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), chapter 7.

²³ A few NT passages: Matthew 16.19, John 20.22–23, Acts 15.28, Romans 8.21, most of Galatians, but notably 5.1 and 5.13. There are doubtless more. This liberty appears wherever the word *ἐλευθερία* and its relatives occur. See the article by Heinrich Schlier on *ἐλεύθερος* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 2:487 ff.

size (for lack of more space) in the words of a joke on the internet about the authority of the human community.²⁴ In a dispute among four rabbis, three against one, the holdout appeals to God, and God says, “Listen to him, he’s right!” The ringleader of the other three says to the holdout, “So? It’s still three against two.” As if to emphasize the point, when Elijah and the Lord watch from on high, and Elijah asks, “Boss, what do you make of this?” the Lord chortles and says, “My sons have defeated me! My sons have defeated me!”²⁵ The authority of the human community stands.

There is more than meets the eye in the brief preparations that set the stage for the dispute about how to clean an oven. It begins with advice that is apparently about how to conduct commercial bargaining in good faith, but that is only the beginning. It is about tact and forbearance, even in religious matters. The implication I would draw is that this liberty of interpretation in the conduct of a covenant is (a) a *responsible* liberty of interpretation, it is not something arbitrary, licence; and (b) it is to be entered into in fear and trembling; and (c) those who disagree are in all likelihood still part of the covenant with the Lord of History. Holding together the responsibility and the liberty has never been easy. Respect and forbearance toward the other in *his* responsible liberty is especially difficult. All too often, disagreements have led to hard words, schism, and bloodshed.

In the New Testament passages about liberty, there is an emphasis on the authority to forgive sins that stands out by its repetition in a way that indicates some controversy at the time. Yes, the community has the discretionary authority to structure its own life. But most importantly, it has the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins (or not, as the case may warrant). In the perspective of the distributed ontology, this is quite striking. In effect, the community of faith has been given the authority to regulate narratives, in particular those of its members’ lives: If narratives can be rewritten, if ontological foils can recast the lives of sinners so that their confession of faith is made valid, not just empty words, then sins can be forgiven (John 20.23). Rewriting the narrative means including in the story of believers’ lives events off-stage that transform their lives. What transforms their lives is the history of covenant, especially the life of Jesus, focusing on the Passion. This is what transforms an intended basic life orientation into an actual life orientation. Jesus was opposed in the Gospels

²⁴ Tractate Baba Metzia 58b–59b, Soncino edition, pp. 347–356.

²⁵ Soncino edition, p. 353.

by many who said only God can forgive sins, and they were right, too, in an important way. To say that only God can forgive sins is to say that in the end, this is an unanswerable question of the sort that arises in boundary situations and is underwritten only by faith (Hebrews 11.1). We cannot *know* what we can believe, trust, and act upon, namely, that humans have an authority in the conduct of a covenant that extends even to the forgiveness of sins, which is to say, to the criticism and adjudication of narratives.

In the Disasters of the First Century and the settlement after it, the rabbis and the Jesus movement parted company. The rhetorical environment was one of apologetic: responses by the Church and the Synagogue to each other, responses to objectors and critics from outside both, and responses to Greek philosophy. In most cases, the responses took the form of argument, proofs, not just answering questions. The word apologetic literally means answering questions; too often it was attempted proof, with all the unseen hazards of proof.²⁶ Especially, it meant disproving any and all competition. The presupposition was that there could be only one covenant community, and if two claimants disagreed, one must be wrong. They could not both be right.²⁷ This ambiguous legacy of apologetic grew through the centuries, first against pagans, then against the other historical religion (and eventually Islam), then against dissenters who didn't believe at all.

Toward those in the Greco-Roman world outside of biblical religion altogether, apologetic often took the form of "we believe in this God because of what he has done for us," with examples both recent and older. Such acts of God are ambiguous: they can be taken as the content of a confessional commitment or as proofs. Such a distinction with precision may have been harder for them than for us, though they managed well enough on their own terms when the issue became unavoidable. When the acts of God took the form of "miracles," confusion of apologetic as confession and apologetic as proof-seeking was inevitable. The ambiguity was passed on to the medieval and modern worlds.

²⁶ See p. 170 above for the vices of proof: those who believe proofs believe *in* proofs (or in their premises) before they believe in their conclusion, God.

²⁷ This idea appears in John Chrysostom, *Adv. Judaeos* 1.6. See my *Elementary Monotheism* vol. 1: *Exposure, Limitation, and Need*, p. 195 and the literature there cited. We return to the issue in section 7.2.3.

6.2.2 The Medieval Synthesis and After

The problem acquired a new dimension in the thirteenth century. Aquinas, in assimilating the challenge of Aristotle, produced a synthesis that allowed concepts of God, man, and the world (as nature) to be accessible to each other.²⁸ That synthesis came apart in the centuries that followed. It was less stable than it appeared to be. I conjecture that the instability was rooted in Aristotle's naturalism; he was a biologist, after all. The problem for the philosophical theology of biblical religion is to make sense of living in history. Categories taken from biology may work — up to a point. In the end, they will fail. Still, given Aquinas's problem and resources, his solution was impressive in its reach and versatility.

The road out of the medieval synthesis passed through nominalism in the fourteenth century. Nominalism led eventually to the new science of the seventeenth century: a science centered on physics, not biology. Both are naturalistic, but the naturalism of Aristotelian biology admits final causes into its discourse and so can be made to accommodate the humanities, if only after a fashion. Physics provides no such resources, banishing final causes from its discourse entirely and tacitly restricting formal causes drastically. As with final causes, Aristotelian formal causes, deployed with creativity and tact in Thomistic hands, can go a long way toward making sense of the humanities. The new naturalism of physics restricted formal causes to the correlate of the material and efficient causes of physics. The possibility of thinking in the humanities on some basis other than the new naturalism apparently was not viable.

Trouble came early in the issue of "miracles." With it came a return to the problem of history and of responsibility in history, though that was not seen at the beginning. The story is told in R. M. Burns's *The Great Debate on Miracles; from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*.²⁹ The physicists, believers all, even the Unitarian Isaac Newton, sought to justify the Christian faith and thereby relieve the neuralgia inherited from medieval philosophical theology. The results were disappointing. Louis Dupré someplace in *Passage to Modernity* comments that whereas before, acts of God and the presence of God were universal in the (natural) world, after the new physics, they became exceptional and rare, because they were forced to

²⁸ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity; An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

²⁹ Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981.

present themselves as violations of natural laws.³⁰ With only a poor ability to distinguish the world under the aspect of nature from its other aspects, in particular from the aspect of history, the problem became acute. When exceptions to natural laws were forced into the gaps in incomplete scientific explanations and then ruled out on principle, the challenge to biblical religion seemed formidable.

The problem focused on biblical texts in two ways. Texts newly read to allege violations of natural laws were no longer credible, and the texts themselves, even when consistent with science, presented other problems. This was the beginning of modern biblical criticism, a movement that continued in the three centuries following and eventually found a way out of the apparent problems with science. In the seventeenth century, it looked as if the historical witness in the texts was not reliable. If the biblical texts were not reliable, there was no credible basis for biblical religion. Even without an obligation to answer critics outside of biblical religion, it is still necessary to provide insiders with an account of the historical origins if this is to continue as a historical religion. Pastors have to tell insiders why the outsiders are wrong, even if the outsiders will not believe them, because the insiders always overhear what the outsiders say. The obligation to provide insiders with an account of the inherited tradition and its history is biblical. It goes back to every command to Remember (sec. 6.3.2 below), but those commands have been radically transformed on the road to the modern world.

The fruit of this history was a task, one which we may call a task of responsibility, though the eighteenth century did not. It was a sense of answers owed, both to outsiders and to insiders of the community of faith. The task grows out of both anxiety and a sense of responsibility to objections if not always to objectors. Crudely put, the task was to find reasons why we should be Christians. The question (or answers to it) are ambiguous, and the task itself was in important respects misunderstood in the eighteenth century.

Discharging the task is ambiguous: answers can be taken as confessional commitments and inevitably also as “proofs,” deductions starting from something “more basic” than Christian faith. A respondent from out-

³⁰ Norman Pittenger pleads for the older and richer understanding of acts of God against C. S. Lewis’s restricted-to-violations interpretation in *Miracles*; see Norman Pittenger, “Apologist versus Apologist: A Critique of C. S. Lewis as ‘Defender of the Faith’,” *Christian Century* 75 (1958 October 1) 1104–1107. In the present study, see section 8.2, on volokinesis: will as a physical cause.

side biblical religion can dismiss a confessional commitment as a failed proof, thus asserting by presupposition that the confessional commitment was *intended* as a proof. The heckler thereby disambiguates the believer's act in a way hostile to the believer. It takes an agile believer to sidestep (and so dismantle) the challenge. There is more ambiguity than just this; the doctrine of faith can be taken as trying to live with anxiety or as getting out of anxiety, as living without a visible, disponible God or as constructing golden calves. Answering questions can be taken as discharging responsibility or as evading responsibility.

Responsibility is defined with respect to a community and a tradition (cf. section 5.4.4 above). It is always responsibility *to* someone. One could almost say the Enlightenment took the relevant community to be universal, encompassing all people simply by virtue of their humanity. This diagnosis is true as far as it goes, but it was not the only pathology. The Enlightenment went a step further and sought objectivity, not universal responsibility, thereby covering up the problem of responsibility entirely. When there are no others to be faced outside the community, one source of anxiety is gone. When tradition-bound rationality is covered up in the pretense of objectivity, another source of anxiety is eliminated. Both the voices of outsiders and relativity to history in tradition-bound rationality work to put believers in confrontation with a most discomforting ultimate reality.³¹ Objectivity confers sovereign immunity to outside hecklers and internal anxieties alike.

The Enlightenment's misplaced universalism was not always innocent. The French Enlightenment was often anti-Christian, though the Germans sought to justify Christianity.³² (To be sure, the established Christian theology and its bearers were also not innocent.) To take the relevant community of responsibility as the universal human community is to include those of nature religions, exilic religion, the meditative traditions, and so on — a great deal more than just historical-covenantal religion. Never mind that it is impossible to satisfy them all simultaneously, since they disagree. To try to satisfy any outside of biblical religion can only be done by taking a starting point for basic life orientation acceptable to those oth-

³¹ John Courtney Murray gloried in that anxiety in *The Problem of God*. The Bible would probably call that exhilaration the Fear of the Lord; something that is only learned, though many would rather not.

³² Thomas Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, c2000), p. 78.

ers — in effect, conversion to all the other kinds of religion at once, or to some greatest common factor in them all. That would exclude anything peculiar to historical-covenantal religion, which may have been what was intended. The concept of responsibility in community has to face the fact that covenantal religion is voluntary, and not all choose to participate (cf. section 5.4.4). One is responsible to insiders in ways that go beyond the minimal responsibilities owed to outsiders.

In the background was the crisis of “miracles,” promoted by devout scientists in the seventeenth century as exceptions to natural law, an objective validation of divine providence in the world. In the eighteenth century worldview, one that excluded exceptions to natural laws, such miracles had become unbelievable for many.³³

6.2.3 The Crisis of Historicism

Though there certainly was secular history writing long before the nineteenth century, modern historiography was transformed in that century. The seventeenth and eighteenth century saw the first questioning that led to modern biblical criticism, but it didn’t come into full flower until the nineteenth. Readers will be familiar with the story, well told elsewhere and not necessary here.³⁴ What unfolded in the nineteenth century was a reshaping of the obligations toward history in a historical religion. The obligation to remember was not new, nor was recognition of the importance of history. What was new was worked out in a changing sense of what we can know of history, how we can know it, and what we are obliged to be mindful of.

The new biblical scholarship was paralleled by a new historiography. Wilhelm von Humboldt was at the center of the changes as they emerged in the new University of Berlin. As with biblical scholarship, there are many excellent studies available.³⁵ Biblical and secular history developed more

³³ See also the discussion of volokinesis, section 8.2.

³⁴ Most introductions to the Bible tell the rise of biblical criticism. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) is exemplary and often given to beginning students. See also Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*. (Trans. S. Mclean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee. Nashville: Abingdon, 1970); Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (ed. John Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Trans. Peter R. Ackroyd. New York: Harper and Row, 1976) includes a history of pentateuchal criticism, pp. 158–182.

³⁵ Only a few of them are Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The national tradition of historical thought from Herder to the present*. (Middletown CT: Wes-

or less in tandem, sometimes one breaking new ground first, sometimes the other. It was not as simple as the myth one sometimes hears, that new methods were developed first for secular history and secularist methods were later applied to the case of the Bible, to the sorrow and disappointment of believers. People worked first on the history they cared about, and often enough, that was biblical history.

What began in optimism turned less than a century later into a crisis of confidence in what historians can know. There were many reasons. The historians sought a kind of objectivity in historical knowledge that they knew from physics, even though they also knew that methods and concepts in the physical sciences would not work for history. In a sense, then, their expectations were incompatible with their methods. This, however, was not the only reason for the eventual disappointment of their ambitions. The secular historians were engaged in a project that we would call political theory of the German constitution at the same time as they undertook to retrieve past history. On Iggers' account in *The German Conception of History*, the study of others' history was German political science, because the meanings to be learned from papal or Turkish or Chinese history were lessons for German polity. In a sense, he (and they) are quite right: the history of other lands did indeed provide lessons for nineteenth-century German problems. But the historians misconceived their work as a quest for objectivity rather than a quest for meanings. It took some time to unravel the puzzle. When European prospects clouded at the end of the nineteenth century, the confidence of the historians about knowledge of past history was undermined also. When the New Testament scholars failed in their project to paint Jesus as a nineteenth-century Liberal and had to face an elusive apocalyptic figure from a very strange century long ago (see Schweitzer), confidence was undermined on another front.

We may say that the problems came from failures of two sorts of as-

leyan University Press, 1968, 1983); Charles Bambach R., *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the crisis of historicism*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Thomas A. Howard, *Religion and the rise of historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the theological origins of nineteenth-century historical consciousness* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, c2000); Allan Megill, "Why was there a crisis of historicism?," *History and Theory* 36 (1997) 416–430; Sheila Greeve Davanay, *Historicism: The once and future challenge for theology*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History*. (New York: Norton, 1994); Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography In The Twentieth Century; From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

sumptions, possibly assumptions tacit and not entirely spelled out. In the first place was the quest for objectivity and the conceptual power that comes with objectivity. The second assumption, an expected corollary, was an ability to settle disputes and prove the superiority of European civilization and the Christian religion. The first was a misunderstanding of the character of historical knowledge; the second was a misguided apologetic project. Ernst Troeltsch was part of both, knew the failure of both, and was on the way to remedies for both, though he never lived to see those remedies. Remedies for the failure of objectivity came in the development of hermeneutics in Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960), which we have already met above, is one account of that work. Remedies for the failure of apologetic came in H. Richard Niebuhr's reflections on Troeltsch and later on historical knowledge in general in *The Meaning of Revelation*.

To the quest for objectivity, some questions may be posed that arise at this point in the present inquiry. They are no doubt answerable questions, but I do not have the answers to them. The questions take the form of a conjecture, one that might be confirmed or rejected by those who know the texts and the history better than I do. Confirmation would be interesting, yet disconfirmation would probably be even more interesting.³⁶ Here is a sketch of the conjecture: It would seem, in a context of inquiry about meaning and motions in human acts, that the quest for objectivity was a quest for what we have called "motions," motions prior to meanings, and motions that could be established by historians independently of any meanings. Such "objective" motions could then be used as foundations for meanings. They would not have spoken of their work this way; they sought historical facts "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*," and the pivotal word is *eigentlich*, a word that apparently has more shades of meaning than its usual translation ("actually") indicates.³⁷ *Eigentlich* would seem to mean the facts as they were, without judgements, evaluation, or meaning.³⁸ The

³⁶ Investigation of a historical period by way of testing a conjecture usually modifies the conjecture if it does not disconfirm it utterly. In the course of disconfirming the conjecture, it may well produce a better account of what happened. Thomas S. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* grew out of just such a disconfirmation; his original conjecture is rarely noted. Testing this conjecture about meaning and motions is well beyond the scope of the present inquiry and beyond my own abilities as well. But others may find it useful.

³⁷ As *eigentlich*, it means actual, real, true. *Eigen-* in other combinations can mean characteristic. In *eigenverantwortlich*, it means responsible, a sense that is most interesting for us.

³⁸ The apparent origin of the oft-quoted phrase: "Man hat der Historie das Amt,

problem, as we have seen, is that we have access to human actions only through narratives, and the narratives that would give us motions already contain *some* meaning, even if they do not answer the questions of meaning we are interested in. We have traces of the past, in material artifacts, documents, institutions, and so forth, but those traces do not simply interpret themselves, even if they allow some interpretations and resist others. Again, we do not have access to motions independently of *all* meaning. I emphasize that these are questions, not answers, and that they arise in a line of questioning that is itself tentative and exploratory. But they do lead us back to the circular relationship between narratives and human actions.

The historians may have sought “motions” independent of meanings, or objective motions independent of the meanings they also sought, but the philosophers were more careful. Late in the nineteenth century, Windelband and Rickert sought to ground an objectivity in history on Neokantian lines.³⁹ For Dilthey, the task was conceived as a “critique of historical reason,” a very Kantian project. A Kantian approach would seek categories that in effect select which motions are relevant to a history, just as the categories underlying physics in the first Critique organize sensory input. Yet Dilthey’s Kantian approach, however cautiously, was transformed by stages on the way to hermeneutics. Categories in a Kantian style provide the desired objectivity. If they become flexible human artifacts, they are no longer in a Kantian style; they have become tools of interpretation. In place of objectivity of the “objects” of historical knowledge, the philosophers came eventually to recognize that what they knew was not objects but meanings left by other subjects, past subjects whose human involvements live on in the present.

die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beigemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will bloß zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.” Quoted from a citation on the internet, <http://crookedtimber.org/2005/09/07/als-eigentlich-gewesen/>, accessed 2009-06-10. Another comment on the net translates it thus: “The role, commonly attributed to History, is to judge the Past, to instruct the Present, for the benefit of the Future: such a high (noble) role is not claimed for this essay: it aims simply to show how it really was.” http://howitreally-was.typepad.com/how_it_really_was/2005/10/wie_es_eigentli.html, accessed 2009-06-10. The sentence appears from various citations to be from *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Leipzig: Verlag Dunker und Humblot 3. Ausgabe 1885) 5 vii. What von Ranke denied (judging the past, instructing the present, for the benefit of the future) are precisely what Heidegger retrieved when what Ranke affirmed became insupportable.

³⁹ My source for this account is Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*.

I have followed Charles Bambach's threading through the story. The problem moved from secular and biblical historians to philosophers, of whom Bambach chose exemplary figures in the crisis of historicism. It began as an epistemological problem and remained so through Dilthey.⁴⁰ In Martin Heidegger, the problem is transformed into something ontological. What is known in and about history has a kind of being quite other than had been presupposed. Bambach's summary is succinct and to the point:

The prevailing historical sciences saw the past as a collection of already given, pre-formed artifacts "there-for-me," waiting to be emphatically re-lived and understood. Ranke, for one, aimed at reconstructing the factually given state of affairs in the past. But Heidegger rejected Rankean factuality for a new form of hermeneutic facticity; what mattered was not the theoretical or empirical givenness of an object but its "situation character" in concrete factual and historical terms. The genuine experience of history for Heidegger was not about reconstructing facts but about retrieving the meaning of the past within the situation of the present as a possibility for one's own future.⁴¹

It is the last that matters: the (epistemological) crisis of historicism meant a revised ontology of history.

6.3 The Past in the Present

6.3.1 Out of Historicism, Heidegger

In our own inquiry, what began from the Aristotelian legacy quest for motions and causes was transformed into motions and meanings, ending in access to motions only through meanings. Motions in the sense of material trajectories are mostly lost, a few points on them surviving as traces in the present and then often only approximately. Motions in an existential sense (by contrast) survive and are knowable only through the meanings that are passed down to us. It has taken some considerable work to reach this point. What we have argued from the logic of a narrative ontology of human action was explored by stages, and Heidegger was the watershed, as Charles Bambach observed above.

⁴⁰ Bambach, p. 132.

⁴¹ Bambach, p. 220.

Heidegger's solution will not entirely be my own, but it is appropriate to pay respects to it in passing. It is also necessary to say a little about what we appropriate from Heidegger and what we pass by. He appears at this point in our story because he made the move from an objectivated past to recovery of a past that lives on in the present in the lives of people now. In effect, he returned to Augustine's approach to the life of the past in the present. He customized and deepened it for his own purposes.

In the epistemological crisis of historicism, Heidegger turned to an ontological remedy. He reconceived what history and the past are, how they exist, how they survive in the present. The tacit assumption that became explicit in historicism and then foundered was the attempt to conceive history and historical events as "out there," back there in time, over against us, whether we heed them or not. Beneath historicist epistemology lay an ontological assumption. When it failed, the remedy had to be ontological.

From a Catholic point of view, Heidegger's contributions are fragmentary, and they are somewhat curious in light of what's there and what's not. Two themes make his work highly problematic for Christian philosophical theology — not useless, but to be read with care and caution. One is in his treatment of authenticity, being a whole, and being toward death. The other is the trajectory from Being back to selected Presocratics, returning to Nietzsche, a trajectory that, pushed further, led to the National Socialists.⁴² It is odd in a work culminating in historicity that he avoids any world-affirming historical basic life orientation: biblical religion and covenant.⁴³ And it is odd that in returning to the Greeks, he slights those who deal candidly with suffering: Sophocles, for one.

Heidegger's most prominent account of temporality and historicity appears in the later chapters of Division II of *Being and Time*. They are prepared not just in the argument to temporality in Division I but in the first two chapters of Division II, which have a texture that has seemed to me very strange and obscure. I think Paul Ricoeur's appraisal has a little

⁴² See John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), and *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993), for an extended critique.

⁴³ The avoidance becomes more than just odd when Hugo Ott points out that remarks in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* are an all-but explicit broadside against both Christian theology in general and a work by Theodor Haecker in particular, *Was ist der Mensch? Der Christ und die Geschichte. Schöfer und Schöpfung* (1935). *Einführung in die Metaphysik* was a lecture course in 1935 and a book only later (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953). See Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 271–272.

truth in it: Heidegger is here more Stoic than Christian.⁴⁴ Ricoeur hits home when the mortality of Division I is elevated into the central color of Division II.

We can first of all ask whether the entire analysis of temporality is not tied to the personal conception that Heidegger has of authenticity, on a level where it competes with other existentiell conceptions, those of Pascal and of Kierkegaard — or that of Sartre — to say nothing of that of Augustine. It is not, in fact, within an ethical configuration, strongly marked by a certain Stoicism, that resoluteness in the face of death constitutes the supreme test of authenticity?⁴⁵

Later on,

... this existential of universal mortality leaves open a vast range of existentiell responses, including the quasi-Stoic resoluteness affirmed by the author of *Being and Time*.⁴⁶

Ricoeur reflects on the matter in more depth as the book comes toward its own conclusions. The theme of Division II is “the possibility of Dasein’s Being-a-whole.” “Nowhere is it said why this question is the principle one that a hermeneutic phenomenology of time has to pose.”⁴⁷ There are other well-known ways of dealing with temporality. Ricoeur more or less accepts Heidegger’s discontent with the times of Aristotle, Kant (an “infinite given”), physics, and even Husserl (the “disinterested subject as Husserl’s transcendental ego”). Ricoeur’s problem (and mine) lies with Heidegger’s own solution:

First, the connection between Being-a-whole and Being-towards-death has to be attested to by the testimony of conscience, whose most authentic expression, according to Heidegger, lies in resolute anticipation.

⁴⁴ I do not, by the way, intend to insinuate that latter-day Stoicism tends toward National Socialism. I personally know Stoics who abhor totalitarianism in all its forms, perhaps because they, like Heidegger, have a Christian inheritance, and unlike Heidegger, have not entirely lost the soul of that inheritance. Perhaps Heidegger sought totalitarian messianism as a replacement for a lost sense of covenant. And calling Heidegger a Stoic may be too imprecise.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3:67

⁴⁶ *Time and Narrative*, 3:136.

⁴⁷ This and the quotations from Ricoeur in this and the following paragraph are all from *Time and Narrative*, 3:254.

The testimony of “conscience” appears in the first two chapters of Division II, but it is not the conscience familiar from Christian experience. It has been transformed, and it is something for Dasein to achieve.

The background can help us. One of Heidegger’s conversation partners was Rudolf Bultmann, and Bultmann had enough sense as a Lutheran theologian to know that authenticity and wholeness, whatever they are, come as a gift of grace, not as things to be achieved. Heidegger has made a choice here.⁴⁸ What we have is in part primordial ontology and in part “a personal option for Heidegger the human being. . . . other existentiell conceptions, those of Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Sartre, are set aside here in the name of a kind of stoicism that makes resoluteness in the face of death the supreme test of authenticity.” Ricoeur for himself asks why not “take philosophy as a celebration of life rather than as a preparation for death.”⁴⁹ The whole has a pall over it, with overtones of despair in its resoluteness. Heidegger had read Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death* and the latter’s appraisal of the despair of defiance, seeking to be the self one has chosen to be instead of the self one has been given to be. Of Heidegger’s appropriation of Kierkegaard at this point, we might well say that he got most of the words right, but he can’t carry the tune.

There are clues to the puzzle, again in the background, and again, they lie with Bultmann. Many observe that Heidegger borrowed the notion of *kairos* from Paul, as more illuminating than the *chronos* of physics, Aristotle, and indeed the entire Platonist tradition.⁵⁰ The source is Rudolf Bultmann, stronger on Paul than he was on the Old Testament. My own New Testament teacher, Edward Hobbs, much though he reveres Bultmann’s work, does not hesitate to supplement it with a strong emphasis on the Exodus.⁵¹

Covenant appears on the larger horizons of our narratives. The phenomenon has appeared as the part-whole relationship already in the initial structure of a distributed ontology of human action, in chapter 5. Several

⁴⁸ He was not obliged to catalogue all the alternatives to his own position, but we may note some of them, as Ricoeur also does.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 3:254.

⁵⁰ One place it occurs is in Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism*, 232 ff.

⁵¹ Christian theology typically overlooks the Exodus roots of covenant in history, and the Exodus roots of the New Testament in particular. This is a legacy of the Marcionite crisis, and it has returned with a vengeance in the modern world, when liturgical practice in most quarters has given up regular reading of the Common Documents, and especially of praying the Psalms, which are soaked in the Exodus.

lines of argument have now come together. The question of meaning and motions arose in initial structure of human action. The example of the Exodus both illustrates the relation of meaning and motions and also presented to us the obligations of covenantal religion to its own past. Those obligations we have not fully explored. They have a history of their own, one that led by stages to historicism. Hermeneutics emerged out of the collapse of historicism. Heidegger's recovery of Augustine's sense of the past living on in the present has opened the way for progress. The past as ontological foils not only gives us the present we find ourselves in, it also offers possibilities, by analogy, for the future.

Heidegger's vision of those possibilities was quasi-Stoic; ours is covenantal. Covenant trusts that the future will bring blessings even in its pains as the past has:

Christian faith might be called the responsive and active relationship to all encounters of life which is confidence that they always and unfailingly offer possibilities for good, or for "life" — that is, for value, or worth, for creativity, for purpose, or for whatever constitutes "life" for men. Or, it might be formulated as an affirmation that all human existence including the unknown and not-quite-manipulable future, is trustworthy, rewarding our trust with worth.⁵²

This is a non-trivial commitment, in view of the pains of life, pains the Greeks knew and Heidegger avoids, pains the Bible knows from the beginning.⁵³

What does Stoicism mean, in the context of Ricoeur's critique of Heidegger? The contrast that matters for our limited purposes is that Stoicism makes only a quasi-affirmation of human life in this world, with no sense of covenant. Stoicism could be characterized as affirmation of life *in spite of*

⁵² Edward C. Hobbs, "An Alternate Model From a Theological Perspective," pp. 32–33: This definition properly should include rabbinic Judaism as well as Christianity. It characterizes covenant in terms of its human side, bypassing questions about its divine origins, so it does not try to be a complete definition of a covenantal basic life orientation.

⁵³ This is easily overlooked: Genesis 1.28, "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it." Cf. Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), in "The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers," pp. 108–109. The editors of the first chapter of Genesis wrote after the catastrophe of the Exile. "And the moment when the word is spoken is precisely the moment of *landlessness*, the exile. Thus it is a radical affirmation against the circumstances in which it is spoken."

its pains. I think covenant does something more: it seeks good and blessing *in* the pains themselves, even though it grieves in those same pains. In its biblical form, it certainly knew pain, suffering, and affliction enough, so it is not under any illusions. Yet it celebrates life; that is more than can be said of any Stoicism I know. And it celebrates in a larger context of history. Covenant does not affirm life in *spite* of its pains; it knows that the pains *themselves* come bearing blessing. That is far more difficult than the Stoic outlook on life, especially when the pains destroy us.

6.3.2 Zakhōr

Historicism of a very limited and chastened kind lives on legitimately in history departments, in the form of what H. Richard Niebuhr called “external history” (section 3.4.4 above). It is history focused on the objective magnitude of events, situated in a time that is chronological, bracketing many of the human meanings of those chronicled. It has struggled with its relations to what Niebuhr called “internal” history, history for selves-in-community, a history of meanings, in a time that is kairological rather than chronological. External history always presupposes that the people it studies have an internal history, and it must struggle with the fact that the external historians themselves also have an internal history, one that can be bracketed only partially. So internal history will out in the end.

The covenantal obligation to remember in its Christian form has changed over the centuries, as we have seen. As much can be said for the other Exodus tradition, rabbinic Judaism. Yosef Haim Yerushalmi in *Zakhōr* reminded his readers that academic history is not the history of the faithful, the history that brings life to believers and animates covenant.⁵⁴ Without much abstract philosophy, Yerushalmi summons his readers concretely to several occasions in Jewish history that illustrate the duty of remembering. From the Bible, the medievals, the transition to modernity, and the present come examples of the command to remember and of its importance. Yerushalmi’s meditation on the relation between communal memory and academic history is quite different from and at least as rich as Niebuhr’s.

Of the relations between the several kinds of history, between meanings and motions, and between events and their larger contexts, none are

⁵⁴ Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhōr: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982, 1996).

thoroughly understood, and none are free from controversy. A few examples may illustrate. “Objective” artifacts, monuments, texts, relics, and heirlooms, testify to history in all its richness. They have a distributed ontology far beyond any tool-being. We treasure them when we can find them. We treasure anything that attests the “motions” in addition to the meanings we inherit, because the evidence of those motions will always be a rich source for new meaning. The beginnings of a Ricoeurian act-in-growth-of-meaning are treasured when we can find them. Sometimes we have little more than the later stages, as with the Exodus. We would dearly love to have the Annals of the Kings of Judah and the Annals of the Kings of Israel, but those treasures are gone. Ancient editors and accidents of non-preservation have given us only the biblical texts we have. Had we the lost documents behind the Old Testament, we might well confirm and deepen the record we have, of the gradual emergence of historical religion by a process of transformation of the original nature religions. Such evidence would also corroborate what we have said already, that narratives can be told many ways, and the acts that get their being from narratives are correspondingly pluripotent also.

Heidegger spoke of *Wiederholung*, variously translatable as *repetition*, *recovery*, and *retrieval* — meaning the recovering of possibilities from the past in the present for the future. He had his own applications in mind. The word *meaning* in Bambach’s summary (p. 204 above) comes naturally to present-day American readers, and we have made much of it in this chapter. Meaning is a vague word, rambling, inclusive, plastic, flexible. It can mean almost anything, and here, that is a virtue and not a vice. It allows us to acknowledge that people differ about the meanings of human actions, of the past, and especially of the ultimate horizons of reality within which meaning makes sense. We have specialized for our own purposes as the inquiry has proceeded.

Commands to remember occur many times in the Common Documents. Here are a few, some explicit, some implicit:

Dt. 5.15, “remember that you were once a servant
in the land of Egypt”;

Dt. 5.6: “I am the LORD who brought you
out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery”

Ex. 13.3, a D text, “Keep this day in remembrance,
the day you came out of Egypt,

from the house of slavery, . . .”

Ex. 20.8, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.”

Dt. 26.5–11, the Short Historical Creed

Dt. 8.14, “do not forget”, 8.18, “remember ...”

The Short Historical Creed doesn’t use the word *remember*, but it is a command to remember nonetheless, for it is a command to recite the events of the Exodus at the time of an annual harvest festival when the world around Israel was celebrating nature gods and nature religion, not history.

Why? Why remember? Why does it matter?

I am to remember the ontological foils that integrate my acts and my life into the larger whole of meaning. The foils constitute me as what I am and my acts as what they are. To the extent that I benefit from the past, to remember is to discharge one obligation of gratitude. If there are debts because of others’ suffering (and there virtually always are) to remember is to remember what one owes to others who went before. I am constituted by my past, a past that extends well beyond me; to forget that is to forget who I am.

The lives of communities raise the same issues. Paul Ricoeur says obligations of memory are obligations of justice.⁵⁵ To remember is justice, doing justice requires remembering. Niebuhr illustrates some of what remembering does, what the past does: Revelation for him is what we would call the foils that matter; it “resurrects the forgotten, buried, and embarrassing past,” sins, betrayals, denials, follies; what we had denied and suppressed. The “unremembered past endures”; it can even be seen from external history. The past survives in assumptions about what is (im)possible. Unburying the past is “confession of sin and conversion of memory.”⁵⁶ To forget is to evade, but it is worse than mere evasion. It is not to know what one is doing. A community’s willful ignorance of its own past is ignorance of its own being.

To act and not know what one is doing is a form of suffering, yet here not entirely innocent suffering. It is a kind of degeneration, a turn toward animal status, though we can never return to pre-linguistic life in nature. Animals are those who do not have the power of language, and so cannot

⁵⁵ *Memory, History, Forgetting* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 89. The obligation to remember what other people did arises from the amended Dasein: the people in view have a stake in each other.

⁵⁶ This paraphrase and near-quotation is from *The Meaning of Revelation* (1940), pp. 113–114; (2006), pp. 60–62. Niebuhr’s theme appears elsewhere in this study on pp. 173 and 235.

spell out what they are doing, and so are limited to animal behavior, not full action. That is why we have such nostalgia for animals: they have a kind of peace with the world, even when they are in conflict, that humans can never have after the acquisition of language. For humans not to spell out is no longer innocent, because humans *can* spell out. For a human, never to spell out would be a form of degeneration. Not to spell out the connections to history (since that is the larger ontological context of human living) is a kind of degeneration to nature religion, a mimetic basic life orientation.

Yet we never spell out adequately or fully: As the rite for reconciliation of a penitent has it,⁵⁷ “for these sins and all other sins that I cannot now remember, I am truly sorry . . .” This is more than just moral wisdom. We know here that we do not know all there is to know about our own actions, and this compunction stems from the structure of human action. It is not just a moral failing; it is ontologically *impossible* to know everything there is to know about human actions, because it is impossible to know all possible ways the narratives of our lives and actions can truthfully be told.

⁵⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 447.

Chapter 7

Action, Liturgy, Community

7.1 Language, Action, Morals, History

Chapter 6 named two issues selected from the phenomena in chapter 5 for further development. One was the relation of meaning and motions in human action. The other, there nominally deferred, was the relation of parts and wholes in narratives. The question of meaning and motions led naturally to that of parts and wholes. The example of the Exodus showed us meaning saved when recoverable motions were vestigial. It also gave us the obligation to remember, an obligation whose character has changed greatly over the centuries. What was to be remembered was a historical context into which human actions fit as parts: the ontological foils in the past that reconfigure human lives in the present. A reciprocal constitution of parts and wholes in human actions appeared within the perspective of hermeneutics (sec. 5.4.1). Things became interesting when it was noticed that parts and wholes are not pre-given to us but are to some extent a matter of choice (sec. 5.4.2). In chapter 6, we saw a changing obligation to remember one particular larger whole. As a consequence, the choices are not arbitrary, and they are open to moral criticism.

At this point, further questions arise. How do the chosen larger wholes work to transform the on-stage? Narratives and claims by other people are ambiguous. To unpack the logic, we shall begin where ambiguities are minimal, in order to see how they are introduced. Non-linguistic animals are mostly free of these ambiguities, because they are acquired with language. Language is the root of real action, and so of moral criticizability, and in particular of original sin in historical religion. Language gave

humans both world and ambiguity, and language can resolve some of the ambiguities that it opens up, though not all, at least not for the present. Eventually, we would like to see how these ambiguities are handled. But first we need to see how they are created, how they appear in the move from animal to human life.

7.1.1 Animal Behavior

More than once, we have claimed that what animals do does not qualify as real action, because they don't have language.¹ The critical distinction for theological anthropology is not a genetic or phenotypic distinction between *Homo sapiens* and other species but rather between those with language and those without. More precisely, it is between those with enough language to narrate their own (and others') actions and those without that narrative capacity. The distinction here made between animal behavior and truly language-capable human action is to some extent definitional, as it serves the purposes of the present study, but it also falls at a natural place where there is a qualitative divide between humans and other animals. Any animal species that turns out to have (or will acquire) narrative ability will qualify as ζῶον λογικόν: for anthropological and moral purposes, human.² Borderline and transitional cases are just that: they are on the way to language, linguistic being, and so far as we know, not very far along that way, though sea mammals are not well understood. Recent research that exhibits the beginnings of linguistic capacity in animals has merely converted a discontinuity into a cliff, but the cliff is still steep and high, and the non-human animals with fragments of language are still very close to the bottom of it.

Why do we tarry over animal behavior? Action as we are interested in it, actor-narratable action, is different from what narrative-incapable animals do. Call the second animal behavior, and the first, for purposes of the present study, human action. Actor-narratable action is almost completely a human phenomenon. What humans can do with language is enormously richer than what non-human mammals can do without language, even if

¹Pp. 20, 20, 155, 212.

² That is, by virtue of language they would join the community of moral obligation simply because they would join the community of moral discourse. As always, generalizations about other animals are subject to revision in the light of future experience and observations. In one sense, I suppose I would welcome the giving of language to other animal species, but in another sense I am quite cautious: to give them language would also be to give them original sin; not something to be done lightly.

mammalian abilities are not trivial or dismissable. It is inevitable that animal behavior, the salient contrast here, will be brought to the conversation, and so it is appropriate to say a little about the contrast. It is pertinent because it is the natural context, or context in evolution, out of which grew human language, actor-narratable action, and so morality, as the following sections will argue. Some claim linguistic powers for animals, and even morality, but their claims are disputed within animal behavior studies. If animals can be shown capable of participating in the narration of action and criticism of narratives, then they will of course become members of the community of moral obligation. To my knowledge, that has not happened. Though some grand claims have been made, they are neither generally convincing nor a real demonstration.

One index of the hazards of projecting human capacities onto animals was demonstrated by analogy in another context by Joseph Weizenbaum. His computer program Eliza was mistaken for human by many observers. His secretary formed an intimate emotional bond with the program quickly, though she knew well that it was only a computer program. Professional psychiatrists thought (to their delight, entertainingly) that it could do much of their work for them.³ When I interacted with the program, it was almost trivial to make it fail the Turing test. And yet it passed the Turing test with many other people, as Weizenbaum recounts. This from a program of six hundred lines of C++, richly commented; the original Fortran may have been shorter. If this sort of mistake is possible with computer programs, the hazards of projecting human qualities onto animals are even greater. The claims of animal morality that I have seen in the animal behavior literature are not self-critical at this point. They do not ask what is projected onto animals and what can withstand further inquiry, what is real and what is mere projection onto animal behavior.

Animals do, in a manner of speaking, make some claims on us, because they share emotions and the ability to suffer. That does not confer rights on them; it merely means that humans have, for human social reasons, some moral obligations toward animals. Why are human obligations with respect to animals not equivalent to animal rights? Rights presuppose membership in a community of moral obligation, which itself presupposes the ability to narrate and criticize the narrating of actions.⁴ It is a feature

³ Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason; From Judgment to Calculation* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976). See especially pp. 5–6.

⁴ It is the capability *in principle* to narrate one's own actions; in practice, that ability can

of human social ethics that we cannot consistently disapprove the infliction of suffering on other humans if we tolerate the human infliction of suffering on animals. It is worth note, and not surprising, that the human social and moral principles at stake in mistreatment of animals are themselves debated and not universally shared. They are relative to history and culture, like most human morality. And so, when we consider animals, our concerns become linguistic: does the animal understand temporality in language, or the difference between indicative and subjunctive moods? Can it express what did happen, what might happen, what did not but could have happened? Can it disambiguate ambiguous action and say which of many possible goals was intended? At a necessary lower level, does it have syntax, grammar, semantics?⁵ There are many components of the human language faculty, and most are shared with at least some other animals, though most other animals share only some of them. Apparently none, in the state of present research, share what some linguists call *recursion*, effectively the ability to structure complex sentences.⁶ That ability would seem to be a prerequisite for the ability to structure narratives. This is why we can say of non-linguistic animals that they do not act but just exhibit animal behavior. Without language, there is neither the ambiguity of intention in the world nor the possibility of disambiguating those intentions.

Without language, an animal cannot specify what it is doing, and of course many answers to that question are possible, as we have seen already: many narratives, and so many actions, would pass through the motions we see before us — if the animal could specify among them. But if neither the ambiguity conferred by language nor its accompanying capacity for disambiguation is possible, then what animals do has to be explained in some other way, a naturalistic way. A science of animal behavior ought

be compromised, lost, or not developed, and the being in question still has rights, because it is a failed human being, something that cannot be said of other, non-narrative-capable animals. Failed humans still have rights, out of respect for their humanity.

⁵ It was these last, the structural aspects of language, that Clive Wynne found undemonstrated in any animal behavior studies. See his *Do Animals Think?* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶ M. D. Hauser, N. Chomsky, W. T. Fitch, “The faculty of language: what is it, who has it, and how did it evolve?” *Science* 298 (5598) (2002) 1569–1579. “It seems relatively clear, after nearly a century of research on animal communication, that no species other than humans has a comparable capacity to recombine meaningful units into an unlimited variety of larger structures, each differing systematically in meaning” (p. 1576).

to reflect the fact that making sense is not something that animals do.⁷ For the animal, its behavior does not have the kind of ambiguity and openness that human action has for humans. To explain acts by subsumption — classifying them under general categories of the lawful and the random — is not the same as narration and the criticism of open narratives. The first is animal behavior as ethologists know it; the second is action as humans know it.

Others have noticed that differences between human and animal access to the world parallel differences in language ability.

Language is not just one of the possessions with which man is endowed in the world, but it is on language that the fact that man has a world at all depends and presents itself. For man the world exists as world unlike it for any other living thing. The *Dasein* of the world is verbal in nature.⁸

Animals have an environment, *Umwelt*, but not a world, or not much world, to speak like Heidegger.⁹ With language comes the ability to deal with parts of the world far away in space and time, without limit to their proximity or imminence.¹⁰ Heidegger spoke of animals as “poor in world,” that is, not entirely without world, but with much less world than humans have. Perhaps we could say that the “horizon” of an animal’s world is much more immediate than it is for humans. In humans, language and

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*, pp. 209–210), says that “actions unintelligible even to the agent as well as to everyone else are understood — rightly — as a form of suffering.” We say this of humans who have lost the ability to narrate their actions satisfactorily, but not of animals who have never had that ability, not even in the more florid claims of animal behavior studies.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. The Weinsheimer-Marshall translation may be consulted at p. 443. This is Oliver Putz’s translation, in “Cosmological hermeneutics: integration of theology and science.” Thesis (M.A.)—Graduate Theological Union, 2006. See p. 63, translating a German edition of *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 446–447. The difference is that possession of a world depends on prior possession of language; without language, there is only *Umwelt*. The direction of dependence is unclear or wrong in the Weinsheimer/Marshall translation. The German amply supports Putz over Weinsheimer/Marshall.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. Part Two treats animals as world-poor.

¹⁰ Actually, it does not matter for our purposes whether language is just the *expression* of a pre-conscious and pre-linguistic cognitive faculty or whether language actually *confers* that ability. We could say that language is the portion of that ability that is accessible to consciousness.

world come together, packaged with selfhood, and language is the “carrier of the package,” as Berger and Luckmann put it. What does seem indubitable is that most features of the human world are not *expressible* without language. Animals do have some powers of acoustic expression, and animal calls figure prominently in some animal behavior, though within a very restricted horizon of meaning.

7.1.2 Origins of Action in Language

Language enables the “specification of actions,” to use Thomistic terms, or, in other words, the ability to say which kind a particular action fits into. Aristotle has seen some of this, and traditional translations of λόγος and its derivatives as *reason* and *rational* do not make it entirely clear. It would be better for present purposes to translate them as *language*, *language-capable*, *appropriately languaged*, and the like, concepts well within the range of meaning of the Greek. One place the phenomenon we are interested in appears is in the *Quaestiones disputatae de Malo*, question 6, on the freedom of the will. In the Sed Contra, number 2, Aquinas is a tad brief, but here is what he says: “Rational powers are capable of contrary effects, according to the Philosopher” (cites *Metaphysics* 9.2, 1046b4–5). “But the will is a rational power, for it is in the rational part of the soul, as is said in Book III *On the Soul*.” (cites *On the Soul* 3.9, 432b5–7.¹¹

At 1046b4–5, Aristotle has λόγος, ἄλογος, wherever the translators have *rational*, *irrational*, or *reason*; Aristotle usually does not even use the adjective λογικός; just λόγος. Λόγος notoriously has many meanings in English (and other modern languages), and the root meanings in language and linguisticity are easily forgotten. Reason and rationality may be the right or appropriate languaging of a thing, but they are nevertheless first a languaging of it.

The pivot for us is Thomas’s comment, “Rational powers are capable of contrary effects.” In other words, language is ambiguous — it can articulate the wrong *logos* of a thing as well as the right *logos* of it. Indeed, more than one *logos* may be right of a thing. Aristotle saw the phenomenon we are interested in, and he engaged it with an instinct that is sure, even if without much detail.

Language gives the ability to *detach* consideration of some phenomenon from its immediate presence (or absence, more often), in a way

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*. Trans. John A. Oesterle and Jean T. Oesterle. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 238.

that quite transcends the animal ability to deal only with things in its immediate environment.¹² Language gives the ability to *select* and to *choose* what matters in the past and what is desired in the future. We can say then that language is the origin of action, because language, when added to the vertebrate and primate inheritance, puts hominids over the threshold of action. Without language, there is no action; with language, we have action in the sense of the present inquiry.

Action is always about something, about things in the past and about possible futures. But there are many things in the past and the future, and many more beyond the first ones one might cite, the ones an act is proximately about. Only in language is it possible to raise or answer the question, “yes, but which ones?” This question does not arise for animals without language. An animal just does whatever it does, without this kind of questioning. For us, questions of animal behavior get answered on naturalistic grounds.

For humans, language brings many pasts and many futures into the present: Many pasts, because the interpretation of past acts and events is a matter of editing, not just nature, and the editing can be done many ways. Many futures, because projected courses of action have many consequences, some desirable, some deplorable, some foreseeable, some not. Language thus confers an enormously expanded reach for “intent.” Better, language-capable beings can intend things far beyond the limited environment of the immediate present.

Where there is no language, there can be no editing among reasons (*αἵτια*, not *λόγος*) for acts, and so no acts at all. Where there is no action, there can be no moral criticism, and hence no sin. Where there is no language, animals are innocent. There are at least two meanings of innocence: the innocence of those who could sin but did not, and the innocence of those who for one reason or another could not sin. The reasons include immaturity (in humans) and lack of language (in animals, and in some circumstances in humans). Animal behavior is strictly a function of nature.¹³

Is language the origin of *sin*? Yes and no. Language is the root of many

¹² Detachability conferred by language appears in Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, pp. 36–40.

¹³ We do not imply, by the way, that nature *religions* have no concept of wrong; they disapprove of some actions and approve others just as historical religions do; only their moral codes are different. Historical and nature religions disagree about whether human action is responsible or just a part of nature.

features of human action, but the concept of *sin* is specific to one tradition, world-affirming historical religion. It would be better to say language is the origin of moral ambiguity and moral criticizability, one interpretation of which is the concept of sin. Without language, there is no answerability and no moral evaluation or criticism.

7.1.3 Original Sin in Historical Religion

The instinct in the doctrine of original sin is that we inherit sinfulness, that original sin is somehow transmissible. It is even called “hereditary sin” in some languages. I have no interest in theories that link the transmission of sinfulness to sex or genetic heredity. We don’t inherit original sin;¹⁴ we are inducted into it when we acquire language. To be born is to be born into a society, with social relations of some sort, and that is to receive language, self, and a world together.¹⁵ We receive also social roles, a place in society, with expectations of us and acquired expectations of other people. It’s the only game in town: we play because we have to; it is not as if we have a choice. No wonder Heidegger and others say we are “thrown” into a world. The social roles we inherit are morally ambiguous, tainted historically with sin. Often we find ourselves facing conflicting demands from opposed virtues, as Antigone did in the play that bears her name.

What follows is a very restricted and tentative exploration. It is a few of the roots of sin that derive from the linguistic and narrative constitution of action. Other roots are not here. In particular, we pass over those roots of sin that come from neurophysiology: cognitive and emotional faculties inherited from animals who are incapable of sin because incapable of real (i. e., actor-narratable) action. Animal behavior such as competition among conspecifics easily displays features that *we* would call jealousy or selfishness, but it is important to remember that the animals themselves do not, for lack of language. Cognitive and emotional faculties of other animals become in humans, when language is added, roots (or origins) of sin. But in animals themselves, they are innocent.¹⁶ What is considered here may well not be exhaustive even of the roots in narrative and language.

¹⁴ At least we do not inherit sin *biologically*; the term “inherit” was originally a legal term, denoting things passed on from one generation to another in social structures, not in nature.

¹⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, e. g., p. 133.

¹⁶ Cf. p. 19 above; it is a category error to reproach cats for behavior that in humans would qualify as wrongful acts.

The roots of sin in the narrative constitution of action can be found

- (a) in the general ambiguity of narrative;
- (b) in different and ambiguous interests,
 some in opposition to each other;
- (c) in trying to get out of the limitations of creaturehood;
- (d) in defining differences between good and evil;
- (e) in the particular ambiguity by which
 an act in view can be directed toward
 quite different possible or intended futures.

There is a certain nostalgia for the innocence of a state of nature in the ethical tradition that knows original sin, but the nostalgia is incoherent. It is premised on the idea that it is possible to be a linguistic being without original sin. That would mean a being who has language, but without the moral ambiguities inherent in language. To reply with an imagined innocent *intent*, an intent that somehow always makes the right choices, is to miss the point. All too often, there are no sinless choices, and the actor is responsible anyway. Yet it is not as if the actor's behavior is strictly naturalistic, as it is in pre-linguistic nature. Ontological ambiguity comes with the kind of freedom and indeterminacy that language confers.

(a) Language and narrative pass their own ambiguity on to the actions of humans. We observed that many actions "pass through" any motions that we can see or consider. Hard questions about human action come down to *which* of those actions are the ones that matter, which narratives capture the motions and their meaning best. And we often are not sure. Any narrative connects motions before us with possible futures and selects features of the past and projected futures that matter. One good generally comes at the cost of another, and how things might work out is never known in complete detail. To act inevitably sacrifices some goods for the sake of others. Action that is unambiguously directed toward life more abundantly for all, whatever that might be, is simply not available. Since there are people interested in the various goods possible, the problems are not just abstract or theoretical. People care, people will object. It's a good day when all those close to an action are happy with it.

(b) This, of course, brings us to opposed interests: people are indeed involved in each other's being, but we usually have interests that are not entirely congruent. We have returned to the amended Dasein, the Dasein that

is at stake not only for itself but for other Dasein also.¹⁷ Therein lies yet one more source of moral ambiguity, for one Dasein's interests can be put in opposition to those of other Dasein. I indeed have involvements in other Dasein — in other people — but all too often, those involvements can be interpreted as conflicting interests. The situation can be interpreted as one in which the only possible way to relate to the other is by exploitation.¹⁸ In plain words, it is always tempting to see ourselves as in competition, even if that is not the only possible interpretation, even when it is arguably the wrong interpretation. This rather obvious phenomenon is an instance of the ambiguity of Dasein's own interests that appears in its narratability. It is important not to lose the "can be interpreted as" above, for interests are a matter of interpretation, and therefore a matter of dispute. It may well be that on one interpretation, my interests are in conflict with someone else's, but on another interpretation, it is in my interest to see the other person prosper, even at my own expense. But such interpretation comes only in language.

(c) Reinhold Niebuhr depicted the human predicament as one of trying to get out of the limitations of creaturehood: Man can transcend himself, which is not the same thing as abolishing his limitations. To paraphrase Niebuhr, man is weak, dependent, finite, though this finiteness is not itself a source of evil; Man is unwilling to acknowledge his dependence, finitude, and insecurity, and this unwillingness puts him in a vicious circle that accentuates the very insecurity he rebels against and from which he seeks escape.¹⁹ This is a very classic exposition of the problem, and major parts of it are beyond this study. Nevertheless, Niebuhr is undoubtedly right at several points. What language gives is not evil but the power to do evil; it is also a power to do good that would not be possible without the possibility of its abuse. There are many limitations of creaturehood. Among them, language confers a cognitive and intentional power and reach that are intrinsically ambiguous. It also confers a limited power to resolve that ambiguity. One could say that the reach of language exceeds its grasp, and therein lies some of the transcendence of human existence. Unwillingness to accept the limitations of human existence is to some extent built in. The instinct for survival inherited from brute animals has become a search for

¹⁷ Cf. p. 81 above.

¹⁸ This root of sin is aboriginal in evolution: life exploits other life simply by eating other life. It is necessary, but not sufficient, to qualify behavior as conflicted; animal behavior becomes action, and so morally criticizable, only with language.

¹⁹ See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, *Human Nature*, p. 150.

security, as Niebuhr observes; and that leads to trouble.

(d) Genesis 2.9, about the two trees in the garden of Eden, doesn't make sense as the tree of *knowledge* of good and evil; for why would any decent God want his creatures not to know those differences, if there are some? It would make better sense to read it as *defining* differences between good and evil: in other words, taking offense at the pains of life. If you eat of this fruit, you will be able to define some things as good, and others as evil. Yet the Common Documents never quite say that there is no difference between good and evil, nor do they say that evil is unreal. I have in the past leaned toward the thesis that everything in the world, as *existing*, is good, though much of it, as the result of *actions*, is wrong. Whether or not this will work, I do not know. The pains of life can overwhelm us. As contingencies, they *can* be narrated as the result of actions, whether we do so or not. When no human actors are available, what do we do? Not taking offense is not easy; not blaming God is not easy. The emotions that we recognize as part of taking offense are built in physiologically, as they are an inheritance from lower animals. There lies one root of original sin that comes before language but is innocent in animals. It becomes an origin of sin only with language.

If an act is constituted by the narratives that *can* be told of it, by the larger contexts it *can* be placed in, even when the choices of narrative are not spelled out, then we are in trouble. For the act is always in some of those narratives constituted as rejecting goods that it should embrace, as taking offense at pains that should be borne without offense. What did I intend? What did I tell myself? Those, too, are open questions, and I could be wrong. There has to be some way of disambiguating human action, if it has the narrative constitution envisioned by hypothesis in the present study.

It is interesting that between the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the eating of its fruit (2.19–20), God asks man to name all the creatures of the world. Man shapes language and thereby shapes the world, though the Yahwist does not say that. The social construction of reality appears at the very beginning. It is not an unlimited power, and it comes with a responsible liberty of interpretation, as the New Testament and the Talmuds will later claim. Most of our problems arise in language.

(e) The choice of larger context and ultimate context, the far reaches of the off-stage, shapes the actions we see before us. The ontological role of the off-stage has motivated every aspect of the present study. This came early, and it was made explicit in chapter 5, where what began in section

5.2.4 grew into 5.4. The problem was posed in the question, “which larger story do you *want* to be a part of?”

The larger context will always be chosen to disambiguate human actions we see before us. It does that by offering some guidance to what really living really is, to what is admirable and what is deplorable, to what is good and what is evil. Often enough, it answers these questions along the way of answering the question where we came from, how we got to where we are here and now. Our narratives of larger context are not just presupposed in small stories; they provide models for making sense of day-to-day actions and events.

What we saw in (d) and (c) are variations on the problem that runs through all five examples of the roots of sin in narrative or narratability. The choice of larger context for the pains of life, and whether we take offense at them, is a choice of whether they are painful “all the way out” or at some stage are integrable into a good world. The relationship to ultimate larger context in (c) is a question of consent to creaturehood — or Platonism and will-to-power “all the way out.” Creaturehood means transformation of the pains of life into blessings, in a loss of control that happens only in faith and trust.

The problem appears in biblical form in Job. That book does many things, and among them, in the background of larger questions, is our problem, the ambiguity of human action. The dispute between God and the Prosecutor (1.6–12) is about what Job *does*, as it is constituted by what he *would* do in other circumstances. The story unfolds with tests of those other circumstances. When Job challenges God in the end, we are left with unanswerable questions. A lesson can be drawn from the story by way of a generalized question: is the actor doing whatever he does from will-to-power, or would he be open to finding some good in disappointments, should disappointments come? The narratives we tell rarely answer that question.

Perhaps we can restate the problem in a theoretical mode. Suppose *A* did *X*, as shorthand for a narrative of some act of interest. We know how to retell stories in other ways (ch. 6). We know how to retell stories to explain how *X* was accomplished, i. e., through *Y*, by which or in which *X* was done. We know how to project the goals of *X* (and *Y* also, which may be different). Some of those goals are admirable, others deplorable, but the *motions* before us are the same, or at least, to be fussy, the material trajectories are the same regardless of goals. If the motions are the same,

why are not all these acts, with their various goals, all true? Because the actor intended some goals and not others? That is merely to select one narrative against others, and we know that people are frequently wrong about their own intentions. People are quite skilled at pleading one goal when they know perfectly well that other goals are satisfied at the same time, and the other goals are to their liking or in their interest. What they tell others may even be what they tell themselves, and still wrong or inadequate. They may be quite self-deceived about what they are doing (Fingarette).

Return to the definition of action or distinctions about action that were reached in chapter 5, p. 149. If the act is constituted by the pertinent stories that can be told of it, then it is not a simple Aristotelian motion or modern intentionally caused change of state but a complex of narratives, actual and potential, told and tellable, about real contingencies and interests, and with them, claims on us, claims of truth. This sets up both the problem and its solution.

The problem to be solved is something like this: How does it come to be, what does it mean to say that some of the narratives possible of the act whose motions we see are *true* and others *false*? The ambiguity of the act is the origin of sin, and the disambiguation is the remedy. Disambiguation will happen through ontological foils off-stage, specifically and focally the Passion of the Christ, but more generally the whole of salvation history: Ultimate reality comes into the world, shows itself in the world, discloses itself as (among other things) suffering-for-others, affirmed and accepted, working as an occasion of grace, all as part of affirming this world and this life as good, in full view of its pains. One cannot affirm human life in this world as good without dealing with the pains, and the pains are ontologically something that is shared. We are part of one another, whether we like it or not; it is only a question of *how* we interpret and so realize that being-a-part-of one another. Suffering for others in its immanent form is part of the remedy for the pains, and as signal of transcendence, or as immanent presence of transcendence, it is well on the way to being the ultimate remedy for the pains.

Different basic life orientations have quite different expectations and different ways of criticizing. Nature religion, as Merold Westphal (and before him, Eliade and Ricoeur) observed, is about fitting human lives naturally into nature, without disturbing nature.²⁰ What is disapproved of

²⁰ Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, chapter 10.

is disturbing nature, and remedies are designed to restore harmony and remove disturbances. Covenantal religion by contrast is about traveling through history in company with a transcendent Other. Harmony with nature is quite secondary. Other life orientations produce other standards and other ways of criticizing.

Nature religions and exilic religions seldom have a concept of original sin, and I would expect that where they do, it was imported from historical religion. In a naturalistic life orientation, it is nature that acts in all human actions, and nature, unlike narrative, is generally determinate. Where it is not determinate, it is random or just simply given.²¹ Its motions are never a matter of choice for which one could answer. This does not prevent nature religions from disapproving the disturbance of nature, though it does prevent them from dealing with the responsibility that comes with the ambiguity of a narrative-based ontology of human action. Exilic religions (Gnosticisms, e. g.), so far as I am aware, view moral criticism very differently from covenantal religion.

7.2 Ontological Foils in Historical Religion

7.2.1 The Work of Christ

Why does Christ's death do any good? How do the disasters of long ago and far away offer any remedy for the problems of life today, whether petty or grand? What happened long ago would seem to make things worse, not better. Those disasters just compound the problem, adding pain to pain and sin to sin.

To make concrete the remedy for ambiguity of human action proposed somewhat abstractly just above, return to Edward Hobbs on the character of God in the Gospels: Among more than a half-dozen of his traits in the Gospels, God suffers for other people, both because of and for the sake of other people.²² If you want to be part of the life of this God, you will do that too. Somewhat expanded: God suffers for other people, both in the sense of because of other people and in the sense of for the sake of other people. He comes into the world to do exactly this, and those who

²¹ I think this is built-in with methodological naturalism; in a truly naturalistic science, it is a category error to explain with concepts beyond determinism and orderly randomness. One is no longer doing science. By contrast, when one talks *about* the results of science, it is from premises that lie beyond just science.

²² Section 3.4.3 above.

would participate in this basic life orientation will follow the example of God: they, too, will suffer for other people. Actually, we all suffer for other people to some extent whether we want to or not. The difference is in whether we suffer willingly, with a blessing, or unwillingly, with only blame.

This is not to deprecate human life in this world as suffering, nor to say that all of life is suffering, though sometimes it seems that way, when all one can see is suffering and affliction. History abounds in examples, some of a horrific scale. The characterization of God in the Gospels does not say that this life is an unpleasant but necessary prologue to some other and better world. Rather, it faces the pains of life in a way that can affirm human life in this world in full view of its pain and wrongdoing. And if one would affirm human life in this world, he will have to share in its suffering, since that is part of life.

Everybody suffers for other people. We all do, both because of and for the sake of other people. It starts out in ordinary family life and goes on from there. In a healthy family, suffering is mild; in dysfunctional families, suffering can be horrible. Obviously, this is not to say that we *only* suffer. We have joys as well as sorrows, and we celebrate our joys. The point here is that we celebrate together. Truly solitary celebration, without even reference to other people who are existentially if not physically present, doesn't make sense. But it is primarily in suffering that we notice our condition.

The roots of this suffering for one another, I would conjecture, lie in the amended Dasein: we suffer for one another because we are part of one another. Pain, some degree of frustration, and mortality are simply part of the human lot. To the extent that these have meaning, they are shared, and we have a stake in each other. We have an interest in each other's existence, and those interests are quite ambiguous and sometimes conflicting.

To affirm human life constituted as suffering-for-others means two things: To be willing to suffer for others and to accept others' suffering for oneself. The first is galling and painful; the second may not be painful, but it is often more galling. The logic of the first is simple enough. If I think that someone else's life, including its pains, is good (in the same way that mine is), then I am willing to share in those pains in order to share in that good.²³ Without that, my commitment to affirm human life in this world as good is incoherent and in bad faith. The logic of the second lies

²³ Cf. *Elementary Monotheism*, section 4.3, and *Unwelcome Good News*, section 7.2.

beneath the first, for it is because others have first suffered for us that we are willing to suffer in turn for them.

One ought to ask at this juncture, if ultimate reality for humans is this mutual involvement, with its sufferings included, then where and how does this ultimate reality show itself in the world? Can we see actual examples? Is this real or imaginary, fictional? Is this an impossible ideal, or can it ever be realized? These are questions that may be asked of *any* basic life orientation and its ultimate reality: How does this proposed ultimate reality show itself in the world? Where in life does it show itself?

For Christians, the answer lies in many places: a long history, but that history is focused in the Passion. Jesus's suffering, by itself, would not amount to much; the Romans crucified many during their rule in Palestine, and it is not the suffering itself that distinguishes this particular crucifixion from the others. Most of all, it is the words of the night before, "This is my body, which is given for you . . . This is my blood, which will be shed for you."²⁴ These words are not the only ontological foils, but they are the focal ones. It is well said that the Gospels are Passion stories with extended prologues, and what comes before the Passion is put there to make sense of the final events. That is to say that the extended prologues are ontological foils which constitute the Passion as what it is.

The words spoken the night before, however, explicitly specify the coming events as a suffering for-the-sake of, not just a suffering at-the-hands of other people. The Words of Institution disambiguate the next day's events: it is perhaps garish to apply philosophical language here, but it is the language we have already used in the abstract, and for good reason. Jesus's words transform the crucifixion from something done to Jesus to something he does in his suffering (cf. the agent patient, section 5.3.3). They also transform the lives of believers afterward. If this is really how and where ultimate reality shows itself in the world, then the events of the Last Supper and the Passion reconstitute believers as people who have been suffered for, by ultimate reality itself manifest in the world.

The Last Supper does not affirm the suffering for its own sake; it affirms the suffering-*for*. That is why, in the liturgy, we remember and continue the Last Supper, not the crucifixion itself (cf. p. 34 above). We would prefer not to suffer at all, but that does not seem to be how life works. We

²⁴ But see the cautions noted on p. 234 below, especially the recent summary by Robert Daly. The Words of Institution may be more inferred from the remembered character of Jesus than they are themselves remembered and quoted.

certainly can try to minimize unnecessary suffering, and doing that is an obligatory consequence of seeing oneself as having-been-suffered-for.

There is a difference between the Passion and the suffering of martyrs (p. 159 above). A martyr's death *exposes* the wrongdoing of his or her tormentors. Exposure is a form of judgement, as Edward Hobbs saw (p. 84 above). In exposure by a martyr, the one exposed has an opportunity for change, but if this is grace, it is a harsh grace: The event exposes the wrongdoer but may offer little comfort or blessing. It takes faith to find the blessing in exposure in such circumstances; repentance can be very difficult. The Passion does something more, because of things that were said both at the Last Supper and from the cross itself. In those constitutive words, Jesus takes upon himself the acts, lives, and very being of those who wronged him. In that taking-upon-himself, the lives of those who consent are transformed. Or better, all human lives are transformed in the Passion, and those who consent to that transformation have accepted the invitation contained in it. They have been ontologically transformed, and in their acceptance, they consent to their transformation instead of rebelling against it. If we are constituted as people who suffer for one another, whether we like it or not, we have a choice — to accept it or not. This is an instance of Søren Kierkegaard's choice in *Sickness Unto Death*: will the self that is constituted from outside of itself consent to be the self that it has been given to be? The cost is surrendering pride and moral legitimacy (because others suffer for me) and willing reciprocation in suffering for other people in turn. These costs are instances of exposure and need; it is a form of limitation that this mutual ontological involvement is the human condition. It is also what enables us to be human in the fullness and richness of human life. Without it we would be impoverished.

7.2.2 The Claims of Critical History

After Ernst Troeltsch, any historical claims are made with a certain caution. It is not as if we can know nothing in history with confidence but rather that a kind of prudence is required: careful choice of the terms in which a historical claim is framed. Some things cannot responsibly be doubted because the evidence is abundant (there was a Roman empire; it was not a fiction). When a great deal rests on a few words attested by a few witnesses, more questions arise. The problem before us is the effect of the life and passion of Jesus on believers today. When that problem is

approached more carefully, the claims can be re-posed in a way supportable by much broader evidence, and the character of the logic is somewhat different. No small part of that re-posing consists of recovering the larger context that constitutes the central events in salvation history. The larger context may be viewed from several perspectives. We shall make four points, starting with biblical criticism. (1) In the typological relationship of the Gospel narratives to earlier texts, events and acts (at the time of Jesus) are shaped in their later narration (when the Gospels were written, late in the first century), in view of *other* and earlier events (in the received Scripture). The structure of typology and the features of human action in a distributed ontology are made for each other, and we shall accordingly give the greatest attention to typology. (2) The perspective of biblical criticism is not without problems, notably a gulf between that time and ours, but that problem has been fairly well addressed for us already. (3) In the perspective of the history of religions, we would expect world-affirming historical religion to deal eventually with exactly the issues we see in the Gospels: affirmation of human life in a world in which we are bound up in each other and in each other's suffering. (4) Finally, the events are visible in the developments that grew out of them afterward, just as we saw with regard to the Exodus. Let me expand on these points, in varying degrees of depth.

(1) To take the first point, look at the place of the Passion in its larger biblical context, starting with what became the preparation in the Common Documents. It is the most important consideration and gets the lengthiest attention. Qoheleth is merely perplexed and chastened by the uneven distribution of rewards and pains in life and by the eventual failure of all our projects. Job faces innocent suffering in a way that has not occurred before in the historical books. There is suffering enough in the Former Prophets, too. Although in the Deuteronomists' view, it is not entirely innocent, some of it is disproportionate. Psalms 89 and 90 tell that story: In 89, You promised, and You broke your promise! The penalties are way out of proportion to the offenses. In 90, we come as suppliants well aware of our own precarious condition. Job radicalizes the problem: Unlike the apostasies in the Deuteronomistic History, Job is innocent, yet his suffering is appalling. In Job this suffering is a personal test, without import beyond Job himself. In Deutero-Isaiah the problem is radicalized again, focally in the Servant Songs.²⁵ The innocent suffers, others benefit, and something good comes

²⁵ Samuel Terrien, introduction to Job, *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York and Nashville:

of it. The New Testament carries on the conversation. Christian commentators generally stop at this point, but there is more.²⁶ In the Bavli, Moses in heaven looks down on his later-generation interpreter, Rabbi Akiba, and is appalled on beholding Akiba's fate at the hands of the Romans. He asks God, and God merely says, "be silent, for such is my decree."²⁷ Something important can be learned from the Talmud's reticence. We are up against an unanswerable question before which, in a perspective different from the New Testament's, silence is the proper response. This is the phenomenon that Karl Jaspers called "boundary situations," and it deserves more attention from philosophy of religion — and more compunction — than it has received. I would guess that both the New Testament and the Talmud are right, if not entirely in the same way. In any case, the problem has not been neglected in rabbinic Judaism.

From our own perspective in the distributed ontology as well as established results in New Testament scholarship, an observation is possible at this point. The New Testament builds on Job and Deutero-Isaiah, and the way it does so is called typology: the earlier narratives are the model for the later ones, and the later events are characterized by analogy with the earlier ones, often only alluded to, or just assumed in the reader's background knowledge. What happens gets its being in language and narrative. That is how the acts are constituted. Narratives do not come after completed acts; the narratives give us the acts they have shaped, as Paul Ricoeur remarked on the circularity of narrative. When we considered *Time and Narrative*, we saw only that narrative shapes actions by its decisions of what to include and how to arrange it. There is more, and in typology we see ontological foils at work overtly. Typology is widely acknowledged in the New Testament technical literature, but its philosophical import is less often remarked. Edward Hobbs saw the problem in its ontological dimension. In unpublished instructional materials, he reviewed a handful of scholars' interpretations of the typological relation between the events of the Passion and their Old Testament antetypes. His own was the eighth in

Abingdon Press, 1954), and Robert H. Pfeiffer "The dual origin of Hebrew monotheism," (*Journal of Biblical Literature* 46 (1927) 193–206), place Job before Deutero-Isaiah because Deutero-Isaiah expands themes in Job. They have detailed textual reasons as well. Whether the chronological order is correct or not doesn't matter for present purposes; the progression of thought is clear enough in any case.

²⁶ More even than we note in the Talmud, for the theme of innocent suffering appears also in Wisdom of Solomon, though that text may be contemporary with the New Testament.

²⁷ Menahoth, folio 29b. Soncino edition, Seder Kodashim 1, p. 190.

the series of interpretations. He allowed that there are many possible ways to construe the typological relationship, and while some may be better than others, it is impossible to say there is one best or standard reference version to which all others may be compared. In effect, we always understand present events in terms of previous experience, and so typology (rather than, say, abstract theory) is the primary way in which we make sense of our lives. Here is what Hobbs said:

By treating the Jesus-traditions (and perhaps the entire New Testament? and even the history of theology as well, e.g., creeds, councils, etc.? though the closed canon muddies this last possibility somewhat) as our “Old Testament” — i. e., in the manner in which the evangelists and early church used the Old Testament, which is to say, as the past languaging of the experiencing of God’s saving activity in our tradition — by treating them in this way, it might be that our task would prove to be the languaging of (or better, the letting come to language of) the experiencing of God’s activity among us, a coming to language which would use the models which *we* have inherited as the language of divine event. Unless the event of God which encounters us and calls us *does* come to language as divine event, it is not divine event, whatever else it is, and however beneficent it may otherwise be. The languaging of it is not an interpretation of the event-already-there, but the coming-to-be of the event; and if it is what the Christian tradition means by divine event, it will require languaging in terms of the models of that tradition.²⁸

The event we have is the event as it was shaped in its typological narratives.

(2) There are, as always, objections, and one needs attention. From the beginning, biblical scholarship has been a story of doubting the texts in the Bible and constructing new ways to read it. That tale is told in respect of Jesus in Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Scholars in the end saw their own hand in their histories and a Jesus accordingly shaped by nineteenth-century Liberal values. Schweitzer complained that

²⁸ Edward C. Hobbs, instructional materials, “Eight Interpretations of the Significance of the Evangelists’ Use of Old Testament Models in Interpreting Jesus,” from about 1976. These observations were noted briefly on p. 157 above.

Jesus was not a Liberal but an apocalyptic preacher, most un-liberal, and a figure quite strange to our own time.²⁹ The teaching that we have in the texts was about changes imminent in the life of Israel. Major changes came shortly after Jesus's time, but they were not changes for the better, and they were not the coming of a kingdom of God; what happened was the Destruction of the Temple and, with it, the devastation of Judaism in the Land of Israel. In the larger perspective of history, national disasters come and go. This one came and went.

Nevertheless, the message was not tied to its time, and that was so obvious that most readers have not been concerned about the troubles of Jesus's circumstances. Edward Hobbs put it that "Jesus's message is free of speculation, details, and nationalistic expectations," and "his message hinges very little on the special terminology and concepts of apocalyptic, or for that matter, of any other speculative system or theology."³⁰ Apart from its apocalyptic ideas, the message is about ordinary life. Even the apocalyptic ideas are easily reinterpreted as counsels of prudence in view of the precarious frailty of ordinary life. Schweitzer notwithstanding, the figure strange to our own time nevertheless has a message for all time, our own in particular. The conclusion from the perspective of the distributed ontology is that this is pretty much what we should expect: Events peculiar to their own time have analogies for other times for those who know how to draw the analogies. The analogies are, as always, disputed, and the disputes are resolvable only on confessional grounds.

(3) From the perspective of the history of religions, the development in the New Testament was to be expected as an continuation of the sequence from Job and Deutero-Isaiah. Affirming human life in this world, including its pains, was bound to be extended to affirming suffering-for-others, with all that entailed. It would have happened anyway, sooner or later, sometime, someplace. That it was attempted in these events is therefore not surprising. What is surprising is that the attempt in some sense succeeded. Those who came after took up the challenge of the Gospels, instead of ignoring it or just relapsing into the normal casual selfishness of ordinary human life.

(4) The events of the Gospels can be known in their consequences, a movement that embraced both suffering for others and its implications in

²⁹ See the opening pages of chapter XX (Montgomery trans., p. 398 ff., Macmillan, 1968), or chapter 25 (Bowden, ed., p. 478, Fortress Press, 2001).

³⁰ Edward C. Hobbs, *Lectures in Houston*, no. 4: "Can an apocalyptic prophet make sense in century 21?" *Foundation for Contemporary Theology*, March 23, 2002.

being-suffered-for by others. The events grew in their consequences, a phenomenon Paul Ricoeur explained in “The Model of Text.” The consequences were extremely messy. The estrangement between the Jesus movement and nascent rabbinic Judaism from the beginning, worsening in the aftermath of the Destruction of the Temple, is only part of it. Given the unattractive character of the later actions of the Church toward the Synagogue, what is most surprising about the events of the Gospels is not that they happened but that they had positive consequences at all, instead of just being swamped in the rather dingy tide of history. Yet messy as they were, among the consequences was a movement in which the pains of life, including those imposed by other people, whether intentionally or not, came to be borne with acceptance and forgiveness.³¹ That movement grew from originating events, and the best explanation that I am aware of is cautiously to trust that there is real history behind the texts, even if that history is not as recoverable in detail as one might wish.³²

7.2.3 Jesus and Rabbinic Judaism

The Church has claimed that it was suffered-for in the Passion, and that its own actions are shaped by that event. Are there events off-stage to this narrative that might put it in another light? There are: The Synagogue has suffered greatly at the hands of Christians and even of the Church itself. The history of Christian anti-Jewish theology is well told elsewhere, and I have reviewed a little of it in *Elementary Monotheism*.³³

More is at stake than just Christian betrayal of Christian principles. That betrayal, fortunately, was not universal, nor, I think, fatal, appalling though it was. It was a close call: if the twentieth century had succeeded in eliminating rabbinic Judaism, a good case could be made for the bankruptcy of the Church, regardless of who did the actual killing of the Jews. The climate in which antisemitism is possible was in some measure created by the Church, though today one finds more antisemitism outside well-catechized Christians than among them. So let us see whether roots of the problem can be found in Christian theological history and whether we

³¹ This actually is not new or original with the New Testament, which renewed and radicalized a movement whose first origins lie in the oldest history in the Common Documents.

³² The twentieth-century controversy was focused by Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Trans. Norman Perrin; New York: Scribners, 1966). One recent survey can be found in Robert J. Daly, “Eucharistic Origins: From the New Testament to the Liturgies of the Golden Age,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 3–22.

³³ Andrew Porter, *Elementary Monotheism*. See chapter 8 and its references.

can see what exactly the problem really was. Answers will be incomplete and to some extent conjectural, but some answers are possible.

We have some resources already for identifying and dealing with the problem. It has appeared for us under the phrase, “a responsible liberty of interpretation,” and it is attested in both the New Testament and the Talmud in other language.³⁴ There are many passages in the New Testament, and at least one in the Talmud, to the effect that the covenant community has the authority to shape its own life and even to shape the Covenant.³⁵ It is this principle that was at stake in the parting of the ways between the Church and the Synagogue, completed only in the fourth century,³⁶ in which each seems to have taken the stance that only one surviving daughter of Second Temple Judaism could be right; the other had to be wrong. Each had rhetorical strategies for disinheriting the other,³⁷ and each claimed a discretionary authority for itself that it could not countenance in the other. The last is the sticking point: if we have the authority to regulate our communal life, why don’t they? Yet there can be only one truth, surely? Hence an apparent antinomy.³⁸ For the present, some preliminary work needs to be sketched. Much of it will be conjectural. Relations between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism are a conspicuous example of events that are usually left off-stage but which transform those on-stage once they are admitted and spelled out adequately.

Christian anti-Jewish theology is exemplary of Niebuhr’s description of what cries out for confession of sin and conversion of memory.³⁹ The “unremembered past endures,” it can be seen from outside, though I would not say it can be understood from the standpoint of external history. What was going on, what acts are in view, remain opaque to the questioning of external history. Or perhaps we could say that external history sees the motions but can say nothing about the meaning for the participants, since that meaning is intrinsically a part of internal history. Yet the motions cry out to us, because we can see meaning in them whether we look for it

³⁴ See section 7.4 of *Elementary Monotheism*.

³⁵ Some of the New Testament passages and the story of the Oven of Achnai are cited on p. 194 above.

³⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

³⁷ Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

³⁸ As we saw with Chrysostom, on p. 196 above.

³⁹ We saw a brief summary of Niebuhr’s functions of revelatory events in internal history on p. 211 above.

or not, whether we know how to spell it out or not. The motions are the long history of violence, prejudice, and imposed legal disability, mostly on one side. What they attest is the antinomy above, though that is rarely seen. Beneath the assumptions about what is impossible in relations between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism⁴⁰ lie both the thesis that only one daughter religion can be right and its implicit contradiction in the claim of discretionary authority by the covenant community.

What lies beneath the history of hostility between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism? We find a quest for religious absoluteness covering up an anxiety rooted in the responsible liberty of interpretation given to the covenant community. Yet Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were well aware of their own discretionary authority; they both spelled it out explicitly. In effect, in living with a responsible liberty of interpretation, the liberty was claimed and well-seen. The responsibility was in some ways denied, hidden, and evaded, the source of a deep anxiety. Yet in other ways, it appears as a claim on the fathers and the rabbis that both gloried in. Perhaps the difference appears in usage: responsibility *to* and responsibility *for*. Responsibility *to*, in this case to God and to acts of God in history, is not exactly comfortable, but it is usually cause for thanksgiving and rejoicing. Responsibility *for*, in this case for the creation of human religion, can bring acute anxiety. For hecklers outside and doubt inside can sneer that human religion is *just* a human creation, with no “objective” correlate in reality. When the correlate is transcendent, both doubt and hecklers are inevitable. God is invisible.

The consequences ripple through theology, but it is possible, I trust, to vindicate orthodoxy in some form. What I take to be the root issue here, the co-existence of two daughter religions after the Destruction of Second Temple Judaism, appears before the Destruction in the Epistle to the Romans, and a helpful guide can be found in Krister Stendahl’s *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*.⁴¹ Paul doesn’t say that Jews should or will all convert to Christianity, contrary to what many read into his text in Romans 9–11.

The relation between the gentile church and the continuing Synagogue is addressed in a particularly focused way in the end of chapter 11. Paul addresses the status and future of the continuing Synagogue and its relation

⁴⁰ This is an example of what H. Richard Niebuhr had in mind in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1940, p. 113; 2006, p. 60) but did not discuss in detail.

⁴¹ Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles; And Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

to the Church, and he does so directly:

As concerning the Gospel they are enemies for your sakes;
but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers'
sakes (11.28, AV).

One must go back to the Authorized Version or the Douay Rheims (or Luther, in German) because almost all the translations after 1920, the RSV included, have corrupted the text; they all have inserted *of God* after *enemies*, but the text doesn't say that, it merely says *enemies for your sake*: ἐχθροὶ δι' ὑμᾶς doesn't say enemies of whom, and modern translations have all disambiguated it.⁴² Enemies *of whom* could just as well, so far as I can see, leave room for the interpretation "enemies of you, for your sakes." A translator may not disambiguate at all without so to speak "running a red light," but a preacher is permitted more. The corrupted text, disambiguated as "enemies *of God*," is hard to make theologically consistent with what follows: "For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable" (verse 29). The critical sentence, verse 28, in a parallel structure, hardly makes sense in recent translations: how can they be enemies of God yet beloved of God? How can God consider them enemies if he loves them? Only if one brings to the text the revocation of the Covenant: i. e., revocation of election, in Paul's word. Implicitly, revocation of the Law is read into the text. But Paul could not rule that out any more plainly than he does (3.31, "we uphold the law"). A little earlier, Paul has answered another question, "What will become of the continuing Synagogue: will it accept Jesus as the Messiah?" Later Christian tradition has blindly steam-rolled over his answer and assumed that at the last day, the Synagogue will convert. Paul says no such thing. "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in" — this is not sentimental affection toward the Synagogue, but look what he says next — "and so all Israel will be saved."⁴³ "All Israel" means the gentile population soon to be part of the Church; the Synagogue is *already* saved. There is no mention

⁴² The text is discussed in Norman Beck, *Mature Christianity in the 21st Century; the Recognition and Repudiation of the Anti-Jewish Polemic of the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 111–112. All of the common translations (NEB, RSV, JB, NAB, New RSV) corrupt the text, as well as some seven others. I think the New Jerusalem Bible has corrected the error. The French Jerusalem Bible and some English translations get it right; the Vulgate follows the rhythm and meaning of the Greek nicely.

⁴³ Cf. Stendahl, p. 4.

of the final conversion of Judaism to Christianity that Christian tradition has usually read into this text.

The Synagogue has suffered all too often at the hands of the Church, on a scale that dwarfs any suffering the Jewish authorities imposed on the first (Jewish) Christians. And so rabbinic Judaism has attested tragically but faithfully to the human condition as suffering-for-others. The Synagogue has kept the Church honest, and the one who keeps me honest discharges for me the work of Christ (“your enemies for your sake”). The Church should treat the Synagogue with a proportionate honor and respect, even if the ultimate relationship between the Church and the Synagogue is not yet well understood.

The story of the oven of Achnai draws several lessons along the way, and the one I would like to recover here is its counsel to forbearance and restraint in the conduct of disagreements.⁴⁴ In the end, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is excommunicated, though the text, in a euphemism, has it that the majority “blessed” him. Would that all excommunications were blessings! Perhaps it could be put this way: Given our disagreements, we cannot continue together, we have to part company, but we can wish each other well — a blessing — anyway. A parting of the ways need not be a consignment to hell, a condemnation, a damnation; certainly not a license for violence.

The antinomy noted a few pages above, that only one daughter religion can be right, though both claim the authority to regulate their own affairs, can be resolved. The first member of the antinomy is wrong, though we do not entirely see how, in the alternative to it, both daughter religions can be right. The existence of multiple heirs of Second Temple Judaism witnesses to several phenomena. First, of course, is the responsible liberty of interpretation in the conduct of a covenant. There can be no sacred canopy in covenantal religion. Second, and less obvious, is the ontological ambiguity in human action and historical narratives that underlies this covenantal liberty of interpretation. A responsible liberty of interpretation is one of the consequences of the distributed ontology.

7.3 Biblical and Liturgical Language

If the language and worldview of the liturgy could be taken for granted, liturgical language would have provided much evidence of the distributed

⁴⁴ Described briefly above, p. 194.

ontology of human action, for that ontology undergirds it everywhere. As it is, we live in a naturalistic culture in which systems ontologies are the normal way to explain all phenomena, even as we instinctively handle human actions with the *skills* of a distributed ontology, even though we don't spell out those skills in the *language* of a distributed ontology. So liturgical language would not have been very convincing as evidence for the distributed ontology. It must take a different place in this inquiry. It is not evidence that leads to the distributed ontology but rather phenomena that the distributed ontology explains, phenomena beyond those that led to the distributed ontology. The logic of this inquiry takes a form common in the sciences: can a theory proposed on the basis of limited evidence explain new phenomena that lie beyond the original evidence for it? It is fair to ask whether a thesis can predict (or here, explain) more phenomena than those adduced in the initial arguments for it. It can. With a distributed ontology, we can make sense of Christian theology expressed in liturgical language in ways we could not without a distributed ontology.

Many liturgical texts have presupposed something like the distributed ontology of human action. Philosophers have ignored them, in part because of instincts taken from Platonisms and systems ontologies, and in part in order to argue to an audience larger than just believing Christians. The present study has specialized to Christianity in part because the distributed ontology, albeit surviving only at the margins, is important in Christian philosophical theology, and in part because I have some doubts whether it is possible to please both Christians and secularists at once on these issues. We have given an account of how to make sense of confessional disagreements; at some point, one must choose.⁴⁵

7.3.1 Paul's Conflicted Self

Paul meditates on the ambiguities of his own actions:

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that

⁴⁵ The basics of tradition-bound rationality are in section 5.4.3 above. Some of the menu of choices can be found in *Where, Now, O Biologists*, chapter 4.

is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:14-25, RSV)

Usually, we read this text in Romans as meaning that my desires are conflicted, that I want to do both the good and the evil (unproblematically identified), and I end up doing the evil. That is true enough, but there may be a great deal more here, as we also know. What seemed to be good may turn out to be not so good, because of unintended consequences or because a proposed good act can also be many other acts, some less than admirable. This text exemplifies phenomena accessible to a distributed ontology of human action but not to any ontology modeled on systems ontologies of nature.

Compare Augustine in the *Confessions*, Book 8, at 8(20)–9(21), about *his* conflicted self. In other places, in the *City of God*, Augustine treats will as an efficient cause.⁴⁶ Here, it is conflicted; the will orders itself to do one thing but does another. Will as efficient cause doesn't make sense in this context.

The phenomena appear in many other places as well. The collect for Purity in the Prayer Book engages the ambiguity of human action even when it does not spell out that ambiguity as a problem, much though it trusts in a solution to the problem. The collect begins,

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid,

for it knows that even to us ourselves, our hearts are *not* open. Our desires are conflicted, ambiguous, and sometimes very difficult to assess with con-

⁴⁶ See Book 5, chapter 9, pp. 201–202 of the Dyson translation of the *The City of God*.

fidence. It is all too characteristic to say, “I’m not sure what I want.” That is continuous with the phenomenon that Herbert Fingarette described as self deception, and those who pray the collect for Purity know well that we are all too easily self-deceived. We stand in right dread when we understand God as the one from whom no secrets are hid, especially when we know that our secrets are so easily hidden, even from ourselves.

Having touched the problem and come to God in trust, the collect continues, asking for a remedy:

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy
Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily
magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord.

It knows that we cannot by ourselves cleanse our own hearts. Here again we see the constitution of acts on-stage by other acts off-stage. The work of the Holy Spirit, both immanent in the workings of the holy people of God and transcendent beyond anything in this world, is named as the immediate remedy. The act re-constituted by the work of God comes next (love and worship of God), and the collect closes as usual with “through Christ our Lord.”

Whatever one may say about divine knowledge (is it a Platonist God’s-eye-view, or is it something else?), the ambiguity of human action, the inadequacy of human intent, and their disambiguation and perfecting by remedies off-stage are both present in these few short words, even though they are not treated as a philosophical problem. It is worth noting what the collect does *not* ask for: the complete and unambiguous knowledge of our hearts and our actions that it ascribes to God. Whatever it is that we immediately need in our lives, it is not the removal of all the ambiguities in our own acts. Salvation for us lies someplace else.

7.3.2 Collects

If Paul sounds like the theory of a distributed ontology with all the paraphernalia of self-deception and ambiguity in human action, liturgical language often displays the transformation of human acts by other acts and events far away in history. Many collects, reaching far back into the history of the church, end with “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” It does not occur to philosophers that this conclusion might be interesting: What we ask and what we do in asking are part of something larger. Our lives are changed by events elsewhere in history.

Fulgentius of Ruspe asks “why we end our prayers with ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord.’”⁴⁷ Fulgentius has noticed that when we pray, we pray *through* Jesus Christ our Lord. Our actions, our words, and our lives become what they are only in and through the actions of another at another point in history. And though that was not ontologically interesting for Fulgentius, it is for us. This is a kind of being that is overlooked in a naturalistic culture, and when people bump into it, they tend to ignore or dismiss it, demote it to second-class being, or just deride and ridicule it.

There is a frequent refrain, in litanies and intercessions especially: “Lord, hear our prayer.” We tend to think of it as little more than an “amen” — or even just a spoken punctuation mark. There is more to it than that.

If the concept of God is of an ultimate reality that is not a being (supreme) or entity (divine), and so not “existing” in the sense that pertains to beings and entities, then whether ultimate reality listens to us or not is quite precarious. There is good reason to ask the Lord to listen: In his holiness, he doesn’t have to.

Language of God is analogical and so a human creation and a human responsibility. We can declare any covenant with ultimate reality we like, but ultimate reality will interpret our covenant by its lights, not ours. It is not obvious that ultimate reality listens to us, or cares. We have only faith to go on.

This is not directly a corollary of the distributed ontology, but it is not far from it. It is a direct corollary of the analogical character of God language and of a *via negativa* in conception of God.

Hippolytus, in the Treatise on the Refutation of All Heresies, says, “We know that by taking a body from the Virgin he refashioned our fallen nature.”⁴⁸ Hippolytus continues on the non-difference of Jesus from other humans, and he speaks in passing in the words, “if he were of a different substance from me,” i. e., using the ontological language of Greek philosophy. Yet the term *refashioned* is also ontological. In a substance and accidents ontology, I think we know where this is going. Yet the phenomenon begs for a distributed ontology, something that Greek philosophy could not comprehend, something that the Church had to bootleg on the side in its

⁴⁷ It is in the Office of Readings for Thursday, Week 2 of Ordinary Time, Epist. 14, 36–37: CCL 91, 429–431. Breviary, first volume of Ordinary Time, pp. 96–98.

⁴⁸ Cap. 10:33–34, PG 16, 3452–3453. Breviary, vol. 1, p. 460, lesson for December 30 in the octave of Christmas.

liturgical language, “unofficially” or just “metaphorically,” as far as philosophy is concerned.

7.3.3 The Mourner’s Kaddish

Consider the origins of the Mourner’s Kaddish, the blessing recited at a funeral and after by the closest relative of the departed. The Siddur of Joseph Hertz gives no origin in an event.⁴⁹ There is a legend of Rabbi Akiba in the explanatory matter. Akiba chanced upon a departed soul condemned to gather the kindling for his own hell. The man told Akiba that he would be released on one condition, that his surviving son be taught to say the Kaddish and the congregation respond in course with “Amen, may God’s great name be praised for ever and ever.” Akiba found the son and the matter was taken care of. The departed sinner’s life was redeemed in the Great Congregation, and its import and meaning and very constitution thereby transformed.

Such an idea seems incomprehensible to the instincts of the modern world, formed as they are in the philosophical aftermath of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That age and its heirs assume that the only things that can be real are those that have an unchanging permanence that is independent of what any person may think, intend, or experience of them. Human involvements are not just ruled out at the start, they are rendered quite invisible. But in the legend of Rabbi Akiba and the departed sinner, the sinner’s life does not assume its final complexion until it is placed within the life of the covenant people.

One may take the legend of the departed sinner as the kind of miraculous narrative that we find variously in the Talmuds, the New Testament, and other religious literature, a genre between fiction, history, and parable. It is ambiguous, bearing several messages. Taken more or less literally, it points to the larger context of every human life: the community in history, and the interaction between the individual’s commitments and the community of meaning in which that life makes sense. Here, God’s mercy is large enough even to save one who has not formally repented in life, a theme that appears recently in a different context, the pastoral care of those who have committed suicide because of organic depression. It may also be read not quite so literally, taking the sinner’s words to Akiba as part of his life

⁴⁹R. Joseph H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch, 1948), pp. 269–271. I am more or less repeating comments that I made in *Elementary Monotheism (II): Action and Language in Historical Religion*, p. 40–43.

instead of truly something after his death. Then his final act is one of repentance, and a few words suffice to wipe out before God an entire life of sin. If there is time, they need to have some reality beyond being just the private thoughts of the repentant one; but it is not absolutely necessary. In the idiom of speech-act theory, they don't count as a successful act of repentance unless they acquire some degree of inter-subjective responsibility. Or at least they forfeit the presumption of successful repentance if an opportunity for responsibility comes and is passed by. More amazing than the requirement of community acknowledgment of the sinner's repentance is the idea that repentance could work at all at so late a stage in someone's life. The meaning of his actions — and thereby the actions themselves — are indeed changed after the fact.

There are two grounds for problems here. One is confessional, one is philosophical. The confessional doubt arises as a challenge to the monotheist's trust in the graciousness of exposure. In a grubby sense, it's not fair that a sinner should even be allowed to repent so late. Exposure should not be allowed to be gracious. The confessional doubt cannot be answered; it is a choice for some alternative to a covenantal life-orientation. The philosophical doubt can be answered: it is a question about the constitution of a life. To be a sinner is to be a sinner to the end; to repent is to cease to be a sinner. For the acts of his life to *finally* count as stonewalling the truth and the needs of others, as ungrateful in the face of the real if painful opportunities of his circumstances, he has to persevere in untruthfulness, hard-heartedness, and ingratitude *to the end*. But his acts may even be transformed after the fact in the acts of others, in just the way that Paul Ricoeur thinks. If he repents late, there is an inevitable sense of tragedy to his life — for he turned to enjoy the truth, the opportunities of life and the fellowship of others late in life, when he could have enjoyed them earlier. It is a crushing remorse; but it is no longer perdition. The earlier acts grounded in a life that was (until then) one of untruth cannot undo the truth at the end. Those earlier acts are no longer acts situated within a life of untruth to the end; they have become, if belatedly, the repented acts of a repentant sinner.

Perhaps this might make more sense if one turns to the way in which the sense of acts, and thus indeed what they are, derives from the place they hold within larger narratives. There is a certain instinct that travels with the empiricist tradition in philosophy, one that takes human acts as atomic motions, motions that cannot usefully be subdivided any further.

We have spent some considerable energy laboring to deflate this instinct already and have shown how an act is constituted by human involvements that may be known by an act of judgement but which quite transcend any description of the mere motions of the act. Those involvements have a temporal dimension that is best exhibited in narrative. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative. Events conspire to throw the hero into a situation in which he has to do something, and the narrative tells the resolution of the problem created by that initial happening. In that sense, a narrative is a quest. To paraphrase MacIntyre, “Quests may fail, be frustrated, abandoned, or just get dissipated in distractions.”⁵⁰ Both the narrator and the one whose life is told have a say in defining the quest that is to be recounted. The narrator wants to know whether the hero found or even sought the truth about himself, the fellowship of his neighbors, and the real opportunities in the limitations of his life.⁵¹ The one living may seek many things on the way to these ends, and he may seek and find a life oriented in some other direction. But the particular acts along the way ultimately make sense as part of this narrative quest, and the individual’s life then fits into the larger narrative of the community in history. As the repented acts of one living in a covenant community, the sinner’s previous acts of betrayal of the covenant are reintegrated into its life and its larger history. Forgotten and hidden in time, perhaps, but once repented, they advance its life of faith nonetheless. To emphasize the points at issue yet one last time, human acts *are* the parts of larger narratives, and the verb here is not just an auxiliary of predication but an indication of something more: Acts derive not only their meaning but their very ontological constitution from being the parts of larger narratives. It is within the terms of this ontology that repentance makes sense.

7.3.4 The Eucharist

There is an antiphon in the Breviary, “Christ died for our sins to make of us an offering to God.”⁵² The Breviary knows that human lives in the present are transformed by events outside their scope, in this case, in the past. In

⁵⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (1984), pp. 218–219.

⁵¹ The presence of the narrator shows that it is not, by the way, as if people could just make up the meaning of their lives. Truth is an inter-subjective thing, a matter of responsibility.

⁵² Responsory to the reading at Evening Prayer, volume I of Ordinary Time: Friday of Week II, p. 955, Friday of Week IV, p. 1248; volume II of Ordinary Time: Friday of Week II, p. 919, Friday of Week IV, p. 1212.

effect, the Breviary presupposes something like a distributed ontology in its understanding of human action. This is a modern text, not biblical so far as I am aware, but it has many biblical antecedents. They are worth note.

1 Cor. 15.3: “I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures.” This is an idea that is quite common, but it is only part of what’s in the Breviary antiphon. It grows from the tradition of the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah.

There is something closer in Romans 15.16. “He has appointed me as a priest of Jesus Christ, and I am to carry out my priestly duty by bringing the Good News from God to the pagans, and so make them acceptable as an offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit.” The word for offering is *προσφορά*, “what is borne forward or toward.” It occurs at Acts 21.26 and 24.17, but in both cases, it refers to ordinary offerings in the Temple and has nothing to do with humans offering themselves (or being offered as selves) to God.

The word occurs at Ephesians 5.2:

Try, then, to imitate God, as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place *as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God* (JB).

A related passage, 1 John 3.16, has “This has taught us love — that he gave up his life for us; and we, too, ought to give up our lives for our brothers.” The theme occurs also in the prophets: God doesn’t want (material) offerings; he wants you.

The word occurs elsewhere with the meaning “offering” in Hebrews 10, but this is about Jesus’s offering of himself, not his transforming us into an offering. Forms of *προσφέρω* occur in Hebrews (often) and in the Gospels but not in Paul (Moulton and Geden).

Of these, Hebrews 10.12–14 contains the idea in phrasing other than that of the Breviary, “make of us an offering”:

Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins and took his seat forever at the right hand of God, . . . By one offering he has forever perfected those who are being sanctified.”⁵³

The last sentence has the core of the idea.

⁵³ The Breviary, and the New American Bible. It is the reading for Evening Prayer II, the 5th Sunday of Easter, p. 821 of the volume for Lent/Easter.

The idea appears in Eucharistic Prayer III also, a bit after the memorial acclamation of the people:

May he make us an everlasting gift to you and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints . . . on whose intercession we rely for help.⁵⁴

The lesson for Night Prayer on Mondays in the Breviary is from 1 Thess. 5:9–10:

God has destined us for acquiring salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us, that all of us, whether awake or asleep, together might live with him.

This contains both the Work of Christ and ontological foils: for the Passion enables both the living and the dead, those before it and those after, to “live with him.”

In the preparation of the altar and the gifts, in the missal of the Roman Rite, the priest says,⁵⁵

Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.

and the people respond,

May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his Name, and the good of all his Church.

But it is not our sacrifice, it is not ours to offer! Earlier, the priest has said,

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through you goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink.

⁵⁴ Catholic Church, National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The Book of Divine Worship*. Mt. Pocono, PA: Newman House Press, 2003. This is the source for quotations from the Mass of the Roman Rite, because it is most readily available. Cf. p. 368, in Rite II.

⁵⁵ *Book of Divine Worship* (Pocono, PA: Newman House Press, 2003), pp. 344–345.

To both, the people respond,

Blessed be God for ever.

This is a variation on the berakoth used as a table grace:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the Universe, who
bring forth bread from the earth,

and

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the Universe, who
created the fruit of the vine.

Neither the wheat nor the grapes are originally ours to offer, nor is the sacrifice that they become as bread and wine in the Eucharist, the repetition and continuation of Jesus's self-offering in the Passion.

The petition occurs also in the priest's prayer over the gifts for Trinity Sunday, before the *Sursum Corda*:

Lord our God, make these gifts holy and through them make
us a perfect offering to you ... We ask this in the name of
Jesus the Lord.⁵⁶

There is a petition late in Thomas Cranmer's canon of the Mass, after the recital of the Institution and the events of the Passion. It is in that sense secondary and not really necessary. But it gives some idea of what is at stake in the lives of believers: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable and holy and living sacrifice unto thee."⁵⁷ It has no counterpart in many other canons, though some have the idea.⁵⁸

How can believers make such a sacrifice of their own lives, and how can mere words accomplish it? This comes from the heart of the distributed ontology. Why are they not just shooting their mouths off, promising something they cannot deliver? For clearly, they cannot deliver — on

⁵⁶ Prayer over the gifts, *Book of Divine Worship*, p. 401, the propers for Trinity Sunday, which coincides with the *Novus Ordo* in the proper for the day.

⁵⁷ It goes back to the first Prayer Book of King Edward VI, though I have quoted it from the 1928 American Book of Common Prayer. For the 1549 source, see Bard Thompson, ed., *Liturgies of the Western Church* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 258.

⁵⁸ See for example, Prayer III in the *Novus Ordo*, noted above, which includes the words, "May he make us an everlasting gift to you ..." in the second half of the prayer. Cf. *Book of Divine Worship*, p. 368. The petition asks that the actions of one long ago and far away transform the lives and self-offering of those who pray in the present.

their own. Yet in the Eucharist, acts and events far from the stage on which their lives play out transform those lives, and they know it.

Gregory Dix worked through the history in which the events of the Last Supper grew into the liturgy we know. It is an instance of the process that Paul Ricoeur detailed in the abstract in “The Model of Text.” The argument of the book wends its way over more than 700 pages. The Eucharistic liturgy has a complex history, and even the *parts* of the Eucharistic liturgy themselves have complex histories, yet it is all in some sense part of one action. In the end, when he relaxes and lets his heart sing, readers have sung too. He remarks that the command at the Last Supper, “Do this,” has spread to “every continent and country”; that “men have found no better thing than this to do,”

for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth.⁵⁹

He goes on in a veritable litany of the saints known and unknown, for all occasions in life, from the high and mighty to condemned criminals, at turning points in the history of European Christendom and the weekly focusing of the lives of ordinary Christians. One might add to Dix’s litany *The Litany of the Saints*, as it appears by itself at the Easter Vigil and broken up in the old Roman canon of the Mass. The Litany embodies the distributed ontology: they are part of us, we are part of them.

The point is made in another way, and one closer to the distributed ontology, near the start of a bawdy, racy novel about a man on his knees. There is a *Life of St. Goderic* by one Reginald of Durham, a monk of the twelfth century.⁶⁰ Frederick Buechner turned it into a novel, and, on the way, he put more life in it than the pious monk gave us (unless one can read between Reginald’s lines). Godric tells his story through his involvements with his friends and through the wounds given and received in every case.

That’s five friends, one for each of Jesu’s wounds, and Godric

⁵⁹ *The Shape of the Liturgy*, pp. 744.

⁶⁰ Paul Halsall, ed., *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/goderic.html> Halsall credits his source: G. G. Coulton, *Social Life in Britain from the Conquest to the Reformation* (New York, Barnes & Noble (1968). This contains a snippet of Reginald’s life of Godric; the full Latin text must be sought elsewhere.

bears their mark still on what's left of him as in their time they
all bore his on them.⁶¹

The wounds are ontological, they change what the people are, permanently,
even when they are later healed.

What's friendship, when all's done, but the giving and taking
of wounds?

The wounds are inevitable, because of Dasein's constitution as having a stake in other Dasein, a stake that is pre-human, part of evolution going back to the earliest life. When language is added, we have the origin of both action and sin. Language is the last necessary and first sufficient prerequisite for action. In its ambiguity, it is also the origin of sin. But the wounds: every Dasein has interests not only in its own being but also in the being of every other Dasein. And those interests are ambiguous and conflicting: one Dasein not only *can* exploit another, some exploitation is inevitable, even though it is not necessary that exploitation happen on any particular occasion. Non-exploitation is also possible: one Dasein can act for the interests of another, and we often do, even as at the same time we also act for our own interests. The two cannot be separated or disentangled.

Gentle Jesu, Mary's son, be thine the wounds that heal our
wounding.

This is akin to the antiphon we have seen from the Breviary, "Christ died for our sins to make of us an offering to God": The effect is ontological. People far from Jesu's wounds are changed by those five wounds — and by Jesus's death. It is not "just" that Jesus's suffering is like our various sufferings; his suffering is an ontological foil that in its likeness to ours constitutes ours as the same sort of suffering as his; the "is" in "our suffering is like his" is not just a verb of predication. And in that larger ontological sense, our pains become a part of his, for we take him and his sufferings as the showing-itself of ultimate reality in this world: disclosing what really living really is, disclosing what is necessary to affirm human life in this historical world as good, in full view of all its pains.

Press thy bloody scars to ours that thy dear blood may flow in
us and cleanse our sin.

⁶¹ This and the quotations that follow are from Frederick Buechner, *Godric* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), pp. 7–8.

This is a pleading for the ontological efficacy of the foils: may they be more than just a shooting-the-mouth-off, may they really change us. (Cf. the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the canon of the Mass.)

Be thou in us and we in thee

This is the amended Dasein, having a reciprocal mutual stake in other Dasein. I am constituted by the other and the other's interests in me, as he is in turn by me and my interests in him.

that Godric, Gillian, Ailred, Mouse and thou may be a woundless one at last.

Needless to say, this is eschatological; it is here only a hope, one awaiting fulfillment, but one that can become the grounding of a basic life orientation and center of its mode of recognition and intention. We may be shooting our mouths off in making promises we cannot keep on our own, but this much language really will do: Our promises commit us, even if they get broken. That would make me a failure, but I would rather fail by standards I respect and honor than succeed by lesser standards. It's the only way to live. (And with the help of the right ontological foils, success is possible.)

Many biblical and liturgical texts make no sense without a distributed ontology of human existence. This language has traditionally been explained by some sort of dualism. In recent centuries, it has taken on a Platonist supernaturalist color, modeled on the systems ontologies of the natural sciences. Distributed ontologies and mystery stand as an alternative, but not one widely recognized today. That may be why the Christian universe itself makes little sense in so much of contemporary culture.

7.4 Coherence of Life and Action

A full answer to the question of coherence of a life would require a complete philosophical and theological anthropology. A little of it does appear within our own study, namely the relation between acts and their larger narrative contexts. It is not the question of coherence of a self as a whole. It is a matter of coherence of an act with the larger contexts into which the act is to be fitted. There may be one self, but there are many narratives. The question of coherence of an act with larger narratives arises with several

other features of human action, of which the most important are ambiguity of action and the transformation of acts by events off-stage. These will serve to tie together the threads of the present study.

The question of narrative coherence appears in many forms, on many levels. It was Troeltsch's issue, on a larger scale: what is an "individual totality" in history? It is ours in a much restricted sense (though Troeltsch's remains, for historians; but we are merely doing theology): what makes a human life be a coherent whole? What gives a human life a coherent orientation? How do its parts fit together? What makes all the parts (here, acts) parts of one whole? How does an intended basic life orientation become an actual life orientation? What saves a declared basic life orientation from being merely "shooting the mouth off," making promises one is in no position to keep.

That version of the question is somewhat daunting, and I intend to approach it from afar, cautiously. Review briefly where we have been and the resources we have in this study. Others with more resources will be able to say more. Colloquial phenomena and the technical literature both brought us to the openness of narrative (chs. 2–5). The question of meaning and motions, with applications in biblical history and religion, appeared as one result of the move from Aristotelian thinking about action to a narrative approach. Ontological foils and their working in the lives of believers in a historical religion followed in the present chapter. Foils have the power to transform acts and lives, and that is one of the central theses of this study. Along the way, we acquired a sensitivity to part-whole relationships, in many places; in particular, in the role of the off-stage in the on-stage and in the hermeneutical circle. The amended Dasein was the means of criticizing and choosing between narratives: people make claims on each other, truth claims. Because people have a stake in each other's lives, people are a part of each other. These two appeared together unnamed, in chapter 4, in Troeltsch's own asking what holds a narrative together in a coherent whole, and his suspicion that the answers are not very objective, with anxiety that the answers might be just arbitrary, without means of responsibility. Hints of the solution came early and emerged more clearly in the present chapter: ontological foils far off-stage, in the Work of Christ. We will reiterate that solution, but it is appropriate to reflect a little more on the problem it solves.

7.4.1 Failure, and Success

I would like to begin negatively, asking not what makes a life story coherent but what happens when it is incoherent or coherent only with an unacceptable narrative. Coherence will emerge from consideration of incoherence. What follows is not a theory so much as a meditation on a text of opportunity, with many caveats prepended thereto. The text is Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.⁶² Her own coursing through the literature is beyond my ability to criticize, and so her exposition should be taken as merely a point of departure for my own ruminations, not justification for them. With those cautions, let us explore.

What happens when a narrative is (or ought to be) unacceptable? When it is in some sense untrue? When, though true, it is unacceptable to the person whose life is narrated? What happens when a life is a wreck, or appears to be, at least in conventional terms? When it is not what we would call "life more abundantly," though what that is is open to many interpretations?

Some people we look on and consider wrecks. Sometimes silently, one can look on oneself as a failure, but we usually don't talk about such things, at least not in public.

It is possible to be or feel abject, abjected. To be abjected is to be thrown out of one's own narrative or thrown out of the narratives of other people whom one had considered vital to one's own life and being. The possibility of abjection makes sense only if people are a part of each other. To be abjected is to be deprived of a coherent and inhabitable narrative.

Kristeva spends a lot of time on Oedipus, and interestingly, Oedipus's troubles begin (in her account) when he seeks a coherent narrative: He seeks to know. Oedipus can do logic, but he is ignorant of his own desire. Abjection breaks out when Oedipus, desiring to know, discovers desire and death in himself.⁶³ The solution in *Oedipus Rex* is a (mythical) exclusion: exile and blindness so as not to see objects of his desire. He is unacceptable to himself; he does not know what he has done, and he is appalled, unmanned, when he learns. The unacceptable is excluded, thrown out, banished, exiled. But it doesn't work: it can be thrown out of a narrative, but it persists as an ontological foil unacknowledged, off-stage, still transforming what is on-stage. The attempt to exclude the unacceptable works

⁶² New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. The French original was published in 1980 in Paris.

⁶³ *Powers of Horror*, pp. 83–84.

to exclude the self that is unacceptable. Oedipus is not only blinded, he is exiled, and we see him next in *Oedipus at Colonus*, a play that was not performed until some eighteen years after *Oedipus Rex*.⁶⁴ Oedipus would seem to be up against a question familiar to us, the question of truth: the task is to include what needs to be included and leave out what doesn't matter. Yet that is too theoretical. What he comes up against is deeply emotional, libidinal, physical, irrational, very messy. Oedipus wants to know, but to want to know is to want to control, to have one's own narrative well-in-hand, safe, secure, respectable. This is a craving for security against Exposure, as Edward Hobbs would say. It is many things, as we know from the distributed ontology. In this case, it is also a desire to be cleansed, exposed, redeemed, saved. And so it is ambiguous to its roots. Its ambiguities play out against each other, for both are real — and we expect this. But it does not appear as a quest of will-to-power against Exposure at the beginning. What we see in the beginning is Sophocles' meditation on human suffering, one growing out of the sophisticated nature-religious culture of Athens in the fifth to fourth centuries BCE.⁶⁵ Sophocles has not the biblical remedies of a historical religion, but he confronts suffering anyway, with a poet's sense and sensitivity to the human condition. He is much more sensitive than philosophers and more sensitive even than some of the more facile theologians in the Bible.⁶⁶ We see Oedipus caught in toils of his own making, his own world, his own self.

In the background is an instinctive handling of the problem: the unclean, impure, defilement are to be thrown out (ab-jected), and so the self (or a whole society) can be purified. This is the way of the aboriginal nature religions everywhere, Greece included, which is one reason why Sophocles draws on it. It is built in and survives as part of the human condition even in a culture thoroughly shaped by historical religion. This is not a bad thing: Merold Westphal said that covenantal religion affirms human life as history, included in which is nature. What Sophocles dealt with long ago and psychiatrists have recovered again today against the rationalizing theological anthropology inherited from the medieval world is genuinely human, if messy and — well, emotional and irrational. It is to be affirmed

⁶⁴ *Powers of Horror*, p. 86.

⁶⁵ It is a culture with a history, and problems inherited from immediately preceding events: See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), chapters 2–6, for Sophocles' place in the development of the moral problematic from Homer to Aristotle in the crises of the fifth century.

⁶⁶ The Deuteronomists come to mind; also Psalm 37.

as part of human life. Yet it is a problem. The impure is what threatens the integrity of the self, and the natural instinct is to throw it out. One drunk or bewitched by modern physics would say this is merely entropy. Part of the normal heat-engine business of shedding low-temperature energy and taking in high-temperature energy is the thermodynamics of life, of which abjecting entropy, waste matter and waste energy, is a normal part. A living organism is in a sense a heat engine.⁶⁷ But that would be to miss the suffering of it all. There is more, much more, than the material substrate, and in any case, appeal to thermodynamics is to evade or deny failure in the end: For in the end, we all die and so render unto entropy what is its due. Success in life, if any there be, has to be found elsewhere and in a way compatible and consistent with human mortality and human suffering. The ancient world, the nature religions, had a lively sense of “purity and danger,” ritual purification, the danger to self and integrity that comes from sources of impurity. This instinct continues in modern practices of hygiene, especially with respect to germs and dirt. Ritual purity occupies a great part of the Pentateuch, and we find it strange only because our own purity codes have become secular and ordinary and the purity codes in the Bible are not in any lectionary. Anthropologists read them, but ordinary believers do not. We find other people’s purity codes bizarre; our own are both “scientific” and also secular in the sense of being ordinary and not a focus of awe or mystery. We have cleansers, antiseptics, and antibiotics if need be, and they usually work. Physical purity has been rendered a merely technical problem by the availability of technical solutions. Our problems lie elsewhere.

Refocus the existential issue: What if the impure cannot be thrown out without also throwing out stuff essential to the self? Without abjecting the self itself? I am thrown out of other people’s narratives, because I am a problem for them, unclean for them, dysfunctional, offensive, repugnant? And if they are necessary for me, a necessary part of my life, if without them, *my* narrative doesn’t make sense? To be thrown out of their narratives is to be thrown out of my own? A lot of drama on television and in the movies consists of abjecting people who are unacceptable — by killing them; but the killing is a ritual, almost ballet, without the real horror of murder. It is a surrogate for not dealing with difficult others. Difficult

⁶⁷ To be fussy, its material *substrate*, its material cause, is a heat engine. (And that is only one possible sense of material cause; there are others.) To confuse the organism with its material cause is precisely the mistake of materialism that we have opposed throughout this study.

selves are invisible.

Come back to Oedipus: The model of abjection is a compromised boundary, and the remedy is to repair the boundary, which presumably includes ab-jecting what does not belong within the boundary. This, in a sense, echoes a theme from the origins of life: life began when a membrane, possibly bi-lipid in composition, defined in its closed surface a difference between self and world, and it was possible for the thermodynamics of a demarcated system to begin. That, in the end, does not work for us, as observed already. My remedy is to transpose the problem from physical or thermodynamic boundaries to narrative boundaries: The question is our old friend, what belongs in a story, what can be left out. (This may be Kristeva's remedy also; she is a psychiatrist, after all.) Abjection happens when the self gets thrown out along with the not-self, because there is no clear way to separate or disentangle the two. Kristeva's answer to "what saves us?" is *Oedipus at Colonus*, and someplace she notes that Freud ignored *Colonus* because he had other remedies. In other words, what saves us is suffering. What we seek to avoid, evade, or escape becomes in the end the means of grace, though it is not thereby a path to rational understanding.

Kristeva follows Freud through the biblical purity codes and ritual purifications, all of which grow seamlessly from the aboriginal nature religions of the ancient Near East. The Bible begins in nature religion, as should be clear to any candid reader familiar with the history of religions. Historical religion emerges as a transformation from nature religion, and the bible is (among other things) a history of that transformation. In the purity codes, we hear from a major biblical voice, the Priestly editors and their sources. The P texts bypass the problem of abjection and suffering with a purity code; the Deuteronomistic theologians rationalize the problem but do not really confront it. Other voices do that: Qoheleth, Job, and Deutero-Isaiah. Sophocles could have gotten along well with Job, and he knew purity codes. By contrast, the Presocratics, Plato, and Aristotle couldn't make much of Job or the Servant Songs. The Deuteronomistic theologians were too rationalistic for Qoheleth or Job.

Kristeva's sojourn with purity codes follows an aboriginal instinct, to seek coherence by throwing out what doesn't fit, on the assumption that a coherent self can be found in what's not thrown out. In the end, the solution in purity codes does not work; it is impossible to abject only what is not-self and keep what is self. Oedipus accepts his own suffering in *Colonus*; he's not very happy about it, and he dies in the end, but he is in

some sense reconciled to it all. It is an important mark of artistic chastity that he dies off-stage, where we cannot see. Oedipus's solution appears in embracing his suffering.

7.4.2 The Unity of a Life

The question of a unity of life appeared for us early: in Alasdair MacIntyre's meditation on a man digging roses (sec. 4.3 above), in the simpler question what the man was "doing." The answers could be found only by recourse to the larger context of his life. MacIntyre didn't develop the question of larger life, but we can say some things without undertaking all the obligations of an anthropology.

One way to seek coherence would be to ask that the parts of a life all advance some narrative of it. There are many possible ways to narrate a life; two are to construe it as a quest or a journey, or to construe living as itself the enjoyment of life. I can think of good theological reasons for both and have no ultimate preference for one over the other. But in both, the integration of an act with larger context would seem to be by way of common goals and common goods. What could we say about a life's goals or purposes, its centers of value, what it was lived for, what it was given to?

Some part of the answers must come from a feature of action that we have already seen, the role of analogy in judgements of action (sec. 5.3.1). When different acts in different contexts exhibit the same virtues or the same goals, they do so by analogy. The power of analogy is far-reaching and disorderly, exceeding the grasp of any system or theory. Yet this may be said of it: it arises in language. It also arises in human interests. We group together goals, virtues, and acts that are unlike in order to deal with them together — usually as parts of a coherent narrative.

To have a basic life orientation means to live consistently *for* something. That raises the questions, What sorts of things can one live for, and, What is the shape of a life that is oriented toward one of those things? What form must a life take if it can be said to be lived for some cause, to borrow Niebuhr's language? In his words, monotheistic responsibility means that "God is acting in all actions on you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."⁶⁸ That is a little too fast for us, for it leaps to radical monotheism over the possibility of many centers of value

⁶⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 126.

and meaning.

The goods and goals of human acts bring with them what one might whimsically call the “bloids”: whatever *bestows life or imposes death*. There are many ways that life can be given, and efficient causes come first to mind. Probably we think of formal causes last. A formal cause gives meaning to life. Whatever you take to be the meaning of life is what you live for.⁶⁹ Yet what gives life in the short term may not give life in the long term; it may not last. And so integrating a short-term goal with its long-term disappointment is one key task of radical monotheism.⁷⁰ We properly ask of an act and an actor, did he seek such-and-such a short-term goal intending it also to serve in the long term, or did he know, was he reconciled to its eventual long-term disappointment? He needs (and works for) money now, to feed his kids, but does he think he can “take it with him?” More realistically, can he see beyond the mere mechanics of supporting a family to the real goods, his wife and children, who are of lasting worth even if they don’t outlive him, as, tragically, they may not? (If family is the only thing that makes otherwise dull work bearable, he probably can see beyond work.)

If the goals of his actions don’t fit into their eventual disappointment, or worse, if his actions are not always directed to proper goals at all, then the problems are more serious. A true narrative will have to be discordant, because his life is discordant, and, to that extent, incoherent. A narrative of his life could achieve happy coherence only at the cost of covering up the discords in his actions. A true narrative is not one he could inhabit comfortably, and it is in that sense that he would be abjected from a true narrative, if one were told.

How is a discordant and broken narrative to be fixed? We have the remedies in hand already, as we shall see in the next two sections. Ambiguity has to be dealt with, and the remedies will be provided by foils off-stage. These are the two chief themes of the present study.

7.4.3 Living in Spin

How does one live with ambiguity, uncertainty, incomplete knowledge of human acts, one’s own and others’? In an ontology in which acts are them-

⁶⁹ To speak of “formal causes” is to default into an Aristotelian sort of rationalism. On p. 152 above we saw Edward Hobbs’s notion of *understanding*, and it does the work of formal causes in basic life orientation: it supplies the bloids.

⁷⁰ So H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 122.

selves incomplete at the present? To what extent can ambiguity be resolved now, and to what extent will its openness remain for eschatological remedies?

One solution, or one place to look for a solution, would be to follow a naturalistic instinct from physics, as we have seen above. That instinct begins the search for truth with the observation that many narratives pass through the material trajectories before us, and so the “truth,” whatever that is, has to be some invariant valid for all of them. As appealing as that approach may be, it doesn’t work, and was dismantled on p. 134 above. Material trajectories give us nothing of meaning.

We are left with many narratives, many *true* narratives, that pass through the motions before us. Which ones we choose color the acts we care about. We live “in spin,” to use colloquial language, and that is an inescapable condition of human life. Appeal to invariants does not work. We need some other feature that runs through true narratives and sets them apart from false ones, a feature that helps us distinguish better and worse narratives.

Can the problem be solved by appeal to some “reference narrative,” from which told narratives are editorial selections? No, for several reasons. In the first place, what would such a reference narrative consist of? A sequence of motions? We have seen that motions already contain meaning, and motions get us neither to material trajectories “lower down,” nor to other meanings “higher up.” Still, there are constraints on true life-stories. Laplace was French and not Chinese, Newton was English and not American. And there are many more constraints on true narratives. Nevertheless, these constraints are quite insufficient by themselves to determine a satisfactory biography. The second reason is that the act of editorial selection itself determines meaning, and so not all selections from motions are equivalent. They can result in quite different stories, as we saw nearly at the beginning, in the question of not spelling out and self-deception. There is a third sort of reason, if we get away from the tacit presupposition that the larger stories under consideration are only stories about the protagonist, the actor in view. To paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, I figure in many narratives, not all my own. The protagonist in one, I may be a nameless accessory in another.⁷¹ All these narratives have to be reconciled, in principle — some sort of principle.

The problem is one of selection and characterization, but it is not

⁷¹ *After Virtue*, p. 213.

solved by appeal to some naturalistic or platonist reference truth. Problems of selection arise in the first place because of the multiplicity of possible narratives of human acts and events. Appeal to a reference narrative is an attempt to make the multiplicity of possible narratives go away, but it is a denial rather than a solution of the problem. As we saw with the ambiguity of the good (sec. 5.3.5), there are always open questions about the goods to be sought in a situation, and so the act, narrated as motions, may work for goods in some respects but will always be open to interpretations on which it also works for unattractive or just evil ends.

There are partial answers: we know in part now, and hopefully will know more later, what so-and-so was doing on such-and-such an occasion. We are forced to settle for less than we would like; we have to live creatively with what we can know now: give us this day our daily truth.

We have at this point, in developing the circularity of narrative and action in Paul Ricoeur and extending it in recognition of its own radical ambiguities, reproduced a feature of radical monotheism that Reinhold Niebuhr emphasized in his Gifford Lectures seventy years ago. If naturalistic and dogmatic solutions are rejected, but history (i. e., narrative) is still taken seriously, we have to deal with the ambiguity and partial character of our knowledge of every narrative. Niebuhr explains the matter in the opening definitions in *Human Destiny*, in the exposition of what a “christ” is, in generic functional terms.⁷² He speaks of partial revelation for the present, complete revelation only at the eschaton.

We are forced to settle for less than we would like because we would like to overleap the bounds of human existence, meaning here the ambiguity and multiplicity of possible true narratives of human lives and human actions. Transcendence of this limitation, resulting in some answers to our questions about lives and acts is possible — in a manner of speaking — but escaping this limitation or simply abolishing it is not. Meaning, Niebuhr says, is disclosed finitely in history but not fulfilled until its end.

In caution, it should be pointed out that the situation is actually somewhat more disturbing than it appears so far. It would be comforting to say sufficient unto the day is the truth thereof, but often it is not. Pain and injustice cry out. All too often, the truth available in concrete particulars in the present is not sufficient to deal with challenges in the present. For hope, we are left only with the promise of an ultimate reality that has dis-

⁷² See volume two, chapter one of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribners, 1941).

closed itself in far distant foils but seems dreadfully absent in a present crisis.

7.4.4 Transforming Acts After the Fact

The remedies for ambiguity of narrative in foils off-stage are brought on-stage as background in the telling of particular narratives. They will transform acts after the fact (sometimes “before” the fact, we could also say), with or without the actor’s intent and consent. There is a tension here between selves as isolated individuals and selves as conditioned in their larger narrative and social contexts. It reflects a tension between selves as distinguishable from the world (whether as thermodynamic systems or as secure narratives) and selves as part of other selves in mutual involvements. Such demarcation as there is comes not from any naturalistic consideration but from the character of Dasein. Dasein in its own interests is a part of other Dasein in ways that do not always confirm its own interests. In effect, the Dasein we knew from Heidegger is in tension with the amended Dasein we corrected in Heidegger. In contrast to Julia Kristeva’s notion of purity and abjection of the impure, integrity of selfhood is not to be achieved by maintaining a clean boundary between self and world. The world supplies the foils that make me a self. To accept the self that it is given to me to be (cf. *Sickness Unto Death*) is to give up being in control in ways we usually would rather not in our time and culture.

We live within narratives that are broken, in discord, incoherent, or not happily coherent; in abjection. They get repaired and their ambiguity gets handled (resolved partially but not entirely) by foils originally off-stage. For world-affirming historical religion in its Christian form, the pertinent foils are concretely focused in the Work of Christ, though there is more to salvation history than just the Passion.⁷³ Abstractly, ambiguity of narrative and action is resolved in the claims of people on one another, claims that arise in others’ suffering. This is the human condition. It has to be dealt with if we are to affirm human life in this world candidly in full view of its pains. Suffering is the part of life that integrates and makes sense of life: in it we become fully a part of each other; in it we become reconciled to our own condition.

⁷³ The Passion doesn’t make the kind of sense when taken by itself that it does when placed in its larger historical context in salvation history. Even the Passion gets its being from foils, principally the body of the Gospels; but beyond them, the Exodus, the Exile and the other Disasters of the First Century.

Success in a world-affirming historical basic life orientation is possible because we can tell stories of believers' lives of a certain kind: "Jesus Christ died for our sins to make of us an offering to God." Criticism of stories (and choice between them) takes the form of confessional commitments. The logic is quite different from criticism of logical inferences from clear and agreed premises (cf. section 5.4.3). Confessionality is based on the claims implicit in the amended Dasein. It cannot impose those claims by force, though it can make appeals that are hard to turn away from.

Our narrative confession affirms human life in this world as good, in full view of its pains, included in which are the entanglements of people in each other wherein we suffer for one another, whether we want to or not, and often needlessly, beyond what is unavoidable. To undertake such a life orientation is to be put in radical debt. The narratives are completed in the ontological foils by which ultimate reality shows itself in the world: principally the Work of Christ.

If ultimate reality transforms the lives of believers by its showing itself thus, there is also another kind of transformation of acts that can be seen simply in struggle with limitation. It is typical of the engagements with life that get most attention. It can appear as despair of defiance, and not to struggle with limitation appears as the despair of apathy. In the distributed ontology, both despairs can be transformed into the hope that they nominally sin against. The transformation is accomplished, as Kierkegaard shrewdly intuited, not simply by replacing the sin of despair with the virtue of hope, but by and in *faith*. Hope desires and strives; hope acts. Faith narrates (cf. p. 284 below). They are connected, as we have seen, in a circular relationship. It is faith that re-situates the struggles with limitation that we all undertake in a larger narrative in which they are no longer defiance, apathy, or despair but steps along the way in hope.

It doesn't matter that the believer, sinner to the core, didn't think "hopeful" thoughts during the struggle. What he did at the time (in defiance or apathy) is converted into hope by his reconciliation later to the limitations as they emerge in the course of his efforts. That, of course, is a process of retelling the narrative of the events.

The prototype is Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok, wrestling with the angel. Jacob is renamed, "Isra-el," one meaning of which is something like "he who struggles with God." We struggle with the limitations of life, and so with the possibilities, at the same time and in the same struggles. What the real limitations are or were may not become known until later,

if at all. Embracing limitation is not a simple all-or-nothing affair with limitation pre-given and clear beforehand. The real limitations may be quite flexible and may emerge only in the course of struggle with them.

A struggle begun in one spirit may be ended in quite another: Begun in defiance, it may be ended in acceptance. The self-assertion of the “devices and desires of one’s own heart” is Kierkegaard’s despair of defiance, insistence on being the self one has chosen to be, rather than the self one is given to be. It can be transformed into Kierkegaardian faith in acceptance of the self one is given to be. But this is not simple: the self one is given to be only emerges with the possibilities of life, and they emerge from the struggle with (i. e., against) limitation.

Chapter 8

Appendices

Hopefully, we now have a rough idea of the features of human action when approached from narrative rather than from the perspective of intention causing motions. What follows is a kind of epilogue or appendix, looking at a few questions that were incompletely treated along the way, in the light of a distributed ontology of human action. The means for this retrospective were not all available in chapter 5 and not really appropriate to the development in chapter 6.

8.1 Systems Action from a Distributed Perspective

Nature and naturalism vex any inquiry into history and historicity today. We live in a naturalistic age and culture, one in which the sciences have shaped and reshaped our lives with benefits beyond the wildest dreams of any save maybe Leonardo da Vinci. Naturalistic explanations are always ready to hand, often crowding out or upstaging better metaphysics. We saw this in the preliminary studies on naturalism, nominalism, and materialism: One can ignore the questioning that leads beyond material causes and easily turn back to naturalism. For many purposes, that is sufficient to cope. We embarked on the present inquiry out of discontent with the problems it confuses or blocks or just doesn't handle very well. Yet the problems of nature and naturalism remain, reasonable objections that are entitled to answers. This section is a place to collect some of those problems.

Analytic philosophy of action deals with action *after* all the editing decisions have been made, *after* there is a narrative and usually with that

narrative reduced to a few tokens or propositions, a bare skeleton.¹ In consequence, all ambiguity is hidden at the beginning, as is any human responsibility at the level of criticism of narratives. Indeed, all the richness and subtlety and liveliness of human action, the grandeur and the misery, are hidden as well. Analytic philosophy is entitled to say it is not interested in what it brackets or assumes as taken for granted. It is interested in some other aspects of the phenomenon instead. That may be, but most of the phenomena of human action are passed by on the way to lesser things. This is playing footsie with the phenomena; it does not seriously confront human action as it is in real life.

This is not enough by itself to convict Analytic philosophy of a systems ontology, for Analytic philosophy usually doesn't speak of systems and knows nothing of distributed ontologies. It is naturalistic, in both good ways and bad, but it is generally not reductionistic (there are exceptions among those interested in neurophysiology). Yet it can legitimately be claimed that features of Analytic philosophy of action are similar in temperament to the sciences it rightly prizes. Both try to isolate the phenomenon of interest from the rest of the world, from its context. Analytic philosophy of action avoids anything that would take the analysis of an act beyond the terms given to it by the available examples. If there were an ontological failure of isolation of some phenomenon under consideration, how could one come to any genuine knowledge of it? Analytic philosophy of action treats acts as things that have a being unchanging in time; they are not revisable after the fact when their narratives come to be revised.² There are few (if any) of the features of action we saw in chapter 5. In these ways, Analytic philosophy of action shares a temperament if not creedal commitments with a systems ontology.

Action in a systems perspective consists, in its extreme form, of the coupled changes of state of two systems, one being the intent of the actor (the cause) and the other being the state of some material system in the world, possibly first in the actor's body (the effect). The extreme form may be a caricature, but even for the more subtle forms, it is not inapt.

¹ Interestingly, much of the Analytic debate about action consists of imagining examples to fit one or another theory, at which point the adversaries change the circumstances off-stage, thereby undermining the imagined examples. This kind of disciplinary program can work only if its method is not spelled out — if narrative and the distributed ontology are unseen.

² The exception would be A. C. Danto. Danto was Analytic, and he saw many features of action in real life, but Analytic philosophers have neglected his work.

The extreme form takes intention to be a physical cause of action, and while the more subtle forms may not do that (disavowing reductionism), they share important features with the extreme form. They ignore both the larger narrative context and how to get from that narrative context to the problems posed in Analytic terms. In a word, they are not interested in the world beyond their chosen problems. It is this that marks them as systems-oriented at heart. In tone and logical procedure, an Analytic approach to human action sounds like a scientific treatment of a problem.

At the headwaters of the tradition stands Aristotle, and the place readers turn first for help is the treatise *On the Soul*. Winsome and attractive, *de Anima* 3.9–10 is Aristotle at his clearest — and so most dangerous. He says that animals are capable of initiating motion from within themselves. Self-evident enough, this quietly slides past important distinctions. Aristotle was not in a position to distinguish between motions and trajectories, and we usually blur the distinction today, but when we want rigor, the distinction is necessary (cf. p. 185 above). The meaning that is already in the motions was so obvious to Aristotle that in its obviousness it hides itself. He didn't have a problem whose solution would require distinguishing motions and trajectories, nor observing that motions (as trajectories) have no meaning, but motion (colloquially) already embodies meaning. He didn't have to observe that motions can themselves be indicated in many ways, though he seems to have known the ambiguity inherent in language. Though motions are by no means all the parts of an act (goals, intention, appetite, desire also figure), it is with motions that Aristotle starts. To start with motions is to focus on what you can see “on-stage.” What we *see* are not motions but trajectories, and trajectories are unique, determinate, and unambiguous. Trajectories do not become motions without an interpretive act in which the goals of the motions are substituted for the lost precision of the trajectories. When we *hear* or *read* about motions, we easily think we are *looking* at trajectories, and so the illusion of unambiguous determinateness persists. Since trajectories are unique, given, unchangeable (unlike appetites, whose conflicts he acknowledges), what the act in view *is* appears to be unique and free of ambiguities.

Interestingly, he knows that where the animal initiating motion is language-capable, there is ambiguity of a kind. Aquinas in *de Malo* Question 6 asks about freedom of the will. He answers that animals with a rational soul are capable of choice, and so are free, and cites *de Anima* 3.9 and *Metaphysics* 9.2, 1046b4–5. There, Aristotle has λόγος wherever the

translators have *rational* and *reason*; he often does not even use the adjective λογικός, just λόγος. *Logos* notoriously has many meanings in English (and other modern languages), and the roots in language and linguisticality are easily forgotten. Reason and rationality are the *right* languaging of a thing, but they are still a languaging of it, and not the only possible languaging of a thing. People often do not agree on what is the right or appropriate languaging of a thing. Language is ambiguous — it can articulate the wrong logos of a thing as well as the right logos of it. Translators are probably stuck translating λόγος etc. as *reason* or *rational* in context, but the problem of letting the roots of reason in language show through in the translation has thereby gone unsolved.

Systems action is a simplification of Aristotle, and that simplification has a history that touches more than just action. It began in the seventeenth century. Some of it passes through the thought of Thomas Hobbes.³ Francis Bacon could be cited also. Spragens compares Descartes with Hobbes; Descartes' instincts are quite Platonist, where Hobbes, for all his modernity, is still very Aristotelian. We see how much modern physics owes to Aristotelian physics, reviled though the latter may have been. To be unfair, Aristotle's approach to action was simple, because his readers focused on the *de Anima* and ignored the *Poetics*. The seventeenth century simplified things further, and in the end, as it rebuilt his naturalism, it kept the Aristotelian instinct to locate the important features of human involvements and human action within the nature that resulted. The details cannot detain us here.⁴ It is the instinct to see human existence simply within nature that concerns us, and Analytic philosophy of action indulges that instinct generously.

The contemporary Analytic approach to action is naturalistic in several senses. It is naturalistic in opposition to the modern supernatural, a supernatural that strikes me as utterly without credibility, however much it is nevertheless widely believed. Analytic naturalism safeguards the modern sciences, and this naturalism is entirely proper. But Analytic action is also naturalistic in a sense broader than the methodological naturalism of the sciences: it *tacitly* seeks a naturalistic way of explaining human behavior

³ See Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes*, chapters 2–4.

⁴ In addition to Spragens, there are fine works by Louis Dupré, E. A. Burt, and Alexandre Koyré.

and human existential concerns.⁵

Instinctive naturalistic explanation of action commits a fairly simple fallacy. It asserts, in its conclusion, that human action is entirely a product of nature, open to naturalistic explanations, some of which we have, with the remainder coming from science “real soon now.” Naturalistic explanation means restriction of explanatory categories to naturalistic deterministic causation or to randomness. The logic of this fallacy is easily missed. The premise is that for every narrative one can imagine a pertinent material substrate, and the substrate moves according to entirely naturalistic rules. This premise is quite true. (In fact, one could find many material trajectories that satisfy the narrative, not just one.) It does not follow, however, that one can reason in the reverse direction, on the assumption that there are natural laws which for every set of natural trajectories yield the narrative of what is going on. Alicia Juarrero makes exactly this point when she insists that narratives come from hermeneutics, not from natural laws. Her reason is that natural behavior is chaotic (p. 65 above). Ours is somewhat different: chaos aside, narratives give us final causes, and there are no final causes implicit in material trajectories. The selection of *which* of all the world’s material trajectories are *pertinent* comes from narrative, human interests, and human interpretation and judgement, not from some naturalistic formula. This, of course, is the by-now-familiar difference between a mere trajectory and a motion: a motion has replaced the details of the trajectory with meaning, and meaning doesn’t come from naturalistic considerations. If there were a naturalistic formula, a mathematical map from material trajectories to narratives, how would it deal with the phenomenon we have seen in the distributed ontology, that there are *many* valid narratives of what is going on, of the acts in view?

Collect here the principal features of Analytic philosophy of action that stand in contrast with the present study. In the Analytic mainstream, instincts run surprisingly parallel to the natural sciences. One reason is that many of these philosophers are mostly interested in the natural sciences. Often they think science is the fount and source of all knowledge and the humanities are just not philosophically interesting. This escalates quickly into a basic life orientation, a religious commitment. Although its carriers would take offense at the word “religious,” they couldn’t very well

⁵ In the sense of Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, though not by the shamanistic methods he depicts. It would use the naturalism of the modern sciences rather than the naturalism of aboriginal religions.

complain about “basic life orientation.”

One feature of the naturalistic conceptual style of Analytic philosophy of action is the temperament in resonance with a systems ontology that we have just seen.

A second feature of a naturalistic conceptual style is the goal of subdividing entities into components down to the scale at which they are not further subdividable. Then one can declare that scale to be the level of atomic or “basic” entities. The quest for subdividability is an instinct that comes from naturalism, for of course the world *sub specie naturae* is subdividable. I think this is just assumed in the sciences, and the assumption has borne prodigious fruit. Applied to action, one wants to see what human acts are composed of and to find rules of composition. The components are supposed to be naturalistic, or to be intentions that can be captured in “propositions,” and propositions are a kind of language, and language can be regulated in a computational manner. The instincts are naturalistic, but in the view of the present study, the ontological “glue” that holds together the parts of a human act is not naturalistic. It is about motives, intentions, whether spelled out or not, interests, involvements in the world; it is about Dasein (ultimately the amended Dasein). Above all, the ontological glue that holds actions together is about narrative, and narrative is open and uncontrollable in ways that Analytic philosophy is loath to countenance.

A third tendency of a naturalistic conceptual style is the assumption that a characterization of an action is unique: that is, once an identification of what an action is has been found, it is equivalent to and can stand for every other characterization of an action. That, of course, is impossible if the ontological constitution of acts has its roots in narrative and narratability. This, too, is naturalistic: for in the natural sciences, any account of a material trajectory is equivalent to any other. Not so in reckoning historical narratives. As always, there are exceptions around the edges of Analytic philosophy; here, Danto and Anscombe.

A fourth character of a naturalistic conceptual style is a marked lack of enthusiasm for conversations with literature scholars, those who narrate actions.

A fifth character of a naturalistic conceptual style is the tacit desire to describe phenomena in ways that are “objective,” ways that leave the describers uninvolved. Where the describers are invisible, they cannot be questioned or challenged. Objective truth is independent of any knowers. To be objective is to ignore rhetoric and audiences. To be objective is to

provide knowledge of things as they are in the world, without involvement of knowers, as in Rankean history. To be objective is to function without an agent intellect. For objectivity, truth and knowledge are not the product of an interaction between knowers and the world. They certainly are not a relation between knowers and the world. A relation between knowers and the world is too unstable, too open to change, too hard to assess, too personal, too living.

A sixth character of Analytic philosophy of action is a quest for certainty and a deep discomfort with the possibility of error or correction. Analytikers assume that there is a true and certain characterization of the acts being narrated, even if they themselves don't have their hands on it just yet.

Many of these grievances against Analytic philosophy are hard to prove: They depend on a style of doing philosophy rather than on explicit propositions or canons of method. They often depend on what is not said more than on what is said. In a miscellaneous vein, Analytic philosophy is markedly uninterested in things that can be known only by means of a hermeneutical circle, a part-whole relationship in which the parts are constituted by a whole and vice versa, and both have an ontology inextricably entangled with the acts of the interpreters who know them. Analytic philosophy tends to presuppose that there are unique descriptions of whatever it is interested in, or that all true descriptions are equivalent. Analytic philosophy tends to hide interpreters, and so to protect them from challenge.

8.2 Volokinesis

In the extreme form of the naturalistic fallacy of human action, intention is a *cause* of the motions of the act. Elsewhere, I called this *volokinesis*, meaning will-caused motion.⁶ It is a hardy weed, ineradicable, and the root of other fallacies. It has a pervasiveness among non-scientists that is perplexing, but it survives among scientists and philosophers in a way that is little short of astonishing. It gets its plausibility from the fact that in ordinary self-experience, I come to a decision about something and then act upon it. Motions follow intentions, *post hoc*, *propter hoc*, and the appearance of causation is simple.

⁶ Andrew Porter, *Where, Now, O Biologists*, section 5.1

The form of the thesis can be stated simply enough. We have two statements,

(1) An intention causes the motions of an action

and

(2) Nerves (presumably in the brain) direct (i. e., cause) the material trajectories of muscles.

Silently added to both is that the resulting trajectories/motions are *different* from what would have happened otherwise, in the “natural course of events”; but return to that below. Volokinesis is sought in the theoretical quest for a way to assimilate (1) and (2), to make the parts of both sentences correspond, by reducing (1) to (2), as (2) is the more “basic,” since we are in a scientific world. Second, that would mean assimilating motions to trajectories, finding some particular nerve activity in the brain that corresponds to intention — really, one that simply *is* the intention. Third, the meaning of “cause” in the two sentences has to become the same.

The first thing that is not noticed is that the two sentences come from different discourses, with different frames⁷ for the terms they use. The second is that motions and trajectories, as we have seen, are not equivalent. To confuse them is a category error. The third mistake is to assume — assert by presupposition, the oldest fallacy known to logic — that “cause” means the same thing in both sentences. We shall see that it has quite different meanings in the two discourses.

About the claim that we are dealing with two discourses: Paul Ricoeur clarified this in *Freedom and Nature*. One discourse is of human practical and existential concerns, the other is that of the natural sciences. He claimed that there is no simple way to convert from a statement in one discourse to a corresponding statement in the other. He backed up the claim by demonstrating large areas where there is no correspondence at all between the two discourses: phenomena that are accessible to one but not the other, and he did so in both directions. Analytic philosophy of action does not read Ricoeur.

About causation: the term “cause” functions truthfully in both sentences, but not in the same way. R. G. Collingwood, in the middle of other business, mapped three or four distinct senses of efficient causation in the

⁷ Different frames, and so in effect, different rules of grammar, in the sense of Fillmore and Lakoff.

Essay on Metaphysics.⁸ Briefly, the three of his causes that interest us are those of history, engineering, and physics. In history, for *A* to cause *B*'s act means that *A*, by his own actions, gave *B* a motive for acting. Unstated but nevertheless true is that the cause does not determine the effect in history. In engineering, the cause of an event is the absence of whatever could have been done to prevent it. That, of course, is different for different parties. If a car rolls on a curve, we may assign causes thus:

The bartender should have refused the driver more drink;

The father should have trained the son better;

The civil engineers should have banked the curve better;

The automotive engineers should have given the car a lower center of gravity;

And so on, as long as one has patience and imagination.⁹

In the sense of physics, in an isolated system, the state of the system plus its limited interactions with the world determine its future trajectory. Note that only in the last case, that of physics, is determinism possible. Reading Analytic philosophy of action can be very quaint. Collingwood's distinctions usually don't appear.

Several points may be amplified or extended. To see the magnitude of the difference of discourses between that of science and that of human existential concerns, imagine an academic scenario in which scientists and philosophers are in quest of a naturalistic explanation of the humor in the comic strips. After all, a theory of everything has to explain everything, no? And nothing can be left out, beyond the writ and reach of science, yes? So we need a differential equation for the humor in the comic strips. This quest is an example of what we call a "category error."

As noted and deferred above, both (1) and (2) are meant with the tacit understanding that the resulting motions or trajectories would have been different if there had been no action. In a *truly* scientific context, that tacit assumption is not possible, but of course we are never (in these quests) in a truly scientific context. We are intent on colonizing the social sciences and abolishing the humanities (or reducing them to scientific terms, as with the

⁸ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) (Revised edition, Oxford University Press, 1998). See chapters 29–34. I have seen more senses of "cause" than he catalogs; so the *Essay* should not be taken as exhaustive.

⁹ This list is a variation on the one in the *Essay on Metaphysics*, p. 304.

social sciences). To say that things would have been different absent action is to presuppose a narrative background to the scenario. The presupposition may be merely formal, with no particulars in mind at all. But always there is an air of action “interfering” with the otherwise natural course of events. That is different from tweaking the position of Mars in a numerical simulation and watching the perturbation propagate through the orbits of the solar system over the years subsequent. So far as celestial mechanics knows, *all* initial positions for a simulation are physically equivalent. Equivalence can be lost only in some other discourse.

There is something more in the presupposition of a narrative context. People easily speak of a sequence of states of affairs, A_0, \dots, A_n , with each one “causing” the next in turn. This can make sense in one of two ways. In physics, each of the A_i represents the whole world at one time (or to be fussy, the world on a Cauchy surface), and the details of causation are complex and can be left to physics.¹⁰ The other way assumes a narrative context, and each label A_i can pertain to a time, but in the narrative, great selection has taken place. Only things are included that matter; all else is left out or can be assumed as neutral background information. What really matters in some claim of causation are particular features of the world at time t^n , features selected by and for the narrative. They bear a causal relation to conditions earlier and later, but the sense of “cause” here is existential, not physical, even if the two are routinely confused.

Paul Ricoeur posited a *diagnostic* relation between statements like (1) and (2), in existential and scientific discourses.¹¹ That is, when one knows both statements, or better, when one is fluent in both discourses, one can sometimes diagnose how the two discourses would speak about the “same” phenomenon. A diagnostic relationship is not a simple reduction formula. How it works resists rules. But humans (in contrast to calculations) can understand.

The quest for intention in scientific terms continues, though one researcher can reflect in a cautious frame of mind thus:

The features of intentionality contrast sharply with a scientific

¹⁰ This hides a tacit assumption that one could even get from physical causation to causation in human practical terms. We saw Collingwood dismantle that assumption above.

¹¹ Charles E. Reagan, “Ricoeur’s Diagnostic Relation.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1968) 586–592. Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: the Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966). The diagnostic relation appears on p. 13 and frequently thereafter.

view of the world. The continual efforts to accommodate intentionality within such a view, after 400 years of impressive progress in the natural sciences, have not yet produced anything other than promising programmes of investigation, soon replaced by new ones. . . . We do not know whether new analyses of the mental will prove able to do the trick. But the recalcitrance of intentionality to be integrated into the scientific picture of the world is, up to now, an undeniable truth, and we should not rule out the possibility that it could, in time, prove to be a necessary truth.¹²

Do you really think so? Are existentialia forever incongruous to science? Is there really no hope of finding a differential equation for the humor in the comic strips?

Volokinesis travels in a vague haze of popular ideas surrounding serious work by Benjamin Libet. As popular accounts have it, he demonstrated that conscious volitional decisions (of the order of sophistication of when to push a button) are preceded and determined by a significant period of *un*-conscious brain activity. In actual fact, as even the most distant acquaintance (the most I could claim for myself) with the technical literature attests, his work was much more careful than something so simple as that. It is also controversial even within its own discipline (neurophysiology) and in Analytic philosophy conversant with that discipline. Fortunately, none of that bears on the category errors that are exposed by a distributed ontology of human action. For in the popular appraisal, intention and will pertain only to the *conscious* experience of them. Colloquial experience attests much the contrary: the importance of unconscious thinking, as in the phrase, “let me sleep on it; then I’ll know what I think.” To suggest that there are unconscious preparations for actions strikes me as no worse than an insult to human vanity. Do the unconscious preliminaries belong to me or to some natural process? Whose brain is it, anyway?

Here are some comments in the Wiki article on Benjamin Libet (as of 2010-02-06) that presuppose volokinesis as the pertinent (if false) model for human action:

Libet’s experiments suggest that unconscious processes in the brain are the true initiator of volitional acts, and free will therefore plays no part in their initiation.

¹² Carlos J. Moya, *The Philosophy of Action: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), p. 70.

Really? Why is freedom of the will necessarily conscious? And do we hold people responsible whether they thought about their acts or not? We do. We clearly do.¹³

If the brain has already taken steps to initiate an action before we are aware of any desire to perform it, the causal role of consciousness in volition is all but eliminated.

(Since when is my brain an actor different from me?) The assumption identifying will with consciousness appears again. In reporting in *Wired*, these ideas appear more candidly:

Hallett [a researcher doing Libet experiments] doubts that free will exists as a separate, independent force. “If it is, we haven’t put our finger on it,” he said. “But we’re happy to keep looking.”¹⁴

This is incoherent, like looking for the tooth-fairy: one looks for something that logically is capable of existing. If it is incoherent or logically cannot exist, it is absurd to look for it. Hallett is right that free will isn’t a “force” — at all. Neither freedom nor will are categories admissible into any naturalistic science, and the attempt to assimilate freedom to indeterminacy simply continues the confusion. That will and freedom do not appear as naturalistic categories of explanation does not in the least prevent them from doing explanatory work in the humanities. Puzzled retorts of the form “well then, where is it?” asked of free will and intention by naive scientists simply reassert by presupposition that will and intention have to be naturalistic categories or they are not potentially knowable at all.¹⁵

In another application, volokinesis seems to be both a popular and technical presupposition of divine action. The causal aspect of volokinesis is the place to begin. In volokinesis, the state of one system (somebody’s

¹³ Cf. pp. 14, 156 above.

¹⁴ http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2008/04/mind_decision, 2008-04-13.

¹⁵ As always, there are more things going on than any one narrative can capture. There is a kind of naturalistic basic life orientation that *has* to find will and intention among naturalistic categories of explanation, or else that life orientation is faced with surds that it cannot explain. Here we see a modern analog of the ancient and aboriginal nature religions trying to make sense of things that are beyond the merely natural — in the humanities, history in particular. One can persist in such a quest (on uncandid and unadmitted confessional grounds), but those who know their way around the humanities are not obliged to keep a straight face.

intentional will) causes changes in the state of another system (something movable in the world). Divine volokinesis differs from human volokinesis in that the causes (and the system that initiates them) are removed to a dual world, where the effects are kept in this world. Such causation is preternatural in the sense that it is a kind of physical causation that operates other than by normal physical laws. It accordingly assumes also that when an act of God happens, the results are extraordinary: the natural course of events would have been different.¹⁶ Such divine “action” could be detectable only as a violation of natural laws. To the extent that human action has its own origins in a dual world, the world of intention, it, too, must violate natural laws. Once will and intention are assimilated to naturalistic categories of explanation, they have to be found *among* natural causes or in *violation* of natural laws. If action has to be approached on naturalistic presuppositions (which is to say as volokinesis), these are the only possibilities that I am aware of. Both of them are unattractive or impossible, so far as I can see.

Yet the credibility of volokinesis persists. Someone once said to me, “It’s a lot easier to believe in divine intervention [meaning creationism on a volokinetic model] than in evolution.”

It is fair to point out what its proponents can do with volokinesis. If an act is a motion caused by a will, and the will is taken as the core of a person, then the person is in control of his actions. (Such control is not entirely possible in the perspective of the distributed ontology, even though the actor is still responsible for his actions.) Volokinesis is most usable by, and most congenial to, overcoming Limitation and imposing one’s will on affairs. Everybody knows this intuitively, even if it is not spelled out, and so will-to-power qualifies as a motive for volokinetic theories.

8.3 Revisiting the Question of Truth

We began with an intuitive definition of truth in regard to human actions as a narrative that includes what it should and characterizes it fairly (pp. 7 and 125 above, and *passim*): “A true narrative spells out correctly and fairly the interests of all interested parties, the intended goals of the actions, the effective goals of the actions (which may not be the same as the intended goals) the real consequences of the actions, as seen thus far.

¹⁶ This is discussed at some length in my own *Where, Now, O Biologists, is Your Theory?*, chapter 5.

A true narrative is adjudicated in community,¹⁷ and it can be revised in the light of later events.” That definition was hazarded in the same breath as the caution that it merely restated the problem without doing much to solve it. We have said more than once that all the hard questions about human action are about narratives: about what to include, what may be left out, what is silently presupposed, and about how to characterize what gets included. It is never as simple as just intentions causing motions of some sort. Intention and motions come *after* narrative questions have been settled, not before.¹⁸

In the meantime, much has happened. We are not in possession of a full and complete definition of truth (if we ever will be), but some progress has been made, and it is possible to take stock. The initial exploration of human action (chapter 5) focused first on multiplicity and ambiguity of narratives. Chapter 6 extended the problematic to focus on meaning and motions, as they appear in the narratives themselves. Aristotelian intention and causation come after narratives; they don’t work as a starting point. In the course of that inquiry, we came (p. 184) to the observation that narratives are constructed to answer questions, and we cited Collingwood as the forerunner in the logic of question and answer. It was Collingwood’s thesis that truth pertains to answers in a question-and-answer sequence, not to propositions isolated from all contexts. That observation applies in particular to truth in narrative.

This is not truth as correspondence: Correspondence to what? There are many narratives. Correspondence would seem to presuppose an Ideal reference narrative, which the openness of a narrative ontology of human action rules out. This is not truth as coherence either. Ideally, all narratives should be coherent, but even some that aren’t coherent are still truthful.

Is it truth as disclosure? Yes, and we have seen disclosure in exposure, the first of the three prototype disappointments of life. We depend on exposure; it is the way that “the truth will out.” It is what saves us from terminal confoundment in error. We may be wrong, but we trust that we will eventually be *found* wrong, and so saved from our errors, whether we live to see that exposure or not. Errors that are not corrected in our lifetime we expect we are saved from in a different way: we live in loyalty to the truth, and that is enough. It is a process.

¹⁷ Since the original hazarding of the definition, we have seen the authority of the community in a little more detail, on p. 195.

¹⁸ Cf. pp. 134, 150, 265.

What an act *appears* to be changes, as we have long seen, and it changes with respect to the questions that arise from later events. How do we deal with truth in such an unstable-looking ontology? How does truth work for us in such a moderate realist, narrativist conception of human action? To ask what an act *is* presupposes that it has the kind of being that has a state in time, but we have seen that it is transtemporal, being an ontological product of a narrative complex and its narrated event complex that is always unfolding in time, but is not a *system* in time. So what do we do? “Give us this day our daily truth” (cf. p. 169 above)? This faith trusts not in some reference narrative but rather that truth will show itself on a day-by-day basis, however partially and incompletely.¹⁹

What about when God is needed but doesn’t help? The only remedy is a faith that truth will emerge, that truth will disclose itself in events. It is a precarious faith, because there is no guarantee that truth will disclose itself at *our* convenience, nor that we will actually get full answers to all our questions when we want them. What then of the collect for Purity, praying to God “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid”? What Platonisms do with the prayer is clear enough, but what if we are not Platonists? It expresses the faith that truth will disclose itself, eventually, in terms adequate to solve our problems, whether we live to see disclosure or not. Ultimate reality is not obliged to gratify human desires for a reference truth. Truth on a moderate realist basis is sufficient. The problem posed in that collect we came to as “living in spin.” We want to know more about how to live with this moderate realist truth, truth on a day-by-day basis, truth that is provisional and revisable, truth whose ultimate form we do not see.

We have said that an action depends on editorial choices made in the narrating of it. Eventually, when a world is sketched, into which acts of present concern are to be fitted, a question arises: Which larger story do you want to be a part of? What makes one proposed ontological foil true (or pertinent) and another false (or irrelevant), when the foils lie far away? (Cf. p. 167 above.) What about foils exemplary of ultimate reality, events in which ultimate reality shows itself in the world? Human action eventually has to be situated with respect to the boundary situations of life, and with them, unanswerable questions that get dealt with in ways other than

¹⁹ Partial and incomplete disclosure of truth we have already seen, on p. 260 above, and in Reinhold Niebuhr’s Gifford lectures there cited. More comments can be found in Brice Wachterhauser, *Beyond Being*, p. 174 ff.

by simple intramundane phenomenology.

What's at stake in truth in narrative is something closer to the old common root of *truth* and *troth* in English. *Truth* (in English) comes from various older words that look like strange spellings of truth, and then the Oxford English Dictionary cites the article on *troth*. The Shorter Oxford defines *troth* as "faithfulness, good faith, honesty, loyalty." *Troth* is commonly associated with a forgotten verb, *plight*, as in "I plight my troth . . .". (The noun *plight* survives well enough.)

The OED lists many earlier variants with similar spellings. The pivot seems to be *tréowþ*, which shifted accent, to *treówþ*, and then lost the *e*, becoming something like *troth*. The modern words *truth* and *troth* seem, if I read the OED correctly, to have been phonetic variants of each other, or of one word (the range of meanings was the same), and have survived in different spellings and pronunciations (thus becoming two words, not one) only because *troth* survived in an older pronunciation in an important phrase: to "plight one's troth."

Which brings us to *plight*, verb and noun: The noun is still in general use; to be in a plight means to be at risk of some sort of loss or disappointment. Meanings for the noun in the OED include obligation, duty, concern, care of or for [another], risk or responsibility for [something or someone?]; or simply risk, danger.

The verb, marked as poetic or rhetorical: "to cause to incur danger, bring danger upon, to endanger, to compromise, to put something in danger or risk of forfeiture, to give in pledge, to pledge or engage (one's troth, faith, oath, promise, etc.)." "I thee plight my word," meaning "I warrant or assure you."

It is sometimes said that being and truth are interconvertible. *Troth* in the sense of being true, being reliable, here means being-there-for, an emendation of Heidegger's "being-there" that may or may not be slight. It puts human truth before natural truth, which is probably the original order of development of the concepts. The attempt to begin with the truth of inanimate things and of nature is a modern fashion. For what it's worth, the Being-there-for of nature means following natural laws.²⁰ The natural is reliable, not least in the simple sense of following predictions of laws. The desire to hide the humans *for* whom troth is being-there-*for* is also a

²⁰ The natural is what answers naturalistic questions, and naturalistic questions get only naturalistic answers. The relationship appears circular; hardly the first circular relationship we have seen.

modern fashion. Yet much there is that lies beyond the reach of natural laws, as we now know. Acts in particular lie beyond the reach of nature, because what an act is depends on an editorial selection: human acts have a redaction ontology. Also, any thing whose being depends on human involvements is not simply naturalistic (tool-being, works of art, heirlooms).

8.4 Escaping the Platonism Cycle

One might well say that nominalism and realism are parts of a complex unity. Fashions in realism and nominalism come and go in cycles, with periods ranging from mere decades to centuries. Fashion is also a function of social location. Individuals and groups — one might say conversations and conversants — go through cycles in phases not entirely connected to other groups.

“Realism” here means Platonist realism, the extreme realism of the Ideal Forms. The complex unity of which nominalism and realism are parts is *will-to-power*. Nietzsche’s diagnosis was pretty shrewd. Plato’s problem was getting control over basic concepts, against the apparently nihilistic heckling of his contemporaries, the Sophists. The control he sought (or the characters in the Dialogues sought, and often his readers, too) would be absolute: not relative to history or culture, and safe from correction.²¹ The truth has to exist “someplace,” or else it’s not really truth. He can concede that human concepts are only approximations (the myth of the Cave), but there has to be, someplace, something that they are approximations *to*, or else we are all hopelessly confused, headed for epistemological chaos and meaninglessness. That “someplace” is the treasury of Ideal Forms. Without it, we are all confused and confounded, living in illusion. With it, even if we do not ourselves have access to it, we can be credited with faith in it, we can get credit for our efforts to approximate the Ideal Forms.

When Platonism fails, and people are bitterly disillusioned, they turn to nominalism. That is why nominalism and Platonist realism circle around each other, each feeding off the other. Nominalism would seem to be distrust (p. 59 above), but it is often as naively trusting as the Platonist realism it rejects.

²¹ This appraisal is something of a commonplace. One who voices it is Hubert L. Dreyfus, in *What Computers Still Can’t Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Boston: MIT Press, 1972, 1979, 1992); See p. 212.

One can escape the will-to-power of this Platonism-nominalism cycle via moderate realism, the tradition from Aristotle to Aquinas, a movement that continues in our own time in figures such as the later Wittgenstein, sometimes the early Heidegger, and other, mostly Continental, philosophers. In practice, though, I think moderate realism alone is not enough. Some choices in theology are required also, whether they are spelled out or remain tacit. There has to be a way of living with fallibility and with being caught wrong. Openness to Hobbs's series exposure, limitation, and need would be enough to make moderate realism bearable. Conversely, moderate realism should be enough to make biblical religion philosophically intelligible. What biblical religion supplies is also a comfort with living in history, and so with tradition-bound rationality.

What the theology of a historical-covenantal religion supplies is confidence that being caught wrong brings grace and blessing, however painful, rather than condemnation and confoundment. What moderate realism supplies is a reality of universals not in some treasury of Ideal Forms but simply as they occur and are instantiated in particulars. What particulars share with each other is shared analogically rather than univocally, as Anthony Kenny observed. In effect, the combination of covenant in history and moderate realism in philosophy enables the believer to pray, "give us this day our daily truth, and teach us to leave tomorrow's truth for tomorrow."

Ultimate reality is excused from maintaining a treasury of Ideal Forms as backing for the currency of human concepts. Human beings are quite capable of coping in the world, living with fallibility and human error, and of accepting correction when it comes. It is sufficient if a human concept can solve a problem today, here and now; it doesn't need to solve its problems for all time and for all cultures.

The spirit of all Platonisms can be gauged from the story of the Ring of Gyges in the *Republic* (Book II, 359d–360d). It pretty clearly underwrites will-to-power, the ability to get away with anything, and to be invisible (immune to exposure) when convenient. Tolkien took it over in *The Lord of the Rings*, where it objectivates will to power and is enforced by terror and anxiety, usually in the personae of the Nazgul.²² It invites the two despairs, approximately as Kierkegaard saw them in *Sickness Unto Death*. Many characters and many events pass through the light of the Ring in

²² Note in anxiety and especially the conversion of anxiety to fear the connections both to Kierkegaard and Heidegger. The temptations of will to power are built into human existence. I don't think Tolkien worried much about Heidegger, and maybe not even Kierkegaard.

Tolkien's epic. One that is pertinent to our inquiry is the meeting between Frodo and Galadriel, when Frodo, weighted by the burden he carries, offers it to her if she will take it.²³ She refuses the Ring, but as she does so tells us what it would be for her. She would use it for good, but it would be no less oppressive in her hands than in the Dark Lord's; all would love her and despair.

This, I submit, is what Plato's readers usually do with his Ring. Gyges' Ring has only a walk-on part in the *Republic*, but its problem persists through the rest of the dialogue. Plato rejects the Ring as the path of wrongdoing, but what follows as the logic unfolds is precisely what it would mean to use the power of the Ring for good, not evil. What is the way to order a just society? The answers are coercive and oppressive indeed. Agreeable readers take up the power of Plato's Ideal Forms — to use them for good, exactly as Galadriel envisioned.

How do the Ideal Forms work as will-to-power? They turn truth and being and the good into something that is not relative to history or culture, to time or place, and not affected by the fallibility of human judgement. They constitute an ideal that we would reach if we could, and if we could, we would be in a position of power: epistemic power, with respect to truth; practical power, with respect to the Good. It is as ideals to strive for that they work as will-to-power. Striving for the Ideal Forms is a quest for control, even if the quest never reaches its goal.²⁴

Galadriel's dark outcome is avoided because these things don't work out as planned, and because in practice, this kind of Platonism has been tempered by the spirit of biblical religion in Western history. That spirit is utterly antithetical to any Ring of Power. This is an instance of a recurrent phenomenon in the distributed ontology: An act intended one way can work out in another — and so *become* another act. What the actor thinks he intends is not always what he is doing. The actor's acts are transformed both by the failure of their original intent and by foils off-stage.

Disillusionment with the failure of the Ideal Forms eventuates in nominalism. Nominalism is still a kind of will-to-power. The *problem* has not been surrendered, even if the Platonist *solution* has been abandoned. When

²³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 381.

²⁴ One more indication that the Ring of Gyges lies behind common Platonisms is that the Ring makes its wearer invisible. That is exactly what Platonism does in making the interpreter irrelevant to the "objective" facts to be interpreted. The human interpreter is hidden in the quest for objectivity, and so he is protected from scrutiny and criticism.

nominalism fails, or runs into problems it cannot handle, people turn to nihilism. Eventually, when they see that nihilism is not just destructive but also boring, they may turn back to Platonisms. The quest is ever the same: some unified schema of categories to make sense of the world, the whole world, leaving nothing out.

Physicists lampoon themselves for seeking a “theory of everything.” It is the beginning of an attempt to make sense of all the miscellaneous phenomena in the world. We want One Theory to rule them all, One Theory to find them, One Theory to bring them all, and under a Sacred Canopy bind them. A sacred canopy purports to account for everything in the world, but in fact it shields its inhabitants from real contact with the possibility of meaninglessness.²⁵ To do that, it has to conceal its socially constructed character; admitting it would give the game away. Not surprisingly, Peter Berger called it bad faith. Under a sacred canopy, one can see stars, but they are painted on its inner surface; they are not real stars. One does not confront the real possibility of meaninglessness, existential dread; under a sacred canopy, one deals with *representations* of dread and of the possibility of meaninglessness, and the representations are quite manageable.

Interestingly, where Aquinas (and doubtless Tolkien) would oppose the two despairs to the virtue of hope, Kierkegaard opposes them to the virtue of faith. Close, but not quite the same thing. Hope is a kind of committed desire, a proactive desire that God will be God and so bless this world as good also. Faith, by contrast, is about history and living in history (cf. p. 262 above). That’s why the creeds are recitals of past and future history and how they constitute the lives of the faithful. The faithful one sets his life in a particular larger context, that of the exodus from nature into history, eventuating in the New Testament and the Mishnah, the Church and the Synagogue. Is he shooting his mouth off? Is this basic life orientation real? In effect, the faithful one trusts that the events of history, working as ontological foils, will make his declared faith real instead of just intentional. If the act of faith fails, it is all just foolish promises beyond his ability to deliver. Are we recaptured by the tractor-beam of nominalism, sucked back into distrust of language, with the claim that this is “just” words? Or worse, nihilism, in which even words fail to do much for us? Or is this setting of lives within history real? Does it *work*?

²⁵ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

The faithful community places its hope in the events of history that transform its life and its members' acts. Faith and hope are one; they are different aspects of one basic life orientation. Aquinas and Kierkegaard are both right. Taking human life as essentially historical, the one who hopes must do so by faith, that is, by choosing how to place his life in history.

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