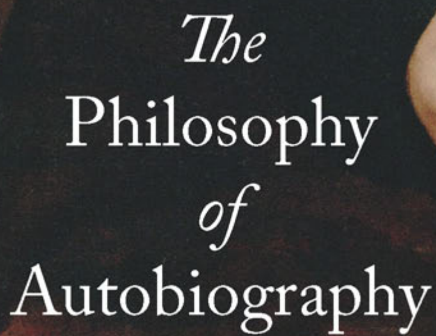
The Philosophy *of* Autobiography



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Introduction: What Is a Philosophy of Autobiography?

CHRISTOPHER COWLEY

We seem to be living through a boom in autobiographical writing. Every half-famous celebrity now seems to have access to publishers and readerships; politicians seem to make a lot more money from their memoirs (and lecture tours) than they did in office; sports heroes and their fans can relive the glory in much greater detail than the visual; and every non-celebrity can create voluble social media sites and blogs without any limits to vanity or banality or shame. Among the scholarly community, there has been a fair amount of recent interest among literary theorists in the genre of autobiography and "life writing."[1] And of course psychologists and psychotherapists have long been interested in their patients' efforts at self-disclosure. However, there has been very little direct, theoretical and systematic interest from philosophers, and as such this volume hopes to fill that gap.

One of the reasons philosophers have perhaps not been interested is that they have already been preoccupied with many of the elements of autobiographical thinking, understanding and telling. The purest case of autobiography, after all, could be Rene Descartes' *Meditations*, with its punctual, disembodied self outside time and space, describing his mental states at that moment. But in addition to the problem of skepticism, philosophers have long been interested in the nature of the self, in the problems of interpreting and understanding, in the paradoxes of self-deception, and in the meaning and narrative structure of human lives. So this volume may be less about filling a gap than about bringing together a number of long-standing debates.[2]

Of course many philosophers themselves have written autobiographies. Perhaps, as Stephen Mulhall (2009) suggests, autobiographical and philosophical inquiry are in many respects very similar, and many of the philosophers in question would consider their autobiographies to be adding to and consistent with their purely philosophical oeuvre.[3] Certainly Augustine's tone in his *Confessions* (written in the year 398) is not that of someone trying to make money, but of someone demonstrating some of his central philosophical and religious beliefs in his own life. Considered by many to have invented the modern genre of autobiography, Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) involves a towering egotism, a relentless self-flagellation, but also a serious exploration

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of the limits of truthful self-representation.[4] John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873) famously describes his nervous breakdown at the age of twenty, and how he learned from it when developing his philosophy (see chap. 4 of Barros 1998). Much of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's works are explicitly autobiographical.[5] Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1908) veers between self-parody and self-aggrandizement with the direct point of challenging many of our notions of the self, of self-understanding and self-reporting (see Steinbuch 1994). And Sartre, the ultimate *philosophe engagé*, wrote *Les Mots* (1977) very much in the spirit of both his philosophical work and public activism to date.[6]

With two exceptions, this volume will generally not discuss philosophical autobiographies in any depth. In her own contribution to this volume (chap. 9), J. Lenore Wright concentrates on Simone de Beauvoir, famous not only for the landmark 1949 feminist statement *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir and Parshley 1997) but also for her four-volume autobiography, which sets out her particular trajectory to feminist consciousness. The second exception is Áine Mahon's (chap. 10) discussion of Stanley Cavell's two autobiographies, which are in many ways as challenging to read as his philosophy.

Three Levels of Autobiography

What is an autobiography? Or, more interestingly for the purposes of this volume, what does the *practice* of writing an autobiography comprise? The first simple image is again of Descartes, rooting around in the closet of his transparent mind, discovering a perceptual belief here, a factual belief there, and a cringeworthy memory over there in the mildewed corner. He's not sure any of them correspond to an outside world, let alone to a world in the past, but he has no problem describing the precise contents of his mind to himself. Right away the Cartesian schema can be challenged in two ways. First, the mind is not nearly as transparent as he thinks: there are problems of obscurity, risks of various kinds of self-deception, and the difficulty of achieving objectivity. (Consider the difficulty of distinguishing, from the inside, love from infatuation.)[7] Second, much of the content of Descartes' own mind was influenced, if not generated, by his interactions with other people, and especially with significant family and friends; even the Latin in which he articulates his doubts had to be taught to him by someone else. Telling a more detailed story about himself—and telling the story not to himself, but to a close friend—would necessarily involve some sort of indubitable reference to the relationships and projects and memberships that partly constitute him, and that he must therefore take as pre-existing in some sense.

So even Descartes's solipsistic investigation turns out to be much more

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complicated than he thought. But the autobiographical practice also requires a *listener*, a listener capable of responding appropriately to the practice. Again, we can start with a crude version. So our basic schema now looks like this: the autobiographer first tries to understand an episode of her life, then tries to articulate it to the listener, and the listener then tries to understand that episode, within the context of her (the listener's) broader understanding of the autobiographer's life. The listener and the listener's responses, both those anticipated (longed for, dreaded) and then actual (and often surprising), are essential to this new dialogical schema. And of course the autobiographer's subsequent telling will reflect her own response to the listener's responses to earlier tellings.

However, even describing the autobiographical practice in terms of a dialogue, such a dialogue could be taken at three different "levels," each of increasing distance from the Cartesian starting point. At the first level, the autobiographer has to sort out her autobiography before she takes the logically distinct step of trying to convey it to another. She trawls and dredges her memories of events, and of important relationships and projects; she explores the narrative links between past and present, as well as her own past and present emotional responses; she re-establishes her guilt for past failures; she constructs justifications for hurting others; she relives and relishes the successful revenge—all with a view to assembling as coherent a package as possible. Here the autobiographical telling is part and parcel of the self's ongoing project of evaluating and understanding itself, an activity that partly constitutes what it means to be a self.

This first-level, still essentially solipsistic, autobiographical practice is crucially and essentially vulnerable to self-deception. The literature on self-deception is vast, and Somogy Varga (chap. 6) outlines some of it in his contribution to this volume. The problem also relates to the phenomenon of weakness of will and the incompatibility of free will and determinism, and goes back to Plato. The central paradox can be seen by comparing it to other-deception. The used-car salesperson knows the truth about the poor state of the car: he successfully deceives me into falsely believing that the car is worth the money, and I only discover the truth a week later when the car breaks down. However, when I deceive myself, then it is not clear who is deceiving whom, nor is it clear whether I actually know the truth or not. One answer to this would be to posit different levels of the self (perhaps in a psychoanalytic vein), but the resulting structures quickly become unwieldy and overspeculative. More subtle conceptions of self-deception involve self-serving redescriptions of my and others' actions and reactions, my more or less deliberate selection of some facts of the past, present, or future in the construction of a

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motivated narrative, and my maintenance of convenient beliefs and conceptualizations in the face of known disagreements with significant others who, I suspect, would be able to persuade me if I gave them half a chance. Any autobiography runs the risk of these more subtle forms of self-deception, unless blunt friends with reliable memories can be regularly consulted.

This reference to trusted friends brings me to the second "level" of the autobiographical practice. Instead of the autobiographer discovering or creating her autobiographical package and *then* delivering it to the interlocutor, the whole business of discovery and creation is essentially protracted, tentative and back-and-forth dialogical. Once again, this is part and parcel of a conception of the self as essentially dialogical. The autobiographer offers up a "first draft" of the autobiographical episode to a friend, and the latter, in virtue of his caring knowledge of the autobiographer and of sharing some of the significant events of the autobiography, is in a position to assist the convergence on the truth of what happened and of how it was significant. This may reduce the risk of certain kinds of self-deception, which can be exposed by the friend in a spirit of gentle teasing or concern. (Of course it might reinforce other kinds of self-deception if both friends are engaged in an ethically dubious project.) The second level of autobiographical practice would also fit the therapeutic context, where an impartial listener, trained to recognize the many types of self-deception, may be in a better position to expose it without threatening an antecedent relationship. (However, it should be remembered that the autobiographer would only visit the therapist when something is wrong; whereas our volume is interested in all types of autobiographical context.)[8] Stephen Mulhall puts the point thus:

> Autobiography and biography are motivated by the requirements of truthfulness towards a conception of human life as possessed of narrative form and structure; and this is not because such forms happen to coincide with the way human existence is objectively structured, but rather because the distinctively human form of individual existence is constituted by the exercise of our capacity to tell our own stories." (Mulhall 2009, 186)

As Alasdair MacIntyre stresses in his seminal account of narrative (1984), different narratives can cohere with the same set of facts, and it is in the essence of a narrative to be contestable. In our second-level dialogue, the autobiographer and the listener might well argue about which narrative coheres better, based not only on the facts available to both of them, but also based on their joint knowledge of the autobiographer's character, as well as on their wider knowledge of human nature. To adapt MacIntyre's own example (206), a man is digging in his garden, preparing it for the winter. At the same time,

however, he might be trying to please his wife after an ugly fight that morning. She had been nagging, and he had put off the garden work, but now he goes to do it in a half-sulk. However, if questioned at the time he might vigorously deny that he was digging the garden in order to please his wife. Yet, autobiographically, he might come to accept this conclusion later, under gentle prodding by a concerned friend, or when re-evaluating the shape of his marriage after his wife's death. And the sense the digging man can make of his particular marriage will also depend on the *institution* of marriage in that society, that is, on the set of shared meanings by which an outsider can reliably recognize this man as "married," by which the man can defend himself against criticism of his marital loyalties, say, and by which the man can understand the contribution of his marriage to his life's overall success or failure.[9]

The Third Level

Nevertheless, this is not yet the whole story (pun very much intended). The first level I have been describing is essentially about *thought*, and the second level is essentially about *speech*. The third level involves a text: the "*graphy*" in autobiography.[10] First-level autobiographical thoughts are essentially private in a Cartesian way. Second-level utterances are essentially private to the two people, usually within a context of a more or less intimate on-going relationship between them, or in the therapeutic context. In contrast, the autobio-*graphical* "dialogue" is essentially public, taking place between the author of a text and the many strangers who read that text, among whom will be a more or less specific target audience (which may include friends, colleagues—and enemies). And while the written autobiography might contain just as many revelations as the intimate exchange, the reader cannot but be aware that hundreds or thousands of other readers are privy to the same revelations, and all sense of a privilege is lost. There is a paradox at the heart of every published autobiography. On the one hand, the book purports to be about a unique life, and all its details, its particular mix of fate and will, of planning and opportunism, of confidence and diffidence, are designed to emphasize just how unique it is. At the same time, if the book is to be intelligible, let alone interesting, to strangers of very different backgrounds, then it has to appeal to certain general features of what it means to live any human life. (There are also cases in between the second and the third level: the politician who arranges for an important cabinet discussion to be leaked; the celebrity who writes an intimate letter to a friend, knowing and perhaps hoping that the letter will one day find its way into a volume of "Collected Letters"; the diarist

who hopes that her grandchildren will one day be interested in reading the text; and of course the whole nefarious phenomenon of Facebook, with its ruthless pressure toward complete self-exposure before one's 300 "friends.")

The appearance of an autobiographical book in public raises new philosophical issues. One might be called the matter of reification. In solitary autobiographical contemplation I can consider a particular thought, and then I can reconsider it. I can sleep on it, and return to it with fresh eyes. I can accept a provisional conclusion while awaiting confirmation of some sort. If I am still unclear, I can discuss the matter privately with a friend, and together we can converge on the truth, or on the best course of action. But once the thought is reified in text, it acquires a life of its own, and the author can no longer control or correct people's responses to it.[11] Sometimes this can be a good thing, as in those courageous autobiographies written in the spirit of bearing witness to human rights abuses, such as those of Primo Levi (1969) and Rigoberta Menchú (2010). Here one can understand the burning need to set down the experiences in print, in order to bring reluctant public attention to the abuses and hopefully to advance justice. But even with autobiographies motivated more by egoism than by outrage, it is easy to understand the autobiographer feeling reassured that her thoughts and her life, now in black and white, are established in a way that can outlive her frail biology and memory. At last the person's experiences can be held in the reader's hand, solid and palpable.

However, the reification and loss of control have a sinister potential as well. Most of the time, a spoken thought can quickly be taken back or qualified; but this is much more difficult with a published thought, since the text will slowly acquire the weight of authoritative revelation; in comparison, any subsequent spoken comments will always seem like damage control. This makes the autobiography at once a product of great vanity and great humility: to have the confident urge to tell everyone how wonderful one is, while at the same time offering up one's life (albeit carefully manicured) for judgment and dissection by the masses, many of whom may well buy the book out of fascinated hostility rather than admiration, ready to impute "true" intentions on the author. To paraphrase Wilde, it is clearly better to risk being maligned in the public eye than not to be in the public eye at all.

Once the autobiography is reified, this increases the risk of self-deception even further, since there is an official version that has to be sustained in the face of unanticipated criticism. In some autobiographies, especially those of politicians, the book may serve precisely to reinforce certain self-deceptive beliefs that are essential to the politician's "legacy"—that crucial possession that is even more important than the power in office, and even more fragile

and dependent on the thoughts and actions of others. In general, politicians are the most obvious people to write autobiographies, precisely because they have been used to making discursive public pronouncements to justify their policies and respond to critics. The autobiography is a continuation of the press conference, and there are still scores to settle and agendas to advance long after leaving office. In 2010 Tony Blair wrote *A Journey*, where he continued his tired defence of committing British troops to the Iraq war in 2003, and exhorted the government of the time to maintain their nerve in Afghanistan.[12] Hillary Clinton published her *Hard Choices* in 2014, in which she not only defended some of her "hard choices" as secretary of state, but implicitly launched her presidential nomination campaign for 2016.

And because the published autobiography has to be written in acute consciousness of the consumer audience, it is constrained by the standards of the genre. The author has to have something to say, something interesting or funny or compelling, and he has to say it well. Most autobiographers will accept a certain amount of experienced editorial advice, but, in so doing, there is a real threat of transforming the content from something true and private into something necessarily false and public, of smoothing the rough edges and enhancing the colors.[13] This might lead to the claim that real autobiographies and fictional autobiographies can and should be read the same way: the narrator is a character along with all the others in the story. We get to know a lot more about the narrator, but that does not mean she is entirely reliable. In the extreme, this leads to the claim that the public persona behind the first-personal pronoun might have no necessary connection with the autobiographer, as long as the story coheres with enough widely known facts. (In their contributions, both Marya Schechtman [chap. 1] and Garry Hagberg [chap. 2] explore and defend the idea of "reading" the author like a literary character.)[14]

And because of the lack of direct feedback that characterizes the second, spoken level, the third level of autobiography threatens to blur the boundaries between the private and the public. This is not only a matter of protecting third parties, for in principle the autobiographer can secure their consent to the draft before publication. However, even when the third party consents, or if they are dead and therefore perhaps no longer in a position to suffer harm, some of the revelations can be excruciating to read precisely because we have a sense that this is none of our business. Sex and hygiene are the classic areas where an autobiographer should fear to tread, but it can include other episodes whose gossip value lies precisely in their apparent privacy. I remember a friend introducing me to his fiancée, and she told me the detailed story of how they first met and fell in love, and I was moved. Later she produced a

website for the guests of their impending nuptials, mainly with practical advice about buying gifts and getting to the church on time. But the website also included an autobiographical note, and there I read with horror the exact same story, the exact same details and phrases that she had previously told to me in what was now revealed to be sham intimacy. A gift had been offered to me, then taken back, molded into tough plastic, and mass-produced for the four corners of the web.

Revealing one's private life is not only about celebration and boasting, however. Here is a notorious passage from Rousseau's *Confessions*:

> With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues. . . . Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous and sublime; even as thou hast read my inmost soul: Power eternal! assemble round thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings.[15]

Moral Luck and Perspective

Two of the dominant motives for writing an autobiography are justification and contrition. In order to get a philosophical handle on this, it will be useful to consider the topic of "moral luck," the term coined by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel in their 1976 Aristotelian Society symposium.[16] Consider Williams's example of a semi-fictionalized amateur French painter named Paul Gauguin (Williams 1981, 23), who abandons his wife and children in Paris in order to devote himself full-time to his art in Tahiti. At the time of the abandonment, it is important that he is unknown to the world, and not yet sure he even has the required talent. This is the nineteenth century, and we (and Gauguin) can assume that the family's prospects without a welfare state are "grim." As things turn out, Gauguin does have talent and, more important, he manages to get his canvases intact to the Parisian art dealers, and his success is assured. Williams is not saying that the end justified the means, or that great art justifies cruelty and betrayal, or that an obligation to oneself overrides obligations to others. Rather, at the time of the abandonment, Williams stresses that the chances of success were so slim, and the chances of the family suffering were so great, that the abandonment could never be justified. Instead, concludes Williams, once success comes it *retrospectively* justifies the abandonment, and we—the art-loving public—should now be "glad" that he abandoned his family. And yet there were so many elements of good luck involved, both the "intrinsic" luck of him having the talent and

the "extrinsic" luck of the absence of any number of different obstacles, that this example flies in the face of the widespread conception of morality as somehow immune to luck.

Now imagine Williams's Gauguin writing an autobiography, one aim of which would be to justify the shabby treatment of his family.[17] Such an autobiography might constitute an appropriate public venue for expressing contrition, as well as gratitude for his wife's support during their time together in Paris. Often it is not enough for apologies to be offered, but, like gratitude and justice and revenge, they have to be seen to be offered. The exact nature of that contrition will depend partly on what happened to the family subsequently to the abandonment—Williams does not tell us. If one of the children had died from malnourishment, or if the mother had committed suicide, that would severely strain Gauguin's justification narrative, and it is in the nature of grief to be unpredictable in its effects. All of this would add grist to Williams's argument about the role of luck in the moral judgments we are inclined to make about past actions.

However, we can see here the role of perspective. Gauguin is writing the autobiography from within the perspective of a successful artist (in purely pragmatic terms, he could not have written it before because nobody had heard of him, and so no publisher would have been interested). That perspective already contains the story of the creative urge, the huge risks of Tahiti, the abandonment of his family, the loneliness and self-doubt, and the triumphant return to Paris: in short, by the time Gauguin tells his version of the story, he is *implicated* in it, and this will limit and inform the contrition he can sincerely and intelligibly profess about the past.[18] In addition, the contrition will be limited and informed by the legitimate claims (voiced or unvoiced) for reparation and compensation that family members can place on Gauguin: Gauguin's response to such claims will reveal the depth and contours of his contrition. If Gauguin does not write about the reparations offered to his family, his readers will be entitled to wonder why not.

This notion of perspective is also the focus for Raimond Gaita's (2004, 240) important criticism of Williams's account of Gauguin. Gaita asks why we, the art-loving public, should accept Gauguin's perspective: why should we accept Gauguin's belief that it was necessary to leave his family in order to paint successfully? This is not a point about the unreliability of memory.[19] The point is that even with a perfect memory, neither we nor Gauguin can ever know what would have happened if he had remained in Paris, or tried some other way to combine painting with the fulfilment of his family obligations (which, after all, he had freely assumed).[20] Given Gauguin's perspective, and what we know of the details that Williams provides, we may understand

why he might feel justified. But we could also understand why Mrs. Gauguin would see the abandonment as unjustified, whatever Gauguin's success. So on this question of justification, at least in the case of Williams's Gauguin, there cannot be—nor need there be—any absolute perspective on the matter. Gaita concludes: we can condemn him for abandoning his family, but we can accept that he had serious reasons for doing so. And there is nothing incompatible with condemning the abandonment and celebrating the paintings.

The Shape of a Life

A written autobiography may comprise no more than a series of disjointed reminiscences, guided by the intention to entertain. In contrast, a more ambitious autobiography will try to say something about the author's life as a whole, to distil the essence or meaning of that life, to show what its author stood for.[21] As Rousseau puts it in the introduction to his *Confessions*, "Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I."

In this more ambitious text, episodes will be reported in terms of their contribution to the whole, people will be described in terms of their importance in making the person who she has become. The concepts of success and failure over time will be much more central, together with various combinations of success and failure. Some of these texts will be focused clearly on the author, while others will be more focused on the project that made them famous. Some will be written by an author at the twilight of his life, as a way of closing up the shop and offering the last word for posterity; others will be written in middle age as an effort to take stock amid new plans for further greatness. More poignant are the sports celebrities who write an autobiography upon retiring from competition, perhaps in their mid-twenties, while another several decades of obscurity await them (unless they are one of the articulate few who can remake themselves into a coach or commentator).

At the very least, trying to summarize one's life as a whole usually begins with a narrative arc, telling the story of humble beginnings (Frank McCourt in *Angela's Ashes*), from weakness to power (the politician Bill Clinton), from diligence and calculated risk to success (the businessman Lee Iaccoca), from self-doubt to certainty (the comedian Stephen Fry), from ignorance to belief (Augustine).[22] The *Bildungsroman* tradition in literature (perhaps best characterized in the English language by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*) structures the narrative arc along the path of self-discovery and self-fulfillment. The lit-

erary device of an epiphany postpones the crucial self-discovery until adulthood or even to the deathbed, as in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Illyich*.

In these examples the shape of the life involves a broadly upward trajectory. But downward trajectories are often more fascinating for public consumption, and also more difficult for people to write about.[23] One striking example are the two autobiographies (1971 and 1976) written by Albert Speer, Hitler's personal friend, chief architect up until 1942, and thereafter Nazi Minister of Armaments until 1944. At Nuremburg he was sentenced to twenty years in prison in West Berlin, during which he secretly wrote *Inside the Third Reich* (1969), and then revised and published it three years after his release. From his release to the end of his life, he also offered countless interviews in the press, radio and television. The great historical question with Speer is: how much did he know about the genocide being carried out in the Nazi-occupied territories during the time that he was minister? There is no evidence that he was personally involved, beyond his deployment of forced laborers in his factories, most of whom were taken from concentration camps. But he spends a good deal of the autobiography speculating on what he could have known at the time (had he inquired), and, more important, what he should have known, and seems genuinely troubled by his past ignorance. Alone among the twenty-two accused in Nuremberg, he accepted full complicity in the genocide. He admitted that it would be impertinent to try to apologize for so monstrous a crime, but there is no doubt that he is genuinely struggling to identify what his life has amounted to.[24]

When trying to write what I have called a more ambitious autobiography, that is, when trying to make sense of one's life as a whole, there is sometimes a temptation to invoke the concept of fate or destiny, either implicitly or explicitly. Both concepts have traditionally been viewed with suspicion by contemporary philosophers. But there need be nothing suspicious or nonsensical about an ordinary statement such as "I knew at that moment that it was my destiny to become a painter," or "My sister had always been an angry rebel as a child, and it's no surprise that she ended up in prison." The philosophers' suspicions perhaps derive from the mistaken belief that the concept of fate collapses into one of the various kinds of determinism, and this would correctly seem to be incompatible with the free will that is so much a part of our everyday experience, of our understanding of human beings, and of my understanding of my life as *mine* in any robust sense.

However, more nuanced and philosophically legitimate understandings of fate in autobiography are available, again having to do with the perspective from within which the autobiographer tries to make sense of her past.

Consider an example from Solomon (2003, 440). If my spouse has been an important part of my life, then the moment and circumstances of our first meeting acquire a new importance retroactively. Even if the meeting itself might have been uneventful, even if it was a massive coincidence, even if there had been a real risk of the embryonic relationship quickly dissolving under misunderstandings or physical separation, the fact remains that the meeting marked the beginning of a long and deep relationship, a relationship that provided not just a vehicle for me to develop and flourish in my own life choices, but that also came to partly constitute me, here, writing my autobiography. From within the determinate perspective I come to adopt when writing, that first meeting has generated a necessary component of my life, viewed as a whole.

Consider other examples: the exile who returns home can declare, without embarrassment or self-deception, that fate has brought her home. Far from being a statement about an external compulsion that would threaten her autonomy, the homecoming is an expression of her distinct individuality. A successful businessman can describe the failure of his first company as fated, in the sense of it being necessary for him to learn certain things about the world and about himself, for better or for worse. Two friends live in Prague in 1968, shortly after the Soviet invasion, and make plans to leave; one of them is successful, the other delays too long and is trapped by impenetrable borders and family loyalties. The unlucky Czech is then placed in a series of ugly dilemmas that his émigré colleague did not have to face. Clearly the two Czechs, many years later, will have different opinions on their respective fates, and this will color the respective autobiographies they write about that period.[25]

The Papers in This Volume

The volume begins with three pieces examining the relationship between autobiography and literature. Is autobiography merely another literary genre, with a more or less reliable narrator, other characters, relationships and a plot? Are we meant to "understand," or to try to understand, the autobiographer in the same way that we "understand" David Copperfield? Marya Schechtman responds to an influential paper by Peter Lamarque (2007). Lamarque had argued that literature and autobiography are fundamentally different, and that this difference was revealed by comparing, on the one hand, the task of the literary critic, and on the other hand the task of each of us in striving to make sense of our lives. Schechtman's response begins with an analysis of the whimsically post-modern film *Stranger than Fiction*, in which

the main character Harold discovers that he is in fact a character in a novel created by a writer (who is another character in the film). By examining how Harold tries to make sense of his life in this absurd scenario, we can learn what it means for all of us to (try to) make sense of our own lives—and this will show that the distance between the real and the fictional world is not as wide as Lamarque suggests. On this revised account persons are characterized by a narrative attitude toward their lives in which they simultaneously assume the roles of character, author, and reader. This attitude yields a kind of life narrative that infuses our lives with meaning, while avoiding the difficulties outlined by Lamarque.

Garry Hagberg also argues that the way we make sense of literary characters, and especially of the *words* that they say to each other, is a good model for the way we think autobiographically and read autobiographies. According to a traditional Cartesian conception of selfhood, the human self, as a repository of inwardly knowable content, exists prior to and separable from any context, situation, or relation into which it contingently enters. Corresponding to this view is the conception of linguistic meaning as being wholly determined by the inward mental content of the speaker also independent of any external relations. In striking contrast to this, the relational conception of selfhood developed by the classical American pragmatists and others since sees the self as created within, and constituted by, the webs of relations into which it enters and within which it actually acquires its identity and its content. Hagberg suggests here that there is a parallel way of looking at words, and that to truly understand a person is in part to genuinely understand the webs of relations, references, allusions, connotations, cross-circumstance resonances, and so forth that give a person's words their meaning. Thus the understanding of a person biographically requires an understanding, with this relation-embedded complexity, of their words; and to understand ourselves autobiographically is to work through an understanding of our own words, our own ways of seeing meaning-determining relations. Hagberg examines these ideas in examples drawn from Milan Kundera, Iris Murdoch, and Rousseau, suggesting that what is at issue here in terms of human understanding is true in life just as it is in literature.

The third piece, by Christopher Hamilton, also focuses on a work of fiction, Alain Renais's 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The film is not an autobiography, but features two strangers trying to understand their lives, partly in parallel to each other, partly in dialogue with one another as a result of their brief erotic encounter. The defining event of the first character is the destruction of his family and his home in the bombing of Hiroshima; the defining event of the second character, a Frenchwoman, was her "punishment"

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at the hands of a French mob for having a sexual relationship with a German soldier during the Nazi occupation. Both events are such as to make the protagonists painfully aware of their corporeal vulnerability. Partly by employing some fragments of the work of Simone Weil and Spinoza, and offering a new interpretation of the film, Hamilton argues that the film draws attention to the way in which a human being is nothing more than his or her body. We can view ourselves this way in a certain mood but, generally speaking, we flee this knowledge of ourselves because it reveals our deepest vulnerability, knowledge of which we cannot bear. Hence, in fleeing it, we necessarily get things (partly) wrong in any autobiographical telling of our life, even as we seek to relate the truth.

The next three pieces concern the relationship between storytelling, knowledge, and agency, and the way that the past conditions the present. Marina Oshana asks what aspects of a person's identity must be available to that person, and in what way, in order for that person to achieve ordinary autonomous agency and the capacity to be held morally responsible. In order to answer the question, Oshana avoids metaphysical speculation about the nature of the self, and investigates instead the precise nature of the damage to her identity that someone undergoes upon becoming amnesiac, demented, or senile. Ultimately she concludes that autobiographical episodic memory (especially memory of intentions and plans) as well as persistent self-recognition, is central to temporally extended self-governing agency: a person requires a psychic connection with his past activity, enabling the person to think of himself, to treat himself, and to be treated by others as a being whose life stretches to the future. Oshana is careful to address some of the apparent ethical implications of her view, namely the thought that amnesiacs might be less than full moral persons.

John Christman examines the autobiography of a former slave and an oral history of an Indian chief. Part of the definition of trauma is that it is impossible to articulate what happened to one because the distinctions between self and world have been undermined. However, even when a systematic and sustained history of oppression falls short of trauma, individual members of an oppressed group may find it difficult to tell their story because their memories and self-conceptions are in tension with the dominant cultural standards of meaningful discourse. Christman uses this as a way to partly challenge those who claim that "narrativity" is fundamental to selfhood: insofar as narratives require a publicly intelligible language that makes sense of the story form that narratives embody, the existence of persons who live under conditions where their own internal sense of character and meaning has no resonance in the public culture renders the view that selves are noth-

ing but narratives problematic. (There is an important overlap here with the oppression of women, as described in Wright's essay below.)

Somogy Varga tackles the classic question of self-deception, perhaps the most obvious component of any "philosophy of autobiography." The risk presents itself at many stages of the autobiographical process: during recollection, during the struggle to understand and constructively interpret the recollections within the context of the time and the context of one's life as a whole, during the assembly of the story from the recollections, and during the reconsideration of one's self-concept as a result of recollecting. Varga focuses on the motive driving the autobiography, for the shape of the motive often determines the shape of the self-deception. When a singular motive such as justification or apology or the promotion of an agenda is not evident, this is where the risk of self-deception, intentional or unintentional, is greatest precisely because the author genuinely believes herself to be an honest broker. Varga is careful to avoid the "post-modernist" oversimplification of thinking that every autobiography is a lie, and that if the author believes its truth then she is necessarily self-deceived; instead, the best starting point is to consider the role of memory in the author's self-identity, since it is the perceived threat to such self-identity that usually drives and explains self-deception.

In the next paper, D. K. Levy begins by rejecting the "conventional" view of autobiography presupposed by Varga and many of the other contributors in the volume. The conventional view sees autobiography as a content (e.g., stories) whose production is challenging. It may be challenging because of limited evidence, distance, and so on, or because the past is not fixed but must be determined. In either case there is a *practical* challenge to establishing the content of a life's past, partly by overcoming self-deception, cowardice, and vanity. What is missing from the conventional view is that every production of autobiographical content is accomplished by an "autobiographical act," and it is this act that is the proper locus of the *ethical* challenge of autobiography. The autobiographical act is a presentation in a medium, with a motive, conveying a judgment of the author's life. The act is integral to the autobiography because it gives form to the content. Levy argues that autobiography is a distinctive kind of creative work that necessarily implicates the author's moral authority in a moral judgment about her life. The challenge of the autobiographical act is finding creditable motives and secure means for the act and the judgment it conveys. The perils of this challenge mean *inter alia* that one should sometimes not write autobiography. To make his argument, Levy draws upon extracts from Iris Murdoch's diaries and Wittgenstein's confession and remarks on autobiography.

Marete Mazzarella is the only contributor of this volume to come from

a literary disciplinary background. In addition, however, she is only one of two contributors to have written an autobiography herself (1992) (the other being Christopher Hamilton [2009]). The book was in fact a biography of her mother, but this necessarily contained a good deal of autobiography. In her contribution, Mazzarella does two things. First, she reflects on the biography in order to ask about the various duties involved: primarily, of course, to her subject; but also to her siblings, who had equal interpretative "claims" on their mother; and finally to herself. Crucially, what does "loyalty" mean in the context of writing a public biography of someone close to you, especially when constrained by the need to tell a sellable story? To what degree are love and gratitude a source of insight and to what degree a source of distortion? How does one find the balance between respecting integrity and privacy, against the biographer's defining urge to psychoanalyze and speculate? Second, in revisiting the biography more than twenty years later, she speculates about her own autobiographical thoughts about her previous autobiographical thoughts. On the one hand, her 1992 thoughts were closer to the subject since she was still alive; on the other hand, her 2014 thoughts might have "improved" with distance, objectivity, further revelation, and discussion with siblings and friends.

The final two pieces discuss the autobiographies of two famous philosophers. First, J. Lenore Wright explores Simone de Beauvoir's four-volume autobiography (1958–1972) in the light of her 1949 magnum opus *The Second Sex* (1997). Beauvoir begins with the question of what it means to be a woman, and a woman philosopher, in the twentieth century: a question both intimately personal but also introducing a general discourse about the nature of oppression and its effect on identity and on the self-other relation (in this she overlaps with Christman's essay). Beauvoir's dual stance—her "double voice" to employ JoAnn Pilardi's phrase—is rare in autobiographical work. To explore this element of her work, the chapter is divided into two parts: "I, Simone" and "We, Women." Part 1 shows how Beauvoir's autobiographical reflections challenge traditional conceptions of the self by moving between the particular and the universal and jettisoning the self-other distinction. Part 2 maintains that Beauvoir's commitment to the particular generates a distinctive voice for women philosophers, one rooted in the ontological and rhetorical dimensions of phenomenal experience. By elevating concrete experience within her philosophical analyses, Beauvoir enacts agency in both a philosophical and a political sense.

Finally, Áine Mahon considers the two autobiographies (1996 and 2010) of that most elusive of philosophers, Stanley Cavell. Cavell has always urged philosophical writing to follow lines of the subjective and the intimately re-

velatory. His work on philosophical skepticism, in particular, develops with a personal urgency markedly at odds with the usual standards and styles of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Áine Mahon follows these lines of the subjective from Cavell's earliest work on skepticism and modernism to his 2010 memoir, *Little Did I Know*. Pushing further on the philosopher's writerly risks and realizations, and distilling from his idiosyncratic oeuvre three guiding anxieties—"fraudulence," "obscurity," and "exposure"—in point throughout Mahon's discussion is Cavell's very paradoxical combination of the autobiographical and the philosophical, of the personal and the transcendent.

All in all, these papers constitute a rich but inevitably incomplete first attempt at defining this new area of philosophy. We hope that the papers, together with the adumbration of related issues in this introduction, might inspire further work in the future.

Notes

My thanks to Elizabeth Branch Dyson, my editor at the University of Chicago Press, for all her assistance and patience in bringing this book to fruition. My thanks also to two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments on the first drafts of this book.

1. For example, see Anderson 2001, Barros 1998, Eakin 1999, and Lejeune and Eakin 1989. See also the International Association for Biography and Autobiography at http://www.theiaba.org/.

2. Because the philosophy of autobiography brings together so many long-standing problems of philosophy, this introduction cannot hope to survey all the indirectly relevant literature. The footnotes are therefore highly selective and idiosyncratic of the editor's background and interests.

3. This thesis is explored in a volume edited by Mathien and Wright (2006). See also Baggini 2002, Parry 1994, and Wright 2006.

4. Catherine Beaudry (1991) explores the relationship between Rousseau and his readers. What did Rousseau, while writing the book, imagine his readers to be, what did he think they expected from his book, and how did he think they would react? (The book was published posthumously, presumably because he feared certain reactions.)

5. On Kierkegaard, see Anthony Rudd's recent book (2012), which he calls a Kierkegaardian account of the self. There is a long-standing question of whether it is possible or necessary to understand Wittgenstein's life in order to understand his philosophy. On this issue, see the collection of papers in Klagge (2001) and the "philosophical biography" of Monk (1991).

6. On Sartre, see Eakin 1985. One of the main translators of Sartre into English, Hazel Barnes, has herself also written an autobiography (1997), which she calls "existentialist autobiography."

7. One popular recent philosophical topic is that of the emotions. De Sousa (1990) and especially Goldie (2000, 2012) have offered very rich conceptions of the emotions, conceptions that link them to rational understanding as well as to narrative self-understandings.

8. Five of the contributors have indirectly explored the first two levels of autobiography and related questions in book-length detail, and it is worth citing them here. (1) Garry Hagberg wrote *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (2008), which is

mainly a discussion of Wittgenstein and the presuppositions that lie behind the use of first personal pronoun. (2) Marina Oshana wrote *The Importance of How We See Ourselves: Self-Identity and Responsible Agency* (2010), which explores the relationship between the self, the sense of self, and agency in the world. (3) John Christman has written extensively about autonomy and identity, including *Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-Historical Selves* (2009). (4) Christopher Hamilton's book *Middle Age* (2009) is a philosophical exploration of a distinctive time period in people's lives, but is also intimately autobiographical. (5) Finally, Marya Schechtman wrote *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), comprising a critique of narrow mainstream theories of personal identity based merely on reliable re-identification.

9. On the notion of one's *life* being structured by one's cares and one's relationships, see also the work of Harry Frankfurt (esp. 1988) and Charles Taylor (esp. 1989). The most extensive treatment of narrative over a life is Paul Ricoeur's three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1984–89). The volume by Hutto (2007), more rooted in analytic philosophy, makes more of the connection between narrative and one's understanding of other people.

10. I thank David Levy for suggesting these distinctions.

11. The idea of a text's independent life can be taken further, along the line of the "death of the author" thesis made popular by Beardsley and Wimsatt (1946) and Roland Barthes (1968), each in their own way. While they were writing about fiction that was not answerable to facts in the real world, there is a similar sense in which, once the autobiography is published, it becomes public property.

12. The choice of the indefinite article in the title is interesting. The original title was to be *The Journey*, but the publisher felt this would give off too much of the Messiah complex which many already saw in Blair. But *A Journey* actually reinforces one of Blair's most notorious verbal tactics. When pressed by interviewers, he would inevitably say something to the effect of "Look, this is the way I saw it, and this is what I believe, and so it is only right for me to act on what I see and believe, even if the results are uncomfortable for me" [note that this is *not* a direct quotation, but a paraphrase]. The indefinite article supports the idea that Blair could have taken many roads, but he chose this one, the unpopular one, and therefore deserves at least reluctant admiration.

13. Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography (2010), part of the *testimonio* tradition, describes the sufferings of Guatemala's indigenous peoples during its twenty-six-year civil war. Partly on the basis of the autobiography, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. In 1999 American anthropologist David Stoll revealed that some parts of Menchú's autobiography had been altered to meet the publicity needs of the guerrilla movement to which she belonged.

14. See also Lloyd 1986. In contrast, see Lamarque 2007.

15. Quotations from Rousseau's *Confessions* are taken from the on-line Project Gutenberg file, without pagination. See: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3913/3913-h/3913-h.htm (accessed March 2014). Rousseau completed his *Confessions* in 1769, but they were not published until 1782, four years after his death. Rousseau started another book, entitled *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, shortly before his death in 1778, and this too was published in 1782. In the *Reveries*, he reflects on the *Confessions* of ten years earlier, and admits it was not as truthful as he claimed—not because it falsified but because it exaggerated some of the unflattering episodes. For more on this, see Garry Hagberg's contribution to this volume (chap. 2).

16. The best collection on the topic—which includes the seminal essays by Williams and Thomas Nagel, as well as an afterword by Williams—is Statman 1993.

17. Gauguin's letters to his wife and friends have been published (Gauguin and Malingue 2003), as well as his diaries (Gauguin 1997). But since the real Gauguin differs from Williams's in

a number of points, I shall not discuss these. For a philosophical discussion of the real Gauguin see Don Levi's essay 'What's Luck Got to Do with It?' in Statman 1993.

18. The metaphor of perspective is similar to that of a person's "moral vision," as developed by Iris Murdoch (1956).

19. The classic text on this question is of course Proust's *Remembrances of Things Past*.

20. In other words, the farther Gauguin has gone down this particular "branch-line" (the one inaugurated by the abandonment), the less he or anyone else can imagine what might have transpired along a different branch-line right through to the present. This notion of the branch-line comes from Derek Parfit's discussion of the "non-identity problem" in part 4 of *Reasons and Persons* (1984). See also Velleman's discussion of Parfit, branch-lines and perspectives in "Persons in Prospect" (2008).

21. The best places to start in the literature on the meaning of life is Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* (2013). See also his survey in Metz 2002. For two very different approaches to the above, one inspired by psychoanalysis and the other by Nietzsche, see respectively Richard Wollheim (1984) and Alexander Nehamas (1998).

22. The idea of the autobiographer as a *convert* is explored by Riley (2004), using the examples of Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau and Sartre.

23. See Velleman 1991 on the notion of upward and downward trajectory, and the impact this can have on overall well-being and the meaning of a life. More generally, see Velleman's anthology *Self to Self* (2005) for many insightful discussions of the nature of the self. The best discussion of remorse is in Gaita 2004.

24. On Speer and his autobiographies, see Sereny 1996. Sumner Twiss (2010) compares Speer's autobiographies to the trial testimonies of Adolf Eichmann and Rudolph Hoess.

25. This example is adapted from one of Nagel's in his "Moral Luck," reprinted in Nagel 1979.

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1

Art Imitating Life Imitating Art: Literary Narrative and Autobiographical Narrative

MARYA SCHECHTMAN

Everybody has a story, or so it seems. This commonplace is given formal expression by philosophers in the narrative approach to selfhood and identity. There are many different versions of this approach (e.g., Goldie 2012; MacIntyre 1984; Ricoeur 1994; Rudd 2012; Schechtman 1996; Taylor 1989), and they differ from one another in fundamental ways. What they have in common is the claim that it is illuminating to think about our lives as narratives. While this idea has enjoyed increasing popularity, it has also had its fair share of detractors. Some objections are addressed to individual narrative views, while others are aimed at the very idea that it is useful or accurate to think of our lives as narratives. One forceful objection of this latter sort is developed by Peter Lamarque in "On the Distance between Literary Narratives and Real-Life Narratives" (2007). There Lamarque argues that while many people tend to think that literary narratives are reasonable models for our lives, or to see characters in such narratives as essentially like real people, this attitude is mistaken and potentially damaging. To show this, he provides examples of literary critics at work interpreting canonical texts and demonstrates how different this activity is from that by which we rightly seek to understand ourselves or others. This leads to a kind of dilemma concerning the conception of "narrative" employed in these views: Either narrative theorists claim that our lives are like literary narratives, according to this argument, or they are using "narrative" in some weaker sense. In the former case these views seriously misrepresent our lives, in the latter it is misleading to use the term "narrative."[1]

Lamarque raises an important challenge to narrative views of the self but not, I think, one that is utterly devastating. He is of course right that there are vast differences between the lives of real people and the careers of fictional characters and that someone who truly failed to appreciate this would be making a rather serious mistake. It is not evident, however, that avoiding this mistake requires us to draw as sharp a line of demarcation between real life and literary narrative as Lamarque suggests, and so it is not evident that the differences he emphasizes utterly defeat the possibility of a narrative account

of self. What they do is to establish a burden of proof for narrative views of self. If they are going to maintain that our lives are somehow like literary narratives while allowing that they are not exactly like them they will need to describe clearly the sense in which they are alike and the sense in which they are different. In this essay I will offer a preliminary sketch of one way of describing these similarities and differences that accepts most of the fundamental assumptions Lamarque makes but nevertheless avoids the dilemma he poses. I will use the film *Stranger than Fiction* as a jumping-off point for developing this sketch. This film depicts the situation of someone who discovers that he truly *is* a character in a literary fiction, and reflection on some of its details will provide a useful framework for thinking about the ways in which our lives are and are not like those of literary characters.

I begin with an overview of Lamarque's argument followed by a fairly detailed summary of the film. Next I analyze the rather complicated sense in which the film's protagonist has a narrative sense of self, and investigate which parts of his self-conception could plausibly be part of our own and which could not. I conclude that although there are important and deeply salient differences between real life and literary narratives of the sort Lamarque describes, there are also points of continuity sufficient to support a particular kind of narrative conception of the self.

Lamarque's Argument

It will not be possible to do full justice to the detail and complexity of Lamarque's argument here, but the basic idea is relatively simple: Although there are superficial similarities between the characters and events in many literary narratives and real-life people and events, the appearance of sameness is misleading. Life and literature are inherently different enterprises with different rules and different logics. Works of literature are self-consciously created by authors for an aesthetic and (broadly) moral purpose, and each element of such a work is selected to express its themes and artistic visions. Nothing is there by accident, and nothing in a literary narrative "just happens." Real life, on the other hand, is an unauthored series of events issuing from the action of natural forces. It is full of randomness and happenstance. There is no reason to suppose that there is an overall theme or aesthetic purpose in the unfolding of a person's life and it is certainly a mistake to assume that each event in our lives happens as it does in order to express such a theme or purpose. To think of our lives as genuinely like literature, Lamarque argues, we need to do one of two things; either we must reduce literature to plot and character—as if the details of presentation do not really matter—or

we must think of our lives as full of purpose and meaning at every turn—as if the accidents and coincidences that befall us are really by design. "The more we try to restore the distinctively literary features of [canonical literary] narratives the more remote they become from real life," Lamarque says. "Indeed a stronger point can be made. To the extent that literary features are brought to bear on real-life narratives they have a distorting and pernicious effect on the self-understanding that such narratives are supposed to yield" (2007, 119).

To show what he means by this Lamarque looks at examples of the kind of work that literary critics do in interpreting and understanding fictional narratives of the sort that might be taken as models for real life, showing that this approach to real-life narratives would be bizarrely inappropriate. He employs different interpretive moves to make slightly different points. To show the difference between literary characters and real people, for instance, he talks about the Veneerings (from Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*), who are described as having everything "bran-new" from their furniture to their carriage to their servants. The words used to describe them show how superficial they are, as does Dickens's choice of their name. It is clear that we are supposed to understand them as deserving of our contempt. Crucially, this is not just Dickens's opinion of them; it is who they are. He created them and made them superficial; there is no other perspective to take, and this makes their ontology wholly different from that of real people. Lamarque also points to critic W. A. Craik's interpretation of the importance of the character of Frank Churchill in Jane Austen's *Emma* in terms of the way in which Frank explains Emma herself. "Again," Lamarque says, "just like the Veneerings . . . Frank Churchill in not just a person in an imaginary world, he is also an element in a structured plot" (2007, 126). It would be worrisome to say the least to view other people in the real world as existing only to help explain one's own nature, but it is perfectly appropriate and highly illuminating as a description of the fictional Frank.

As with characters, events and details in literary narratives must be understood in teleological and aesthetic terms that do not apply in real life. Lamarque points, for instance, to the accident at the beginning of *Tess of the d'Ubervilles* and literary critic Dorothy van Ghent's interpretation of the way in which the details of the accident serve to foreshadow and symbolically represent the unfolding drama and themes of the narrative as a whole. Clearly the right way to answer the question of why this accident occurred is in just the terms that van Ghent does. But this is not why accidents happen in real life, and if traffic safety officials looked for these kinds of explanations they would not be doing their jobs properly. Similarly, J. Hillis Miller describes how the mud and fog in the opening paragraph of *Bleak House* prefigure

and represent the state of the world depicted in the novel (Lamarque 2007, 124). This is just the right way to explain the mud and fog in the novel, but it would be a strange kind of explanation to hear from the meteorologist on the evening news.

Each detail and each event in a literary narrative is chosen, and so each is chosen for a reason; they are not causally necessitated, or random, or statistical probabilities. This means, Lamarque says, that we have to take a completely different approach to understanding events and characters in literature than we do to understanding events and people in our world. If we take "the great literary works to be models for our self-directed narratives," he concludes, "we are prone to two serious mistakes." The less serious is "to suppose that literary works are simply stories about people like you and me, a species of real life narratives." The more serious and potentially dangerous mistake is "to suppose that our own life narratives are mini-works of literature complying with the principles of literary appreciation." This mistake is potentially dangerous because it invokes a "false image of ourselves as kinds of fictional characters, whose identity rests on narrative description and whose actions are explicable in functional, teleological or thematic ways" (Lamarque 2007, 132).

Lamarque's observations are incisive, and they raise a powerful challenge to narrative understandings of the self. There are, of course, a variety of ways in which one might try to resist his conclusions, including a rejection of the overall framing of the problem. One might, for instance, insist that all of the events in our lives are directed by a Divine or Transcendent author according to a Purpose or Plan, which makes them meaningful in very much the same way that literary works are meaningful. This is a position that many people have taken historically, and that many continue to take. The disagreement in worldview expressed in this response is about as fundamental as such disagreements get, and I will not attempt to delve into these issues here. Instead I will take up the more modest project of considering whether granting Lamarque his fundamental worldview requires us to give up on a narrative conception of self. The question I am asking is thus this one: Suppose that Lamarque is correct in his basic naturalism. Does it follow that it is inappropriate and potentially problematic to think about our lives in the way that we think about literary texts? I will argue that it does not, but of course everything depends upon what it is to think about our lives "in the way that" we think about literary texts. We obviously cannot think about them in *exactly* the same way for reasons Lamarque makes very clear. To defend my affirmative answer to this question it is thus necessary to specify the points of overlap. As a first step toward doing so I will look at the fictional (and

absurd) case of someone who *is* a character in a literary narrative in a very straightforward and literal sense. His circumstances will help us to identify a variety of ways of in which one might think of one's life in narrative terms, making it easier to consider which might reasonably be part of a real life and which could not.

Stranger than Fiction

In *Stranger than Fiction* Harold Crick, an IRS auditor leading a mundane life, suddenly begins to hear a voice narrating his every action. The narrator describes how he brushes his teeth (counting the strokes), ties his tie (a single Windsor to save time), and counts his steps to the bus. She details his frustration and boredom at work and the lonely life he goes home to. Special attention is given to the wristwatch that controls his time-governed life and will, the narrator tells us (and him), play a momentous role on a fateful Wednesday. Naturally Harold finds this voice extremely disquieting, especially when it utters the sentence: "Little did he know that this simple, seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death."[2]

As viewers we see that the narrator is Karen "Kay" Eiffel, a brilliant novelist known for killing her characters off in creative ways. Kay is working on *Death and Taxes*, the novel in which Harold is protagonist. The writing of the novel has stalled because she cannot decide exactly how Harold should die, and for much of the film she investigates different modes of dramatic death—hanging out on the tops of buildings or in hospitals, or along dangerous stretches of road in hazardous weather. Kay insists that Harold's death must be aesthetically perfect, and assumes that in order to be so it must be realistic with respect to Harold's character and the conditions of the world in which he lives.

Harold, meanwhile, tries to find the source and the meaning of the narration he hears. After consulting a psychiatrist to no avail he seeks out the help of Dr. Jules Hilbert, professor of literature. Dr. Hilbert helps Harold determine the genera of his narrative, and quickly narrows it down to either romantic comedy or tragedy. He asks Harold if he has met someone who loathes him to the core. In fact Harold has just started auditing a baker, Ana Pascal, who has withheld a portion of her taxes as a political protest, and to whom he is deeply attracted. He reports to Dr. Hilbert that she has told him to "get bent," to which the professor replies: "Well, that sounds like a comedy. Try to develop that."

For a while signs are auspicious. Soon, however, Harold misinterprets a gesture of friendship from Ana, making her angry, and the balance of indi-

cators points toward tragedy. Dr. Hilbert recommends to Harold that he go "live his life," telling him to "make it the life that he wants." And he does. Having always wanted to be more musical Harold buys a seafoam-green Fender guitar and learns to play; he moves in with a friend from work, and, most significant of all, he pursues and wins Ana Pascal. The moment he recognizes that she is falling in love with him is profound. Kay puts it this way: "Harold's life was filed with moments both significant and mundane, but to Harold those moments remained entirely indistinguishable"—except for this one.

In addition to the obvious reasons for being thrilled by this development, Harold also takes it as evidence that he is in a romantic comedy after all. This elation is short-lived, however. As he shares this information with Dr. Hilbert he recognizes Kay's voice in a television interview, and learns from the professor that she always kills her heroes. Harold refuses to accept this, and sets out to find Kay to see if he can convince her to spare him. Just at that moment, however, she has an inspiration about how Harold should die. By the time Harold finds her she has outlined his death. Both Harold and Kay are uncertain what to do. Ultimately she gives him the manuscript to read. Unable to look at it himself he takes it to Dr. Hilbert, asking him to let him know how his demise comes so that he can avoid it. When he returns Dr. Hilbert tells him that he has to die. The book is an incredible masterpiece, "the most important novel in her already stunning career and it can only end one way." To Harold's protestations Dr. Hilbert responds that he absolutely will die one day anyway and, he assures him, if he does not accept the death Kay has written for him the one that he has will not be nearly as meaningful or poetic.

Harold takes the novel and reads it on the bus, eventually showing up at Kay's house and telling her that he thinks it is beautiful and that she should write it as planned; he is willing to accept his death. We then see Harold move toward his planned doom. Because his wristwatch had malfunctioned days earlier he asks a stranger for the time. Because the stranger's watch is running three minutes fast Harold happens to be at the bus stop earlier than usual on the fateful Wednesday, and because of this he is present when a child on a bike darts out in front of an exhausted bus driver. Harold runs in front of the bus to save the child and is himself struck.

We soon discover, however, that the ending has been changed from the original conception. Harold is in the hospital, alive but severely injured. He will make a full recovery. He should have died, but a bit of his wristwatch broke off, blocking a torn artery and preventing him from bleeding to death. The watch that was to have led to his demise by getting him to the bus stop early in the original version saves his life in this one. Harold and Ana are

blissfully happy about this turn of events, but Dr. Hilbert is clearly disappointed. The novel, he tells Kay, is "okay" but it is not a masterpiece, and certainly not her best. The ending, he says, does not go with the rest of the novel. Kay is unfazed. She will, she says, rewrite the rest of the novel to go with the ending, explaining that she needed to save Harold not because he was real, but because he knew he was going to die and was willing to anyway, knowing that he could stop it. She asks, "Isn't that the type of man you want to keep alive?"

Harold's Narrative Self-Conception

In some ways *Stranger than Fiction* serves as a perfect illustration of Lamarque's point. The comedic aspects of the film reside precisely in the bizarre application of techniques of literary criticism to a human life (consider, for instance, Dr. Hilbert's twenty-three questions aimed at categorizing Harold's genera, including: "Has anyone recently left any gifts outside your home? Anything? Gum, money, a large wooden horse? Do you find yourself inclined to solve murder mysteries in large, luxurious homes to which you may or may not have been invited? On a scale of one to ten, what would you consider the likelihood you might be assassinated?") If we look more closely, however, Harold's narrative self-conception actually involves a great many facets, some ridiculous and some familiar. Untangling these will provide a useful framework for thinking about the relation between real life and literary narratives.

To begin we can distinguish between Harold's *belief* that his life is a narrative and what I will call the "narrative *attitude*" toward his life this belief engenders. Harold, that is, thinks of his life as a narrative in the very straightforward and literal sense in that he comes to believe that there is an author scripting his life for the purpose of creating a literary work for dissemination and consumption. This belief has a profound and, as it turns out, overwhelmingly positive impact on Harold's life. Before hearing Kay's narration Harold's existence is decidedly unliterary. He eats alone, lives alone, and his social interactions seem limited to amusing his colleagues by multiplying large numbers in his head. While brushing his teeth, an activity during which, as Kay points out, others might be fantasizing about their days, Harold instead counts the strokes of his toothbrush. We have already mentioned the fact that he does not distinguish between the mundane and profound moments of his life. He is, we are told, "a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations, and remarkably few words," whose favorite word is "integer."

After he realizes he is a character in a novel, Harold thinks, apparently for the first time, about the shape of his life as a whole—trading in his mathe-

matical picture of the world for a more narrative one. He employs the critical skills he learns from Dr. Hilbert to look at the events in his life as telltale signs of the genera to which it belongs and works to "develop" it into the story he wishes it to be—endeavoring to live a romantic comedy rather than a tragedy. He recognizes that he wants music in his life and gets a guitar. It is by thinking about what kind of story his life is that Harold gains the perspective needed to change it. As long as he was absorbed in calculating and counting he could not see how lonely or frustrated he was or what an alternative way of existing might be.

As part of this transition Harold also learns to recognize and appreciate metaphorical and symbolic features of his daily existence in a way he did not before, and to use these to positive effect. Because he is distracted by his newly discovered ontological status, Harold's facility with numbers falters, but his sensitivity to language and to literary nuance blossoms. Symbolic representation becomes important to him. In the scene where he buys his guitar, for instance (a scene he singles out for special praise when he discusses the manuscript with Kay), he looks at each of the guitars in the shop and considers which to buy. The point, we are told, is not just to buy a guitar, but to buy a guitar that "says something" about Harold. He sees each of the guitars as "saying" something different, and recognizes the green Fender as the one that rightly represents him. The importance of Harold's ability to interpret symbolic detail is also seen in his developing relationship with Ana. The misunderstanding that leads him to believe that he is probably in a tragedy occurs when he does not understand that the cookies she offers him are meant as a gesture of friendship and he insults her by offering to pay for them. The cookies are heart-shaped, something Harold fails to notice. Later, however, he mends fences by appearing with a box containing ten paper bags and explaining that he "brought her flours." His newfound ability to play with words (i.e., the pun on "flowers") and to represent his feelings through a symbolic gesture shows that he is able to operate effectively with figurative interactions in a way he could not at the beginning. In the final scene, Ana again offers Harold heart-shaped cookies as he lies in his hospital bed, and this time he appreciates them fully.

Harold thus begins as a *mere* character, oblivious to the fact that he is in a story at all and muddling through each day at the mercy of clocks, counting, and algorithms. Motivated by the narration, and with the help of Professor Hilbert, he learns how to be a *reader* of the story that is his life, assessing it critically and seeking to determine the significance of the different events within it. Ultimately he takes up the role of *author* as well, trying to shape his life and make it the one he wants. Paradoxically, Harold feels in many

respects more alive and more in control of his life when he discovers that he is a character in a novel than he was before he knew this. What I have been calling the "narrative attitude" that Harold develops can be generally characterized in terms of the way in which he simultaneously takes all three of these perspectives, seeking to understand and shape his life as he is living it.

In a moment I will argue that although the narrative *belief* is something that we obviously should not share with Harold, the narrative *attitude* is something that we can, do, and should share with him, albeit in a somewhat modified form. Before I do so, however, it is necessary to say something about the sense in which Harold can be the "author" of his life, since we know that in fact Kay is his ultimate author. Thinking too hard about Harold's agency in the film leads to headache and confusion in much the same way attempts to lay out a lucid explanation of what is happening in stories of time travel does, and for similar reasons. It is very unclear just how much freedom Harold has, to what extent his reactions to hearing Kay's narration are independent, and to what extent they are scripted by Kay. I suspect that there is no consistent and coherent answer to that question within the film, whose aim is undoubtedly at least in part to deconstruct the sharp lines between author, reader, and text. For our purposes, however, this strange and undeniably intriguing question is not directly relevant. What really interests us is Harold's self-conception, and it is evident that he *experiences* himself as free, whether he is or not (and whether or not the source of this experience is Kay's writing or something else). He experiences tremendous angst about his decisions, weighs options, and in other ways acts as if his life is his to shape. We may wonder how this sits with his realization that his thoughts and actions are being written by someone else, but then there are also perennial questions about how real people can take themselves to face choices if we believe that there is a Divine Plan or that we live in a causally determined world. Questions about freedom of the will are dizzying whether they are about us or about someone in Harold's strange situation, and fortunately there is no real need to answer them in order to make the comparisons we need to make here. We are certainly no *less* accurate than Harold when we think of ourselves as authors of our own lives and this is all that we will ultimately need to be able to show for the defense of the narrative view I will develop here.

The fact that Harold's life has an external author is nevertheless central to understanding the similarities and differences between real life and literary narratives in other respects (which are not altogether unrelated to questions of free will), and we will return to these later. For the moment, however, we can focus on the narrative attitude Harold is depicted as having, setting to one side the question of whether he has developed it on his own or it was

written for him by Kate. His experience of his life moves from one of bemused and passive drifting at the beginning to one in which he interprets and experiences the meaning of the events that befall him, reflects on the character of his life as a whole, and works to shape it into the life he desires. The next question to consider is whether a narrative attitude of this sort is appropriate to the lives of real people, or whether it is peculiar to Harold's circumstances.

Real Life Narrative Attitude

It seems clear that our attitude toward our own lives should not be precisely like Harold's attitude toward his. His attempts to understand the shape of his life, for instance, involve going through different established literary genera and seeking to classify which his life belongs to, in something like the way we might be asked to classify a text on a literature exam. Under the tutelage of Dr. Hilbert, moreover, he comes to think (rightly) that every event or accident he encounters is really fraught with meaning. Trying to escape his doom, for instance, he hides in his home, but is almost killed when a wrecking crew misreads an address and swings a wrecking ball into his living room. He assumes that this event has some deeper purpose, and Dr. Hilbert concurs ("Meeting an insurance agent the day your policy runs out is coincidence. Getting a letter from the Emperor saying he's visiting is plot. A wrecking ball . . . is something else entirely"). To take exactly this attitude toward our own lives would of course be comical and represents just the kind of mistake Lamarque warns us about. There are, however, counterparts to Harold's attitude in real life that are not absurd but are, to the contrary, absolutely central to our personhood and way of life.

Stepping back from our day-to-day activities and thinking about the overall shape and direction of our lives is part of what makes us the kind of beings that we are. It is this capacity, according to many philosophers, that allows for the possibility of autonomy and moral agency.[3] If we did not reflect on the kinds of lives we are living we would, like Harold at the beginning of the film, drift along at the mercy of whatever forces drive us, unable to direct our lives. It is not even uncommon (or obviously damaging) to employ literary genera or specific works of literature to help focus our reflection on where our lives are going and where we want them to go. It is important to recognize, moreover, that we can use literary narratives to think about our lives without being entirely literal-minded. Someone might, for instance, see *Hamlet* or *Moby Dick* as providing a useful picture of how his life is likely to unfold given his obsessive need for revenge without necessarily believing that the sequence of particular events in his life is somehow going to follow a plot

template set down in either work. It is entirely possible to appreciate either of these works as depicting with some accuracy the kind of toll that such an obsession can take on one's psyche and relationships without assuming that one will be literally dragged to the depths by the object of one's obsession or that the floor will end up littered with bodies. Works of literature can help us to see the significance and potential implications of certain life paths without our needing to presuppose that our lives will be emplotted in just the way that the literary works are.

Connected with this, we can see that the appreciation for figurative language and gestures Harold develops over the course of *Stranger than Fiction* is also a crucial feature of everyday life. Heart-shaped cookies and self-expressive guitars exist in the real world as well as in the film, and the kinds of symbolic gestures found in *Stranger than Fiction* are ubiquitous in our lives. One's choice of car or clothing or neighborhood, the mascots that represent our sports teams, the religious emblems we wear or display in our homes, the books on our bookshelves all serve to express things about us in a way that is metaphorical or indirect. In describing the kind of interpretative work appropriate to literature but not to life Lamarque points out that in *Tess of the d'Ubervilles* details like the white dress Tess wears at her May Day celebration and the scarlet ribbon in her hair signify facts about her nature and destiny (2007, 131). But surely white and red clothing can have similar significance in real life, and in fact have the import they do in literature largely because of what they signify in real life.

In life, as in literature, figurative expression works in many different ways. In some cases we consciously choose elements in our lives to serve as symbols (e.g., the images tattooed on our bodies, wearing white at a wedding) and in other cases we do not (perhaps our choice of shoes or house or books reveals something about us we did not consciously intend for them to reveal). In some cases symbols are used to express a personal style or a trait one acquires by the very act of employing the symbol (e.g., in buying a sports car one may be trying to make oneself, as a billboard some years ago put it, "the person the chat room thinks you are"). In other cases a symbol might be used to express a deep fact of character or personal history (e.g., religious symbols or national dress might be like this). The crucial point for present purposes is that we frequently interpret the actions of others in something like the way we interpret details of literary texts, and we must do so if we are to understand one another. We must also be able to express ourselves in this way. Difficulty interpreting and using symbolic or metaphorical gestures (as happens, for instance, in some cases of autism spectrum disorder) is generally

acknowledged to be a deficit insofar as it interferes with our ability to understand ourselves and others fully, making social life hard to navigate.

This is not to say, of course, that symbolism, metaphor, and related literary devices function in real life in exactly the same way that they do in literature.[4] One notable difference is the scope of their application. In real life an interpretive attitude of the kind described above is appropriate only with respect to details that result from people's choices, whereas in a literary narrative everything may potentially be understood in this way. The fact that someone bakes cookies in the shape of a heart may have symbolic significance in real life but the fact that it is foggy or muddy outside probably does not. Similarly, the fact that the bride wore white but insisted on scarlet accents may be something to interpret if we wish to understand the bride, but the fact that the limo was rear-ended between the church and the reception does not necessarily tell us anything about the likely course of the marriage, no matter how tempted we may be to try to read it as a sign. To the extent that there is such a difference Lamarque's cautions are on target, but perhaps of more limited application than he suggests.

Like Harold, then, we too take the perspectives of character, reader, and author of our own lives. We experience our lives on the ground, but we also try to understand them as they unfold, reflecting on their shape and on the significance of events that transpire and their place in our lives as a whole. At the same time we see ourselves as authors, charged with shaping our lives and expressing ourselves in them. In this way we have a narrative attitude toward our lives. Because we are not actually characters in a novel, however, there are some differences between the way in which we take up these perspectives (when we do so appropriately) and the way Harold takes them up. We need to read our lives differently because we cannot (or should not) assume, as Harold does, that each event in our lives will have a pre-given purpose. This difference stems from the fact that Harold's life is ultimately written by an external author whereas ours (we are assuming) are not. This is obviously a fairly significant point of divergence, and its implications must be understood before we can truly understand the relevant similarities and differences between real life and literary narratives. In the next section I will explore these implications.

Self-Authored Narratives

There are, in some sense, two authors of Harold's life. Harold is an author, I have said, insofar as he experiences himself as faced with choices about what

to do and how he wishes to direct his life, and Kay is an author in a (relatively speaking) straightforward and ordinary sense. In our lives (per assumption) there is only one author. This is important because the two authors are (or at least should be) guided by different norms. What is best for Harold is not what is best for *Death and Taxes*. More specifically, it is best for Harold to continue to live his life, playing music and developing and enjoying his friendships and his relationship with Ana. What is best for the novel is that Harold die a heroic and tragic death just as he has found happiness. To this extent the guiding principles for a literary author seem to be very different from those of the author of a life. The author of a life appropriately chooses a path aimed at her own flourishing while a literary author chooses paths for her characters that are aimed at fulfilling the aesthetic and moral purposes of the work she is creating. This difference is, of course, at the heart of Lamarque's argument about using literature as a model of life.

There is, to be sure, a conception of flourishing according to which these two sets of principles converge. A long and venerable philosophical tradition holds that the best life is one that is purposive, cohesive, thematically unified, and aesthetically pleasing. Dr. Hilbert represents a view like this in *Stranger than Fiction* when he urges Harold to accept the death that Kay has written for him, noting that death is inevitable and that a meaningful and purposive death can be preferable to a longer (and even happier) but less aesthetically perfect life. Something like this view can also be found among some narrative theorists. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, says that to *lead* a life is to search for and aim toward the good. "The unity of a human life," he therefore concludes, "is the unity of a narrative quest" (1984, 219). He, along with Charles Taylor (1989), arguably claims that to live well requires that we give our lives a teleological aim and morally-based thematic unity.

The question of what constitutes human flourishing is obviously a profound and contentious one, and not entirely unrelated to the question we set aside earlier about whether there is, in fact, some kind of external author of our lives. This question, like that one, is too profound to engage in any serious way here. What does seem evident is that Lamarque rejects the idea that living well requires us to organize our lives as models of literary narratives, and his argument presupposes a different conception of human flourishing. He is clear that trying to apply strictly aesthetic principles to our lives is a dangerous distortion. In this essay I am limiting myself to the goal of showing that it is plausible to defend the legitimacy and usefulness of a narrative account of personal identity even granting Lamarque's most fundamental metaphysical assumptions. I will therefore assume for the purposes of this argument that the desiderata of literary authorship and of life authorship can

be in tension in the way that they are depicted to be in *Stranger than Fiction*, and that what makes for the best life is not always the same as what makes for the best literature.

Once we have granted this, however, it may seem as if Lamarque's dilemma is truly unavoidable. Since we are assuming that our lives have only one "author"—ourselves—it seems that in taking the perspective of author toward our own lives we must take the attitude either of a literary author or of the author of a life. If we take the former we are, by Lamarque's lights, misrepresenting our lives in a damaging way; if we take the latter, he would argue, we are not thinking of our lives in literary or narrative terms. This statement of the dilemma, however, overlooks a third possibility—that in taking a narrative attitude toward our lives we somehow integrate and combine these two perspectives. That such a thing is possible is intimated in *Stranger than Fiction* by the representation of Harold's and Kay's changing views on of the question of how *Death and Taxes* should end. Harold starts out wanting desperately to live and seeks Kay out to try to convince her to spare him. After he reads her novel and appreciates its aesthetic virtues he is willing, literally, to step in front of a bus. Kay, meanwhile, starts out determined to kill Harold off, but as she gets to see his development and appreciate the richness of the life he comes to have she intervenes and saves him. Kay's decision to save Harold is closely related to the fact that he comes to appreciate the aesthetic elements of literary fiction—it is not because he is real but because he is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of the narrative that she is not willing to let him do so. Her decision recognizes at once both the importance of Harold's literary attitude toward his life and the fact that it is possible to take it too far. It is not that he sees his life in literary terms at all, but rather that he does not appreciate the proper limits of this perspective, that causes Harold to fall into the danger Lamarque describes.

In *Stranger than Fiction* Kay does not in the end accept Harold's willingness to give up what is desirable from the perspective as author of a life in favor of what is desirable from the perspective of a literary author. But, crucially, she does not completely repudiate the perspective of literary author. Her ultimate solution is a compromise. She does not walk away from the novel with Harold as protagonist, leaving him to lead his life without benefit of literary sensibility. Instead she revises the novel (and with it Harold's life), making it (at least from Dr. Hilbert's position) a somewhat worse novel, but one that will allow for the flourishing of her character. The wristwatch that was to have a pivotal role by causing Harold's death does not become merely a timepiece, but turns instead into the means of Harold's salvation, and *Death and Taxes* is not abandoned, but becomes a novel about the way in which our

willingness to give significance and meaning to the seemingly random and trivial events that make up our lives is what makes those lives worth living. Kay's closing narration recounts the items and moments Harold has come to treasure over the course of the film, those that make him want so much to avoid the aesthetically perfect ending Kay originally wrote for him, even as he is willing to enact it. She finishes *Death and Taxes* (and *Stranger than Fiction*) by telling us that "we must remember that all these things, the nuances, the anomalies, the subtleties, which we assume only accessorize our days, are effective for a much larger and noble cause. They are here to save our lives. I know the idea seems strange, but I also know that it just so happens to be true. And, so it was, a wristwatch saved Harold Crick." This is hardly a caution against taking a literary perspective on our lives; to the contrary, it is a claim that our lives depend upon such a perspective.

We do not need to accept this position just because a character in an admittedly whimsical film expresses it, of course, but the kind of merging of the perspective of literary author and life author depicted in *Stranger than Fiction* offers, when applied to our own lives, an attractive and plausible way of responding to Lamarque's dilemma. We can make a meaningful and important distinction between real life and literary narratives, and hence between real people and characters in novels, without forcing ourselves to deny that there are important points of contact. Sometimes Lamarque makes it sound as if the difference between real life and literary narratives is that in literary narratives events have a meaning and significance beyond themselves, while in real life events just are what they are and do not point to anything further. It seems, however, that a far better way to draw the distinction is to say that in a literary narrative the characters are there to serve the narrative, and in a real-life narrative the narrative is there to serve the character. We face the dangers Lamarque describes when we forget this fact and let our lives become subordinated to the narratives we have constructed rather than constructing (and reconstructing) narratives in ways that enrich our lives. This is what Harold forgets. The solution to his problem is not, however, to go back to his number-driven, literal life, but to use his newfound narrative skills to find a story that suits him. In our own case, this solution is not to view our lives as without significance but rather to recognize that meaning with which actions and events in our lives are imbued comes from us and not from some external source. The point is that understanding this does not require us to conclude that the meanings are somehow unreal or fraudulent.

According to Jean Paul Sartre (1956, 96–119) it is "bad faith" to think that one's life has a given essence, plan, or meaning that comes from the outside. A certain kind of narrative view of oneself, one that depends upon a transcen-

dent meaning or an aesthetic ideal to which a life must conform, would undoubtedly qualify as bad faith of this sort. But, Sartre says, it is equally a kind of bad faith to see only facticity or natural causation in one's life. To be honest is not to deny that the events in one's life are meaningful; it is to acknowledge that one is the author of their meaning and responsible for it. Meanings are not given, they are created, and they can always be changed. It will sound strange to put forth Sartre as a champion of a narrative conception of self. His doctrine of radical freedom is clearly at odds with the idea that our choices must be governed by any kind of fixed logic, including the logic of a narrative. My point however, is precisely that taking a narrative view of one's life does not require one to think of it as bound by a rigid and inflexible template or subject to external norms. It can instead involve taking a particular attitude toward one's life, viewing oneself as character, reader, and author of a life in progress, negotiating meaning, interpreting, and revising as we go along.[5] It is not insignificant here that Sartre expressed his philosophical views about the human condition in novels as well as in nonfictional works.

It is also worth noting that we need not accept the doctrine of radical freedom to extract the point that we are after here. Frankfurt (1988) and Korsgaard (1996) both accept the idea that we must endow our lives with meaning and recognize this meaning as self-generated if we are to fulfill our natures. Both also argue, however, that doing this requires a great degree of diachronic stability, and a kind of commitment for the future that Sartre would repudiate. This kind of approach would also avoid Lamarque's dilemma through the insistence that we recognize the absence of externally given meanings but would support a more thoroughgoing narrative view.[6]

There are a variety of ways in which we might work these ideas out. The central claim, however, is that the "literary" work involved in creating meaning in our lives is work we must do if we are to build a characteristically human existence, and it is in this way and to this extent that we can and should have a narrative conception of ourselves that enriches our lives and expresses what we are. The kind of narrative work we do will not be exactly like that of an author or reader of literary fiction, but it will not be entirely unlike it either. Truth may or may not be stranger than fiction, but the two are not, at any rate, completely discontinuous.

Notes

I thank Christopher Cowley for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. For a somewhat different version of this dilemma see Strawson 2004.
2. All film quotations are from Forster 2006.
3. See, e.g., Korsgaard 1996 and Frankfurt 1988.

4. It is worth noting that they also do not function the same way in all genera or instances of literary narrative.

5. The "revision" and "reinterpretation" here need not involve confabulation or distortion—what alters is the significance we give to events and actions, not our recollection of the events and actions themselves.

6. I mean for this point only to be suggestive of future research directions. Both of these views are very complicated and it would take a great deal of work to develop the point I made here.

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2

A Person's Words: Literary Characters and Autobiographical Understanding

GARRY L. HAGBERG

I

What has been widely discussed as the Cartesian conception of selfhood, the notion or conceptual picture of a human being claiming that the most fundamental fact of human existence is autonomy or metaphysical isolation, has been illuminatingly challenged by the American pragmatic tradition. On the Cartesian view, the self is existent prior to any relation into which it enters; it has consciousness, and it has unmediated introspective access to the contents of that consciousness.[1] Anything external to it is secondary and merely contingent. On the pragmatic (or what has also been called the relational) view, the self is instead no less than *constituted* by the relations into which it enters.[2] It is made by, and it is given its content by, the complex, intricate, and layered networks of relations surrounding it. Indeed, for the foundational pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey, and for subsequent pragmatic thinkers such as George Herbert Mead and Josiah Royce, the connections between things are as important as the things connected. Thus in truth, "surrounding it" is not quite the right phrase, in that this way of putting it implicitly preserves what the pragmatists regard as the fallacious and widely unexamined preconception of the autonomous entity existing prior to those interconnections. Indeed, William James argued that we have never truly seen any given thing *wholly* by itself, so the model of object-autonomy (where we see a given isolated object first, and then, only contingently, situate or relationally interconnect it) mischaracterizes the actual phenomenology of human perception from the start.

Some of those interconnections, those relations, are born (as we shall see below) of the creative act, as we revealingly put it, of *making* comparisons, so that to perceive a thing for what it is is to perceive that thing within an often expansive and always indeterminately bounded network within which the object in question is positioned. What I will suggest here is that not only do persons (as the pragmatists suggested) exhibit a similar relational ontol-

ogy (as George Herbert Mead explicitly discussed), but indeed those persons' *words* do as well. This means that:

1. To understand their words in a full and deep sense is to understand who and what they are (and what they are made of, which, to a striking degree—once we are positioned to see it—are complex networks of endorsed words);[3]

and

2. The true understanding of their words requires seeing those words within complex constellations of evolving relations.

This is I believe close to what Wittgenstein called "the field of a word," which he rightly insisted proves decisive in determining a word's meaning as it is used in a context.[4]

But after laying the foundation of this discussion, that is, showing how other-understanding works in these relational terms, I also want to suggest that:

3. Autobiographical labor, the work of self-understanding, functions in precisely these terms as well.

This, as we will explore below in literature, biography, and autobiography, is in large part a matter of conducting subtle inquiries into the telling comparisons (in words) between:

ourselves and others;
competing self-descriptions;
narrative descriptions of the connections between our present and past selves;
what we hoped for and what we actually have (where we express these distinct categories linguistically);
words we used and words we should have used, or things we said and better things we should have said;
one way of connecting past experiences and another of achieving a form of lived coherence;

and numerous further comparisons (some kinds of which we shall shortly see) all the way down to the very finest linguistic detail.

Awareness of the content of those word-borne comparisons, for the relational view of selfhood, becomes a defining part of the content of the consciousness that—as we discover in the act of undertaking this kind of autobiographical reflection—was not and could not have been hermetically sealed in accordance with the Cartesian picture of autonomous interiority. Indeed, we can come to see that it is instructively difficult to so much as imagine a self—not a philosophical caricature, placeholder, or cipher, but an *actual*

human self—prior to, or without the defining content of, those networks of self-defining comparison-generated relations, or without, to adapt Wittgenstein's phrase, the "field" of a self.[5]

Seeing all of this clearly will involve, as we progress: (a) seeing how (meaning—in what terms) one literary character comes to understand another, where this proves to be a rather complicated, intricate, layered interrelational undertaking or, equally important in terms of this discussion, misunderstanding them; (b) seeing ourselves in the act of reading coming to understand a literary character, where this functions as a model, or a special kind of acuity-enhancing rehearsal, for actually understanding another person, and so within that readerly self-reflection seeing what it takes to achieve such understanding; and (c) thus seeing how it is that we can come to an ever-fuller understanding of ourselves through a self-reflective process of making ever more nuanced comparisons on the model of understanding a literary character.

And then, reaching just beyond the bounds of these three previous intertwined considerations, I will suggest (if in only provisional form) that:

4. It is not only self-knowledge that can result from a distinctive kind of literary absorption: it is also possible that nothing less than an act of self-composition takes place, where in the imagination the reader makes resolutions (resolving, as it were, in the subjunctive mode: getting clear about what one would do if . . .) concerning self-identity that then become, as a real result that runs parallel to the fictional world, stabilized or solidified in character, in the reader's identity.

Central to this process of self-definitional reading, and connecting directly to considerations (1) and (2) just above, will be a cultivated understanding of what it *actually* is to *thoroughly* understand a person's words in a highly particularized sense.[6] As my focus-case I will look closely at the chapter "Words Misunderstood" in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,[7] and then, working through the lists of topics above, consider the significance this holds for autobiographical understanding as we will see it in self-investigative writings of Iris Murdoch and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

So there is some ground to cover. But even at this early stage we can already say: If the Cartesian conception of selfhood and the self-transparency thesis that is its immediate corollary were true, we would have unmediated access to the meanings of our own words just as we are thought to have unmediated access to our inner contents of consciousness. In that case, autobiographical writing would simply be a matter of reading off internal content and reporting it externally. But indeed, here also in an instructive and per-

haps surprising way, we can learn that we have to *work* autobiographically to understand the fuller significance of our own past words just as we may have to work to understand the present and past words of others; *this, it will turn out, is true in life just as it is literature.* What this will suggest about words is that an atomistic conception of word-meaning is as misbegotten as an atomistic, or nonrelational, conception of the perception of an object or the perception of a human being: words are in part the makers of the networks of relations in which we live and have lived and in which we perceive and have perceived. So words, as the instruments of the comparative processes under investigation, deserve the closest attention in terms of their contextually distinct nuanced content and—when working in one distinctively reflexive way—their powers of self-constitution or self-composition. But all of the foregoing suggestions will reveal their plausibility, and indeed their more specific content, only in the contexts of detailed examples. So we turn to Milan Kundera's "Words Misunderstood," part 3 of his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.*

II

In stepping into this text we enter a verbal context that has already described itself as a kind of private reserve: Franz has finished his university lecture in Geneva and is going to see Sabina, his mistress, with whom he has been in love for a few months. This love, comparatively gauged against the alternative context of his married life, is "so precious to him that he tried to create an independent space for her in his life, a restricted zone of purity" (Kundera 1987, 82). We readers are told that he has been accepting all invitations and speaking engagements around Europe and North America in order to be able to take her with him; he has also started inventing such engagements and thus further lying to his wife so that he and his mistress can take still more frequent secret trips. With this as immediate background (as we shall see shortly, it is much more extensive in a way that shows something important about linguistic meaning), on arriving at her apartment-studio (she is a painter) he asks, "How would you like to go to Palermo ten days from now?" (82). Her seemingly simple answer, "I prefer Geneva," is actually a complex, relationally intertwined set of three words with a multiplicity of connections, and Franz is quick to sense this, even if he could not articulate all of them in advance of the successive exchanges.[8]

He replies, "How can you live without seeing Palermo?"; she replies that she has seen it; and he replies in turn, "You have?," with, as Kundera's narrator tells us, a hint of jealousy. We immediately imagine that, because he

travels with her (preserving the integrity of the "zone") to conduct his affair with her, that she may have traveled with someone else to Palermo. Thus the question, "You have?" is hardly reducible to a combination of the dictionary definitions of the words "you" and "have" followed by a question mark; this question's meaning is not contained within a request to confirm what she has just said; nor would any such reconfirmation coherently answer what he has said or follow along its conversational trajectory; instructively vis-à-vis the problem of word-meaning, any such answer would be uncomprehending and oddly deaf to inflected content.[9]

But she does follow the conversational trajectory, and it immediately emerges that she was toying with him (by playing within the range of significance that her knowing Palermo, in *this* context, might entail or carry in its particular and distinctive trail of connotations), and that she has seen Palermo in a photograph on a postcard. But that settled, still "Franz was sad. He had grown so accustomed to linking their love life to foreign travel that his 'Let's go to Palermo!' was an unambiguous erotic message and her 'I prefer Geneva' could have only one meaning: his mistress no longer desired him" (82).

These sentences not only induce his somewhat crestfallen state; they also open an avenue of psychological explanation within this exchange: his words functioned to send her "an unambiguous message" in addition to—or actually, within—the words inviting her to Palermo. And her reply, which we see is felt as rejection, establishes implicitly what Kundera's narrator expressly articulates next: as the antithesis to Franz's public life, in which we are told he is powerful and even feared for his arrogant tenacity in putting forward his views, he sees love as a form of longing, where that takes psychological shape as "putting himself at the mercy of his partner" (83). This transforms him, making him "like a prisoner of war" who has given up his weapons and is "deprived in advance of defense against a possible blow." Thus his longing for antithetical love (that is, secret and transgressive love, antithetical to his public persona) is for him always psychologically present in the form of his "wondering when the blow will fall." All of this prepares us for our comprehension of the meaning of the sentence that is itself giving the meaning of a word in this context: "That is why I can say that for Franz, love meant the constant expectation of a blow."

I mentioned above that the perception of objects is a relationally intertwined matter (parallel to the relationally intertwined understanding of words): "While Franz attended to his anguish, his mistress put down her brush," and returning with a bottle of wine, "she opened it without a word and poured out two glasses." What is the content of this wordless but mean-

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ingful presentation of an object? Franz, upon seeing it, is greatly relieved and suddenly feels "slightly ridiculous": the significance of the object, in this circumscribed context, corrects his earlier utter misapprehension of the significance of her words. "The 'I prefer Geneva' did not mean she refused to make love; quite the contrary, it meant she was tired of limiting their lovemaking to foreign cities" (83).

Now, it is true that one might here insist that the meaning of the words as used are in essence simple, direct, and invariant across context, just as are the objects perceived: "I prefer Geneva" means "I prefer Geneva"; to see a bottle of wine is just to see a bottle of wine. But that would be to exclude, in the name of a superimposed uniformity, everything in play here that concerns cultivated human sensibility—in short, it would exclude everything that concerns *actual* language as spoken, as used by us. It would exclude, in the name of a neat theory, the linguistic world in which we live. One could also say, locating a sort of halfway house between the conception of fixity of meaning or invariant semantic content on the one extreme and context or occasion sensitivity on the other, that the meanings are fixed but that they here are speaking in code, where the encoded content is itself in any case fully expressible in direct and nonrelational terms.[10] But at a glance one can see that they are decidedly not speaking in code: that would be to agree in advance that one word stood for another, or one phrase stood for another (as, for example, when bank robbers agree in advance that when the leader says to a teller, "Good morning," that means "Pull out your guns"). This exchange, by contrast, is unfolding in the partially improvisational way actual language does, in a way that is aware of prior moves in the linguistic game but that is not preordained by prior explicit agreement.

So one could say next (and now locating a position at a sort of three-quarters house), that the meanings of the words in this exchange are fixed by circumstantial detail, so that the words as used are fixed with singular semantic content by these speakers on this occasion. But Kundera's next passage addresses this, showing that the truth of the matter is more interestingly intricate than this "three-quarters house" formulation would capture.[11] While being "overjoyed that her refusal to go to Palermo was actually a call to love" (and thus that he now is rightly positioned in relation to her words), he is slightly crestfallen, but now for the reason that the action that redirects the trajectory of her words carries with it, in its meaning-contributing undercurrent, twin possibilities. The first is her being for some reason intentionally and comprehendingly determined "to violate the zone of purity" we learned of above, thus bringing by brute force the transcendent union he believes they share into the objectionably quotidian. Or, the second possibility, she has uncom-

prehendingly "failed to understand his apprehensive attempts to save their love from banality and separate it radically from his conjugal home" (83), thus leaving him feeling the slight chill of the psychic isolation that comes from the incomplete or imperfect understanding of a lover. It is thus not only that the meaning, as corrected, is not monodimensional; one could express "non-monodimensionality" in a simplifying theory of word meaning in terms of doubled or layered significance. It is rather, more deeply, that the very question of *word* meaning is slowly but steadily losing its intelligibility: to understand the language in play here, we do not begin with linguistic atoms (parallel to the point about the perception of objects that William James made) that we then add together; nor do we (we will see this more clearly below) understand the words in any way independently of an understanding of the persons using them. Biographical or other-understanding (and as we shall see below, autobiographical or self-understanding) is neither prior nor posterior to the understanding of the words of those persons; rather, persons are the vehicles of words while words are simultaneously the vehicles of personhood. Kundera shows this with considerable precision and philosophic exactitude; indeed, he does so with a degree of subtlety that requires attention to detail to make its force and significance philosophically explicit.

Sabina, painter–mistress–intricate speaker, next (again silently), while removing garments in a measured tempo, becomes curiously autonomous and acts as if unaware of his presence; she is indeed "behaving like an acting student whose improvisation assignment is to make the class believe she is alone in a room and no one can see her." She then fixes Franz with a long stare, but of a kind that is not *of* them, of their relationship, of who *they* are together. Kundera's narrator describes this as her transgressing implicit rules of the game that, he correctly claims, "all lovers unconsciously establish" (84); important for present considerations, this leaves Franz unable to understand this look, and he had "not the slightest notion what it was asking." We, as readers, do not yet know that she will shortly reflect, with incredulity, on how many years she has spent "pursuing one lost moment" (86); what we do know is that Franz is disoriented, that what he is witnessing is a fragment of theater not of them and their evolving embodied conversation, and that the trajectory of these gestures is disconnected and seems, dangerously and threateningly, to come from elsewhere. "The stare she had just fixed on him fell outside their rules."[12] This comes, suddenly and intrusively, from another language game,[13] another relationship, another identity-constitutive interactive style; it treats him as absent—or, far worse, as another person he does not know—and thus painfully not as the self she sees in and with him. It moves beyond the bounds of what he can, within this context, understand.

This is a perfect microcosm of other-misunderstanding, where that misunderstanding derives from the superimposition of one expressive/interactive style that one does not know over the top of another that one does know and where that superimposition is motivated by a private or unshared (and, given its wholly separate origin, perhaps unsharable) desire to recapture something lost, something unfinished, something with a teleology or internal trajectory that stopped short of a cathartic or settled conclusion.[14] And it is a perfect miniature of linguistic incomprehension—it is not that one does not know, in dictionary terms, the meanings of the words. It is that one does not recognize the interrelations between the words and the person, and one does not see the complexly intertwining relations that connect what is happening now with what happened before.

Sabina leads them to a mirror, before which she directs her still-alien gaze to herself for some time, and then, in a secondary way and only glancingly, only with a thin and constrained acknowledgment of his (or of at least some) presence, to him; she reaches out to retrieve, and don, an old bowler hat. We get a description of what the mirror reports back to him: "instantaneously transformed," we learn that "suddenly it was a woman in her undergarments, a beautiful, distant, indifferent woman with a terribly out-of-place bowler hat on her head, holding the hand of a man in a gray suit and tie" (85). Distant, indifferent, out-of-place, a (not *this*) woman: all the result of words and gestures from elsewhere—so much so that he now describes himself also as an unknown generic. He is not enmeshed in the relations that they have woven together, and he cannot find himself.[15] He knows he understands nothing. And so now he longs for restoration to the context of their convergence from this alien, slightly chilled, disorienting place. Seeing that the disrobing has yielded not "erotic provocation" but rather only "an odd little caper" (85), and beginning to feel that this caper has gone on too long (the time for romantic union, if it was ever there within this estranging mini-drama, is now gone), he gently removes the bowler hat as his attempt at restoration, making within his perception a metaphorical connection to what the strange hat is not in order to better capture what it is, to better describe the content of his gesture of romantic restoration for him and, he hopes, for Sabina. "It was as though he were erasing the mustache a naughty child had drawn on a picture of the Virgin Mary" (85). And with all that has transpired, he now asks what has become a very different question, a considerably more interesting and complex one—if clothed in the same garb of the previous one: "Will you come with me in ten days to Palermo?"[16] Now, "she said yes unquestioningly, and he left." The field of these words has changed, their relational web complicated. To understand them, as readers imaginatively entering their word-

borne world, is to see this. And from this conceptually intricate example, we get a glimmer, or more, of what constitutes the real content of understanding another.

Sabina, now by herself, puts the bowler back on and contemplates herself in the mirror. And it is here that she finds herself "amazed at the number of years she had spent pursuing one lost moment" (86). Why? Her previous lover, Tomas, with whom she has remained in a kind of sustained private imaginative contact of the mind, once was lifted, very much *with* her and *of* them, from a fleeting comical joke with the hat to a shared moment of transcendence that seared its way into both of their identities. To summarize an extended passage, Kundera here makes clear that the erotic encounter was in a sense the vehicle of, but by no means the whole content of, the experience. Thus the perception of the relationally constituted object, the hat, is gaining in complexity. But he as quickly shows that it is still much more than what we, as readers, presently see in this artifact. As if explicitly clarifying the philosophical significance here, Kundera's narrator makes for us a catalog. The list includes:

1. The bowler hat (recall the "what one would look like as a mayor" line above—a phrase that itself is now being more fully situated into a constellation of meaning-determinations) "was a vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather, the mayor of a small Bohemian town during the nineteenth century" (87).
2. It "was a memento of her father"—but this too is not the case in any simple way: "After the funeral her brother appropriated all their parents' property, and she, refusing out of sovereign contempt to fight for her rights, announced sarcastically that she was taking the bowler hat as her sole inheritance." She thus sees the symbol of her own act of defiance and assertion, even if (or perhaps especially because it is) self-defeating, in the memento (and for her, not separable from her perception of the object).
3. "It was a prop for her love games with Tomas." One might understand this as a special kind of externalized "object-memory" or objectified emotive-erotic mnemonic.
4. "It was a sign of her originality, which she consciously cultivated. She could not take much with her when she emigrated, and taking this bulky, impractical thing meant giving up other, more practical ones." That is, to see what the object means for her, and thus to come to know her perception of the object as parallel to her employment of any particular set of words as she means them and as they are meaningful for her, is in this sense to also see what it is not—the hat was not any of those more practical, manageable, and predictable items. And here again, the flouting of that predictability in circumstances of pressing practical necessity is not

only a symbol of herself; rather, the act performed with that hat becomes a defining part of who she is and of who she is (this is how the word "consciously" functions here) to herself. When she refers to it, she refers, in a perhaps subtle but meaning-contributing sense, to part of herself and her inner historical genealogy.[17]

III

The fifth entry in the narrator's catalog is however the deepest: earlier, when she went to Zurich to see Tomas, she donned it just as he opened the hotel room door. She thought she was jokingly playing, but she underestimated the power of the shared relationally expansive perception of the artifact.

5. The hat suddenly became "a monument to time past" (87), and rather than only "a continuation" of the established "game," it "was a recapitulation of time, a hymn to their common past, a sentimental summary of an unsentimental story that was disappearing in the distance."

All of their past time together, everything they were to each other, was telescoped into that moment by the unexpected power of this shared relationally enmeshed perception, by this network of increasingly compressed meaning. And the sense of the uniqueness, of the irreplaceable nature of *that* connection, conjoined to the sense that this could not last, lifted this moment above and beyond its time—indeed, in a sense above and beyond time. And thus Sabina was condemned to try, endlessly and futilely, to recapture it—precisely the driven repetition she is presently enacting with Franz. Thus what is calling to her with the enchanting grip of Sirens in the mirror is a repetition compulsion that is for us as readers brought within the bounds of the comprehensible through the process of coming to a cultivated understanding of her words.

But, with our initial reminders in mind of (a) what William James and his pragmatist colleagues said about relational perception, along with (b) the suggestion about the similarity of this to a properly nuanced account of word meaning, and (c) the significance of this for person-understanding, what might we now say of *how those words are actually working*? What, in this still-further-evolving context, is the meaning of the artifact, and of its name, "bowler hat"? Kundera, philosophical novelist, captures the matter precisely:

> The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina's life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed. I might call it Heraclitus' ("You can't step twice into the same river") riverbed:

> the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another *semantic river*: each time the same object would give rise to new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. (88)

Wittgenstein said that words have meaning only in the stream of life. And in this particular stream, in these threatening words, gestures, and facial expressions,[18] Franz will forever be a stand-in: the audience (Sabina) wants to see (and is condemned to forever attempt, hopelessly, to see) the real actor, the original. And so—marking the progress in our slowly earned ability to understand the meanings in play here—Kundera's narrator says:

> Now, perhaps, we are in a better position to understand the abyss separating Sabina and Franz: he listened eagerly to the story of her life and she was equally eager to hear the story of his, but although they had a clear understanding of the logical meaning of the words they exchanged, they failed to hear the semantic susurrus of the river flowing through them. (88)

Language-games, in Wittgenstein's sense, can come together and generate new vocabularies that are, or become, comprehensible: the language of hydrodynamics merged with the language of mental activity produces a Freudian language of pressure, blockage, flow, release mechanisms, and so forth (they may be disguised metaphors that can be mistaken as literal descriptions, but that is another matter). And some language games, merged, generate uncorrectable incomprehensibility: asking for the color or weight of an abstract number or the committing of a Rylean category mistake.[19] It is the more sophisticated and more human form of this that Kundera is investigating: Franz, in a simple sense, understands every word Sabina is using—he does not need a dictionary, nor would one help him now. In a real, that is, a complex, sense—in the sense of a *person's* using language—he understands very little. "And so when she put on the bowler hat in his presence, Franz felt uncomfortable, as if someone had spoken to him in a language he did not know. It was neither obscene nor sentimental, merely an incomprehensible gesture" (88).[20]

What Franz understands from *within* the context of their relationship he in an unmediated sense grasps (and he does so in an important sense without having to learn it, to work it out) in a way that is internal to who they are to and with each other. What he confusedly sees before him that Sabina brings from outside of their relationship (and that she is inwardly compelled to bring, despite knowing that both its gesture language and spoken language are alien to who she and Franz are), he will not and could not understand

without working through the process of gradual, careful, attentive, internally interconnected, and exactingly nuanced understanding that Kundera's case study illustrates. And she will not, within their world, give him what he would need to know about Tomas in order to patiently earn a true understanding of what he sees before him in terms of a transcendent moment and her unquenchable and ultimately ruinous compulsion to attempt to recapture it. And so the analogy to musical composition again:

> While people are fairly young and the musical composition of their lives is still in its opening bars, they can go about writing it together and exchange motifs (the way Tomas and Sabina exchanged the motif of the bowler hat), but if they meet when they are older, like Franz and Sabina, their musical compositions are more or less complete, and every motif, every object, every word means something different to each of them. (89)

Kundera follows this with a section he calls "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words," proceeding through the words "woman," "fidelity and betrayal," "music," "light and darkness," "parades," "the beauty of New York," "Sabina's country," "cemetery," "the old church in Amsterdam," "strength," and "living in truth." Each case shows, with a detail that only an intricate close reading can capture, the way in which the learning of what a word or set of words means to a person constitutes significant, and I want to argue irreplaceable, content of our understanding of that person. And as mentioned above, this shows (also a point to which we will return below in terms of autobiographical understanding) that our understanding of a person significantly deepens by coming to understand how that person came to learn the meaning of a word or set of words that are constitutively important for that person.[21] A fully revelatory close reading would proceed microscopically and thus at length, but briefly, it can be said here: "woman," for Sabina, is a given, a fact of one's existence into which one is born. But for Franz it is an ennobling honorific—not all women, for him, deserve the term. And he makes a distinction between respecting Marie-Claude (his wife) and respecting the woman in Marie-Claude. "But if Marie-Claude is herself a woman, then who is that other woman hiding in her, the one he must always respect?" (90). Kundera's narrator asks if the internal woman might be the Platonic ideal of woman in some sense contained within but metaphysically separate from the individual, but he quickly corrects this: it is his mother of whom he would never say that he respected the woman in her. He respected her as identical with the ideal.

This brings into focus the difference between their understandings of the word, but we learn next how, for Franz, this difference is indissolubly con-

nected to his learning of the meaning of another word; our understanding deepens accordingly. "When he was twelve, she suddenly found herself alone, abandoned by Franz's father" (90). The boy sensed something very significant had just happened, but his mother "muted the drama with mild, insipid words so as not to upset him." (We see here that phraseology can itself be the primary expression of an act of kindness.) But the important connection is: when he and his mother went into town that day he saw that her shoes did not match, and although he wanted to point this out, the boy sensed that this might somehow hurt her and so refrained. (We see here that sensitive reticence, not speaking or withholding words, can be the primary expression of kindness or sympathy as well.) But during the two hours they spent walking in the city, he kept his eyes on her shoes. "It was then that he had his first inkling of what it means to suffer" (90).

This case suggests one way of putting the point: knowing what it means to suffer is what is actually involved in knowing the meaning of "suffer." And to understand how he acquired this concept, the circumstances of its emergence in his awareness and the way in which this early experience resonates throughout his sensibility, is to begin to understand him as a person. (It is for this reason, I believe, that Wittgenstein often returned to the question not only of the meaning of a word, but of learning the meaning of a word, or what Stanley Cavell would call the scene of instruction.)[22] Learning what it means to suffer; the protecting of a boy from the harshest reality of the content of that suffering; the bearing of that suffering with a quiet dignity; the role of his mother at the center of this relational matrix; his having carried with him all of this as a formative memory throughout this life—these are the constituents, the resonances of the word "woman" for him, and it is why, with the exception of that maternal relational center, he makes the distinction between "the woman" and "the woman in her," a distinction not within the consciousness of Sabina. (I will suggest below that this is precisely one central way in which, on reflection of a particular kind, we come to know ourselves.)

Similarly, for fidelity and betrayal: Franz, in speaking about his mother, displays fidelity, and he does so with the ulterior motive of charming her and ultimately winning her over not just for now but permanently. But "what he did not know was that Sabina was charmed more by betrayal than by fidelity" (91). This of course cannot be understood when stated in that reductive way (without making her sound morally alien to a point of incomprehensibility), but the picture starts to change when we learn that Sabina at fourteen was in love with a boy her age, and so her father would not let her leave the house unaccompanied for a year. Her father painted sunsets and vases on Sundays, and once made fun of Picasso in her presence. Not being able to love the

boy, she loved cubism, and after completing schooling she went off to Prague where she could, to become who she was, betray her home and its conventions. So while she had been told betrayal was the most heinous offense, for her "betrayal meant breaking ranks. Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going of into the unknown" (91). But after the death of her mother and the suicide of her father a day later out of grief, she now wanted, as she conceived it, to betray her betrayal—and that became self-defining in turn. All the while, with each expression of maternal fidelity against this unknown background, Franz makes himself ever less magnificent, ever less adventurous, ever less able or willing to make himself who he is or could be by self-willed action against a background of conventional expectations. Without genuine understanding, they are perennially doomed to work at cross-purposes within the same word. There is a distinct sense in which we can do this within ourselves, working against or blinding ourselves to self-knowledge by using a conventional or simplified meaning of an important word or phrase as a shield behind which we hide precisely the kind of rich content being shown here by Kundera; our false confidence in our grasp of what we take to be perfectly clear significant phrases of our past or present becomes a form of self-deception precisely in cases where what we need is an analogue of close-reading practiced upon our own lives.[23]

And then of the word "music": for her, it is endless noise (going back to summer camp with loudspeakers blaring from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m.); for him, it is the escape from endless words, realizing that "all his life he had done nothing but talk, write, lecture, concoct sentences, search for formulations and amend them." Against this nonstop verbiage, he longs for an "all-encompassing, over-powering, window-rattling din to engulf, once and for all, the pain, the futility, the vanity of words. Music was the negation of sentences, music was the anti-word!" (94). We have the expression: What a (given thing—a diamond ring, a diploma, a yacht, a father's pen) stands for. This is importantly distinct, and often more revealingly complex, than the expression: What a (given word—"diamond ring," "yacht," and so on) refers to. This is one way of marking the contrast between merely understanding a word in a minimal or dehumanized sense on the one hand and the humane understanding of a person through understanding his use of words on the other. For Franz, what music stands for comes from its significance as connected to his identity; this content of the "stands for" kind is thus a subset of the associations sometimes dormant, but always present, within his use of the word "music." So, in this way, to understand that is to understand him. And his knowing this is one part of the content of his autobiographical self-understanding. "He yearned

for one long embrace with Sabina, yearned never to say another sentence, another word, to let his orgasm fuse with the orgiastic thunder of music" (94). Kundera does not say so, but a reader expects that the irony contained within this inward antagonism, that is, that this "anti-word" thought is only expressible in words and that its content is only definable against words or polemically in a way that necessarily includes its opposition, is not lost on the professor.

The remaining terms in Kundera's dictionary reveal more subtle differences that weave together as a fabric of biographical understanding in literary form: "darkness" for her means the willful negation of what is seeable, an act of refusal to see, a disagreement with what is seen. For him, it is to descend into a world of unbounded, consuming sensory pleasure. And we see Europe's intentional, designed beauty standing in contrast to New York's "accidental" beauty; Sabina's first mature painting emerged because of an accidental drip of red paint—for her, "beauty by mistake" is much richer, evocative, and varied than Franz's preferred "composed beauty of human design" (102). In this case, to understand the meaning of a term on a human level within a context of usage is at the same time to uncover an aesthetic predilection (born of meaningfully interlinked past experience) that becomes a constitutive part of a distinct sensibility. To understand a person's aesthetic life is far more important to understanding their personhood than is widely recognized; that aesthetic life, even if centered on visual art or music, is cultivated in words, in a vocabulary of criticism and appreciation. "Sabina's county" is a phrase for her associated with the words (which Franz hears her utter in connection with this phrase), "prison, persecution, enemy tanks, emigration, pamphlets, banned books, and banned exhibitions" (102); for him, it is a phrase relationally entwined with a romanticized conception of "life on a large scale," "a life of risk, daring, and the danger of death," all combining to renew his "faith in the grandeur of human endeavor" (103). "Cemetery" means a place of green, of flowers, of undisturbed peace even in a world of conflict; it means "an ugly dump of stones and bones" (104); in some cases in this text, we learn *that* the difference is there (as in the cemetery case); in other cases, we are shown *why* the difference is there, and in those cases we understand not merely that a word happens as a mere contingency to have different associations. Rather, we understand the person ever more exactingly. Like the distinction between "refers to" and "stands for," the "that" versus "why" contrast can also serve to mark the difference between shallow and deep autobiographical understanding.

But then, as Kundera's philosophical novel also shows, the meaning of the phrase I have used throughout, "understanding a person," does not itself

reduce to one simple or unitary thing. As we can see across the examples I have discussed to this point, and as we can also see throughout the book (and indeed throughout Kundera's oeuvre), we can utterly fail to understand, superficially understand, partially understand, misunderstand, fully if narrowly understand, fully and deeply understand, and so forth along what we might picture as an Aristotelian continuum.[24] But as quickly as we picture that continuum ranging from nothing on the one pole to everything on the other, we see that Kundera has shown—important in these waters—still more: we can fully understand a part of a person, deeply understand one side of a more complex matter, only superficially understand one aspect of an utterance while more deeply, but not entirely, fathoming the significance of another aspect, and so forth though countless epistemic variations.

Kundera is showing us the fascinating and often layered complexity of the process of gaining an understanding of another: we see this, within his fictional text, at a reflective distance inside the verbal world of Sabina and Franz. We are shown what it is or would be for one person to gain a word-borne understanding of another, what it is or would be for the other to reciprocally understand the first, what it is or would be for those literary characters to understand the other's words, what it is for us, as readers, to understand not only each of them but also the limits of their mutual understanding. And, equally important, we gain insight into the nature or character of the exchanges between them, their language game, and what it is to understand the words that constitute the linguistic grounds of their identities[25] and to understand the words with which, as an active process of self-constitution, they compose themselves.

IV

But, with all of this behind us—and only with all of this behind us—I want to say explicitly what I have suggested throughout: the forms of understanding shown here—one literary character understanding or not understanding another, a reader understanding literary characters, a reader understanding the relationship between two characters—are all direct models for, and indeed present in, the active processes of autobiographical writing. Or to put it another way: a person, working toward and ultimately gaining an understanding of herself or himself, proceeds in precisely the foregoing terms, that is, just as we have seen them operating within a literary world, and as we have seen them in our reading of and reflecting upon that world. Language, with all the nuances we have seen within Kundera's text, carries the content of the autobiographical process in precisely the same intricate ways. But to

make this link between the depicted understanding of one person by another within fiction and self-understanding in real life, we should look, if briefly, at the intermediate case of biographical understanding, that is, the understanding of one person by another in written form. This is a hybrid of the literary and real life, and can be revealing as a halfway point between the two.

In Peter J. Conradi's (2001) biography of Iris Murdoch, after more than 500 pages of tellingly informative detail ranging throughout her life, he writes, "As for Iris's dress-sense, after marriage she gave up feminine impersonation. Before then she could disconcert at dances, wearing a velvet dress and full make-up including mascara and lipstick" (512). *Impersonation*? This captures in one compressed word the relation this multidimensional person had to one distinct idiom of her own self-presentation—she was too complex a person to fit into one single projection or self-image. But it is not only that: in the details to follow, Conradi connects a number of dots pertaining to Iris Murdoch's issues about clothing, including ways she was perceived and described by others as well as issues of clothing and appearance she herself brought up with others. What these individual episodes, these now-connected dots, show is that "impersonation" is nowhere near as harsh a word as it initially seems, and that beneath its misleadingly nasty first impression it carries a message. Murdoch could be adroit at dress: "Iris could also be stylish . . . she arrived in a splendid antique military coat made of the finest black cloth with gilt buttons" (513). But she also went to the other extreme: she asked an acquaintance at a dinner party if her present attire would be suitable for her appearance as a guest of honor at an Oxford college the following week; she was wearing a "black karate-like tunic and trousers lightly marked by what could very possibly have been scrambled egg" (512). And she could cultivate a deliberately "bohemian or eccentric" look, as with "the tangerine-coloured plastic mac with purple outfit she wore in a filmed interview around 1970" (513).

But what this collection of episodes (along with others described in Conradi's study) shows with a collective force is precisely the fittingness of the word "impersonation"; the logic of the concept of impersonation plainly requires that there be a real person beneath the exterior doing the impersonating. It is that real person beneath, the person who has enduring and truly self-defining traits that these fleeting sartorial episodes implicitly point out in a sense negatively: to see these episodes together is to see that the matter of real interest is beneath them. Or: to see them rightly is to see what they are not (or not unto themselves), or to see them in a web of relations that point out their deeper meaning beneath their own surface. We are put into a position, by these anecdotes, to better understand the words describing the real person beneath those merely contingent appearances. And the words we next get

from Conradi's biographical composition—words describing what is of the essence of the person—are those of Murdoch's friend Frances Partridge; she writes of "her magnificent realism, her Joan-of-Arc-like quality, her way of attending to what everyone said, weighing it (to the accompaniment of a very Oxford 'Yes, yes, yes') and then bringing out her response" (513). This is the kind of incisive, fully present, close attention and cultivated interaction (i.e., the close reading of a person) that one rightly values highly; this is the true person beneath the indirectly truth-telling episodes, one who on the score of human attentiveness never once fails throughout Conradi's biography. And it is the person doing (once the deeper truth of her character and intellectual style is brought into focus) the "impersonating."

Conradi increasingly understands Murdoch, both as novelist and as person, as his book progresses, and he places the reader, by assembling details that together show the fittingness of particular descriptions, in a position to achieve the same. We see within this biography numerous moments that show what it is for two central subjects within it (Murdoch and her husband John Bayley) to be bound together, to live inside a mutual understanding. On this score one passage may stand for many:

> Some friends, they decided, were "elephants," others "angels." John's brother Michael was Iris and John's premier example of the great category of elephants; later friends—Stephen Spender, George Clive who farmed and entertained in the Welsh Marches—were others. The defining characteristics of an elephant included quietness, secretiveness, impenetrability, small eyes, being kind and easy to be with, someone who might, in the pleasantest of ways, under an always polite exterior, be pursuing their own ends. . . . "Elephants" cannot be "angels": angels have the wonderful capacity of never belonging entirely to themselves: there were not many angels. Elephants definitely do belong to themselves. They lead, however, unexamined lives, and don't desire self-knowledge.

One could say one knows perfectly well the meaning of the words "elephant" and "angel," and in some circumstances one would be right to say this. It depends on what the emergent criteria for knowing the meaning of these words are within that conversational circumstance. But there is no generic or universal or case-insensitive super-context in which one would always be right to say it—how would we describe such a super-context? What Murdoch and Bayley meant by these terms, we get a glimpse of here (a glimpse of Wittgenstein's "field" as they, like Sabina and Tomas with the bowler hat, have idiosyncratically expanded it, or like Kundera's "musical theme" that they have developed together), and the truth concerning the cultivated high-focus

attentiveness Murdoch exemplified beneath the seemingly trivial details of clothing inflects and informs it: what we see under those connected dots gives further specific content to their humorous-yet-deeply-serious term "angel." Angels, in not entirely belonging to themselves, are always in part constituted by their relations to others, always *truly* attentive to others, and always (in Stanley Cavell's sense of philosophy itself[26]) tirelessly responsive (which this kind of attentiveness, as a moral achievement, requires). "Elephants," overtly or covertly (beneath a covering of politeness or clothing), are always in some sense mindful of pursuing their own ends.

One could work through Conradi's entire biography and patiently show how very well what we see herein corresponds to the process of word and phrase understanding as Kundera presented it, but suffice it to say for the present: cases of characters inside literature coming to understandings (or not, in informatively differentiated ways, or to a degree, within limits) of each other through the very highly nuanced understandings of the words in play are without question different from cases of biographers coming to an understanding of their subjects; this is true for the simple reason that the former is of fictional characters and the latter is of real persons. But this should not blind us to the very striking similarities, and indeed to the possibility of understanding the latter *in terms of* the former. The similarities run deep.

However, as mentioned above, the biographical case is transitional to the case that is our final target here, that is, the content of self-understanding that takes shape in autobiographical writing. It is true that there are a number of reasons that commonly suggest themselves (some of which we saw at the outset of this chapter) to radically divide autobiographical from biographical understanding: to put it most briefly, the problem of other minds, the problem of knowing the contents of the mind of another, does not (as we imagine the contrast in overly stark terms) arise in the first-person case. As *auto*biographers we are, as it seems to us, always already one with the subject. And this leads us to the belief that all the content is always already there—we need only turn our inward attention to it. This philosophical myth, born of the dualistic picture of immediate or privileged access to first-person mental content,[27] can itself blind us to the striking similarities to biographical understanding, which as we have seen are (once one is prepared to look in the right way) strikingly similar to the understanding of fictional (or wholly word-borne) characters in turn. But—as in so much of philosophical thinking—the steps that are decisive in setting out the lines of the ensuing discussion are the very first ones, taken as given or taken as granted in such an obvious or unproblematic way that to pause to reflect on them would be only to

unnecessarily retard the progress waiting to be made. Such presuppositions are almost always false, as they are here. But what are these presuppositions, specifically?

I used the phrase just above, "all the content is there—we need only turn our attention to it," as though we readily and transparently understand all the elements making up this phrase. Because I used the phrase "philosophical myth" just after it, one might be forgiven for concluding that I would simply put a negation sign in from of the phrase, and argue its contrary, that is, that I would simply argue that the content is not there, ready for attention or, indeed, transcription into written form (thus seeing autobiographical writing on a model of inner-to-outer correspondence).[28] And having claimed, as the antithesis to the thesis, that the content is not there waiting, I might then argue that the autobiographical narrative is wholly created, wholly contingent on what I happen to say, wholly constructed. This negation assumes that I know what prepackaged autobiographical content is or would be; my claim would then be stated polemically against that picture as presumed intelligible from the outset. But that way of proceeding, that is, accepting the initial presupposition of *the very conception of* ready transparency, would block the kind of progress we actually need to make on this issue—progress that takes form as freedom from the grip of this picture—a picture that manifests its foundational influence whether we argue for it or against it. So, if not polemically where we presume ready intelligibility within our opposition, how do we proceed? We might use a passage from Iris Murdoch on getting ready to write her second novel to begin to loosen the grip (what Wittgenstein called "assembling reminders for a particular purpose").

Only a few days after completing her first novel, Murdoch registered the fundamental idea of her second. She wrote at that time: "The next thing. Which is already present, only I have not yet turned to look at it. Like a king whose bride has been brought from a far country. But he continues to look out of the window, though he can hear the rustle of her dress" (389). What I am suggesting is that we too easily think of autobiographical content, waiting to be externalized in written form, in precisely this way, as though we need only turn our attention to it to fully and thoroughly know it—an inward gaze at memory images would yield instant self-knowledge. But the more interesting truth is otherwise—indeed to a degree that our confidence in the intelligibility of the phrase "all the content is there" as employed in the context of autobiography is shaken rather badly: her phrase was "Which is already present." Except, as she learned the hard way, it wasn't. We learn shortly that she worked through multiple drafts over the next two years of steady and rigorous labor, working out all kinds of problems (a close study

of the notebooks and drafts would show how involved a process this actually was). So what then was present in advance? What she in truth had was: a very general idea (which she registered or in a sense copyrighted), an idea that required an enormous amount of labor to articulate, to exactingly express, to specify in language.[29] This, I want to suggest, is *very* like the difference between the generic idea of self-knowledge as imagined in the abstract and the reality of actually working through the painstaking process of understanding self-defining and self-composing words as Kundera has captured the matter. Murdoch had to create selves with pasts in language so that they can within the textual world be made to understand each other and so that her readers can understand them.

Murdoch wrote that nothing ever came out right the first time, that she had to write and rewrite; thus, recasting was not merely, not only, a matter of polishing something already there, but rather a labored process essential to acquiring and stabilizing the language that carried these characters through their word-dependent lives. Misunderstandings, wrong descriptions, partial or superficial understandings, and prismatic or motivated misperceptions all have to be supplanted by what are often hard-won improvements. Her initial words, recall, were: "Only I have not yet turned to look at it." *Only*?—again, as though this is simply a matter of turning one's gaze in order to fully know the thing in question? In order merely to see the clothes the new queen is wearing, perhaps. But to see the person? And at what does the king presently look? Presumably at a landscape or a garden, from a height and a distance, that is, not *closely*. As though turning quickly, any moment, to the bride with an equally distracted, superficial, and distanced—that is, inattentive—gaze will do. As though that glance will show him who she is. This is the outward source of the misleading model of the inward glance.

But there is still more here: the king hears *evidence* (the rustling fabric) of the presence of the bride. Just as an autobiographer can sense the presence of significant self-knowledge that has not yet been examined with requisite care, the requisite high-focus attention, the very kind of attention Murdoch consistently gave others—but now focused on the first-person case. The bride is a *person*, and so to be understood, indeed seen, for who she is will require very much more than a glance. It will require what William James said of objects, and what Josiah Royce suggested may apply even more strongly with person-perception. It will require what Tomas and Sabina had, what haunts Sabina still as a now-impossible standard of mutual understanding, and what Franz and Sabina, separated by words—despite all they do have—cannot have, fully, together. Even a quick look into Murdoch's actual practices as they refuted her initial words—words that we might have thought lend cre-

dence to the picture of ready-to-write internal autobiographical content—immediately shows not only that such content is not there in any full sense, but more strongly (and it is this that begins to undercut the presupposition of the ready intelligibility of the phrase) that it is not at all clear what we might mean by autobiographical content being already there, awaiting transcription. We acquire and carry autobiographical knowledge in linguistic form, and those words, sentences, paragraphs, texts, do not come already worked out. Nor is the process of self-descriptive writing anything like simple one-to-one matching. So the vague intimation of autobiographical content in the way Murdoch saw her next novel, yes, but fully articulated content, as she indeed experienced over two years, is another matter. It certainly does not conform to the simple conceptual template or philosophical picture that presents itself on first reflection. And with that, we move to autobiographical writing itself.

V

Rousseau, in his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (2011), provides in microcosm the more complex process that I am suggesting is in play here: he provides this microcosm, fittingly, while autobiographically reflecting on his prior autobiographical writing. By the time we see the following passages (passages, like much of this book, in which he is reflecting back on the nature of the autobiographical work he undertook in his *Confessions* [1953]), he has repeatedly emphasized the significance he now sees in what he (a) decided to put into language, (b) what he did not, (c) what he elided, (d) what he over-extended or exaggerated, (e) what he reframed from one version to a better or different one, (f) what he recast in more carefully chiseled terms—in short, the very things Murdoch did during those two years and what we see that Franz needs to work out and work through in connection with Sabina's past, with his past, with their past, and with the differences of meaning between them. Rousseau writes, "I have never felt more keenly my natural aversion to lying than when I was writing my *Confessions*, for it is there that I could have been frequently and sorely tempted to lie, if I had been so inclined" (44). We might well think that autobiographical lying here is a simple matter: he either tells it as it was, or he fabricates—another initial-stage unexamined presupposition all too consistent with the one examined above. But this simple picture is immediately, and importantly, made more complex:

> But far from having passed over or concealed anything that could be used in evidence against me, by a turn of mind which I struggle to understand and

> which perhaps derives from my antipathy towards all kinds of imitation, I felt more inclined to lie in the opposite way, by accusing myself too severely rather than by excusing myself too indulgently, and my conscience assures me that one day I shall be judged less severely than I judged myself. (44)

Lying, like word understanding, is not one thing, and it too falls on a continuum that itself is here again then seen to be too simple, too reductively monodimensional: his impulse is to lie in the self-incriminating way in order to express, within that lie, what he regards as a virtuous dislike of imitation. (We then understand his complex soul within these complex words.) And of course he says here that he "struggles to understand" this impulse, and he is speculating about, and not reaching a settled conclusion about, what drives it—this is hardly the look of ready, immediately available inward autobiographical content. (And a reader might now ask—especially having read about self-interested "elephants" above: Is what he says his conscience assures him in fact a polite, thinly disguised invitation to his future readers to enact what he predicts and judge him less severely? If so, the words function in still another way—where manipulation and self-protection converge, and so we understand him, characterologically, correspondingly differently.) He quickly expresses pride in his truthfulness, concluding the passage with "and so I told the whole truth."

But then things become suddenly very much more interesting still. He writes, "I never said less than the truth, but sometimes I said more than it, not in the facts themselves, but in the circumstances surrounding them, and this kind of lie was the result of my confused imagination rather than an act of will" (44). What he more fully articulates now in retrospect that he at the initial time of writing only intuitively sensed as a necessity, and that he now sees himself as having taken autobiographical license at that time to provide, is precisely the filling in of what Wittgenstein called "the field of a word," or what separated the understandings of Sabina and Franz. Rousseau knows that the circumstances surrounding the description of an event, an action, a thought, a person, fill in relational content that determines—in countless, subtle ways—meaning. This, for Rousseau, at this meta-autobiographical point, initially seems one kind of lie. But then he now sees more clearly that precisely such filled-in content is what the imagination demands to make language real, to make it—in exactly the sense that ordinary language philosophy investigated imagined and real cases to understand and clarify the meanings of words—intelligible. So reflecting on what a lie actually is (A deliberately gets B to believe P when A knows not-P), and seeing how he was forced by his deeper sense of the demands of intelligibility to fill in what he

did, he adds, "I am in fact wrong to call this a lie, since none of these additions was actually a lie." These additions specify meaning; they make significance determinate.

But why is this not an autobiographical lie precisely? Because his memory "only provided [him] with imperfect recollections," he "filled in the gaps with details which I dreamed up to complete those recollections, but which never contradicted them." The completion of those recollections, to fill in the gaps, was, in this self-descriptive project, to surround the words that were central to his narrative with the rich contexts (of precisely the kind we saw in Kundera and in Conradi on Murdoch) that will indicate the fuller, human, *employed* sense of a word. Without this, Rousseau sensed as writer that his narrative would be schematic—really only a mere skeleton of a narrative at best, and mere detached bones at worst. And the element of truth he claims to have preserved is captured by his words "but which never contradicted them." He extrapolates from the truth he knows to be the case, without allowing his added content that directs the sense of the words, to come into conflict with the accuracy of the fundamental elements of his narrative. This is thus not lying, but it is not, as he now reflects, wholly, or perhaps better, *strictly* truthful either; it is not exactly nothing but the truth. Yet the added content truthfully directs the senses of the words—but with content extrapolated, not remembered. Lying, like truth-telling, is not one thing (the formulaic definition mentioned above is thus only a start). How does he say this?

> I embellished them with ornaments which my fond regrets provided me with. I talked about the things I had forgotten as I thought they must have been, or as they perhaps really had been, but never contradicting what I remembered them to have been. I sometimes invested the truth with exotic charms, but I never replaced it with lies to cover up my vices or to lay claim to virtue. (45)

The fact that we sense here an important difference between "exotic charms" and "as I thought they must have been" is instructive. The continuum ranging from blunt truth on one pole to blunt falsity on the other does serve in some cases; if we picture truth on the left pole, then "exotic charms" falls farther to the right than does "as I thought they must have been." And our sense that there is an important, if subtle, distinction here reminds us that autobiographical writing is full of fine shades of grey and fine distinctions we make in context on the ground of our actual practices—true or false, bluntly understood as *trans-contextual* terms, will not suffice. Invented content can deliberately mislead; another kind of super-added content can unwittingly mislead; and another kind still can rightly and truthfully convey the sense (in, indeed, Kundera's sense of "sense") of the centrally important words in

play. And then, of course, one could make the line between remembered and extrapolated content explicit—although that too would be a line emergent only *in situ*. Going back to the relational themes opening this chapter, we could, as I said, *make* new comparisons, new informative relations, in retrospect, that are new at the stage of autobiographical reminiscence (i.e., they were not comparisons made at the time of the episode being recounted). And yet they may be wholly truthful in conveying the sense of the words used at the time and wholly truthful in describing the past event exactingly (recall Franz's making the comparison between removing the bowler hat and feeling as if he were erasing the drawing of a mustache on a picture of the Virgin Mary by a naughty child in order to describe with some precision what he felt he was doing). As philosophical literature shows, a schematic model or conceptual picture of word-to-world correspondence for autobiographical truth is simply far too crude an instrument to measure these finer distinctions.

Rousseau, it is clear, shows that he recognizes the importance of the distinction between filling in for intelligibility and willfully misdescribing to cover vice or to falsely accentuate virtue. And he appeals to a kind of compensatory justice within the complex autobiographical situation of writing his *Confessions*: when he says he may have "painted himself in profile" in order to "conceal the ugly side," he insists that such omissions were more than made up for by his omissions on the positive side. He offers a number of examples (with the earlier compunctions concerning self-congratulation now apparently removed) that show "the fine qualities with which his heart was endowed" in his early years. The central importance of this for us is that he repeatedly refers here to "the story" and what it requires from him as author to be made comprehensible, what it requires to be fully told, and he repeatedly shows the kind of human detail that is (as we have seen in the foregoing) prerequisite to the fuller understanding of the words he is using to tell it. He makes it clear that, without such detail, we will not, and cannot, understand him—it is *he* who uses *his* words, not what a generic person (e.g., a man in a grey suit in front of a mirror) might generically say. Philosophical literature can prepare us to see what an autobiographer of Rousseau's stature means by such a claim, how this claim fits into our larger understanding of what autobiographical writing actually is over and against some too-easy initial-stage philosophical presuppositions and conceptual pictures, and what it would indeed mean to map out the field of the word "autobiography" itself.

I said at the outset that the pragmatists asserted that the relations between things are as important as the things related, and that objects, persons, and words can all be seen in this light. Frank Kermode has said of Rousseau's autobiographical project that "Rousseau is in hot pursuit of a closure to be

achieved by leaving nothing out, by inserting, and then later supplementing, innumerable bits of truth and leaving the reader to make them whole" (2003, 296). This conception of closure is not compatible with the way in which the understanding of a person's meaning emerges as examined here: even a complete assembly of every episode of a life, if not connected in a meaning-revealing way, would be only raw material for understanding, not the content of understanding itself. The *connections*, of the various kinds we have now seen, are essential to that. It would be to merely see the dots, but not the pattern(s) presented by their structured relations. A complete, or final, or settled interpretation, of those arranged particulars would be a different, and more fitting, sense of closure. Kermode, reviewing a number of positions on this matter, says next:

> Nabokov's artful autobiography is full of elegantly rendered and various detail, but, as he once remarks, what gives such a work its formal value is thematic repetition. He illustrates the point with an anecdote of a general who amused him as a little boy by playing tricks with matches. Years later this general turns up, dressed like a peasant in a sheepskin coat. He stops the boy's father, now in flight from the Bolsheviks, and asks him for a light. While hoping that the general also escaped Soviet imprisonment, Nabokov adds: "but that was not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme. . . . The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography." (296–97)

Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1989) could be closely studied in connection with the foregoing discussion, and it would show us a great deal more about the process of understanding a life on the model of literary understanding, where that understanding is carried within the intricacies of words. But even a first glance at this passage shows us the importance for understanding him, for understanding his aesthetic sensibility, for understanding his literary conception of understanding itself (here, like Kundera, also expressed in musical-thematic terms). The true purpose of autobiography, Nabokov says, is the following of such thematic designs though one's life. I want to suggest that we can only do this with an enriched conception of word meaning (or again, really to move beyond a narrow conception of *word* meaning) of precisely the kind Kundera has shown and Conradi has put into biographical practice, with a grasp of what the pragmatists were claiming in terms of the importance of seeing a thing, person, or their speech within an expanding web of relations. Such understanding will never emerge from a condition of hermetic, Cartesian enclosure.

But I also said at the outset that I would make a final, if brief, supplementary suggestion based on all the foregoing: it is not only that we follow such

thematic designs and connections. Like comparisons, we also *make* them, and so through these processes of imaginative reading and autobiographical writing we both find and—if we resolve matters one way or another—make ourselves, compose ourselves, within those descriptions.[30] And those descriptions are made of words that we ourselves can have to work to more fully understand. Is this a process we finish? Kermode says of Wordsworth's great autobiographical *Prelude* that, while we may think of it as "aspiring to or even achieving some sort of provisional totality," that in fact "it represents the growth of a poet's mind," and that through a decades-long process of revision and expansion, "The pattern changes." It can change by becoming more nuanced, more thematically resonant across one's life, or it can change in a more fundamental way, by restructuring the fundamental connections of a life-narrative. Kermode says, rightly, "It changes because the self knowledge of the autobiographer becomes more complex" (2003, 300–301). The character of that complexity, something that philosophy might help articulate while looking at autobiography, is what I have tried to intimate here.

Notes

1. The *locus classicus* of this view is Descartes' second meditation, in *Meditations* (Descartes 1996). Gilbert Ryle (2009) criticized, on linguistic grounds, the picture ("the ghost in the machine") Descartes' theory seemed to paint. For a discussion of the impact I believe this view has had on our pre-reflective intuitions concerning autobiographical writing, see *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (2008), in which I also discuss briefly the possible difference between what Descartes intended and what many philosophers since Ryle have meant by the term "Cartesian."

2. I offer a discussion of these views in "Imagined Identities: Autobiography at One Remove," *New Literary History* 38:1 (Winter 2007): 163–181.

3. I offer a fuller examination of this particular point in "Self-Defining Reading: Literature and the Constitution of Personhood" (Hagberg 2010).

4. Wittgenstein writes: "A *great deal* can be said about a subtle aesthetic difference—that is important.—The first remark may, of course, be: '*This* word fits, *that* doesn't—or something of the kind. But then all the widespread ramifications effected by each of the words can still be discussed. That first judgement is *not* the end of the matter, for it is the *field* of a word that is decisive" (2009, 230).

5. We will discuss this in much greater length in the following, but one neatly contained example of what is to be investigated here is found in Iris Murdoch's diaries (Conradi 2001). Writing of John Bayley (later to become her husband), she writes: "JB rang up this morning. His voice was consoling. How can I describe how remarkable he is? . . . A grace of soul—humility, simplicity, and a way of being very acute & subtle without ever protecting oneself by placing and despising other people." The tone, the musical aspect of the voice, consoles; this implicitly describes him as a sympathetic person, and this quality itself is discernible in a description she gives of another matter seemingly independent of word meaning, that is, tone or sound. And to discern a grace of soul is perhaps at once an intrinsic and relational description: with a double

aspect, it tells us of him—but then this quality only stands out against the background of unnamed others. And then, with the kind of complexity of comparative and relationally embedded description we will look into below, while we see humility and simplicity standing out in the same way as grace of soul, we get "without ever protecting oneself by placing," that is, judging from above and rank-ordering, thus showing that she perceives the defensive purpose of such acts of "placing," and that she sees the special way in which he has transcended any such impulse to invidiously place people in order to attempt to position oneself as superior, an action she rightly sees as in truth lowering the person trying to be superior. So this description of him is undeniably about him, but it is also at the same time a form of comparison to others contained within that description; it is revelatory of what she sees in him; it is about the human folly of "placing and despising"; it is about ulterior motives; it shows what she sees as an embodiment of a moral ideal and her admiring stance toward that ideal (and this carries within it the as-yet-unconfirmed possibility of implicit self-criticism); it is about the possibility of being acute and subtle without demonstrating these features in the negative judgment of others; and it is about an interesting form of moral backfire. This web of complex relations is indispensable to understanding what she is saying of him, and it is indispensable to our understanding of what she has revealed about herself in this brief diary-entry description of him. Thus even at this early point it begins to become unclear what the very idea of a hermetic, purely factual and intrinsic, or nonrelational description of a person amounts to or could amount to.

6. One way of expressing this particularity is to specify the aspect, or set of aspects, in which they use or understand the word in question, and how they thereby make it their own, or (I will return to this below) how they make it *of* them. In this connection see Stanley Cavell's (1979a) emphasis on the distinctive, centrally important, and often missed sense in which we are, in speaking, showing a distinctive attachment to our words. See also his discussion in his "The Touch of Words" (2010a), where he writes, "A striking idea among Wittgenstein's remarks about seeing aspects is his saying that the importance of the concept lies in its connection with experiencing the meaning of a word and with our attachment to our words. . . . Some idea of the attachment to our words is indispensable to Wittgenstein's fundamental procedures in the invocation of ordinary language (which, as I often emphasize, highlights the fact of language as *mine*)" (85). Philosophy, it seems, too rarely says this; literature frequently shows it. I offer a discussion of some of the relations between aspect-perception and self-knowledge in "In a New Light: Wittgenstein, Aspect-Perception, and Retrospective Change in Self-Understanding" (2010a).

7. Kundera 1987, 81–127. Closely related philosophical themes emerge in other novels of Kundera's: in *Slowness* (1997), we see the tale of two seductions, separated by over 200 years, but where they interweave in such a way that the influence of the past on the present and, more strongly, what we see as the events taking place in the present are informed by that history (and so they are relationally or thematically intertwined with a seemingly separate narrative of a long-past episode). One could well read this as a dramatization of how we, as individuals, experience a nonhermetic, or in William James's sense, relationally intertwined present. And Kundera's *Identity* (1998) concerns person-recognition and the character of our knowledge of others close to us, where that knowledge is, after all, made by words of and about them.

8. See in this connection Cioffi 1998, 80–106.

9. There is an exact parallel here to an issue in the interpretation of art, where some claim, on formalist grounds, that only formal features strictly contained within the work itself (as though we know what that would describe and where to draw that line) are aesthetically relevant to the appreciation, understanding, or criticism of the work. For an insightful discussion

showing what this conception systematically loses, see Richard Wollheim (1993), who writes: "However, the question that has to be asked is whether this autonomy is purchased at too heavy a price. How circumscribed will the meaning of a work of art turn out to be if the only properties of the work relevant for its ascription are those which are perceptible without benefit of cognitive stock?" (136). See also his discussion of Panofsky's example of Rogier van der Weyden's Blaedelin altarpiece in this connection, where he writes, "it is hard to see where the line is to be drawn" (137). I would add to Wollheim's observation that the cognitive stock of which he rightly speaks is not always, nor in any case fully, immediately available to introspection—we cannot always immediately articulate it; as we shall see below, the web of relations and thematic resonances can require self-investigative work.

10. See, as an exceptionally clear and lucid orientation to the issue of fixity of meaning or invariant semantic content, Capellen and Lapore 2005. For a powerful and helpful defense of the position of context or occasion sensitivity in the philosophy of language, see Travis 2008.

11. This formulation is central to what is often discussed as "contextualism"; for a helpful orientation to the issue and arguments in favor of this position, see DeRose 1999.

12. There is an entire wholly untouched field connecting the ongoing debate on rule-following and meaning-determination to meaningful gestures and facial looks within a rule-enacting (not exactly rule-governed) relationship; this will have to wait for another time.

13. I refer here of course to Wittgenstein's discussion in *Philosophical Investigations* as well as his earlier introduction of language-games in *The Blue Book* (1958); I examine the aesthetic relevance of this idea in "Language-Games and Artistic Styles" (1994).

14. I pursue this issue at greater length in "Narrative Catharsis" (2007b).

15. See Cavell 1996, esp. 380; Cavell is developing Wittgenstein's remark "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (*Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 123), which he retranslates as "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I cannot find myself.'" I discuss the significance of these passages at greater length in Hagberg 2008, 240–57.

16. The connection (the relational comparison) between this kind of linguistic phenomenon and music, particularly in a theme and variations, is informative: the theme, reheard at the end, is in one sense the same exact theme, and in another sense now entirely different. This is nicely illustrated by a remark in the diary of David Pinsent, close friend of Wittgenstein's: "At 7:15 I dined at the Union, then visited Wittgenstein and with him went to a concert at the Guildhall. The programme was splendid and included Bach's Chaconne, a Mozart Sonata for 2 pianos, the Kreutzer Sonata of Beethoven and Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Haydn. The latter was amazing—the most wonderful thing I had heard for a long while. The theme itself is indescribable—the variations typical of Brahms at his very greatest, and finally when at the end the theme emerges once more, unadorned, fortissimo and in tremendous harmonies, the effect is to make one gasp and grip one's chair! I simply cannot describe how it excited me" (von Wright 1990, 53). Words, as Kundera is showing, can work in the same way.

17. In this connection see the powerfully illuminating study by Alexander Nehamas(1985).

18. The connections between these could be investigated at length; on this matter see the groundbreaking study by Mitchell Green (2007).

19. See Ryle 2009, chap. 1.

20. Kundera's phrase here is "as if someone had spoken to him in a language he did not know." This is not "like someone speaking to him in a language he did not know." The difference is important for present considerations: The latter could be explained in terms of atomistic or dictionary word definitions that he does not know; by contrast, the kind of misunderstanding here is not reducible to this or explicable in its terms. Hence the need to find a way of providing

(which, I am suggesting, a philosophical reading of literature can provide) at least an intimation of what Franz is here missing and what would be necessary for full understanding (we will return to this below, where we see this serving as a model for self-understanding in autobiography).

21. It may seem slightly odd—it is certainly unusual—to quote from an acknowledgments page of a book. But in this case there is a world of philosophy in it. And what I want to suggest is that we know, at some intuitive level (philosophy's task here is to clarify and articulate it), the human importance of what Kundera is showing in his novel and we thus recognize an acknowledgment of this when we see it in life. At the close of his autobiography *Little Did I Know* (in which one finds countless details relevant to this discussion), Stanley Cavell, an author steeped in the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Austin—and an author richly alive to the kaleidoscopic relevance of literature to philosophy—thanks Cathleen Cavell with "and to Cathleen, who continues to know the words" (2010, 558). "To know the words" is not a phrase with which minimal definitions of these words (actually words about words) will help; a humane appreciation of the great sophistication of actual linguistic usage, along with an appreciation of the importance of words for personal identity, will. The final few books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1962) are on the nature and value of friendship; a modern supplement to that discussion could concern the profound value we can have to each other in (in this more fully articulated sense) "knowing the words."

22. See Cavell 1979b. For a discussion extending the issue of word-learning into aesthetics (and particularly the illuminating comparisons between being taught language and being taught art), see Wollheim 1974.

23. The result of keeping up the barrier of presumed word-knowledge to the kind of self-reflection required for true and deep autobiographical knowledge is not easy to describe succinctly, but Martin Amis finds a phrase that serves well in his remarks on an Iris Murdoch novel. Amis writes of the characters Murdoch develops in her *Nuns and Soldiers* that they live within a "suspended and eroticized world, removed from the anxieties of health and money and the half-made feelings on which most of us subsist." Half-made feelings would be those that we have while presuming that our words require no further work. Amis's phrase is "half-*made*," not "half-felt," thus rightly and insightfully emphasizing that there is an active element here. In Conradi 2001, 559.

24. I refer here of course to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*(1962).

25. These conceptual linkages are not new. There is a marvelous passage by Marcus Aurelius in his part-autobiography, part-philosophical-Stoical notebook *Meditations*: "With everyone you meet, begin at once by asking yourself, 'What ideas does this person hold on human goods and ills?' For if he holds particular views on pleasure and pain and the causes of each, and on reputation and disrepute, and life and death, it will not seem extraordinary or strange to me if he acts in some particular way, and I shall remember that he has to act as he does" (2011, 72). This is a profound remark. Its profundity lies in the clarity and depth with which it captures (a) the fact that the true understanding of words and sentences people find they deeply endorse or to which they hold fast (expressed here as the beliefs they hold—but these are invariably expressed or expressible in words) is the substance of our understanding of them as persons, (b) that what they do will make sense (even if wholly objectionable, which is another matter), and will no longer seem extraordinary or strange, once we see what they do in light of the articulated beliefs they deeply endorse, and (c) that he will, in a sense, be constituted by those word-borne beliefs in such a way that (given that those are deeply engrained) he has to act as he does. (The "has" here neatly connotes the great constitutive power on personhood of endorsed words.) As we will

consider more directly below, we can come to an autobiographical understanding of ourselves through a very similar process.

26. See Cavell 1989: "Philosophy's virtue is responsiveness. What makes it philosophy is not that its response will be total, but that it will be tireless, awake when others have all fallen asleep."

27. For a useful set of articles covering much of the field here, see Cassam 1994.

28. I offer a discussion of the instructive dangers of the transcription (or "reading the self") model of autobiographical writing in Hagberg 2007c.

29. We encounter in Stanley Cavell's autobiography a perfect example of using a phrase but in using it knowing that there is content contained within that remains to be investigated and elucidated; or perhaps it is more a sensing on a general level of the aptness of a phrase while at the same time sensing that there is much more to it, and knowing that to find that out will require labor. (It is a form of sensing content that could not be accommodated by the Cartesian picture of introspectively transparent word-meaning.) Cavell writes, of a 3:00 a.m. television search, "On one such memorable pre-dawn excursion I came upon Howard Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings* as it was beginning, made in 1939 but looking earlier, in I guess the reverse way that Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby*, made in 1938, looks later. (I do not know what the descriptions, or impressions, 'looking later and earlier' are based upon. But I have been at this long enough to want to know, and to be fairly good at waiting for a chance to know)" (2010, 541). (Neither waiting, nor the very idea of having a *chance* to know, would make sense on the picture of transparent Cartesian speaker-meaning; rather, we would, as imagined of the king and the arriving new queen, just momentarily inwardly look and then instantaneously know.)

30. This is of course not to suggest for a moment that anything goes, that is, that we are free to reflexively describe as we like. Criteria for the acceptability of autobiographical descriptions may arise within particularized contexts, and they may be distinctive to, or indeed unique to, that context. The way in which they function within Iris Murdoch's diaries, within Rousseau, within Wordsworth, and within many other autobiographical works may require the kind of heightened sensitivity to word-meaning that we saw in Kundera. But that is not for a moment to say that there are no criteria at all, and so any "constructed" description is as good as any other.

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3

Body, Memory, and Irrelevancies in *Hiroshima mon amour*

CHRISTOPHER HAMILTON

> Matter is our infallible judge.
>
> —SIMONE WEIL

In the last volume of her autobiography the British writer Kathleen Raine remarks:

> Too much happens to us in the present world for it to be possible to preserve a sense of what is really ours. We think we 'know' what we possess merely by hearsay, or from books, or on the word of other people. Our lives are encumbered with irrelevancies which we mistake for living experience, and which in the end come more and more to usurp it. (1991, 263)

In this chapter, I wish to suggest that this knowledge, this acknowledgment, underlies Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima mon amour*. In arguing for this claim, I aim to explore Raine's comment in the context of the film, providing thereby an illustration of what she means in a particular context, which will, among other things, help make clearer what she means by the somewhat obscure notion of "irrelevancies"; a philosophical perspective on self-understanding that we often miss; and also a fresh perspective on the film itself. And this is part of a larger enterprise, namely, an attempt to explore philosophically a specific example in order to contribute to our understanding of how it is that human beings tell the story of their lives in a bid to make sense of themselves and what they experience. What I wish to suggest is that, in a particular way that I shall seek to explain clearly, reference to our corporeal vulnerability is of crucial importance in an adequate philosophical understanding of how it is that we struggle to make sense of our lives.

1

Hiroshima mon amour (1959), directed by Alan Resnais from a screenplay by Marguerite Duras, tells the story of a French actress, whose name we never

discover (to whom, following the screenplay, I shall therefore refer as "Elle"), who is in Hiroshima in the late 1950s to make a film about the bombing of the city on August 6, 1945. Elle meets a Japanese man, "Lui," an architect, with whom she has a brief and intense love affair. His entire family, we hear, was incinerated in the bombing of the city—he was himself away, fighting in the war. And during the course of this affair, she recounts to him her story from the previous war: she had fallen in love with a German soldier, with, therefore, one of the soldiers of the German occupying forces, in her hometown of Nevers in France. But he was shot dead by a sniper on the day before the liberation of Nevers and, the affair having been exposed, she was shamed: her hair was shaven and she was confined by her parents to a cellar. Later, she made her way to Paris by bicycle—when she arrived there the talk in all the newspapers was of Hiroshima.

Some critics have found the story somewhat banal, that is to say, the love story, particularly in its relation to the account of the bombing of Hiroshima. As Emma Wilson has put it: "One of the risks of the film is the way it appears to allow the trauma of Nevers to take precedence over the mass horror of Hiroshima" (2009, 53). But all the interest lies in the way the material is handled. *Hiroshima mon amour* inscribes itself in, indeed is an early document in the postwar struggle with, the attempt to represent the unrepresentable. We live in an age, as for example Régine Robin (2011) has pointed out, obsessed with the past, with memory. The horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima are two of the seemingly innumerable unspeakable barbarities we humans have created for ourselves in the recent past and to which the other side of the modern sensibility—precisely the side that is horrified by these events—wishes to try to respond by doing something, just something, that might at the very least begin to look like an adequate response to them: something, indeed, that might memorialize them adequately or, at least, not wholly inadequately. It is almost universally agreed that an adequate memorialization is pretty much impossible. As Marguerite Duras remarks in the synopsis of the screenplay to the film, it is "impossible to speak about HIROSHIMA. All that one can do is speak of the impossibility of speaking of HIROSHIMA" (1960, 10). The film problematizes memory—that is, the memory of trauma; we are not talking about routine memories of everyday life, of what I had today for breakfast and the like—not simply in the sense that it worries about finding ways adequately to remember what it, and what no one and nothing, can memorialize, but also in the deeper sense that it suggests that the process of remembering is itself also a process of forgetting. It suggests that what we take to be remembering, that is, the memorials we construct for the dead, the ceremonies we hold for them, the stories we tell about them and so on,

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are, even as they are forms of memory, also forms of forgetting, since they stylize memory, provide comforting and thus misleading narratives around victimhood, and so on. In other words, in various ways they falsify reality. Sometimes these forms of memory might even be forms of sentimentality and thus in this regard ways of forgetting or refusing to face the reality of the past, as Imre Kertész has suggested.[1]

Such, for example, is the line of interpretation offered of *Hiroshima mon amour* by Bernard Pingaud, who argues that the experience of remembering Hiroshima is always, and at the same time, a process that offers "*images de l'oubli.*" The film, he says, "sets out to show us that memory is a form of forgetfulness, that forgetfulness can only be wholly achieved once memory has itself wholly completed its work" (2002, 67)—that is, that fully to remember some trauma is also to forget it because, in supposing ourselves to remember it, we stylize it or control it in various ways. The early moments of the film emphasize this: Elle goes four times to the museum at Hiroshima and sees photographs, models, descriptions, films, and so on of the bombing, but these things are all "*faute d'autre chose*"—for want of anything else. Everything is second-hand; there is no direct access to the event, to the buildings destroyed, to the inhabitants incinerated. These bearers of memory are forms of gaps in the memory, forms of absence as much as they are forms of presence—in a sense, nothing at all, and she sees nothing, as the film insists. Moreover, when Elle starts to recount to Lui her experiences during the war, she starts, paradoxically, to forget her former lover: "Oh! It's terrible. I am beginning to remember you less well. I am beginning to forget you. Having forgotten so much love makes me tremble" (Duras 1960, 99). Her memory is more intact when it is not attended to, when it is buried in the mind, in the body; when it is recalled, it starts to fade. "I am blessed with memory. I know forgetfulness" (31), she comments at one point. Remembering is a form of forgetting and forgetting a form of remembering: for her to remember her trauma and seek in this way to honor her dead lover is for her to forget him, by *placing* him in a narrative that at least partly falsifies the reality.[2]

By now, these paradoxes of memory are fairly well rehearsed in the philosophical literature and related areas.[3] And there is no doubt that the kind of reading of *Hiroshima mon amour* just sketched is eminently plausible: the film certainly is about memory, and it certainly is worried about the kinds of paradoxes of memory mentioned. However, in my view, the emphasis on memory in the reading of the film tends to obscure other interpretative strategies, strategies that should not be seen as opposed to that concerning memory but, rather, as deepening it. When Rosamund Davies writes, expressing

an idea that is common in interpretations of this film, that "remembering is always a kind of forgetting. This is the central paradox around which all the other paradoxical and oppositional relations in the script are structured" (2010, 166), I think she misses that deeper aspect of things. Pingaud seems to gesture at this aspect, without developing the point further, when he says that forgetting is "the desperate, distressing condition of life itself" (2002, 72). I wish to draw attention to one aspect of that desperate condition, expressed by the problems about memory, as it is explored in the film. It is that aspect of our condition that is the deeper topic of the film. Or so I wish to argue here.

2

Let us start by reflecting on the concept of the body as presented in this film.[4] And there are, I think, two philosophers in particular who help us see what is at stake in this film in this regard: Simone Weil and Spinoza.[5]

In the case of Weil the key concept I wish to invoke here is that of *pesanteur*—"gravity," as it is usually translated into English. We readily understand such a concept with respect to material bodies, seeing them as relentlessly and inescapably subject to gravity. But for Weil, all natural phenomena are subject to gravity in an extended sense: "All the *natural* movements of the soul are determined [*régis*] by laws analogous to those of material gravity" (2004, 41). For Weil, there are mechanisms that determine the soul just as there are mechanisms that determine the movement of material objects, even if it is true that, in the former case, it is much more difficult for us to grasp what these laws are. For example, according to Weil, just as the movements of the sea are subject to gravity—or, as Weil sometimes puts it, *necessity*—so too are the movements of the human soul. This view of things gives rise in Weil to a sense of the terrible vulnerability of human beings, which is also a source of great beauty, just as the sea's subjection to necessity limits its behavior but also produces in us a sense of its beauty. Hence: the "vulnerability of precious things [e.g., human beings] is beautiful because vulnerability is the mark of existence" (181), and further: "our whole entire being—flesh, blood, sensibility, intelligence, love—[is abandoned] to the pitiless necessity of matter" (Weil 1970b, 103).

Spinoza's writings, too, share very much this conception of things in his insistence that the body and mind are two different expressions of the same thing, two ways of looking at the same thing—a human person—and that a human person is a point in the determined movements of Nature. As he puts it: "the idea of . . . mind and body are one and the same individual conceived

now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension" (1955, pt. 2, prop. 21, note). Both Weil and Spinoza share the same sense of human beings as fundamentally *exposed* in the world.[6]

The film opens, after the credits, with the most exquisite images of what reveals itself to be the embrace of two lovers: we see simply their arms, shoulders, and part of their backs, and these are drenched in ash, then rain, then dew, and finally sweat. The eroticism is both immensely discreet and intense, and yet it is also disturbing, since the materials with which the bodies are showered give rise to a sense not simply of the intense beauty of these bodies—and thus of the human body—but also of the intense vulnerability of the human body, of its fraternity with inert material substances, its similarity to these things, thus its immense, terrible *materiality*.

The image is of the body as capable of being the object of the most generous tenderness only because it is so intensely fragile, that is, only because it can *also* be so easily harmed, wounded, destroyed. When Elle says that in the museum she saw iron burnt and broken ("*brûlé*," "*brisé*"), "iron become as vulnerable as flesh" (Duras 1960, 24), and the spectator sees twisted, burnt iron girders, and a bicycle frame and wheels in a similar state, as well as metal bottle tops melted together into a kind of monstrous "bouquet," we are faced not simply by the way in which these things can become like flesh but also by our knowledge of *our* subjection to the materiality of things, by the knowledge that we usually seek to repress that we are material through and through, that we are subject to the same forces as impinge on material such as iron. And the inescapable involvement of our flesh with these forces is rendered only all the clearer when we see images of victims' skin preserved in jars, "human skin floating, vestiges still in the freshness of their suffering [*survivantes, encore dans la fraîcheur de leurs souffrances*]" (24). And again and again we see images of burnt, mutilated, massively wounded human bodies, victims of the bomb, alternating with images of the lovers' bodies, their skin gloriously smooth and supple. Our bodies, the film says, the film reminds us, point us toward, expose us to, agony and ecstasy, are caught up in, are at one with, the world's materiality and the pressure of that materiality, its subjection and its dominance, its inescapable, unavoidable *force* to use another of Weil's term.

This is the real meaning of Elle's refrain: "You kill me. / You are good for me." ["*Tu me tues. / Tu me fais du bien*"]. And of: "Devour me. Deform me to the point of ugliness" [*Dévore-moi. / Déforme-moi jusqu'à la laideur*"] (35). (Lui later tells her that he finds her beautiful and ugly.) To whom is she speaking? To her dead German lover and to her present Japanese lover. They are becoming, they will become, one in her mind, as she recounts her story to Lui. But the crucial point is that she now understands her body's vulnerability

and the way this is *her* vulnerability, and the vulnerability of human beings as creatures subject to the force of the world, in a way that she had dimly sensed when her German lover died but had not fully grasped. Being in Hiroshima, here with this Japanese man, she begins to grasp all this clearly. She now knows that, as she prostrated herself over her German lover, clutching him as he lay dying, "I was not capable of sensing the least difference between this dead body and mine" (100), and that this incapacity is the source of both the pain and joy to which flesh is heir. As Pingaud puts the point, she wants her lover—both her Japanese lover and her German lover—to mark her "physically in such a way that the perfect moment of love be fixed forever in her flesh, as the traces of the bombing are fixed in the flesh of the survivors and in the ground itself of the city" (2002, 73).

It is for these reasons that the film says a human being is nothing more than his body and as such he is exposed to the same forces that govern all material things. There are, this film intimates, not two things here, the strength and weakness of a human being and, related to these tangentially or crosswise as it were, the strength and weakness of a human being's body. Rather, in the vision of this film, the strength and weakness of the body *are* the strength and weakness of the human being. Moreover, the human being, the human being's body, is inextricably caught up in the flux of matter as moved by necessity: human bodies, human beings, are no freer from this necessity than is any other material object.

Now, from a phenomenological point of view, there are different ways in which I can think of the relation in which I stand to my body. Arthur Frank (1997) suggests at least the following possibilities: the *disciplined* body, in which one thinks of one's body as something one has and needs to regulate, as one does a machine; the *mirroring* body, which conceives of itself in the light of, and models itself on, an ideal image; the *dominating* body, which defines itself as a force, as it might be, against others, and through which, say, anger is expressed by venting itself on others; and the *communicative* body, which fully accepts contingency, that is, the sense that what it is and how it is exists in a kind of dynamic relation with the external world and that the boundaries between body and world are unclear and fluid. And, in various ways, these possibilities of thinking of the body map onto the difference between my thinking of my body as something I *have* and thinking of it as something I *am*. Of course, we can think of our body in all these ways, and perhaps they sometimes compete for our attention and allegiance at the same time. Which way we have of thinking of our body at any given moment will depend on many factors, factors that we might express through the concept of *mood*, where I mean "mood" in a sense that overlaps partly with the use of this term

in ordinary life but also captures something of the idea of an existential orientation toward things: in certain moods, I shall experience my body as Weil and Spinoza claim it is, that is, as exhausting what I am and as being exposed to the necessity of matter (Weil) or Nature (Spinoza).

Of course, if one believes that the truth of our condition is revealed by this idea, then this belief will tend to come into and go out of focus. This is why I have invoked the concept of *mood* in this context, for only in a certain mood will the belief come fully into focus and be, as it were, appropriated by the person who has it. When it goes out of focus, this is not because it is no longer believed but because it has become, for various reasons, difficult to sustain. Indeed, the belief in question is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to sustain for any length of time, except under special conditions: my reasons for saying that will become clear in due course. And it is extraordinarily interesting that Spinoza, who did of course accept this belief, was acutely conscious of the fact that it is hardly possible to occupy the relevant mood for long. His lengthy and anxious Note to Proposition II of Part III of the *Ethics* is immensely revealing in this regard. Having argued that the human mind and the human body are two expressions of the same thing, he then, in Proposition II, claims that "body cannot determine mind to think, neither can mind determine body to motion or rest" (1955). What makes Spinoza anxious is, evidently enough from the Note, that, even if he takes himself to have proven the proposition in question, he knows that it is phenomenologically very difficult, generally speaking, to feel the truth of what he claims. Indeed, he knows that we *resist* such knowledge, in part because our experience is often not in accord with his metaphysical claim since, for example, we *do* experience the mind as able to set the body in motion or bring it to rest. That is, we do *not* often experience the mind and body as two ways of looking at the same thing. Hence it is that Spinoza appeals to experiences that support his view. His aim in doing so is not to *prove* anything, since the deliverances of phenomenology are, for him, the product of inadequate ideas and not of clear ideas. Indeed, his appeal to phenomenology is precisely an appeal designed to show his readers that they do not know what the powers of the body are and thus what the relation between mind and body is. He wants to open his readers to the truth of what he is claiming about the relation between mind and body, that is, that they are expressions of the same thing, by showing them that the phenomenology of such is confused and thus proves nothing. Nonetheless, his appeal to phenomenology is intended to show that there *are* experiences that are in accord with his metaphysical claims; he seeks, in appealing to such experiences, to show that there are some experiences that give rise to the kind of mood in which the phenomenology of the situation is in

line with what, according to him, the metaphysical reality is. But he knows, as I say, that usually things do not appear to us this way. And my point is that Spinoza is right about the phenomenology of things—except that there are conditions (as he sees) in which we *do* experience the body as exhausting all we are. What is that mood? It is precisely the mood conveyed by this film.

How is this mood conveyed in the film? The strategies are numerous. I have already mentioned the ash, rain, and so on, that cover the lovers' bodies. There is also their intertwining in each other, the absence of clear distinctions between them, conveyed by the manner in which they are filmed. Then there are the images of foodstuffs—fish, for example—poisoned and hence inedible, which establish a clear link with the mutilated human bodies we have already seen: we are no different from the animals, the film is telling us, we are subject to the same vulnerability and materiality. So we are told too by the wounded dog that strays in the ruins after the bomb. Or by the cat that Elle strokes when she has finished her final shoot and is approached by Lui—and, indeed, by a further cat that visits her in the cellar. Or again, we might think of her scraping her knuckles on the wall of the cellar and licking her blood, or licking its walls to taste the saltpeter they contain. And there are also the parallels between the images of the bombed city and the scars on people's bodies, where often, at least at first, we do not know if we are looking at a material object, or a map, or human flesh. We might even suppose that there is something like a reflection on our subjection to our materiality in Elle's odd reaction when, in bed with Lui, she remarks that it is four o'clock because someone is passing by: he always passes by at four o'clock and coughs. She seems anxious for a moment and buries her face in his chest. In coughing we are subject to the body, which exercises in this way a kind of revolt against us: we are delivered over to it, however briefly.

And beyond this, there are the two cities, Nevers and Hiroshima.

Our memory is, from the present point of view, in our body. Think here of Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* [Berlin Childhood around 1900]. Benjamin describes his childhood, his childhood memories, but his memories are of—are largely of, anyway—the *things*, the *objects*, of his childhood: the telephone, the covered market, hiding places, the colors of a pavilion, and so on. His memories are not in his head; they are in his body. What I mean by this is that Benjamin evokes the way in which his understanding of these places and things, and therefore his memory of them, is inscribed in how he instinctively, unthinkingly moved around these things. And he would move around them in the same way, his body would remember them in the same way, were he to go back now. His memory of them would not be in the form of images or ideas or thoughts but in the form of a kind

of *unthinking bodily orientation* toward the things around him, were he to go back.[7] Or, rather, since most of the things of which he speaks no longer exist, his memory would be thwarted insofar as his body would be checked, held at bay, frustrated in its movements by their absence.

Elle's memory of Nevers is in her body in this kind of way, specifically in its erotic dimension, and it is brought to the surface by Hiroshima or, rather, by Lui in Hiroshima. It is as if she moved in Hiroshima as if it were Nevers, as if her bodily memory of Nevers were found again, here, in Hiroshima. Hence, she finds startling "meeting-in-Hiroshima" or possibly "getting-to-know-one another-in-Hiroshima [*se connaître-à-Hiroshima*]" (Duras 1960, 48)—the hyphenated phrase emphasizes the necessity of place, of the body's sense of place, of its memory of place, for the erotic attraction she feels toward Lui and which becomes indistinguishable from that which she felt (feels) for her dead German lover. Hence also: "How could I have known that this city was made for love? How could I have known that you were made for my own body?" (35). It is this place (where this place is Nevers or Hiroshima, Nevers and Hiroshima, Nevers-as-Hiroshima) that reveals her memory in her body, in her body's possibility of erotic encounter, of its need for erotic encounter and the way in which this is her way of remembering. Hence it is that at the end of the film there is the extraordinary moment in which she actually tells him that his name is "Hiroshima" and he accepts this, replying that her name is "Nevers." They are at one with their respective cities.

So, this film says: a human body is not something a human being has; it is what he or she is. And the body is caught in the web of the world: the world exerts its pressure on the body, and the body responds with its own pressure. I find no better way to express this than to say that this film intimates a sense of the relentlessness, the intense *implacability* of the materiality of our existence, of the implacability of the body and of the world, and of both in relation to each other. We could put the point this way: the body is simply one point at which the world meets itself and mingles with itself. The world runs through the body and overflows itself in the body, as Michel Serres puts it.[8] The belief in question, as I said, is something that goes in and out of focus. It depends, to be fully appropriated, on mood and cannot, I think, in general, be sustained in the *mêlée* of the world, of our quotidian, worldly activities. But there certainly are particular works of art and reflection that convey and help sustain, perhaps inflected in different ways, the relevant kind of mood, the kind conveyed by the film we are exploring: some of the paintings of Pierre Bonnard, as Michel Serres suggests—he has in mind in particular *Le Peignoir* from around 1890, and, I might add here, his extraordinary *Nu dans le bain* of 1936 (Julian Bell comments: "The crucial decision of the painting

is to treat . . . [the] immaterial radiance [the sunlight] as a subject equal in weight to the fluid and solid elements of the bathroom. . . . Tugged in . . . diverging directions, the bathtub buckles and dissolves, taking the woman's individuality with it, in a host of bizarre but unassailable transmutations" [1994, 114]); certainly Serres' own philosophical reflections, as well as those of Weil and Spinoza, obviously enough; Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*; Kafka's writings, generally speaking; parts of Nietzsche's work; some of Montaigne's essays; the sculptures of Rodin; and so on.

Now, even if it is true that, generally speaking, we do not experience the body in the kind of way suggested, the fact remains that there are certain ordinary or normal experiences that can evoke in us the relevant mood. Aside from injury, which is central to our film, illness is an example—or, at any rate, some forms of illness—in which we become acutely aware of the body's exposure in, vulnerability to, the world, and in which we fully experience our body as something to which we are abandoned precisely because we *are* this thing. It is not coincidental that it is in an essay on illness that Virginia Woolf captures magnificently a sense of the mood that we are discussing:

> All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending process of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness. (2002, 4–5)

What illness—or, again, some forms of illness—can make us feel is the truth of Weil's comment that a

> play of circumstances that I do not control can take from me anything at all, at any moment, including all those things which are so much a part of me that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing in me that I could not lose. Chance could abolish [*abolir*] at any time what I am. (1957, 35)

Given that this is so, we might even suggest that certain cultural forms work to conceal, alternatively, reveal an acknowledgment of our vulnerability.[9] Thus, for example, it is almost certainly true that a feature of life in a highly materially wealthy society such as ours is that this allows us to avoid acknowledgment of our material vulnerability, partly because we experience levels of physical comfort hitherto unheard of in the history of humanity, but more importantly on account of our deep attachment to the concept of choice and to idealized conceptions of both the acting and thinking subject. Our culture is deeply wedded to conceptions of subjectivity that view it as having exten-

sive power to make choices, and part of this is a sense of our wide-reaching freedom from and/or control over contingency. Further, such choices are seen as an obviously good thing. But there are deeper reasons for this avoidance of acknowledgment, which I shall touch on below.

One might object: but if it is only in a certain mood that one can have the sense in question, then this cannot reveal the truth about us, since the truth will not depend on the vagaries of mood. But this cannot be right. For one thing, we can never escape moods, as Heidegger pointed out, so any view on a human life will express a mood. That is, if one insists that my body is something I *have* (not *am*) and that I am not exposed to the pitiless necessity of matter, then of course this will sometimes or often seem right: but only when in a certain mood. When in the mood evoked by *Hiroshima mon amour* or any of the other works of art and reflection I mentioned, that other kind of mood will not seem right if one wants to understand what kind of thing, what kind of creature, a human being is. For another, even if it is true, as I think it is, that it is difficult to appropriate the belief in question and that its appropriation depends on a special kind of mood, not easily available—that is, that generally we do not find ourselves in this mood because it is not the mood of our quotidian existence—it does not follow that it is our quotidian mood that most clearly reveals the truth of our condition. This could only be supposed to be true if we also supposed that, in general, we are insightful about our condition, that generally we understand the truth about ourselves. But the contrary is more likely to be the case. A sense of the deep-rooted self-deception of human beings and of their confusion, their *opacity*, in the face of themselves, ought really, in my view, to be at the center of pretty much any humane philosophy, that is, a suspicion about whether, to use a Heideggerian turn of phrase, our ordinary everydayness is of much use in revealing in any direct or straightforward manner what we are. And the endless interminable disputes in philosophy, literature and so on concerning our fundamental condition, which take off from our ordinary self-understanding, do not bode well for our capacity to understand ourselves with much clarity. So I do not think that the relative rarity of the mood in question and thus of our capacity to sustain the belief in the implacability of our material existence shows that this belief is somehow misleading; indeed, the contrary might be true.

A second objection to what I have been arguing might be this. It is clear that I am suggesting that our fundamental ontological condition is given by our vulnerability and it might be wondered why this should have any ontological priority over those quotidian experiences in which we do not experience ourselves this way but, rather, in which we experience a kind of faith

or trust in the world, a faith or trust that may indeed be expressed in a sense of one's being at one with one's body and at one with the world. The powerful athlete, for example, may precisely see his body as something he *is* and also experience his body as something through which the world flows and in which it overflows itself. Yet he does not experience himself as vulnerable. Are such experiences of trust not just as ontologically basic as those of vulnerability? Are these they not, so to speak, ontologically on the same plane as those in which we experience our vulnerability?[10]

Let me say, in seeking to reply to this objection, that I do not think that there can be anything approaching proof of the view for which I am arguing. Despite the ambitions of many philosophers past and present to *prove* that our ontological condition is to be understood in this way or that, I do not think that such an attempt can ever, in the end, make good its claims: to conceive of one's, of our, ontological condition in a certain way is always, at least in part, an attempt to bear witness to a way of looking at things that can never be wholly justified by neutral argument. The best one can do is to give one's reasons and then leave others to reflect on what one has said. Thus, it seems true that there are certain very striking ways in which our vulnerability can be revealed to us—say, for example, in the case of severe injury or witnessing such in those one loves, or in that of persistent bodily illness—such that anyone who has in his or her own life had the kind of experiences in question will be likely to be marked by these experiences in such a way as to believe that what has been revealed is an insight into that which is fundamental in our condition, and certainly more fundamental than the faith in the world of which the objection speaks. Such was so with Simone Weil, and it is also the case with the two protagonists of our film. The case is analogous to William James's sick soul and healthy soul: the sick soul, who thinks that the "evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world's meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart" (James 1970, 140), takes what is revealed to him to be deeper than the view of the world offered to the healthy soul. Furthermore, James suggests, the sick soul can understand the healthy soul, but the latter cannot really understand the former, and this is because the sick soul will know moments in which he shares with the healthy soul the latter's view of the world but the healthy soul will never really be able to grasp the sick soul's view on things, that is, grasp it from the inside. Similarly, Weil certainly could understand moments of trust or faith in the world, as she did experience them, but for her they concealed our fundamental ontological condition, however valuable or important they were. This is in part why she wrote her essay on the *Iliad* in which she sought to show that

even those—like the athlete I described—who think of themselves as full of energy and at one with the world, that is, the Greek and Trojan heroes, are in fact subject to force, to gravity, even if they do not think they are.

Beyond that, it seems clear that the fact that we are mortal is both part of the vulnerability in question and a synecdoche for it. For, on the one hand, it is manifest that we all know that we are mortal and that this is a piece of knowledge that we find it almost impossible to acknowledge: we live, and cannot but live, *not* in the light of a full acknowledgment of our mortality but, rather, with a barely acknowledged sense of our mortality, just as, I am arguing, we know we are vulnerable in all kinds of ways but do not acknowledge this in our everyday lives. And, on the other hand, our mortality is actually a form of the vulnerability in question in the sense that our death shows that we are vulnerable, even as we might have supposed we were not. Death *is* a confrontation with our vulnerability, even the maximal such confrontation, because it makes it evident in a wholly unavoidable, utterly undeniable way. In death, there is no possible retreat into the illusion that we are not vulnerable. As Cora Diamond puts it in an acute discussion of the vulnerability we have in common with the animals:

> The awareness we each have of being a living body, being "alive to the world," carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of the vulnerability of death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all . . . is wounding. (2008, 74)

These points do not, as I said, constitute anything like a proof of the point for which I am arguing but they do give some good reasons why someone might think that the truth of our condition is one concerning our vulnerability. And it will be clear that the sense of our vulnerability is not something by which in general we like to be confronted, as Diamond highlights. Nonetheless, and contrary to Diamond's emphasis, I want to insist that the revelation of our vulnerability is not *always* disconcerting or, at any rate, not always disconcerting without admixture of that which consoles, a point that is implicit in, for example, my reference to Serres' invocation of Bonnard, a painter whose work is often immensely sensually appealing. I shall return to this point toward the end of this essay.

Serres expresses his thought about the mingling of the world and body in a further, complementary way. He suggests that one's soul can be out there in the world, pointing out that the metaphysics of the soul begins with gymnastics: the gymnast's soul is the point about, around which he wraps himself in his exercises, for example, in the high jump or in floor work. Again, he says

that the footballer's soul is out there among the players in the ball, and each player hunts for his soul in the ball. Similarly, we might say, the souls of the Elle and Lui in our film are out there in the world, in the material stuff of the world. This, once again, would be what is conveyed by the mood of the film. It is what gives the film its extraordinarily *tactile* sense. This is a point to which I shall return.

3

Memory is, as I mentioned earlier, highly problematized in this film. Forgetting and remembering feed off each other. However, in my view, as I said earlier, memory and its problematization are expressions of something else, something deeper in this film. That something else, so I want to suggest, is that which Raine referred to as the "irrelevancies" of a human life, those things that clutter our lives, taking us away from reality even as they seem to take us toward it.

As the protagonists become increasingly involved with each other, Elle begins to recount her story about Nevers. As this happens, Lui becomes ever more intent on hearing this story. He experiences "*une joie violente*" (Duras 1960, 103) when he discovers that even Elle's husband does not know her story, that, indeed, he is the only one who does. Eventually, he takes on the identity of the dead German lover in order thereby better to elicit her story from her, speaking to her as if he were the German soldier. Why does he do this?

Her love for the dead soldier was, as she herself says, an "impossible love" (110) because it *had* to end in disaster, given his status as an enemy of her people. Lui knows this. In accepting the role of the dead lover, he accepts that her love for him—if it is love: if not, her desire for him—is impossible. This goes well beyond the idea that she is to return to Paris the next day, as is shown by the fact that, at first, he does not know this. Rather, what is at stake is something else: although he has a deep physical need of her and repeatedly implores her to remain with him, he also has another need that conflicts with this. In taking on the role of the dead lover, he evacuates his own personality in order to become a container for her anxiety. He needs her pain because, in having been absent from Hiroshima when his family was destroyed in the bombing, he feels what Primo Levi says is "the shame [*la vergogna*] . . . that the just person experiences in the face of the offence committed by others, and it pains him that it exists, that it has been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and that his good will has been empty or inadequate, and was insufficient as a defence" (1997, 10–11). Her pain substitutes itself

for the pain his family experienced and he did not, as if he could somehow have it in having her pain, and that, his having her pain, also and relatedly expresses his bearing witness to the horror of what has been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things. No doubt there are "healthier" ways in which this comes out in his life, too. He is an architect, and he works also in politics, so these two are also surely ways in which he responds to his sense of horror, by seeking to ameliorate the condition of others. But absorbing her pain is also such a response. He turns her into a penitent, himself into her confessor. He cannot always bear his own pleasure. One of the reasons why it can sometimes be hard to bear pleasure is that accepting pleasure renders one open—one sees through the self to the world—whereas in pain one is intensely aware of one's own existence, of the hum of subjectivity. Pleasure involves letting go, and this can be—carries the risk of being—a fraught strategy for a human being because we are creatures whose psychology is geared to a profound and continuous state of acute awareness of the world (except principally when we sleep, which is a much odder condition for us to be in than we usually suppose[11]). Furthermore, in the case of Lui, accepting pleasure is certainly problematic because he needs to accept pleasure in a place that makes him profoundly conscious of the suffering of human existence. Indeed, as I have suggested, in absorbing Elle's pain Lui seeks a substitute for the fact that he was not in Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped, but his family was. Just as Elle sees nothing in Hiroshima, so too he sees nothing: he was, is, as absent from the trauma as she was and cannot bear this. Her pain, incorporated by him, becomes an expression of *his* need to "see."

Elle is involved in a similar strategy. Her memories, deeply problematized as they are, render her life, in a way, impossible. We have seen much of this already—in, for example, her desire for ugliness and deformation. But it comes out elsewhere. At one point, reflecting on the past but also thinking of the present, she says to herself, "I was hungry. Hungry for infidelities, for adultery, for lies and for death" (Duras 1960, 115). And when Lui had earlier said to her, "When you speak, I ask myself if you are lying or telling the truth," she replied, "I lie. And I tell the truth" (54). True, she goes on to say, "but with you I have no reason to lie." Yet directly after she says that she is morally dubious and, when he asks what she calls being morally dubious, she says, "Doubting others' morality" (55). The truth is that these comments only make clear what is implicit anyway, namely, that this is a character who is both disoriented and disorients. There is in her a psychological complexity that sets up cross-currents and movements that cut against and undermine each other.

What I am suggesting, then, is that both of these characters have their

irrelevancies: Lui in his making himself a container for her pain; Elle in an attachment to the agony of the past, a past that is irrevocably lost but that, in her fantasy, is still present and resurfaces in Hiroshima. She is probably more knowing about this than he is, which may be why the film is largely seen through her eyes: she is forever fighting a rearguard battle, knowing that she has a need of her dead German lover and being unable to endorse it precisely because she knows him to be forever lost and thus that her attachment to him and to the pain that that attachment brings encumber her life—that they are an irrelevancy. I am not, of course, in any sense criticizing them; nor am I suggesting they could be otherwise, even supposing such a thought would make sense of fictional characters. But I am suggesting that neither can live in the present.

4

Before pursuing this thought further, I want to say something about the film medium itself in the case we are exploring.

A very natural assumption to make about film is that it appeals principally to the eye (and secondarily to the ear through music, dialogue and the like). Film is something *seen*. This is the kind of understanding of film pursued by Stanley Cavell. Film, he says, satisfies

> the wish for the magical reproduction of the world by enabling us to view it unseen. What we wish to see in this way is the world itself—that is to say, everything. To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self. (1979, 101–2)

Of course, these massively suggestive remarks capture something central about our experience of films, of film. But I do not think they can apply to all films, even if the nature of the medium is well articulated by such remarks. It is the phrase "from behind the self" that seems to me problematic. In the case of a film like *Hiroshima mon amour*, we are not so much behind the self as a self absorbed in the body. We view, not from behind the self, but from a self become corporeal, in a sense lost or submerged in the body. This is because *Hiroshima mon amour* manifests a kind of impatience with the sense of sight. This is clear, of course, in the repeated idea that Elle saw nothing when she went to the museum in Hiroshima: "*Tu n'as rien vu*," Lui tells her again

and again. Part of what is important here is, of course, the inaccessibility of anything but a second-hand understanding of Hiroshima, of the inability of these things in the museum really to allow anything more than the most minimal, sketchy understanding of the horrors of the bombing and its aftermath.

But the impatience with sight is also an impatience that the film has with its own limitation as something seen. The film wants, as it were, to be felt. It wants to reach beyond its own visual quality and become more than it is, appeal to more than the eyes—somewhat as Beethoven, in his Ninth Symphony, became impatient with music's appeal to the ears, wanting symphonic music itself to be able to address the discursive intellect, and thus had recourse to words, breaking with the limitations of absolute music in symphonic form. This is why the film has an immensely tactile quality, as I mentioned earlier: the film, in its visual imagery, in the extraordinary tenderness, alternatively, brutal directness, of its images, evokes in the spectator a sense that he or she can *feel* these images on his or her skin, on the tongue, between the hands.[12] But that feeling is frustrated, of course, because there can be no such *feeling* satisfied. The viewer is thus faced with the experience of what one might call *corporeal incompleteness*, a sense of his own body being evoked and rejected at the same time.

We can now add this to the reasons we gave earlier for suggesting that this film has a capacity to give a particular sense of our materiality: the film makes the spectator feel himself to be wholly bodily in what it invokes in him. But at the same time the incompleteness in question problematizes not only the spectator's body but also that of the two protagonists: their bodies become seen as vehicles for their "irrelevancies." Those strategies, I suggested earlier, centrally involve the idea of not being able to live in the present: Lui is a container for her agony, Elle in her attachment to that agony, now past but always present, is disrupted. Hence Caruth says, speaking of Elle: "Her bodily life . . . has become the endless attempt to witness her lover's death" (1996, 39). In the case of Lui, his bodily life becomes the attempt to absorb her pain, which is the pain of his family killed at Hiroshima. And the most obvious way in which the protagonists' bodies become vehicles for their irrelevancies is, clearly enough, the fact of their love-making. It is this most profoundly corporeal of human acts that evokes for them all of the impacted complications of their inability to exist in the present along with their struggle to do so, imperfectly but partially realized.

Of course, there is nothing at all surprising in the fact that it is their love-making that evokes all this: human sexual acts are necessarily fraught because always transgressive, representing as they do one of the key limits of human

confrontation with nature as a denial of culture and, at the same time, as expressive of culture (our conception of nature always expresses a cultural idea). This is why pornography is inhuman: it denies that necessity (even as it trades on our knowledge of it) and so denies what is human in human sexual acts. But the exact way in which, in any given individual and any given couple, the transgressions in question are negotiated, and the exact types of needs, desires, anxieties, and so on evoked, depend precisely on the individual and the couple. No doubt the problematization of the body in sex in general is part of the problematization of human life, but if sex is necessarily problematized in human life, then one of the things it problematizes is its own satisfaction. Or, rather, it recruits its own problematization to its satisfaction so that its failure or imperfect realization can become part of its (complete) realization—I mean, the fact that sex can never for a human being be the wholly unproblematized thing it is for an animal is part of what makes it such that it can satisfy us even as it seems that the effect must be the opposite. This is one aspect of the fact that human sexual satisfaction is so unlike the sexual satisfaction of the animals. However, there is, after all, something highly particular about the form this takes in Lui and Elle. And that leads away from their sexual encounter to their condition more generally.

5

What is meant, exactly, by "irrelevancy," the term I have taken from Raine? Obviously enough, the contrast is with a kind of reality. Raine's image of the self is that it appropriates something that betrays it as if it were not that which betrays but that which is real—which it is not. The self mistakes itself and thereby betrays itself. When Elle takes herself to have betrayed her dead lover by telling her story to Lui—"I have told our story. I deceived you this evening with someone I don't know" (Duras 1960, 110)—really she senses implicitly that she has betrayed herself, partly by betraying the story that can only be remembered when not attended to, when forgotten, buried in her, in her body, as I mentioned earlier. That is, in telling the story she has to acknowledge that her life is encumbered by the irrelevancy of the irrevocable loss I mentioned earlier: she has to face the fact that her attachment to her dead lover is, indeed, an irrelevancy, an acknowledgment that she can avoid so long as she does not tell the story, for in not telling the story she can live with the illusion that somehow the loss is not irrevocable. Similarly, her scornful self-mockery a little later when she describes her story as "cheap" ("*Histoire de quatre sous*" [118]) is a recognition of the same self-suspicion. In the case of Lui, what is at

stake is his self-betrayal in his fantasy that by absorbing her pain he can know what it was like to experience the bomb first-hand: he cannot come to terms with, does not know what to do with, the absence of such suffering in his life.

"Irrelevancy," then, means this: in the case of both of these figures, they suppose that there is something that can put them in touch with reality that cannot do so. What Elle wants is the reality of her love for her dead lover, and she supposes herself to be able to achieve this by wrapping herself around her unspoken memory of him *and also* by offering it to Lui in such a way that the identities of the two men become united in her mind. What Lui wants is the reality of his family's pain, which he supposes himself to be able to achieve by absorbing her pain.

What we see, then, in these characters is an immensely subtle investigation of the way in which human beings can *misidentify what can satisfy their deepest needs.* Why do they do this? In part, it is because these needs are so imperious that, in an effort to satisfy them, they grasp at what looks to be, but is not, a likely candidate to do that for them. But there is a much more profound aspect to the situation in that many of the deepest needs human beings have cannot be satisfied: *there is nothing that would count as satisfying them*, as we see in the case of Lui and Elle. And because that is so, it is highly likely that they will, after all, misunderstand what those needs are because the knowledge that nothing could satisfy them is unbearable. So they start to think of them in other ways, that is, in ways that mean they could be satisfied. Elle misidentifies her need as a need for Lui, for Lui as her dead lover; Lui misidentifies his need as a need for her pain. To be condemned to the hopeless attempt to satisfy needs whose nature is misunderstood: such is the bleak vision of the condition of the protagonists of this film.

6

If I am right that Lui and Elle manifest well for us what Raine means by saying that our lives are encumbered by irrelevancies that we take for reality, then can we say that we are all like these two characters? Are all our lives so encumbered?

I think they are, as I intimated in speaking above of human beings' deepest needs. Of course, even if I am right, I am not claiming that the form this takes for each of us is the same as the form it takes for Lui and Elle: our lives are encumbered in as many different ways as there are human beings. But I want to suggest that what lies at the root of our unavoidable tendency to encumber our lives with irrelevancies is our incapacity to accept a certain aspect of the reality of our condition. And that aspect is, precisely, the implacability

of our material existence, our exposure to gravity, of which I have spoken and which, if I am right, *Hiroshima mon amour* makes so present to us. That is, we find unbearable the fact that we are each, as it were, wholly given by the body, a body caught up in the same play of forces as is all other matter. And it is because we are, in general, in flight from this aspect of our condition that we encumber our lives with irrelevancies. We could put the point this way: our fundamental condition is one of extraordinary weakness and vulnerability. This is something we know but find it almost impossible to acknowledge. We seek out stratagems in fleeing this acknowledgment, living in a kind of fantasy, dream-like world in which we suppose ourselves much more in control of our lives than we are, much less vulnerable than we are. One of the key strategies we adopt in this process is that of seeking to dominate—to dominate others or, as Nietzsche correctly pointed out, recruiting one part of the self to dominate another part. One could say: the deepest need of human beings is to acknowledge their vulnerability and this is just what they find it impossible to do in any sustained way.

So we can say: when we tell the story of our life, give our autobiography, we necessarily get it wrong, fleeing from our vulnerability. We do not get it completely wrong, of course, or wrong all the time, and we may well make the deepest attempt to get it right, but it is as if the reality of our lives were just over there, beyond the horizon of what we say, of what we can say: we see it dimly, and capture it intermittently (hence we do not get it wrong completely), but it lies beyond reach, inciting us, enticing us, to speak, yet resisting our attempts to do so. Our lives and the story we tell of them are thus always inadequate, and must be. But this is not self-deception (though it can descend into that): it is the inevitable incapacity we have to tell the reality of our lives, an incapacity that, more or less clearly sensed, goads us into further attempts to tell the story again, and this time correctly, truthfully, in full cognizance of its reality. It is as if our failure here were a necessary condition of our success, ensuring that the project of providing an autobiography remains, and must remain, one expression of a desire to tell the truth, which is at the same time a desire to flee the truth.

And now we can see why it is that we cannot, in our ordinary quotidian activities, sustain the mood in which we acknowledge our exposure to gravity: we flee it. When we are confronted by it, it comes as a shock. That shock is profoundly troubling and, in general, disturbing, unpleasant. But not always. For it can also, and perhaps at the same time, have a kind of consoling quality for it does, after all, allow us to glimpse the reality of our condition. There is here an analogy to our experience of tragedy as a literary genre, on at least one central and plausible understanding of tragedy.[13] What tragedy gives us

is an insight into the reality of our condition, into how things stand with us, primarily with respect to our capacity to inflict suffering and be subject to suffering. It is just part of our nature, a brute fact about us, that we flee such knowledge because it is so painful, but it is also one of our basic needs to grasp the truth about our condition. Tragedy allows us to do this. This is in part why it can have a consoling quality. Similarly, when we are confronted by the truth about our material condition, we are shocked, disturbed, but at the same time can be consoled because here we are in touch with the truth of our condition. This is one of the things that makes *Hiroshima mon amour* so powerful: it balances all the time between an evocation of the most intense, corporeal pleasure and an unbearable insight into our vulnerability.

Elle and Lui exemplify the flight in question. In neither case can they bear the fact that they are exposed to a play of forces over which they have no control and both seek compensation through forms of domination. In the case of Lui, his attempt to absorb her pain is an attempt to gain power over her. Pingaud (2002, 74) is right, in a way, that Lui performs the role of a psychoanalyst for Elle, and this does place him in a position of power over her, but he is much more emotionally implicated in her and in her story than Pingaud sees: Lui's power over Elle is a matter of his seeking to *organize* her suffering for her so that he can make it his own. Unlike the psychoanalyst, whose aim must be to remain neutral, Lui's directing of his conversations with Elle expresses his own desire to appropriate her suffering and *not* a desire that she grasp the nature of her suffering for herself. In her case, she seeks to dominate him by making him over in the image of her dead German lover. What makes this film so fascinating and insightful is not so much its concern with memory, absorbing as that is, as its exemplification of the hopelessly intertwined strategies of these two characters as they each seek to dominate the other by constructing a narrative that answers to their individual, different needs, meaning that they sometimes get what they want but only by luck, as it were. The film thus exemplifies this thought of Weil's (1970a, 271): "In a general way, what one expects from others is determined by the effects of gravity in us; what one receives is determined by the effects of gravity in them. Sometimes that coincides (by chance), often not." This is why the movement of their relationship is gradually a movement of alienation, symbolized powerfully by the penultimate scene in the café where they just stare at each other across the void: they become alienated from each other because their individual projects are on a trajectory of self-destruction. When, in the final lines I mentioned earlier, she says that his name is "Hiroshima" and he says that hers is "Nevers," we reach the apotheosis of this alienation, for they are

each now emptied of significance as individuals and reduced to places—to the places in which the force of gravity for each made them who they are.

There is something missing from our reflections so far, and on this thought I shall end: if I have managed, at least in part, to justify my claim that *Hiroshima mon amour* is animated by a sense of the irrelevancies that usurp our lives, I have yet to say something directly about Raine's point that we think we know what we possess from hearsay, the word of other people and the like. Her point is that we are all second-hand, supposing ourselves not to be. But it should be clear how this applies to the protagonists in this film: each thinks, fantasizes, that what the other says is what he or she wishes to say him- or herself. Lui fantasizes that the story of the dead German is his story, and that this second-hand story can give him access to his family's suffering; Elle fantasizes that the story of his desire to understand her is, indeed, the story of her love for the dead German, is the reality of this love. They each think they know what they possess, but, in the end, they possess nothing.[14] This is what life always delivers, and its image is death—death that haunts both the French actress and her Japanese lover.

Notes

Many thanks to Christopher Cowley, Sebastian Gardner, and an anonymous reviewer for the University of Chicago Press for comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1. See, e.g., Imre Kertész, "Wem gehört Auschwitz?" available online at http://www.zeit.de/1998/48/Wem_gehoert_Auschwitz (last accessed July 16, 2013).

2. It is clear we are dealing here with the way in which, in seeking to remember and thus tell the story of one's life, one can be led astray by placing this story, the autobiography of one's life (or some part thereof), into a readily available schema or structure—"a love story," "a tragedy," and so on—a schema or structure that, precisely because it offers itself so readily through social and cultural influence to the person telling the story, leads him or her to mistake in various ways the reality of what he or she experienced. No doubt this is part of what Raine had in mind in speaking of "irrelevancies." To think of this as self-deception is tempting, and not entirely mistaken, though, as I hope the rest of this essay will make clear, such a concept would offer, in this context, a relatively blunt approach.

3. See, for example, from different perspectives, Huyssen 2003; Finkielkraut 2002, esp. chap. 4 on the "*compétition des mémoires*" in the modern cultural climate; Schwartz 2007; and the work cited by Robin 2011.

4. The body plays a role in the interpretation of this film offered by Caruth (1996, chap. 2). She suggests that *Hiroshima mon amour* offers "an exploration of the relation between history and the body" (26), though her emphasis is less on the materiality and phenomenology of the body than is mine in what follows.

5. For some relevant further reflections of mine on Simone Weil see Hamilton 2008, 315–30. In helping me see the significance of Weil's work for reflection on film I am indebted to Anat Pick (2011). Pick does not herself discuss *Hiroshima mon amour* in her book.

6. For an interesting comparison between Weil and Spinoza see Cockburn 1998, 173–86. Cockburn's sensitive discussion of Spinoza reads him as claiming that "those portions of the material world which are fundamental to my understanding of my life are, by definition, aspects of 'my body'" (177). It will become clear below that this reading is very much in line with my reflections on the significance of Spinoza for an interpretation of *Hiroshima mon amour*.

7. I am indebted here to Mark Wynn (2009), esp. chap. 5. Wynn draws in particular on the work of Bachelard, Lefebvre, and Bourdieu.

8. Serres 1985. There are connections here also with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who certainly influenced Serres. See in particular his reflections on the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1969): "The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being . . . is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element'; in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being" (139).

9. Once again, as I mentioned in n. 2 above, we see the *social* dimension of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, of our autobiography—who we are, that is, as a people or culture, and who we are as individuals.

10. I owe this objection, for which I am grateful, to Christopher Cowley.

11. I have tried to say something about this oddity in Hamilton 2001, chap. 10.

12. Cf. here, Wilson 2009, 46. Speaking of the images at the opening of the film, she says that they "summon our embodied knowledge and somatic memories, our sense of touch and physical sensation."

13. See, for example, Schier 1989

14. And again we see the way in which the telling of one's autobiography or some fragment thereof fails through its appropriation of a story or schema that offers itself for such a purpose because it seems to capture the truth, but does not.

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4

Memory, Self-Understanding, and Agency

MARINA OSHANA

1. What This Chapter Is (and Is Not) About

The task of this chapter is to determine what aspects of a person's identity or "selfhood" must be available to the person, and the manner in which they must be available, in order for the person to function as a self-governing agent. For the purposes of this discussion I shall understand agency as a fairly robust state. So understood, an agent is a being who deliberates, reflects, decides, intends, and brings about states of affairs. An agent (ideally) establishes standards of behavior for himself and is in control of himself, unlike a patient, or a being that is acted upon, managed, or caused to assume various states. A patient may well have desires and goals, and a distinctive conception of the good he wishes to realize. He might have the good fortune to see these realized, perhaps on his behalf, by others. But only *qua* agent is a person in a position to realize these goals by his own effort. To be a *self-governing* agent calls for a further characteristic.[1] This characteristic is the ability to anticipate one's intentions as leading to action by way of self-monitoring behavior. In what follows I will suggest that this robust form of agency is missing from the lives of persons beset by a spectrum of disorders of memory and of senility. I shall argue that memory, and principally autobiographical episodic memory of past experiences, is a central element in our standing as self-governing agents.

In the section that follows I will argue that the concepts of personhood, selfhood, and agency must be finely delineated. This delineation is needed for conceptual clarity; it is also needed if we are to circumvent serious worries about the ethical implications of the claim I am staking. In section 3, various types of memory will be described. I will argue that while most varieties of memory, and episodic memory in particular, are essential for self-governing agency, not all are obviously necessary for personhood and selfhood. Section 4 will take up the concept of agency in greater depth. I will argue that the crucial thing for agency is the persistence of self-recognition and the persistence of intentions and plans for action that are due to the direction of the actor rather than to accident or exogenous factors. The "in the moment"

agency characteristic of amnesiacs and of persons afflicted by diseases such as Alzheimer's renders them ineligible for sharing in a range of important forms of moral engagement, notably engagement of a sort that is essential to being responsible and to holding responsible. Finally, section 5 will explore why agency of the sort I discuss is so important to us.

As a caveat, I should note that the position I am staking is not intended to rely on bold metaphysical commitments about the self. I want to keep at arm's length the debate between, on the one hand, proponents of the thesis that selves are one of the fundamental ontological categories, the subject of our inner mental lives and the inner citadel of free agency, and, on the other hand, critics of these views such as Hume and those whose positions on the subject reflect Hume's influence.[2] At the same time, I do take seriously that there is something to which we sensibly refer as "the self one is" and I take it that this cannot be equated conceptually with the human being one is, or with the will one manifests in choice and action. "The self one is" is whatever part(s) of an entity's psychic, embodied, and social economy that serves the role of practical subject and, in the case of selves that function as robust agents, serves the role of self-governance.

I also distance the discussion of this chapter from claims about the metaphysics of identity, and (albeit to a lesser degree) from claims about the special concern persons have for time-slices of their lives of which they are aware. Take the question of the metaphysics of identity. Suppose the entirety (or a substantial quantity) of information in person A's memory-bank at t1 is erased. (I am going to stipulate that the means by which this occurs is irrelevant.) Unbeknownst to A, new information is substituted at t2. The being at t2—let us call her B—does not experience memory loss. Rather, her memories are as if a certain set of experiences are her own when in fact they are not—they are entirely fabricated. Now, it seems sensible that the veridicality of memory certainly is important to sameness of identity. To the extent that memory is *all* that matters to identity, or that memory in its various incarnations is essential for identity,[3] it seems correct to say that, in this case, person A at t1 has abruptly ceased to exist and a new person, B, has seamlessly assumed her place at t2. This substitution does not undercut B's qualifications as an agent, of course, and B's actions could still appear to be congruent with those of A. But they would not make sense as a continuation of the life of the same individual, nor could they be counted as expressions of activity that is within the control of a temporally continuous agent.[4] This need not be cited as a deficiency or loss in B's life insofar as it has no measurable effect on B's practical activity. But it seems correct to say that the mental content needed

for self-governing agency as I have described it is in this case compromised because whatever B does, her choices and actions are not such that they represent the continuation of a self-concept, and the plans and projects that this self-concept encompasses. The claim that a continuous self-concept rests on continuity of memory (of some sort or of one particular sort) needs to be defended, of course; doing this is the task of this chapter. In a nutshell, the argument is that as self-governing agents we operate on the expectation that our behavior bears the imprint of a temporally extended being in a position to make sense currently of her life principally in terms of the trajectory that has taken her to this point. Diachronic self-understanding is foundational to self-governance and to responsible agency. Moreover, we operate on the expectation that we will be able to justify subsequent behavior as continuous with a sufficiently veridical self-concept.

None of this is to suggest that matters of real consequence do not hang on the conservation of our identity as temporally extended agents. Among these matters is a practical concern for the quality of our future lives. How we plan for our lives is a function of what we care about and what we anticipate for ourselves. If I, at t1, am told that I shall be tortured at some point in the future, but will have any recollection of that experience eradicated from my memory bank so that psychological continuity is not preserved, have I reason to fear this future experience? It seems straightforward that I have good reason to fear what will happen. Maybe this concern is a waste of time, and it would be more expedient were I configured in such a way as to redirect my interests to a future that is psychologically continuous with the present. But even if this concern is justified, it raises issues pertinent to those that occupy the subject matter of this chapter only insofar as such concern generates (or signals) problems for practical agency and planning activity. To be sure, a natural expression of my self-governance will be that I plan for the experiences my body might happen to undergo in the future. But the fact that I do so—the fact that certain future states are objects of my self-interested concern—does not by itself establish that I am planning for the life of the same person I am today,[5] and it certainly does not establish that the same person I am now will in fact continue. It implies nothing about the metaphysics of personhood or about the metaphysics of identity, at least in so far as these have been standardly analyzed in the philosophical literature.

2. Persons, Selves, and Agents

The claim that memory, and episodic memory in particular, is needed for agency may prompt some to worry that beings who suffer from impairments

of memory (and comparable cognitive disorders) will fall outside the class of beings to whom moral consideration — or, at least, full moral consideration — is due.[6] Carl Craver cautions that

> There are ethical implications of saying that a human individual lacks a self, is not a person, or is no longer an agent. Such terms as self, person, and agent are not mere descriptions of states, such as having a mass or reacting at a given rate; they are statuses granted to special sorts of individual. To claim that an individual has lost these statuses is to imply (knowingly or not) that he or she no longer deserves the rights appropriate to selves, persons, and agents proper, and that they can no longer undertake the commitments, obligations, and duties that selves, person, and agents proper can undertake. (2012, 451)

Among the commitments, obligations, duties, and rights at stake are promising, truth telling, respectful treatment, legal liability, human liberties, and constitutional rights. If, owing to a deficit of memory, there is no continuity of personhood or of selfhood, then (the worry goes) a promise made today to one person vanishes when the memory bank is erased; it need not be kept tomorrow with respect to some other person. If, owing to a deficit of memory, there is no possibility of agency, then the practice of holding persons accountable for their actions is unjust—why hold a person accountable for what he has not done? This practice would also be meaningless, for what pragmatic aim could we possibly hope to achieve by holding accountable someone who has no mental connection with the behavior at issue? These would be worries if personhood, selfhood, and agency were conflated. But they ought not to be conflated. They are distinct phenomena and demand distinct conceptual analyses.

Let us begin with the concept of personhood, a contentious concept if ever there was one. One reason why the concept is so contentious is because so much rides on it: the moral legitimacy of abortion, the scope of human rights, duties of care, and so forth.[7] This is all the more reason to render the concept more precise, or at least to clarify what is meant by the term where the moral status of sentient beings, and perhaps human beings in particular, is concerned.[8] One account of personhood, premised on an account of personal identity, is offered by Marya Schechtman, who has argued that "personal identity consists in the continuity of a person-life; a person exists as long as a single person-life does."[9] Personhood is the state of living a person-life. Many of the features of "person-lives" are congenial to the lives of memory-impaired individuals. For instance, in contrast to standard (Lockean) accounts of personal identity (Locke 1979), "person-lives not only come in degrees but can be partial and incomplete in all kinds of complex ways" (Schechtman 2008,

50). Among the distinguishing features of a person-life are "higher-order capacities [of] reflective self-consciousness and rationality," as well as "more primitive and less structured psychological episodes—emotions, daydreams, drives and impulses" (46). These capacities and characteristics are within the reach of a subset of the memory-impaired. Person-lives call for embodiment in whatever configuration would be fitting for participating in person-like recreations, a requirement that is surely within the grasp of many individuals affected by impairments of memory. Person-lives are socially embedded: "To live a person-life, one generally needs to be surrounded by others in an environment that supports such a life" (48). Again, this feature does not seem a stretch for one beset by disorders of memory. Indeed, Schechtman explicitly acknowledges that

> Many aspects of a person-life depend not so much on a particular individual's having complex cognitive capacities but rather on her participating in a way of life typical of those who commonly do have those capacities. Person-lives would not exist but for the fact that those who live them usually have reflective self-consciousness and the capacity for complex forms of rationality, *but because such a life is lived socially, not everyone who lives a person-life must have these capacities*. . . . The implication . . . is that a person-life can continue if only the outer features are in place, or at least if the inner features are seriously impaired. The limiting case of this analysis would be PVS [persistent vegetative state]. Those who suffer from PVS are embedded in a social structure (as are those who are comatose). (48; emphasis added)

In other words, although persons in PVS lack the capacity for self-reflection and for rational thought and as a result cannot engage with others socially, they nonetheless may remain part of a social network that includes caregivers and (hopefully) family who continue to regard them in the familiar social-relational terms—as parent, friend, child, spouse, and so forth.[10] We have no reason to suspect that social "person-lives" will be closed to the memory-impaired. Person-lives may include more exclusionary qualities, however. Normally, a person-life will include undertakings "that those offering more agent-based accounts of identity focus on," such as prudential reasoning and planning activity (Schechtman 2008, 48). But I think that what Schechtman offers ought to allay the fears of those who believe the protective carapace of personhood will be snatched from the lives of the memory-impaired.

A more demanding account of personhood, but one I think is nonetheless within the reach of persons with compromised memory, is offered by Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt contends that personhood is closely allied with freedom

of will and freedom of will with the possession of a hierarchical structured motivational psychology. In his seminal paper "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," he tells us that the criteria for personhood "are designed to capture those attributes which are the subject of our most humane concern with ourselves and the source of what we regard as most important and most problematical in our lives" (1971, 6). What persons care most about is that their decisions and actions are ones they genuinely want to be moved by. Persons are distinguished from "wantons" and other nonrational animals, human and nonhuman, in their ability to reflect upon their motivational psychology. Upon noticing the preferences and desires they have for various things, persons will form preferences and volitions of a higher order about which of their "first-order" desires should serve as their will, or their springs of action. The capacity to form volitions of a higher order indicates that one is the kind of being that might enjoy or suffer a lack of free will.

Frankfurt's account of personhood could accommodate some beings beset by disorders of memory. There seems no reason to deny that amnesiacs of every variety are incapable "of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are" (6–7). Indeed, we shall see that many are acutely aware of their impairment and wish they were possessed of normal memory. It also seems possible for amnesiacs to form volitions of a higher order. They can't keep these volitions present to mind, or use them for the planning activity I regard as important to robust agency. But this is just to say that amnesiacs are not robust agents. I have yet to argue this point; one reason for doing so is to show that agency, while hugely valuable and valued, is not definitive of the lives of persons, nor must its absence diminish a person's moral standing.

Other accounts of personhood are more exacting, yet still invite beings afflicted by disorders of memory into the fold. Consider, for example, Daniel Dennett's six themes or necessary conditions of personhood (1976). These inform us that

1. Persons are rational beings.
2. Persons are subjects to which states of consciousness (mental or intentional) are predicated.
3. Persons are the object of certain attitudes and stances.

The first three conditions are conjointly dependent. In concert they define an intentional system, "something whose behavior can be (at least sometimes) explained and predicted by relying on ascriptions to the system of beliefs and desires (and other Intentionally characterized features . . . [that] include

hopes, fears, intentions, perceptions, expectations, etc.)" (179). In addition to these three,

4. Persons reciprocate certain attitudes and stances.
5. Persons are capable of verbal communication.
6. Persons are self-conscious.

Certainly most amnesiacs meet these criteria, even if the criterion of intentionality is satisfied for only a truncated period of time.

The ethical worries arise when "persons" must meet more complex benchmarks. Peter Singer, for example, argues that persons are rational beings, self-consciously aware of themselves as existing over time; they are, moreover, capable of planning activity and autonomous agency (2011, 78–84). But I think Singer's definition suffers from a fusion I wish to challenge, namely that of the concepts of person and of agency. There is no reason to assume without argument that personhood ought to be interpreted in the more demanding fashion Singer outlines. Some ethical worries can be preempted if we understand "personhood" in a legal sense. I noted (see n. 7) that the concept is employed in law to demarcate a class of entities that are bearers of rights and, usually, responsibilities. So understood, personhood is a category that includes many, though perhaps not all, human beings, including human beings who are beset by cognitive disorders.

The concept of selfhood is no more clear-cut than that of personhood. The folk notion is that selfhood refers to what differentiates one as a person in possession of a particular identity. Some philosophers have gone so far as to deny the existence of selves, and so the representational content of selfhood, entirely.[11] My view is that the concept has representational content. Selves are needed for agency, a view I shall argue for as this chapter develops. But even those who disagree about the nature of the self, and about the usefulness of the concept of selfhood and its ethical significance, agree that the self—whatever it turns out to be—if it exists is that in virtue of which the distinct identity of a being is had.[12] So suppose we start with the (not uncontroversial) assumption that we can refer intelligibly to something called the "self." And let us treat the following as truisms. The self, whatever it is, if it exists, is the subject of which properties and relations may be predicated. The self, whatever it is, if it exists, is also the object of interest to us as the bearer of a life that is its own. The self, whatever it is, if it exists, must be a synchronically and diachronically unified entity, and it must be able to represent itself first-personally. Finally, the self is the site of moral agency and of responsibility.[13] In section 4 I will discuss the self as the site of moral agency. At this juncture, let us focus on the ideas that selves must be synchronically and diachronically

unified, and must be capable of first-personal representation. Do amnesiacs and those with comparable maladies suffer from a deficit in either aspect?

Let us begin with the qualities of synchronic and diachronic unity. The synchronically unified self at any given time is perceptually aware and cognizant of her thoughts and feelings. Amnesiacs beset by deficits of episodic memory, Carl Craver contends, suffer no greater synchronic impairment than do members of the general population: amnesiacs "recognize objects and follow instructions. They hold conversations. They understand jokes. They play card games and watch baseball games on TV" (2012, 455). I assume Craver means that amnesiacs do these things in a way that demonstrates an understanding of the games and an ability to follow the sequence of plays. If this is in fact what Craver means, I confess I find it implausible. Certainly the working memory of anterograde amnesiacs (persons lacking the ability to form long-term memory) is too fleeting to support such endeavors.

Diachronic unity, in which selfhood is a function of a temporally extended, persistent identity, will be lost for amnesiacs only if episodic memory is essential to such unity. Craver questions whether it is essential, arguing that some individuals with amnesia can nonetheless possess the concept of indexical time (time indexed to specific events or phenomena) and so can "know what it is for an event to be in the past, in the present, and in the future"; they can know "that the causal order of things runs from the past to future and not in reverse" (465). Craver treats episodic memory generally as overrated. He reminds us that, as a criterion for identity, episodic memory long ago fell prey to worries about circularity: if a person's identity is a function of remembering one's experiences, then it must be the case that the person existed (and was identical to the person who survives in memory) in order for the experiences to be recalled and to be one's own. To avoid this charge, philosophers have advanced the idea of quasi-memory, which makes persistence of identity a function of causal connections of dependence between conscious states.[14] If enough quasi-memories are present, then episodic memory is less essential for identity and so, the argument goes, for selfhood. As Craver notes, "individuals with and without amnesia maintain many causal relationships among conscious states independently of episodic memory" (457). If all we require of diachronic identity is connections between a being's mental states, then a kind of unity of selfhood is possible where episodic memory is lacking.

It seems plausible that quasi-memory connections allow for the persistence of some form of personal identity. Persisting as the same person, amnesic or not, is a step toward the state of being a self-governing agent. But surely there is more than this to the self that is identified with a particular being, and that operates as the conceptual center of agency. Perhaps agential selfhood

lies in the capacity for first-personal representation. To motivate this thought, let us make use of John Perry's idea of a self-identity file (2002). Perry argues that indexical self-referential thinking is an essential and ineliminable component of our theoretical toolbox, without which we would be ill-equipped to participate in the real world and engage in practical reasoning. More generally, it is fundamental to structuring normal human thought.

Following Perry, let us assume the term "Marina Oshana" refers to an occupant of the world whose perspective is had by a particular self. The self can have a view of herself as one among many selves, of course. That is, among the things represented in the world to Marina Oshana is Marina Oshana. As Perry states (with some modification):

> In my impersonal conception of the world, there is a representation of [Marina Oshana], a rather full and robust one, since I know a lot about her. . . . But its status, within the impersonal representation, is on a par with my representations of everyone else. Usually I have another rather intrusive representation of myself, one I might retain even if I forgot who I was, based on contemporary information I can pick up about myself through feelings and perception and tied to the word "I." But in this philosophical mood this representation is attenuated; I bracket off most of this information, and I focus on the impersonal conception. But I cannot fully sever the connection; while what is conceived may be objective and impersonal, the mental conception itself belongs to only one of those people represented in it. That person has a special way of attending to it that allows him to think of it as *this*. (2002, 217–18)

Perry offers a rather complicated story of how self-recognition occurs when "objectively represented information about people in various positions relative to me" are attached to "the agent-relative roles they occupy" (228). Roughly, Perry's view is that when the information is collected in the individual's "self-notion buffer-file" and is put to use in a particular way, the information comes to be recognized by the individual as self-representational. The content of the file then expresses not just an identity relation but a self-concept. This suggests that one component of selfhood is representational. That is, a capacity for self-representation is needed.

I am not defending or even buying into the entirety of Perry's story; I am only interested in the idea that some of the information that generates self-identity assertions must be acquired and put to use in particular ways if this information is to serve agential self-governance. Perry's account of the genesis of self-understanding supplies a helpful starting point for an appreciation of agency. But much that is included into a self-notion file is of little importance to agency. My self-notion includes the facts that I was born in a certain year, occupied a certain dwelling during my childhood, and no longer

enjoy butterscotch sundaes, none of which are facts upon which agency and self-governance rely.

Which pieces of first-personal information among the mass of facts included in a self-notion file are vital in this respect? Obviously these facts include first-personal information about a person's beliefs, values, dispositions, relationships, history, and so forth. But somehow this information must enable a distinction to be drawn between objective facts of the world that provide the truth conditions for statements such as "The woman who teaches at The University of California, Davis, is Marina Oshana, and she believes X and values Y" and those conditions that make the words "I am Marina Oshana, and I believe X and value Y" true when I say them. Self-recognition is an essentially indexical phenomenon (Perry 1979). Self-recognition occurs when I recognize *me* as *myself*; it is not a function of recognizing Marina Oshana. In addition to rather generic practical qualities that must actually be in place if a person is to be a self-governing agent, such as the quality of being a minimally rational deliberator, self-reflexive skills and comprehension of a more indexical variety must be within the purview of the putative agent. A skill is self-reflexive where it is directed to the self by the self. Comprehension is indexical when it indicates some state—in this case, some state of the agent.

I want to explore the idea that the relevant elements of selfhood where questions of agency are at issue are those that make self-recognition possible. More precisely, the relevant sort of skills and first-personal information are those that enable a person *to think of himself as an agent and to conduct himself as an agent in possession of a distinctive identity*. What matters is not just the information a person might accrue about himself, but the manner of access. Why? Because we are looking at self-governing agency, and such agency cannot be accidental. In order for self-governing agency to be possible, information has to be connected to the person in a particular way.

Some philosophers have argued that the needed connection is manifest in a person's capacity for narrative identity.[15] The rough idea of narrative accounts of selfhood is that what we call the "self" is constituted out of relations among our lived experiences that assume a narrative form and take on meaning as a unified chronicle that we "write." To be a unified self is part and parcel of the enterprise of making sense of oneself and representing oneself by way of this narrative. Schechtman writes:

> At the core of [the narrative self-constitution] view is the assertion that individuals constitute themselves by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have expe-

> rience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs. Some, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons. On this view a person's *identity* . . . is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers. (1996, 94)

One underspecified element concerns the level of lucidity, of veridicality, and of independent authorship a person's narrative identity must possess if it is to enable her to think of herself as a self-governing agent and to conduct herself as self-governing.[16] But with these details forthcoming, we can see how narrative self-representation supports self-governing agency.[17] Notably, the narrative must have a particular source. This source is the person's indexical identity-file. The narrative must draw on aspects of a person's identity-file that enable a person to map out, decide upon, and explain her behavior. Such information serves as reasons by which a person attributes behavior to herself, both presently and at earlier times, due to causal connections with her own activity. Typically, the elements of the self subject to reflexive direction are phenomena that a person can easily access and retain in memory, and are of a sort that influence the person's public engagements by affecting the person's motives for action and behavior. For this reason, a narrative based primarily on tales told by others or second-hand testimony won't do.

Insofar as agency calls for a self that is subject to reflexive direction, agency depends on a conception of selfhood, and a conception of oneself, as synchronically and diachronically unified, in possession of a working memory of sufficient duration to serve practical ends, such as that of grounding ascriptions of responsibility. My view is that while the threshold for a suitable duration of memory varies depending on the type of responsibility one wishes to ascribe, in most contexts of moral and legal responsibility there is an expectation that attributing a person with responsibility for what he has done and holding a person accountable for his actions call for persistence of a narratively unified agential self through the time of the performance. I will return to this theme in section 5.

3. Memory

The orthodox view has been that autobiographical memories consisting of explicit recollection of past episodes in a person's life are central in supplying the constitutive elements of the self.[18] Episodic memory corresponds to spatio-temporally indexed specific events having been experienced and then recalled. It is usually declarative and propositional, involving beliefs about some phenomenon consciously experienced by the person. My view is that

episodic memory is necessary, though not sufficient, for self-governed agency. Other forms of memory may serve as factors in autobiography as well. One such variety is semantic memory of general facts or concepts, shareable with others and not reliant upon spatio-temporal context.[19] Examples would be remembering that the most selective and esteemed journals in philosophy underrepresent feminist philosophy in their publications, and remembering that fully ripened fruit tastes best. Another example would be the semantic memory of a particular quality associated with a person or an event—good humor or gustatory pleasure, or of the mannerisms and conventions distinctive of certain roles, such as the exaggerated (and stereotyped) gestures of a waiter in a French café.[20] Such memories needn't evoke a particular event one experienced. By itself, semantic memory is inadequate for self-representation. Semantic memory can be perceptually thin, lacking contextual background, and indexed or not to a given time. It is nonetheless valuable, for semantic memory often serves to represent general attributes of persons and experiences, and may draw on what affected a person in her past experience.

Memory might also be implicit, involving for example procedural memory of a "how-to" variety, the sort we retain in our knowledge of how to ride a bike or scramble an egg. Memory built upon habit and training may figure with various degrees of salience in autobiographical memory. In this way, implicit memory, too, may undergird our aptitude as agents possessed of distinct identities.

Finally, we need to note the capacity of an actor's working memory. We need to know how large it is, and how long-lasting it must be for self-governed agency. We need to know the extent to which the actor can make a plan and carry through with it. As I have noted, the answer has implications for the variety of moral responsibility, or scope of responsibility, with which the actor can be credited. Can we hold accountable a person in possession of a very narrow window of working memory, even for actions which the person at the time of execution endorsed or (to borrow from Frankfurt) identified with wholeheartedly?[21]

Propositional data about her environment that a person has amassed in memory coupled with learned skills enable a person to exert a modicum of control over her circumstances as practical agency requires. The question of which variety of memory or which assemblage of these types of memory is crucial to agency is less tractable. What capabilities of memory must a person possess, and to what extent must a person possess these, in order to claim the status of a robust agent? The question of what sort of things one must remember about oneself—what the content of memory states must be—if one is to have a sense of the direction of one's life is open as well. Progress can

be made on both questions by examining the situation of individuals beset by various types of memory loss within the spectrum. What are we to make of the agential selfhood of persons for whom elements of their history has been lost to them through a want of previously held autobiographical, propositional, or implicit data?

Consider the case of Henry Gustav Molaison—the famous "H.M." whose development of anterograde amnesia following experimental brain surgery (involving the complete removal of the hippocampus) to treat severe epilepsy rendered him the object of medical study for fifty-five years, until his death in December 2008 at the age of eighty-two.[22] I have argued elsewhere that Molaison's amnesia rendered him in possession of a self so ephemeral as to be unsuitable for robust agency (Oshana 2010). I am still of this view, but I believe it calls for some clarification. Let me spell out the nature of Molaison's amnesia. To begin, Molaison did not forget himself in the rudimentary sense of errors in physical recognition; he could tell that the person reflected in a mirror image was himself. He was capable of differentiating between himself and others, and understood first-personal and reflexive concepts. Despite his inability to retain most newly acquired information, Molaison preserved some pre-onset episodic and semantic autobiographical memories, as well as a lingering body of pre-onset values, preferences, and mannerisms. He appeared aware of the self he had been prior to the inception of his amnesia, and continued to represent himself first-personally.

Some of these memories exhibited a high degree of salience in his interpersonal dealings; an observer might cite them as evidence that Molaison continued to have general ends and even plans that structured his actions.[23] For instance, there was constancy of preferences and of personality; Molaison remained genial and articulate, and interested in the lives of those whom he met. He was devoted to crossword puzzles, and an avid reader of newspapers. (I find the latter activity impressive if it means Molaison not only read, but could follow, a storyline.) He was able to orient his days around routines, such as making lunch, mowing the lawn, and watching television. And, oddly, he was able to form new explicit memories where the content held special emotional resonance. For example, he was able to provide unique, identifying details about a select number of famous individuals. He described Lee Harvey Oswald as "the man who assassinated the president." He was sufficiently enamored of the television comedy *All in the Family* that he knew Archie Bunker referred to his son-in-law as "Meathead." Dr. Suzanne Corkin describes this ability as "astonishing" and surmises that Molaison's knowledge of these people could be traced to "an emotional component . . . because these were people that he liked, or who had been associated with a violent

event, like the assassination of Kennedy. I think that this extra processing from the emotional component made it stick better in his memory."[24] Poignantly, Molaison possessed a clear and persistent sense of himself as someone who could not keep experiences in mind for any length of time, as well as a sense of what his future held for him as a result.[25] He exhibited the sort of first-personal practical concern for the welfare of his future self that is characteristic of normal persons.

So perhaps the crucial thing for self-governed and responsible agency is not memory so much as it is the persistence of intentions and plans. In Molaison's case, perhaps it was adequate for agential selfhood that he had plans and intentions, even if he could not keep these present to mind by endogenous means such as drawing upon autobiographical experiential memories within his self-referential data bank. I am not persuaded that the regularities Molaison exhibited serve as evidence of planning activity, or that that they suffice as solid evidence of the sort of selfhood upon which agency relies. Indeed, the Molaison case suggests that views that treat a supply of first-personal knowledge as the basis of selfhood are inadequate for agency. Proper grammatical use of "I" is not sufficient for agency. Many of the essentially indexical elements of a person's self-notion file are available even to persons for whom impairments of memory are acute. Molaison possessed a fairly extensive supply of first-personal knowledge at the same time that key aspects of self-understanding were lost to him. He was able to know who he was only in an attenuated sense because he had no memory of what he had done. Knowing who one is depends on knowing what one has done, and it depends on retaining some of this knowledge and doing so in a particular way. Knowing who one is depends on the persistence of reasons or motivations for action that are connected in the right sort of way, by self-reflexive narrative representation, to motivations in the present. Molaison's capacity for providing dependable testimony of himself—testimony of a sort upon which he and others could rely as evidence of self-governed, responsible agency—was seriously compromised. He could gauge neither his own motives nor the motives of others for drawn-out intervals of time. Indeed, he lacked any sense of why certain people were present in his life, even those whose presence, such as Corkin's, was a constant.

I think the lesson is that, among the qualities of selfhood that are available to persons, those that cement their agential activities are those that belong to the individual in a special way marked by manner of access and character of presentation. Notably, Molaison's impairment robbed him of an important variety of cross-temporal self-recognition, namely cross-temporal self-recognition of a sort that calls for placing oneself in the past and having that

recognitional thought carry through to one as one is now, with plans one intends to come to fruition, into the future (Korsgaard 1989). I want to suggest that the agency needed for self-governance and responsibility calls for this rich variety of cross-temporal self-recognition, and so for an ability to recognize oneself in less restrictive and mundane ways than were within Molaison's reach.

4. Agency

I have claimed that the kind of agency that allows us to carry out projects (and most important, projects we care about) is self-monitoring, temporally extended agency. Perhaps I have exaggerated the importance of such agency. After all, Molaison's life likely had purpose—or, better, value—for him and for others, and this may be as important, or more important, than the fact that he could not keep memories in mind. I agree that "there is something that it is like to be an individual with amnesia" (Craver 2012, 455), and what this is like may be a joyous and meaningful type of selfhood.[26] So I do not deny that it may have meant more in the scheme of things that Molaison's life was one of joy and satisfaction than that it was a life he could recall. I would also allow that the life he led offered a form of agency by means other than recalled experience. What I deny is that impairments of memory and, more broadly, impairments of cognition such as dementia allow for full-blown agency. I will argue in this section and the next that this is a deep lack for which no amount of joy and value in other elements of life can substitute.

At a basic level, Molaison was an agent, as is my mother-in-law, now in an advanced stage of senility. Both have qualitative states of sort that are "part of a coherent unity that is constitutive of and experienced as myself" (Searle 2011, 50). Neither suffers from dissociative identity disorder. Basic agency calls for active capacities, such as making up one's mind, and this is something Molaison could do (this is less true of my mother-in-law), even if he could not keep in mind what he had settled on doing. A more demanding expectation is that agents know what they are doing when they do it. This is part of what it means to wield control over one's actions; control calls for awareness that what is happening is of one's own doing. Knowing one's own agency means being aware of what one is doing when one acts, knowing whether what one does conforms with what one intends to do, and knowing what one ought to be doing given these intentions. We assume that a person's action is less his own when the person is not aware of or cannot acquire awareness of what he intends to do. As Anne Newstead (2006) writes, "[the] idea is that so long as one is acting intentionally, one will (potentially) have access to one's

intention and interpret one's action in the light of that intention. . . . Movements that one undertakes but cannot interpret as fulfilling some intention of one's own are not one's intentional actions, but mere *happenings*." One might argue that this sort of awareness can be had simply when one's actions are the product of one's practical reasoning, and someone like Molaison is capable of episodes of practical reasoning of relatively short duration. In addition, many features of intentional agency operate nonconsciously and draw on implicit information-processing of a sort of which anterogrades are capable. Memory impairment need not compromise nonconscious awareness of one's actions.[27] Where occurrent action is at issue, Molaison meets these conditions for intentional behavior.

Does the satisfaction of these conditions suffice for intentional action of a sort that supports self-governing agency, or full-blown unified agency? What *does* one need to experience and to be aware of in order to have the experience of one's agency? I believe the lives of Henry Molaison and of persons such as my mother-in-law indicate that there are certain things about oneself one must remember if one is to function as a full-blown unified agent. In addition, one must be able to remember in a particular way in order to function as a full-blown unified agent. Notably, agency of this variety demands more than implicit memory apparent in the preservation of preferences, mannerisms, and practical skills. It calls for more than acquired responses to environmental stimuli and to social cues. It is to have more than the ability to continue an autobiographical narrative even where one's motivation in this endeavor is a desire to make sense of what one recognizes (if only viscerally) as the impoverishment of one's circumstances. It calls for more than the ability to employ indexical concepts properly. Finally, even if anterograde amnesiacs can have nonobservational knowledge about their current actions absent further evidence, and even if they can know what they are doing just by acting and trusting (for the moment) that what they do fits their intentions under some description, I would suggest that this level of knowledge is not enough for self-governing agency.

To restate what I hope is now a less contentious point, *knowing who one is depends on knowing what one has done*. Evidence that one has this sort of knowledge is that one can correctly anticipate one's intentions as leading to action by way of self-monitoring behavior. These are the practical activities we expect of self-governing agents. If I am correct, persons suffering cognitive impairments of a sort that anterograde amnesia and senility produce will be ill-equipped to assume such a role. Such persons will struggle to respond cross-temporally to questions about their future plans by appeal to what they have settled on doing as a prediction. Molaison was aware of him-

self as having had a past and as confronting a future, but to his mind there was no future point of view from which he was able to witness the realization of his current intentions. Even if he were able to do this, intentional action of the kind upon which self-governance depends is more than just a mode of anticipation in which a person projects himself into a future perspective so as to make his current actions intelligible to himself. Intentional action of the kind upon which self-governance depends calls for predicting future behavior on the basis of what one has decided to do. Anterograde amnesiacs and persons beset by senility are challenged on this front. They lack a cross-temporal outlook of a sort that supports continuity of behavior and enables cross-temporal projects to continue. Working memory and veridical episodic recollection do just this. Memory organizes autobiographical profiles by rendering the present in terms that make sense of it as the extension of a life and that can be recognized by the actor as the extension of a life that is hers. I am doubtful that whatever types of memory remain accessible to anterograde amnesiacs (and to persons such as my unfortunate mother-in-law) serve them in this respect.

Anterograde amnesiacs fall short of controlling their actions by way of self-monitoring behavior in other obvious ways. Our agency depends on the contribution we make to running our lives. Lacking an internal mechanism for keeping themselves—their character, their commitments, their plans, and perhaps even their values—present to the mind's eye, anterogrades cannot bear witness reliably to themselves. This is apparent even in cases where the subject employs other methods of preserving noteworthy data. Consider David Chalmers and Andy Clark's case of the fictional Otto:

> Otto suffers from Alzheimer's disease, and like many Alzheimer's patients, he relies on information in the environment to help structure his life. Otto carries a notebook around with him everywhere he goes. When he learns new information, he writes it down. When he needs some old information, he looks it up. For Otto, his notebook plays the role usually played by a biological memory. . . . Otto is constantly using his notebook as a matter of course. It is central to his actions in all sorts of contexts, in the way that an ordinary memory is central in an ordinary life. The same information might come up again and again, perhaps being slightly modified on occasion, before retreating into the recesses of his artificial memory. (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 12–13)

Otto retains working memory to a degree that permits him to recognize the notebook as his own and to recall its function. He is sufficiently aware of himself that he can trust, for good reason, the content of the notebook he keeps. I have no problem attributing to the fictional Otto the extended mind of which Clark and Chalmers speak. I assume Otto's disease is in the

relatively early stages. But for persons suffering from the advanced stages of Alzheimer's, or from senility or anterograde amnesia, these external devices are less useful extensions of themselves.[28] I am mystified by Leonard Shelby, the fictional amnesiac in the film *Memento* (2000), who attempts to render permanent facts about his pursuits by tattooing himself; surely the method is unreliable, since his impairment leaves him incapable of remembering why a particular tattoo has significance. Molaison, my mother-in-law, and Shelby—even Otto—must repeatedly reacquire and then reprocess significant information about their lives. This hampers agential capability.

I stated above that the task of memory is to organize autobiographies so as to make sense of the present as the continuation of a past. Some measure of autobiographical continuity can be preserved by means of shared recollection, whereby memories of noteworthy events in one's life are offered by third parties and by material documentation. That Molaison and Otto and my mother-in-law cannot resurrect post-onset memories on their own does not mean that access to the information memory supplies cannot be furnished from other sources. Others can construct a veridical narrative of episodic and, perhaps, even semantic memories for them.[29] I question whether witnessing oneself in this indirect, third-personal manner will enable a person to revive a first-personal self-conception. But even if it does—even if a person comes to believe the narrative we have constructed and comes to recognize herself among the data—none of the subjects I have discussed has the capacity to recognize this in the manner of a *responsible* knower and as a *responsible* inquirer.[30] An undeniable fact of human life is that we are epistemically dependent on others; what we know depends on facts about our embeddedness in communities, our use of language, our shared values, practices, and so forth. To be a responsible knower is to retain epistemic autonomy (this is not the same as epistemic atomism!). It is to understand and be responsible for our beliefs and for the choices we make, at the same time we acknowledge that our epistemic skills can be sharpened through the testimony of others or by supplementary methods of extending the mind (journaling or videotaping, for instance). The chief characteristic of responsible inquiry is a willingness and an ability to self-scrutinize—to lead the examined life, as it were. Molaison and persons suffering from similar impairments of memory are incapable of leading a life by way of self-examination. None can accomplish whatever ends they might seek by way of self-monitoring behavior. Not one can settle upon a course of action; not one can devise and execute for any significant period of time a stratagem that makes sense given his or her objectives.

The experiences of Henry Molaison and the others bring out the importance of self-recognition and the importance of recognizing oneself in one's actions. Once we comprehend what Molaison and similarly situated persons have lost, we are able to identify a critical characteristic of self-governed agency. In the end, it doesn't really matter how much first-personal material is in one's self-file. Molaison retained a fairly extensive body of first-personal knowledge. What matters for self-governed, robust agency—agency of the sort whose importance I wish to emphasize—is whether the material that is in the file enables one to make one's actions intelligible to oneself. It is under the guise of the self *qua* agent that we take an immediate interest in particular components of the self-notion identity file.

The fact that particular elements of the identity file anchor self-recognition and are vital to self-governed agency is evident on several scores. First, when they are made accessible to the person through reflection or through the attention drawn to them by external perspectives, a person will register these features of the identity file as salient to her self-conception. Memories form a foundational component of a person's self-conception. Second, select elements of the identity-file shape a person's interpretation of the world. They offer a frame of reference for choice and action, as it were. Absent these, a person would be hard pressed to live in a way that gives expression to her values and concerns, if for no other reason than because she would have a tenuous understanding of what her values and concerns are. In consequence, a person would be less capable of standing as a reliable and genuine partner in social exchange with others. The elements of the identity file that are at the heart of self-recognition and that are critical to self-governed agency tend to be those that enable a person to "be herself," and permit those with whom she interacts to recognize her as "the way she usually is." On this basis persons are able to engage in intentional behavior that is intelligible to themselves and are better equipped to cope interpersonally. On this basis a person is able to, in Jan Bransen's terms, "determine the best alternative of oneself" or continuation of oneself (2002). An alternative of oneself is settled by choosing among different ways of being, each of which is in harmony with one's evaluative and motivational profile.

Can persons in circumstances akin to Molaison choose among continuations of themselves in this sense? What kind of memory, or ways of knowing, convey first-personal information that a person is herself, or is as she ought to be? Richard Kraut brought to my attention a passage from Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftsbury (1671–1713), in the latter's "Philosophical Regimen" (Rand 1900). What Shaftesbury writes challenges the position I have staked out. Here is the quote:

> The metaphysicians and notable reasoners about the nice matters of identity, affirm that if memory be taken away, the self is lost. [But] what matter for memory? What have I to do with that part? If, *whilst I am*, I am as I should be, what do I care more? And thus let me lose *self* every hour, and be twenty successive selfs, or new selfs, 'tis all one to me: so I lose not my opinion. If I carry that with me 'tis I; is all is well. . . .—The *now*; the *now*. Mind this: in this is all.[31]

One might ask whether a life lived in the eternal present would necessarily be so bad: "If one's present experience is sufficiently rich, why should it be downgraded simply because it is not experienced as something that is connected to a past or a future?" (Kraut 2011). Well, I am not sure it would. As Kraut points out, this may be akin to the life extolled by Buddhism, focused on the moment. It need not be a bland, empty, joyless state of existence. And I suppose one could derive contentment and a sense of gratification from a life that was lived in the moment. But to practice Buddhism is to live *mindfully* in the moment; it is not to live untethered to the moment. Henry Molaison, as we have seen, lived quite happily, but in an untethered way. I am not sure how the experiences of someone who lived in an untethered way would convey a sense of how they should live, as Shaftesbury suggests, or how this person could carry his overall outlook or character with him. Doing that seems to call for recognition of and identification of oneself as a cross-temporal agent. Additionally, I am fairly confident that even if Molaison's overall outlook and essential character could be preserved as Shaftesbury and Strawson allege, this would not amount to self-governed agency. Molaison would lack an overall outlook that affords a psychic and practical connection with his past and future.

5. The Value of Memory

I have emphasized the role that a person's memory of a subset of beliefs, values, preferences, and the like plays in providing a compass in life. Autobiographical memory supports practical identity, where this includes one's identity as an accountable being, by furnishing a person with some of the resources needed to justify subsequent behaviors as continuous with that person's self-concept. Memory tells us what we recall of ourselves, and anticipation reveals what we expect of ourselves. More precisely, memory is integral in underwriting our normative powers as intentional agents. The significance of the distinction between self-monitoring agency and in-the-moment agency is that the former makes action for which we are responsible possible, and allows us to carry out projects that matter to us.

Memory loss confronts all of us as we age. Usually this loss is of a mild and benign sort. Certainly most of us are never forced to cope with the profound psychic disarray wrought by anterograde amnesia. Still, we do fear succumbing to memory loss of a more commonplace variety. Part of what we fear about the prospect of becoming victims of senility is this tenseless sense of existence.[32] Senility diminishes the capacity for having the plan-like or intention-like attitudes that Michael Bratman argues function as authoritative policies vis-à-vis the agent's motivational stance with respect to her desires.[33] Without recollection of who we have been and what we have done, we are incapable of knowing what we ought intentionally to do—what plan of action we should develop—congruent with our considered needs and interests, values and concerns.[34] Senility exemplifies a loss of the sense of self that we all value—the recognition of ourselves in our actions coupled with the confidence that we are recognized as ourselves by others. At the heart of all this is the loss of self-governance. Self-governed agency and responsible agency are perhaps the most valued elements of ethical engagement. We care about the traits of character and the memories that are lost to dementia because of the central role they play in the constitution and support of our standing as unified, active, independent subjects in possession of a rich, evolving, generally veridical and first-personally accessible self-notion file.

To summarize: Self-governing agency requires that the parts of a person's self-notion file to which the person has access are those that make possible recognition of oneself as a temporally extended being. Recognition of this sort must be essentially indexical, and it must be of material in the file that supplies reasons for what the person does, material the person can draw on to make sense of what she does as her own doings. In order for self-recognition on this level to transpire, the standard maneuvers of self-monitoring and self-representation must be operational. These maneuvers heavily involve memory. The material matters to us because, in normal situations, it affords a person a psychic connection with her past activity, enabling the person to think of herself, to treat herself, and to be treated by others as an agent whose life stretches to the future, even the future of fifteen minutes hence.

Notes

A first draft of this chapter was discussed at the Davis Group in Ethics and Related Subjects (DaGERS) and profited from the conversation. I thank David Copp and Russell DiSilvestro for their comments, and David for discussing many of the ideas in the paper with me. Subsequent versions were presented at the 7th Moral Philosophy Conference in Riquewihr, France, at Bowling Green State University, and at the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, Fifth International

Colloquium on Ethics and Applied Ethics, Brazil. I am indebted to the discussants on all these occasions. I owe special thanks to Richard Kraut, who commented on the paper in Riquewihr, and to Michael Bratman, whose insight and long-familiarity with many of the issues I raise was hugely beneficial. The chapter has also benefitted from the editorial suggestions of Christopher Cowley.

1. I use the term "self-government" rather than "autonomy" because what interests me is distinct from many of the questions that discussions of autonomy are meant to address, such as questions about the nature of free will and questions about a person's standing under conditions that threaten free agency.

2. I thank Richard Kraut for urging me to make this point explicit.

3. See the discussion of types of memory, below.

4. I realize this point is contentious, but the scope of this chapter—and my limited familiarity with the extensive literature on the metaphysics of identity—make a fuller and more satisfactory discussion of the idea impossible.

5. Russell DiSilvestro takes issue with this, stating (in conversation) that "egoistic concern seems, to me, to be constituted in part by the sense that I am planning for my ego (my person?) in a future stage of its life." I disagree. It is plausible that my current egoistic concerns could have as their object of interest a life that, while continuous with mine, is that of a different person.

6. Of course, all humans—agents or not, persons or not—enjoy certain moral rights. Even humans who are in persistent vegetative states are assured a moral right to respectful treatment, for example.

7. United States law counts something as a person if it is recognized as having rights and duties credited to it as legal subject. *Black's Law Dictionary* defines a person as "in general usage, a human being (i.e., natural person) though by statute term may include a firm, labor organizations, partnerships, associations, corporations, legal representatives, trustees, trustees in bankruptcy, or receivers. National Labor Relations Act, § 2(1)" (Black 1979, 1028).

8. The fact that I am going to focus on members of the human species should not be construed as an endorsement of the idea that humans enjoy or should enjoy elevated moral standing vis-à-vis nonhuman creatures.

9. Schechtman 2008, 45. Also see Schechtman 2011, 65–79.

10. I thank Chris Cowley for suggesting that I clarify this point.

11. Hume (1978), of course, claimed the self to be merely a bundle of impressions. Galen Strawson (2009) claims that there is no self that he is and he is none the worse for this.

12. Galen Strawson would probably contest this.

13. So construed, the self is a hybrid. But I think we always conceptualize the self as a hybrid entity. See Oshana 2010.

14. For instance, see Parfit 1971 and Shoemaker 1984. For a criticism of Parfit, see Schechtman 1996.

15. For example, Atkins 2008; Dennett 1992; Nelson 2001; Schechtman 2008; and Velleman 2005.

16. Schechtman takes up the questions of veridicality and independence in chapter 5 of *The Constitution of Selves* (1996). For a critical but not skeptical assessment, see Christman 2004.

17. Narrative self-representation also offers a safeguard against fragmented, ephemeral selfhood; self-governed agents cannot be fragmented selves or ephemeral actors, a point I shall develop in section 4.

18. Locke (1979, Book 2, chap. 27, sec. 9) tells us that "Personal Identity—that is, the sameness of a rational being—consists in consciousness alone, and as far as this consciousness can

extend backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person. So that, whatever hath the consciousness of present and past action is the same person to whom they belong."

19. The distinction between episodic and semantic memory is drawn in Tulving 1983.

20. This is drawn, of course, from Sartre's famous example of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* (1993), chap. 2.

21. Frankfurt 1987.

22. The seminal study of H.M. was conducted by Dr. Brenda Milner of McGill University. Milner's study involved a motor coordination task in which H.M. learned to trace a line between two outlines of a five-pointed star reflected in a mirror. On each occasion of the three-day study, the task struck H.M. as an entirely new experience. Yet he became adept with practice. This is a task persons with perfectly normal memory find difficult to perform. "The findings lead Milner to speculate that certain motor skills can be developed independently of the medial temporal-lobe system. Milner's breakthrough proved that the brain was not just governed by a solitary memory system, a revolutionary concept in the 1950s." Milner's work on memory earned her the moniker "the founder of cognitive neuroscience" (McDevitt 2007).

23. As do William Hirst (1994) and Carl Craver (2012).

24. Corkin reports that "what [Molaison] couldn't do was tell you what happened at a particular time and place. He could not tell you, 'I remember on my 10th birthday I spilled hot chocolate all over my white pants, and my mother was furious at me.' We tried and tried and tried to get these specific, detailed memories, episodic memories, from him—something that happened on a holiday, or birthday, or whatever. He could not give one single episodic memory, with one exception—on one of his birthdays, [he remembered] going in a small plane and flying around Hartford. This obviously had a huge emotional impact on him." Dr. Suzanne Corkin, "The Man Who Couldn't Remember," interviewed in February 2009 by Sarah Holt, producer of *How Memory Works*, NOVA Online, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/corkin-hm-memory.html (accessed April 17, 2011).

25. Indeed, Molaison was eager that his brain should be preserved upon his death for scientific study. See Milner quoted in Richman 2009.

26. I have no idea what to say about the internal comprehension of oneself as a temporally extended being that might be available to the amnesiac. I wonder what it feels "from the inside" to be himself through time.

27. Naomi Elian and Johannes Roessler note Marc Jeannerod's point that "even under perfectly normal circumstances many aspects of intentional actions are controlled on the basis of non-conscious, 'implicitly processed' information" (Roessler and Elian 2003, 24).

28. An excellent albeit fictional example of the unreliability of such external devices is found in Watson 2011.

29. Certainly, then, there exists a social dimension to the memories that foster self-understanding and that make agential unity possible: Memories are forged in common exchange and contribute to successful partnering in social exchange. But social contributions to the genesis of autobiographical memory will not yield remembering of the sort which Molaison et al. lack.

30. See Grasswick 2012, 307–38, for a discussion of knowing responsibly. Michele Moody-Adams takes up the issue of responsible enquiry in "The Idea of Moral Progress" (2003, 256–72). While the focus of Moody-Adams's paper is the characteristics of responsible moral enquirers, these can be generalized, with suitable modification, to responsible inquiry in its entirety.

31. Kraut cites this passage from Galen Strawson's recent book *Selves* (2009), who uses it to support his own thesis that the "overall outlook, essential character, and moral identity" (202) that underwrite our practical lives do not rest on the preservation of temporally extended self-recognition.

32. I am grateful to David Copp for suggesting that I make this point explicit.

33. As Bratman notes, "This characteristic role of such policies gives them a claim to speak for the agent, to help settle where the agent stands with respect to a particular form of motivation" (2002, 76).

34. Chris Cowley wondered what I would say about someone in locked-in syndrome. The locked-in person, he remarked, "could be said to have an enduring self, but no self-governance. He cannot plan, he cannot act as an agent." This is a fascinating example but space does not permit me to explore it in these pages. For what it's worth, I think some cases of locked-in syndrome—the most familiar in popular imagination being that of Jean-Dominique Balby, immortalized in his autobiography *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (1998)—are capable of planning agency and can, if adequately and respectfully assisted, exhibit self-governance.

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5

Telling Our Own Stories: Narrative Selves and Oppressive Circumstance

JOHN CHRISTMAN

We all have stories of our lives. In recent decades, however, thinkers from several fields of inquiry have insisted that we *are* the stories of our lives. That is, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and other researchers have developed models of the self or the person that portray it as having an essentially narrative structure. Rather than seeing the self as a biological being simply or as a changeless Cartesian ego, these thinkers insist that the self is a sequence of events, experiences, actions, and characteristics that over time exhibit the structure of a story.

This view has also met resistance, and the resulting dialogue has produced much complex theorizing. One aspect of this debate that has received passing attention is the elusive character of narrativity itself. Of special interest here is the fact that narratives are expressed in culturally specific forms so that a story in one location may not make sense as a story in another. This connection between narratives and the public language of a culture has implications for this model of selfhood that bears particular attention.

People have variable relations to the public language of their surrounding culture. In many social conditions where people exist without a surrounding linguistic and cultural milieu that recognizes and supports their own language of memory and self-definition, and indeed where publicly accepted standards of character and virtue are imposed upon them, their autobiographical self-constructions face a conflict that poses a challenge for narrative theorists. Insofar as narratives require a publicly intelligible language that makes sense of the story form that narratives embody, as applied in conditions where public standards of behavior and meaning are *oppressively* imposed on individuals, the claim that persons are nothing but narrative constructions is problematic, or at least it is a claim that must grapple with these all-too-common circumstances.

As in many other areas of philosophy with social implications and presuppositions, theorizing about persons and the self must take account of the various non-ideal social conditions in which such concepts apply and operate. This is to ensure that theoretical concepts do not merely mirror the

rarified and idealized worlds of privileged intellectuals. The specific examples to be examined here are slave narrative and a case of a culturally decimated social group, the Crow Indians. In both cases, the individuals' language of memory and past self-constructions—a language that carries with it various normative presuppositions about what counts as character, intelligible behavior, and patterns of thought—finds no recognition in their current social surroundings. Indeed, key elements of the language of self and memory will be fundamentally distorted and denigrated in their cultural milieu. In the case of the slave, the question of whether her remembered life contains acts of "rape" or not will be defined in one way by their contemporary social setting but perhaps quite another in her own internal reflections. If a person is nothing but a narrative, who then is this person?

My plan in reflecting on these questions is as follows: I will first spell out in summary form the basic structure of the narrative approach to the self/person. In so doing we will take special notice of the requirement that narrative self-conceptions must be articulable in a public, culturally grounded language. I will then discuss two kinds of cases where people's memories and self-conceptions are in tension with the public standards of meaningfulness that would guide the intelligibility of personal narratives in the surrounding dominant culture. Following this, I will conclude with the lessons such observations teach us about the limitations of narrative accounts.

My conclusion, however, is not that narrative approaches to the self should be abandoned, but only that "narrativity" at work in them should be understood in a pared-down manner. More important, the notion of agency at work in such models should center on what I call one's diachronic practical identity, a notion I explicate in the final section. I then conclude with some observations about the implications of these arguments for narrative theories of the self.

Narrative Selves

Many things happen to a human being and there are many things true about her that we would not say are part of what constitutes *her*. But it is also quite difficult to differentiate all and only those elements that are central to the person as a single entity enduring over time. Bodily continuity alone seems insufficient, and mental connectedness, such as remembering or anticipating, seems to already presuppose that it is a single (identical) being remembering, anticipating, and doing the things recalled or intended.[1] Nonetheless, for many practical and theoretical reasons, we still seek conditions that constitute a single self or person over time.

Now this can be approached as a metaphysical issue, and the issue of personal identity has traditionally been framed in those terms. However, we can reserve our concern here to the practical question of identity, meaning that we want conditions that delineate when we can take ourselves to be or treat another as a single self for purposes of acting and interacting (holding people responsible for their actions, for example). One prominent approach to determining those conditions utilizes a narrative framework for personhood.[2]

The basic idea of the narrative approach to selves or persons is that selves are more than merely human bodies or an unchanging ego or even a series of mental states connected by memory and expectation. A self or a person (we use these terms interchangeably for now) is a series of experiences, characteristics, relations, and actions that are related in a particular way. The elements making up the life of a single self are connected by virtue of their structure as a story or narrative. What does not fit into that coherent narrative can be considered external or alien to the person, while those elements that make up the story are part of that (single) person's life. A person beginning to grasp her identity as a gay person or lesbian may well be alienated from those aspects of her life—the heteronormative expectations of her surrounding society for example—that do not fit that self-conception; so they would count as aspects of her condition but not aspects of her central identity or life story.

The narrative conception of the self operates in various arenas and fields. In philosophy, reference to the narrative structure of lives or personalities appears in a variety of settings: theories of personal identity, views about the nature of selves or the unity of consciousness, and social and political theories specifying the communitarian or socially embedded conditions of personhood.[3] In these contexts, and in a variety of ways, the view is proffered that something called "narrativity" is an identifiable characteristic of the sequence of memories, reflections, actions, mental events, or other such factors that marks them out as unified and individualized. Narrativity is meant to help explain what it means to be a unique, individualized subject of experiences, as opposed to a dissociated, disconnected series of selves.[4]

For simplicity, let us refer to the elements making up a self as embodied consciousness and actions, including experiences, affect, and reflection, occurring over time. A self is structured by a self-concept, a working (often implicit) set of ideas, value orientations, characteristics, and dispositions that structure a person's understanding and action. The narrative framework for understandings selves, then, claims that self-concepts are unified only when their elements can be ordered in narrative form. More than merely a recounting of the causally connected events and physical properties that constitute the (body of the) person, narrative self-understanding arranges these events

and other elements into an order that is intelligible as the story of a person's life, specifically *this* person's life.

John Davenport describes what he calls the "Signature Narrative Thesis" this way: "each person's individual identity *is*, or *depends on*, an understanding he has of his life in narrative form, as a development from his past towards his future prospects, ending in his death" (2012, 2). Of course this doesn't tell us what a narrative is, although we know from canonical examples of stories in various cultures what they are like. The narrative theorist of the self must tell us what picks out all and only narratives and why this type of ordering of the events and actions of our lives marks us as unique, separate selves, where merely cause-and-effect accounts of lives do not.

Hilde Lindeman Nelson gives a valuable account of narratives in this context. She writes that narratives are a temporal ordering of elements, and they have four important features: they are *depictive*, in that they are representations of human experience; they are *selective* in what they depict; they are *interpretive* in that they offer a particular way of construing the acts, events, and personae that are represented; and they are *connective*, creating relationships among their own elements and to other stories (2001, 11–12).

What is important here is that narratives are not merely portrayals, they are interpretive, selective arrangement of elements into an order that conveys understanding. The self-concept, in this rendering, involves self-understanding since it involves grasping one's life through an interpretive lens that makes sense of that life. If someone cannot sustain such a vision of herself, she lacks the internal coherence required of selfhood.[5]

However, the act of taking myself in, so to speak, of understanding myself as a coherent entity, must itself involve a functioning self, a lens through which I am able to reflect on the various facts about my existence and to separate what *is* me from what *happened to* me. One powerful way to capture that functional apparatus is the idea of one's *practical identity*. Christine Korsgaard describes practical identities as those cognitive and affective structures by which we orient our values, plans, and motives and which embody our fundamental normative commitments. Practical identities express and organize our moral world, and as such our judgments about what is valuable for us are structured by these identities (Korsgaard 1996, 101ff.). They are functional elements of our (embodied) psychology that contains our most fundamental value commitments and make the lives we lead minimally valuable.

This last point, that practical identities express what is minimally valuable about our lives, is necessary because such identities ground reasons for action. Our functioning self-concept gives us reasons to act because being such a person is worthwhile, so part of our reasons for doing anything is that this is

the kind of thing a person like me should do and being that kind of person—like me—is valuable.[6]

Returning to the narrative account of the self, what such views posit is that our self-understanding is constituted by a narratively organized view of our lives. However, to grasp the ways that narrativity aids in the coherence and intelligibility of the self we must briefly touch upon the ways that narratives offer *unique* modes of understanding. How do narratives explain or convey understanding in ways that simple causal explanations or statements of fact do not? Recall that a narrative is more than an arrangement of events in a causal order—this marble hit that marble and the latter moved in a new direction—that would amount to a mere description or, if it were a sequence of events, a "chronicle." The latter is a retelling of events in a simple temporal order without embellishment and without any attempt to convey deeper meaning. But what is the deeper meaning that stories uniquely convey?

David Velleman (2003) answers this question by claiming that stories resolve affective tension and expectations, so that a narrative telling provides an emotional "cadence" or resolution. Following Roger Schank, Velleman claims that we understand things via narrative by assimilating them to what is familiar.[7] But for Velleman, the emotional arc of a story is the key to its explanatory power. He follows de Sousa in claiming that

> we are made familiar with the vocabulary of emotion by association with *paradigm scenarios*. These are drawn first from daily life as small children and later reinforced by the stories, art, and culture to which we are exposed. . . . Paradigm scenarios involve two aspects: first a situation type . . . , and second a set of characteristic or "normal" *responses* to the situation, where normality is first a biological matter and then very quickly becomes a cultural one. (2003, 12)[8]

So narrativity provides the emotional cadence that furnishes intelligibility to the events narrated.

This view about what is uniquely revelatory about narratives is acceptable as far as it goes. I would add, however, that a cognitive aspect of how stories convey understanding is also important. Recall Nelson's account of narrative structure. She claims that the "story's capacity for connection [between character, setting, events, etc.] allows us to make sense of what has been represented." This making sense, however, must involve insight conveyed by the portrayal of familiar character types, tropes, and scenarios, so that we understand what has happened when it is relayed as a story because we already know what *tends* to happen in such situations. Nelson writes: "character types and the stock plots that are associated with these characters can be lifted from

stories that are familiar cultural staples and be reworked as variations on old themes. . . . The connective feature of stories is absolutely central to the narrative construction of identities" (2001, 14).

But this shows that narratives depend crucially on cultural meanings and shared public understandings, of types of persons, psychology, situations, and event patterns. As Zahavi argues (in a piece critical of the narrative approach), "the concepts I use to express the salient features of whom I take myself to be are concepts derived from tradition and theory and will vary widely from one historical period to the next and across social class and culture" (2007, 181). This, as we will see, is central to the question we are asking here, namely whether the narrative model of selfhood can exhaustively capture the fundamental aspects of selves.

To be meaningful, stories must be "tellable" in that they must be structured so that an audience (even an implicit one) could recognize them as such.[9] That audience must be able to grasp the modes of expression relied on by the narrative, the patterns of expectation, and resolution that stories rely upon to convey meaning. This refers to what Schechtman calls the "articulation constraint" in her narrative account of personal identity. The person should be able to convey her narrative self-concept in terms that are "locally" acceptable—intelligible to her culturally structured surroundings (1996, 114).

This means, however, that insofar as narratives depend for their meaning on their reflection of culturally located semiotics (meaning-bearing symbol systems), then the person's relation to her culture becomes central to who she is, and not central in the sense of "important" but central in the sense of "constituted by." To consider this issue further, then, let us consider cases of social *dislocation*, where a person's self-understanding is constructed in one set of culturally located terms but her surrounding culture recognizes quite another such set, indeed one in deep evaluative conflict with the first.

Reconstructing Life Stories in Oppressive Circumstances

THE STORIES OF SLAVES

One set of examples of social disorientation and self-narratives can be taken from the accounts of slavery and its aftermath by those who have left oral or written records of those events. The slave narratives recorded in the United States before and after the Civil War exhibit attempts to tell a life history in a language that may not in many cases be structured by the semiotics that capture the experiences of the person in question in terms she can fully embrace. For slaves imported into the Americas, they would have been forced to

adopt an entirely new language, conform to unfamiliar modes of behavior, and submit to violence and captivity in terms that are as foreign as they were inhumane. In the slave narrative tradition, attempts were made to recapture the stories that chronicle those times as well as later eras where individuals were born and grew up in a slave environment.

But slave narratives are notoriously complex modes of conveying historical events in that they were often related through intermediaries, they were constructed in many cases for propagandistic purposes (albeit well-meaning, abolitionist ones), and they often recounted events far in the past. However, my point here is not to raise questions of accuracy, but to cite examples where the very *language* of the telling of the stories—the language of a powerful white population—was structured by mores that carried the implication that the people telling these stories were subhuman, incapable of full moral agency, and not recognized as full persons.

A particularly poignant case of this disconnect between felt experience and surrounding cultural expectations involves the ubiquitous sexual violence perpetrated against female slaves by their masters (and others). Recalling those events, the survivor often had to revert to language that may well fail to capture the terms in which those events were experienced. The modern word "rape," for example, would not have been available to the public culture of the American slave-owning South, at least not in ways that carry the unqualified moral opprobrium it now does.[10] Retelling those events to a white audience can be understood as involving a complex negotiation between first-person experiential categorizations and the publicly recognizable language available to express them.

One powerful and famous case of this sort of disconnect is that of Harriet Jacobs, in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1987), where she recalls, among many other aspects of her life as a slave, the relationship she had with one Mr. "Sands" (Samuel Tredwell Sawyer) with whom she had two children.[11] In her narrative, Jacobs recounts, she was first subject to sexual coercion and threats from her master but then also began an affair with another white man that she claims was not coercive. Concerning the sexual violence to which she was constantly exposed from age fifteen onwards, Jacobs writes of her master:

> He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. . . . But he was my master, I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted

> against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or from death. (1987, 27)

During the period of these abuses, Jacobs became acquainted with a white lawyer in her vicinity who was kind to her and began to express friendship and affection to her. They eventually began a sexual relationship that lasted a significant time, producing two children. Jacobs's difficulties in relaying these events is fraught with shame as well as confusion and subterfuge. She writes:

> If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice. I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstance, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. (54)

And further after revealing the affair to the reader in veiled and indirect terms, she writes:

> Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it was to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. . . . The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others. (56)

As the editor of one edition of *Incidents* relates, Jacobs struggled painfully to find the terminology with which to convey these events and the courage to make them public. In a letter she acknowledged the obscurity and dissembling that was required in retelling these events, "there are some things I might have made plainer, I know," and explained that it was much easier for a woman to "whisper" of sexual activities and abuses to a dear friend than to "record them for the world to read" (xxi). This is more than merely a strategic decision to keep certain well-defined facts secret; the tension she is describing is in finding the language that captures her memories as her own and that would be understood as coherent by her imagined readers. What Jacobs's struggles here show is that constructing a working self-concept is often a conflict-ridden negotiation between one's own phenomenological (and affective) grasp of one's memories and the public standards of self and personhood by which a "tellable" story must be relayed meaningfully. Mary Vermillion captures this idea (specifically referring to Jacobs) when she writes:

> [The] study of a woman's written record of her own rape can illustrate [a] dual consciousness—[one where] a woman's alienation from her culturally defined self motivates the creation of an alternate self in her autobiography.[12]

Jacobs clearly suffers from what Miranda Fricker describes as "epistemic injustice" (2009).[13] That is, the terminology dominant in her culture is insufficient to capture accurately (from our point of view) her mode of victimization. It is not that she is violated by her lover—there is no evidence that the affair was coercive—but her feelings of shame from being "unchaste" dominate her consciousness of her past, making it difficult to piece together the narrative of her life in, to her, acceptable terms.

But what is important to note is that she is clearly *struggling* to find these terms. She worked tirelessly not only to write her narrative but also to make it public. Its incompleteness, and indeed the apparent incompleteness in her own mind of the best way to capture what she remembers, speaks to the ongoing nature of that struggle for her. But clearly *she*, as an agent and a courageous woman, is the instigator of that struggle.

Moreover, the values that she would say structure her judgments and experiences—and ground her wounded self-respect—lead her forward in this struggle. But if I am right in interpreting this narrative as incomplete, at least during certain periods of Jacobs's life, and yet presenting a picture of a fully functioning practical identity guiding this agent in her quest to piece together this narrative in proper terms, then the self, person, or agent called "Harriet Jacobs" cannot be *reduced* to such a narrative.

To further clarify this point, let us consider another such socially disoriented attempt at self-narration.

THE RADICAL HOPE OF THE CROW

Another case that illustrates the disconnect between individual agency and the publicly articulatable narratives that define lives can be taken from Jonathan Lear's interpretation of the Crow Indians in the United States, and in particular the motives and experiences of Chief Plenty Coups (Aleek-chea-ahoosh) who led them for a generation (Lear 2006).[14] Plenty Coups gave an oral history of his life and his people after the Crow had lost their traditional homeland and were living on a reservation under the control of the US government (around 1887). The telling passage from that history that spurs Lear's inquiry is this:

> [The historian recounts that] Plenty Coups refused to speak of his life after the passing of the buffalo, so that his story seems to have been broken off, leaving

> many years unaccounted for. [Plenty Coups said] "I can think back and tell you much more of war and horse-stealing. But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened." (2)

What is interesting about such a claim is that many things *did* happen to the Crow after this point, as Plenty Coups and his people took up a farming life, he negotiated with the US government for a settlement with his people, and so on. However, Plenty Coups's statement, according to Lear, was more than merely an expression of malaise, more than saying that "nothing *much* happened." The claim expressed a view of both history and the collective experience of the Crow that moves Lear to develop a view of agency and value that emphasizes the deep social embeddedness of identity. For Lear, Plenty Coups's claim makes sense in that for events to have meaning, for things "to happen," there must be a functioning social nexus that allows practices definitive of the basic value categories of the persons involved to operate. The social practices of the Crow, which were structured around an elaborate warrior culture, including the hunting of buffalos and the protection of territory by their own efforts, was no longer allowed to function and so was socially unavailable. The narrative that made life of the Crow intelligible came to an end when the buffalo were decimated and traditional tribal life was ended.

So after 1887 such practices were no longer available. It was clear to Plenty Coups and the Crow generally that these changes were not temporary but marked a permanent alteration of their social existence. The tragic question facing Plenty Coups and his people was how to go on in the face of this social, and in a way personal, annihilation. Put in the terms we have used so far, how could a meaningful narrative of Crow Indian life continue, a narrative structured by a practical identity that defined actions as meaningful or not? How could such a narrative be extended in a world that did not recognize the meaningfulness of those values?

Of course, the motivation simply to *survive* is clearly available. Seeing oneself as a living human being who can (perhaps) escape abject pain and suffering and hence cope with a stressed existence on a reservation could well motivate a desire, simply, to live. But Lear's point, whose interpretation I follow here, is that such an existence would embody *despair* in a deep (Sartrean) sense; merely surviving, where one's only motivation is satisfaction of desire itself but not pursuit of goals which one's identity structures as valuable, is not to live as oneself anymore, as an agent and a person.

But for Lear, Plenty Coups chooses an alternative path. Plenty Coups, as not only paradigmatic of a Crow individual but as leader of the Crow people,

constructs a set of plans that honors the memory of past practices but continues different versions of them as part of the new life on a restricted land area without wars to fight or territory to defend.

The question this case raises for the present analysis is how publicly recognized narrativity can be said to be required of people such as Plenty Coups, who have been robbed of the socially recognized meaning structures that had made their history up to this point coherent to them. In those years of social exile, between 1887 and the establishment of a new way of life on a reservation, Plenty Coups had to organize his intentions around a plan that was, at the time, meaningful for him, and not merely a matter of simple survival. But what would *ground* the meaningfulness of that project? The traditional identity that flourished within older practices had become fractured and inert; yet the sense of himself that Plenty Coups eventually developed—the neo-Crow identity—had not yet been established. Further, Lear claims that his account is not a "theodicy," by which he means that he is not assuming a teleological conception of history where faith in the progressive arc of the future is always reasonable (96). So what guided Plenty Coups at this point in his transition to a new life?

The only possibility left, I think, is something like a bare capacity for agency *as such*, that is to say, the general capacity to *seek* and socially renegotiate a self-defining narrative that has enough connection with one's past and one's ongoing practical identity to keep one's memories alive but that also guides one into an uncertain future in a radically altered social setting. Only the general capacity to find a reconstructed narrative, without yet having one, can organize the motivations in question, for the identity of "being a traditional Crow" is no longer operative and the identity of "being a modern Crow on a reservation" is not yet constructed. So this more general capacity of self-governing must be operative.

What do these accounts illustrate? I do not consider either to be idiosyncratic or unusual, as history is replete with peoples' attempting to find a life in radically foreign and unfriendly cultural territory. Such struggles for self-*re*constitution, however, reveal something profound about the role of narratives in the self-concept and indeed about limitations of that role. Let us now turn to those implications.

The Subject of Narrative Self-Constitution

Of course there have also been many fictional representations of people in such oppressive and dislocated circumstances that can be cited in this regard. Interestingly, however, we see how novelists such as Toni Morrison (*Beloved*,

A Mercy) use stream of consciousness and first-person narrative to express the memory and consciousness of those subject to oppressive circumstance, racism and slavery in particular, but a stream of voices that are fragmented, disconnected, and jarringly incomplete, reflecting, one could say, the struggle for narrative self-reconstruction without presupposing it. In contrast there are novelists like William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*), William Styron (*Confessions of Nat Turner*), or André Brink (*A Chain of Voices*) whose first-person narratives tell a story in full sentences, complete thoughts, and narrative unity, even if the stories themselves are told piecemeal in the novel as a whole.

I mention this contrast simply as an example of the problem I am exploring, namely the difficulty in expressing (or representing) a life in circumstances that in many ways forbid its public expression, at least in terms that might make sense to the person in question. What appears to occur in many such cases is a dynamic *negotiation* between the person (and her cohort) and the actual or imagined audience for her story, a negotiation that *produces* a story rather than discovers it. But as in therapeutic settings where, similarly, narratives of trauma and recovery are produced by way of dialogue and interpersonal connection, the narrative is not constructed out of whole cloth.[15] What Schechtman (1996) refers to as the "reality constraint" still holds.[16] My point is that there is a self or person or agent who is actively engaged in these negotiations and for whom the resulting constructed narrative either "fits" or does not.

Peter Goldie (2003) has argued that in order for a successful autobiographical narrative of a life to be constructed there must be coherence, meaningfulness, and emotional import to the sequence of events. Both the meaningfulness and emotion of such events must be grounded in a set of standards of meaning that would support the rationalizing explanation that the narrative provides. Such narratives, in other words, explain why a *person* (not simply a human body) did what she did, as well as why other events and activities occurred and are intelligible to us as a life. However, traumatic memories provide, Goldie claims, gaps in one's recollected self in that one may not be able to identify emotionally with the person who did or suffered the things in question (313–14). One desires a kind of "closure" in such cases where one can once again find the appropriate emotional attachment to the subject of those memories (oneself).

In the two cases we have examined, the agents in question struggle to find a publicly graspable language in which to construct their own life stories. They must *work* to constitute a sense of their past (in Jacobs's case) and their future (in Plenty Coups's) that accords with their own functioning identity as

well as their surrounding cultural and evaluative environment. That renegotiated identity must fit with the sense of themselves that our exemplary subjects utilize. The general conclusion to reach, then, is that this identity, this sense of oneself, cannot *reduce to* the narrative of one's life up to that point and into the future. Hence, narrative theorists must revise their accounts to avoid claiming this, or so I submit.

But let us look closer at some of those theorists in order to refine this conclusion. One way to avoid the implication just drawn is to bite the bullet on the narrative structure of persons and say that, independent of the representational account of the events of one's life, that life *already has* a narrative shape. This is the view defended by John Davenport according to which narrativity is a real property of person's lives, a property that is *discovered* by reflection and discursive representation but not constituted by it (2012). This type of life structure he labels one's *narravive.*

Davenport would argue that the claims I am making in this chapter about the independence of agency from the narratives that they struggle to construct partakes in what he calls the "logos fallacy," namely the assumption that narratives require a literal storyteller and a literal audience (2012, 53–54). However, he claims, equating narratives with narration in this way cannot account for the way that some stories we do tell about ourselves are "closer to the truth" than others. This phenomenon (of accuracy or inaccuracy of autobiographies) can only be explained if there is a prior, narratively structured, true sequence to which these (actually) told stories must conform.

However, this point should be seen as more of an invitation than an objection, namely that a nonnarrative account of agency must make sense of the normative standards by which we judge the suitability of actually told narratives about people's lives. I think the sketch of diachronic practical identity I will give presently is capable of meeting that challenge. But for now, we need only point out that the sense of suitability that applies to stories of lives can be accounted for by reference to factual elements of one's life (what Schechtman calls the "reality constraint") and standards of internal coherence given by the idea of a practical identity itself. Neither requires that there is a story to our lives already *there* that our accounts attempt to capture.[17]

What, then, is the account of agency that emerges from these reflections, one that makes sense of the struggles for socially recognized self-narratives (and hence the separation of agency from narration) and also takes seriously the temporal and socially structured nature of identity? I can only give a sketch here, but such a view would include the following elements.

PRACTICAL IDENTITIES

A self is structured by the functional set of value orientations and commitments that shape and ground action and judgment, as described above.[18] Such identities not only give us our reasons for action, but they also orient and guide moral attention. Being a certain sort of person explains (in part) how I see the world, seeing some things as disgusting, for example, and others as precious or sacred, prior to reflection about them. But of course the value orientation that guides feelings and thought can also be explicit objects of conscious reflection, as exemplified by what a person would call his or her core moral beliefs. For Plenty Coups, this orientation was shaped by the values and social organization of traditional warrior culture; for Harriet Jacobs it was her sense of self-determination, sexual virtue, and longing for freedom (among many other things).

DIACHRONICITY

Selves exist and function over time. Our conception of agency must account for the evolving nature of personality and perspective. In addition, certain evaluative aspects of our identities involve temporal trajectories: being a mother, for example, involves having *sustained* attitudes toward one's children as they grow and not merely episodic or fleeting feelings. This means further that the intelligibility of my self-concept (how I represent my practical identity to myself) must be shaped temporally as well, so that elements of my life make sense as part of a sequence. For instance, being a *lapsed* Catholic at thirty-five only makes sense insofar as one once *was* a Catholic at an earlier stage in one's life.

This comes closest to a condition of narrativity in this account. But I would maintain that temporal intelligibility is significantly weaker than having the property of being structured as a *story*.[19] For instance, John Davenport claims that a moderately unified self (what he calls "level-2 unity") involves "volitional continuity that emerges from the self-sustaining diachronic form of the cares through which our practical identity governs more short-term plans, courses of action, and emotional responses to circumstances affecting what we care about" (2012, 110).[20] But this condition (along with the one to follow) can be stated without any reference to the idea of a narrative or story, thereby avoiding the challenges that cases like Jacobs and the Crow pose.

TELEOLOGY

The evaluative elements of our practical identities must orient our aims in action and will involve projects and plans that are defined in terms of their purposes. So agency must involve evaluative perspectives that issue in purposes for the person.[21] Harriet Jacobs organized her self-understanding around goals such as securing freedom for herself and her children, aiding the cause of abolition by attempting to describe her life, and so on.

SOCIAL INTELLIGIBILITY

Following Korsgaard, we could argue that practical identities provide reasons for action only if they can be justified intersubjectively (since, among other things, there are no private languages). But this implies that there must be *some* community of language users who share normative standards for meaning that comprise the subjects of this intersubjective agreement. However, this need not be an actual community or audience, nor a public culture. As we saw with our examples of dislocated selves, often agency amounts to a *search* for recognition by a culture. The way that search is represented to ourselves, however, must be in terms that have meaning intersubjectively. The difference with the narrative account is that we are not saying that the *stories* we tell about ourselves must be accepted as meaningful by our surrounding culture, but rather that the terms we use to articulate and justify our practical commitments can be seen as meaningful by fellow language users.

As I said, this is merely a sketch and as such needs much fleshing out to be defensible. My modest claim here is that it falls short of the narrative conception of the self as that has been articulated and understood.[22] For example, this view lacks what Nelson claimed is essential for narratives, namely their depictive or representational feature. Diachronic practical identities must be socially meaningful but they do not represent a "story" in a sense of a sequence with a plot or *fabula*. Rather they are functionally described as the perspective with which we, over time, understand ourselves and, as such, give ourselves reason to act. It also departs from the feature of narrative that we earlier saw was required for them to render *understanding*, namely the use of publicly recognized character types and tropes that suggest why certain sorts of characters did what they did. Our examples of disoriented persons exemplify a search of a currently *unavailable* set of such character types and tropes; yet the selves in question were exhibiting agency, if not a level of autonomy.

Conclusion

It is typical for philosophers to use "normal" cases as paradigms from which to draw lessons in theory building. In the case of selfhood and agency, the well-adjusted, rational, and untroubled person tends to draw our focus in developing models of the self. But in a nonideal world, the typical is more often not the "normal," at least not in displaying characteristics of even a minimally flourishing life. To truly test our views on such matters we should search for agency at the margins, so to speak.

In these reflections I have tried to follow this advice in order to delve deeper into the assumptions of the narrative approach to selves. My conclusion, however, need not be understood as a rejection of that approach but perhaps a refinement, in that I asked what narrativity can and must mean if (a) that feature picks out unified agents but that (b) we often encounter cases of agency where the stories of people's lives are still being constructed, in particular against the grain of a dominant surrounding culture that imposes denigrating ideas about those people's lives and identities. My conclusion is that the seat of agency is not entirely a narrative, so that it is not exhaustively captured by the idea of a story-like sequence of experiences and events. Rather, a stable structure of cognitive and affective (and bodily[23]) dispositions guides the journey through those experiences and events, specifically one's diachronic practical identity.

The manner by which I have defended this view has much in common with theorists of agency who focus on recovery from trauma (e.g., see Brison 2003; Nelson 2001). However, my claim has been that in cases of social dislocation and other similar contexts, we should not regard these selves as merely damaged and in need of recovery (though clearly they exist in conditions of oppression) but rather as themselves agents attempting to construct a self-concept that can have a home in the social spaces they find themselves in. Rather than seeing this as a process of the *recovery* of agency, these are cases of agents looking for a narrative that best captures the persons they (already) are. This shows not only that agency precedes narrative (in a full-blown sense of that term) but also that often being a person simply means struggling to find a social location in which one can be at home in the world.

Notes

I am grateful to Christopher Cowley for extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay. I made several alterations in the text in direct response to his suggestions.

1. These claims are familiar aspects of debates about personal identity. For an overview, see Schechtman 1996 and the essays in Perry 2008.

2. Both the shift to the practical point of view—what she calls the "characterization question"—as well as the narrative account can be found most prominently in Schechtman 1996.

3. For discussion see, e.g., Atkins 2004; Davenport 2012; Dennett 1988, 1989; Schechtman 1996; Taylor 1991; Velleman 2005; and the essays in Hutto 2007. For a treatment of narrativity and the self with which my approach has much in common, see Goldie 2003. For a prominent critique of narrative approaches, see Strawson 2004.

4. A similar idea can be found in accounts of the self or self-concept as presented in psychology and the social sciences. For example, some theories of self-concept use narrativity as a model for the factors that determine whether memories, self-reports, and experiences lie within the core of the person's sense of self. See, for example, Bruner 1983 and Kagan 1989; for an overview of literature on the self-concept generally, see Ross 1992.

5. For an examination of the narrative approach to selfhood with special attention to these kinds of breakdowns, see Mackenzie and Poltera 2010.

6. This way of explaining practical identities may imply that they can be captured as a set of value propositions that we can judge to be *true* or *valid* in some way from a position of reflection on them. That is an unfortunate formulation, since the self is not the being stepping back and making such value judgments; it is composed of those value commitments that function to guide action and judgment itself. One's practical identity validates itself when one acts. Korsgaard (2009) calls this view the self-constitution view of practical reason.

7. Velleman 2003, citing Roger Schank, *Tell Me a Story* (New York: Scribner, 1990), 24.

8. Velleman quotes de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 182.

9. See Leitch 1986. Cf. also Charles Taylor's claim that we constitute ourselves in dialogue, even if it is with an implied audience (see Taylor 1991, 32–33).

10. This is made evident in light of the fact that the rape of a slave in North Carolina of this period, for example, was not considered a crime but a trespass against the master's property. See Jacobs 1987, editor's note (p. 27, n. 2).

11. It will be relevant to note that Jacobs was born into slavery and so grew up entirely in an (enslaved) American context.

12. Vermillion 1992, 243, referring to Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 37.

13. Specifically, Jacobs suffers from "hermeneutical injustice." For discussion, see Fricker 2009.

14. Page numbers in the next several paragraphs are to Lear 2006. I also consider this case in "Autonomy and Social Disorientation" in Geoffrey Levey, ed., *Autonomy, Authenticity, and Multiculturalism* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

15. See, e.g., Susan Brison's discussion of narrative reconstruction as a response to trauma (2003) as well as Nelson (2001), as discussed above.

16. This constraint on the plausibility of self-narratives is complex and controversial of course, as the case of "recovered" memories attests. See, e.g., Hacking 1998 for discussion. I have discussed the role of memory in constructing the self-concept in Christman 2009, chap. 5.

17. Davenport's full developed view is complex and nuanced and this brief comment does not do it justice. In fact, what I am calling diachronic practical identity may be very similar to the view of narrativity he eventually defends, though I would still disagree with him about the ontological status of the structure of lives to which his view remains committed. For a similar rejection of narrative realism, see Zahavi 2007.

18. Some theorists have distinguished the language of "self" from that of "person" or "agent" in this context. See, e.g., Schechtman 2007.

19. For discussion see Christman 2009, chap. 4. Also, the account given here resembles in many ways the "planning" model of agency defended by Bratman 2007.

20. Davenport (2012) explains three levels of unity of the self, of which this is the second. He argues, however, that a third level of unity, involving the pursuit of strong valuations (in Charles Taylor's sense), is required for autonomous agency. My view is that such a requirement, if plausible at all, is too strong for selfhood and agency as such and is really an account of a *flourishing* life rather than simply a human one full stop. See Davenport 2012, chap. 3.

21. This echoes a central element of Bernard Williams's account of agency, namely his reference to core projects. See Williams 1981; and again, cf. Bratman 2007.

22. This view may not be significantly different, for example, from Marya Schechtman's revised version of her narrative account of identity, as she has defended a moderate position on the continuum of the ways selves must be structured in narrative terms. See Schechtman 2007.

23. I have not stressed the embodied nature of personhood here in order to keep the exposition parsimonious. However, it is clear that propriocentric experience and the presentation of our bodies in social space (and the reception of that presentation) has much to do with the nature of the person. Gender, race, and ethnicity are central examples of features of the self that have an irreducibly bodily component (defined by social setting and interaction). For an examination of identity that emphasizes these issues, see Alcoff 2006.

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6

Self-Deception, Self-Knowledge, and Autobiography

SOMOGY VARGA

> Any actual process of remembering falls somewhere on a continuum between two extremes: utility (using the past to accomplish some present end) and verity (using memory to recapture what really happened in the past).
>
> — NEISSER 1988, 357

Introduction

In a sense, literary works always to some degree entail an autobiographical dimension: they inevitably capture and reveal something about the author's imagination, creativity, and interests. Nevertheless, when we speak about autobiography we designate a distinct literary genre. This genre is particularly intriguing, and it puts to the test our more or less commonsense beliefs about authorship as well as about the nature of the relation between fact and fiction (Anderson 2001; Lejeune 1982).

One of the many differences between autobiographical writing and fiction lies in the way in which the reader approaches and interprets the text. Literary works of fiction are usually interpreted without giving much thought to the intentions the author might have had under the process of writing. In our current outlook on the nature of literature and interpretation, we usually hold that the text begins to live "a life of its own" as soon as it leaves the hands of the author. For an adequate interpretation, reflection on the internal events that the author might have undergone under the process of producing a piece of work is not regarded as particularly relevant. However, the case is significantly different when we are dealing with autobiographical writing. In this literary genre the question about the intentions of the author naturally springs to the mind of the reader.

Differently as with fiction, it seems natural to wonder why someone would take the time and effort to capture the story of her life. In fact, we can even argue that the whole idea of writing an autobiography is unintelligible in the absence of motives on the author's side (Palmer 1979). It seems that the decision to produce an autobiographical work must be motivated by something. However, just because this question naturally arises, it cannot be taken to

somehow diminish the value of autobiographical writing. Also, it is important to add that the question of such motive does not by itself warrant the conclusion that autobiography should not be considered as a literary genre. Instead, we need to pay attention to the manner in which the question about authorial intention arises.

Basically, we may distinguish between two sorts of autobiographical writing. The first group of autobiographical works is written from a particularly clear motive. The motive could, for instance, be apologetic or self-justifying, and if this feature is clearly revealed in the text we may be in doubt whether or not we should count this particular text as a piece of literature. Put differently, we tend to approach works written from a particular motive in a different manner, with different questions in mind. When dealing with such particularly motivated autobiographies, the relevant question that springs to our minds is to what degree the accounts of specific episodes in the work are depicted in a sincere fashion. In other words, *we ask ourselves whether we are being deceived*, intentionally or unintentionally. It seems natural to think, for instance, that a self-interested motive might give the author sufficient reason to distort facts in order for her actions to appear justified and in general to appear in a better light in the eyes of readers.

However, when dealing with autobiographies that are not written with some particular apologetic or other motive, the question of sincerity and deception arises in a markedly different fashion. Such "unmotivated" autobiographies became popular by the eighteenth century, and their rise was intrinsically connected to a change in the way self and identity were conceptualized. Roughly, individuals now figured as persons with unique personal identities that more or less dynamically evolved over the course of a lifetime and that could be made sense of retrospectively (Anderson 2001; Eakin 1992). In this type of "unmotivated" autobiographies, the author pursues the goal of telling a true and coherent story about her life partly in order to make sense of her own life. The question of deception, of course, also creeps up with this type of autobiography, but it is a rather different question. It is now not so much whether the author is trying to deceive the reader, but *we ask ourselves whether the author is deceiving herself*. In this chapter, I want to focus on the question of self-deception in autobiographical writing.

Authors engaging in autobiographical projects are usually driven by a desire for a profound *self-knowledge*. However, the process of recollection and reflection that is involved in this process is prone to *self-deception*. This chapter will address the issue of self-deception in the context of autobiographical writing. The notion of self-deception is itself debated because it leads to several puzzling questions. For instance, in our case, how is self-deception

possible? Is it possible for the autobiographer to believe in some proposition while simultaneously believing it to be false?

Realism, Constructivism, and Agnosticism about Autobiography

Whether or not self-deception in autobiographical writing is even possible will to a large extent depend on the way one understands the nature of the autobiographical text. While there are at least three possibilities in which autobiography may be understood, the possibility of self-deception arises only in one of them. In the following, let me briefly sketch these positions.

On a commonsense, "realist" understanding, autobiography seems little more than the recollection of one's memories about the past, which are then simply poured unrestrictedly onto the page. While not excluding that some of the memories may be inaccurate, traditional "realist" approaches nevertheless tend to lump the genre of autobiography together with biography and history, with the underlying idea that the authors attempt to convey an exact, unfiltered, and unmediated description of significant events and experiences within a narratively coherent framework. Such a realist understanding is often accompanied by a certain conception of how our minds work. This view is characterized by a certain assumption about our access to the content of our minds and, relatedly, to the way we achieve self-knowledge. In his *Confessions*, when Rousseau raises the question of the boundaries of truthfulness, he seems to support the view that we have a special and infallible access to the content of our minds and therefore are able to achieve the most profound self-knowledge.

> I have only one faithful guide upon which I can rely, that is the chain of feelings which have marked the development of my being, and by means of them that of the events which were their causes and effects. I may make factual omissions, transpositions, mistakes about dates, but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt nor about what my feelings have led me to do and that is what it is all about. (Book VII)

Rousseau relies on what he sees as an infallible knowledge about his inner life. He admits that he can make factual mistakes about "outer" entities and dates, but holds on to the view that his introspection cannot go wrong about his feelings. He holds that introspection can bring about an accurate knowledge of his "inner being" (Rousseau 1957).

If one adopts a realist understanding of autobiography together with such a picture of our access to our minds, it seems that there could be no such thing as genuine self-deception. However, it is possible to attend selectively

to different memories. In other words, the realist position can be compatible with the fact that the author can't document the entire range of events.

The author might tell the truth about herself, but—given the direct knowledge about our minds—this cannot be explained by the lack of the appropriate self-knowledge. Rather, the failure to tell the truth about herself can only be seen as a willful attempt to deceive and seduce others. This may be why Rousseau can be so confident about the truthfulness of his *Confessions*: "I have told the truth. If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have here recorded, though he prove it a thousand times his knowledge is a lie and an imposture." The realization of further complexities of autobiographical writing and the emergence of a different approach is closely related to "postmodern" thought. Thinkers like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have in their work approached autobiography in a way that is hostile to the "realist" position. Very roughly, we can say that postmodern thought has led to the emergence of a "constructivist" take on autobiography. As Brosman (2005, 76) notes

> It seems clear that the dogmas of postmodernism (including two of its components, poststructuralism and deconstruction), generally viewed and treated as "discoveries" (that is, as if they had proven, factual validity), threaten autobiography to the point at which its practice tends to become impossible, since the substance of the self to-be-narrated is ultimately denied along with the possibility of expressing it in any coherent fashion.

It is not difficult to see that such thinking is in diametrical opposition to the "realist" view. The constructivist position radically questions the idea of a reliable, objective knowledge of the self by the self, viewing the nature of knowledge as characterized by its being "constructed," be it intentionally or not. Moreover, the point is not merely that we are deceived about ourselves and the world because we inhabit a particular, culturally conditioned world. Rather, the point is also that there is no "real truth" about the self behind the façade that can be discovered in autobiographical writing. This, however, does not preclude that one can simultaneously be more or less deceived.

The constructivist position claims that texts written by authors are notoriously of intertextual nature: instead of merely conveying the author's thoughts, they to a large degree echo previous texts and take over some of their noteworthy qualities. Some authors not only claim that there is a polyphony of voices in any given work of literature, but they also argue that often the dominating voice in a literary work is that of "the other." It is not difficult to see how this is in striking contradiction with the realist position.

One important point that characterizes the constructivist position is that autobiographical writing involves a narrative framing of significant life episodes that is itself influenced by changing literary standards. Jacques Derrida (1980) famously argued that just as fiction, autobiographical writing is governed by conventions and principles that define how the (often developmental) narrative can unfold and order time and experience. Derrida's point is not just that autobiographical writing entails the activity of framing and ordering experience *within* specific literary laws. The point is also that many of the literary devices and principles used in autobiographical writing are identical to those used in fiction. In addition, the choice of what events in the autobiographer's life are to be narrated is a question of convention, but also a question of the kind of self-disclosure that the author wishes to achieve. These features may have contributed to the emergence of the radical "constructivist" view that autobiography is nothing but particular kind of fiction in which the protagonist (who undergoes the events that the author recalls), the narrator (who reflects on these experiences), and the author are identical. Paul De Man (1979) in many ways radicalizes the "constructed" element in autobiographical writing. As elaborated in his "Autobiography as De-Facement," De Man argues that autobiographical discourse does not "tell the truth" about the world as its frame of reference remains inside the text. Of course, this does not mean that everyday autobiographical statements such as "I had a great vanilla ice cream last time I visited Rome" cannot correctly refer outside the text. The point is rather that the "De-facement" starts its course when autobiographical statements are forged together into a narrative that follows the rules of a literary genre.

Just like the realist view, the "constructivist" understanding is usually accompanied by a certain conception of how our minds work and embraces certain assumptions about our access to the content of our minds and about the way we achieve self-knowledge. The claim is not only that we don't have reliable access to our minds, but that a genuine knowledge of self that the realist connects to the work of an autobiographer is impossible. Just as there is a polyphony of voices in texts, the self is also a malleable construct that does not give rise to its voice, but far more is itself a function being spoken.

> The "I" that we confidently broadcast to the world is a fiction—a jerry-built container for the volatile unconscious elements that divide and confound us. In this sense, personal history and public history share the same dynamic principle: both are fables agreed upon. (Brosman 2005, 97)

In this picture the whole idea of autobiography is contested. It seems to be little more than a text written by an author who is herself only a construct in

the web of linguistic meanings. Accordingly, given the constructivist picture of the nature of texts and of the self, it does not make much sense to talk about self-deception in autobiography.

The most significant upshot of the discussion so far is that both on the realist and the constructivist view, the talk of self-deception in autobiographical writing makes little sense. However, for someone who thinks that there are good reasons to hold on to the possibility of self-deception, there is some middle ground available between these positions. Call this the "agnostic" position. On the one hand, a proponent of this view might acknowledge that "realism" is naïve and acknowledge fictional features of autobiographical writing; she could argue that the literary medium cannot convey "raw" experiences without somehow affecting their content or meaning. On the other hand, she can argue that the "constructivist" overemphasizes the point: the mere existence of fictional elements in autobiographical writing does not warrant inferring that they must be seen as entirely works of fiction. Such an "agnostic" would place autobiography neither into the realm of facts nor the realm of fiction, but hold on to the possibility that the autobiographer may in some cases be deceiving herself. Rather, the agnostic would maintain that the autobiographical writing takes up a rather indefinable place somewhere on the continuum between fact and fiction.

To carve out this position, in the following I will start by reflecting on what anyone has to rely on when attempting to engage in autobiographical project: introspection and autobiographical memory. I shall argue that we don't have infallible introspective access to what is on our minds and that we play an active, co-constituting role when we call into awareness our mental states. Thereafter, I argue that the dynamic intertwinement of introspection and mental states is even more salient when the autobiographer has to rely on a special aspect of memory usually referred to as autobiographical memory. It is first when we acknowledge our co-constitutive agency in these matters that we can begin to speak about the possibility of self-deception.

Introspection

As mentioned earlier, the traditional "realist" approach groups autobiography together with biography and history, maintaining that the sincere author is able to convey an unmediated description of significant events and experiences. Also, I have said that this understanding is supported by a certain assumption about the manner in which we achieve self-knowledge. Going back to Rousseau, we see that he implicitly assumes some "inner sense" by which we access the content of our minds (see also Derrida 1997). To put

this in more contemporary terms, his model relies on the assumption of an inner-directed mechanism whereby we have "privileged" perception-like access to our inner states. Thus, the view is that one can discover one's inner life through a kind of "inner" perception, utilizing one's "inner sense," which is a kind of perceptual faculty dedicated to the detection of beliefs, feelings, and intentions.

On the face of it, Rousseau's view does account for our intuitions about the sense of intimacy and privileged access we have to our inner states, feelings, motivations, wishes, and so on. While it is right that introspection is epistemologically distinctive, providing us with an immediate nonobservational and noninferential access to our metal entities, this picture of introspection is nevertheless flawed. Due to the analogy to perception, the account of introspection must posit a clear distinction between the entity that inspects and the entity that is being inspected. But this cannot be the case for the following reason. Recall that it is in this view we achieve awareness of a given mental entity through an inwardly directed quasi-perceptive act. However, this inwardly directed perceptive act also constitutes a mental entity (or state) of its own. But then, in order to gain full consciousness of the original target thought, we would also need to bring this second state into consciousness. Consequently, we would need a third-order inwardly directed quasi-perceptive act, and so on, leading to an infinite regress. For this reason, it seems warranted to say that introspection cannot be efficiently modeled on perception as detecting independently obtaining entities.

While space prevents a thorough analysis of introspection, one important upshot for our discussion is that when we bring our thought into awareness, this is a process that involves not only passive observation and reporting, but also active *interpretation.*

Introspection does not merely detect independently obtaining thoughts. Such an understanding of introspection would neglect the role of agency that we entertain towards our mental states. As Richard Moran has convincingly argued, "being the person whose mental life is brought to consciousness involves a stance of agency beyond that of being a kind of expert witness" (2001, 4). Moran emphasizes the constituting agency of the person and the dynamic relation between first-person reflection and mental life, and argues that acquiring knowledge of our inner life is not a neutral epistemic undertaking. Rather, it involves a self-reflection that enters into interaction with the designated object of consciousness. Such self-reflection will always involve some kind of process of interpretation, which means that our awareness is somewhat indirect in the sense that it involves interpretation. Mental states are far from being independent and stable entities that await introspective dis-

covery, and they are dynamically intertwined with our first-personal agency. This process involves reflection that may alter the content in question.

In all, the traditional "realist" holds that the sincere author is able to convey an unmediated description of significant experiences, due to his direct and infallible access to the content of his mind. However, there are good reasons to reject the underlying assumption of a unmediated perception-like access to our inner states. It is first when we acknowledge that introspection cannot be claimed to detect *independently obtaining* thoughts, that we don't have infallible introspective access to what is on our minds, and that we play an active, co-constituting role when we call into awareness our mental states.

Autobiographical Memory

The dynamic picture that characterizes introspection is even more noticeable when it comes to another aspect that the autobiographer inevitably has to rely on, namely the special part of memory usually referred to as autobiographical memory. This is the aspect of our memory system that focuses on the recollection of experienced past events in a way that combines personal experiences of self, objects, or others at a particular time and place and general knowledge about facts and the world. In other words, autobiographical memory involves both *episodic* and *semantic* knowledge of the past; while episodic memory makes possible the recollection of personal experiences that occurred in a particular time and place, semantic memory allows the retrieval of general knowledge and facts. Thus, autobiographical memory contains both memories of first-personally experienced events and facts about oneself and the world (Schacter 2001).

While autobiographical memory can be approached from a wide variety of angles, I intend to place special emphasis on the strong connection between autobiographical memory and the sense of self-identity. As a general claim, the linkage between autobiographical memory and self-identity seems intuitively plausible: a sudden erasure of autobiographical memory—that actually might happen as a result of severe brain injury—will inevitably raise the question of whether we are dealing with the same person. The aspect of this linkage I want to explore here is how autobiographical memory and current sense of self-identity are dynamically intertwined. We have seen in the case of introspection that the activity of bringing the contents of our minds into consciousness is itself an active process that co-constitutes the content of the relevant mental states. Now recollecting past experiences involves introspection "from a distance," which, as we shall see, gives rise to a different pos-

sibility in which self-deception can occur. The retrospective position of the author in autobiographical writing increases the possibility of self-deception, simply because a larger (temporal) gap opens up between the act of remembering and what is remembered.

In other words, whether there is self-deception might depend on one's aims and *goals*, and it is reasonable to assume that the longer the gap, the more these aims come into play. This, however, does not preclude that self-deception is also relevant shortly after the event in terms of the descriptions under which one understands the actions that one has undertaken.

As Ross (1989) showed, the recollection of past experiences often involves a two-step process. This can be explained by the fact that present mental states are introspectively better available than past ones. Thus, S's recollection of past mental state X starts with introspection about how S currently feels about X. From here, there are two possibilities depending on what kind of meta-belief S holds about her attitudes over time. Depending on whether S sees her attitude toward X change or remain stable over time, she will reconstruct past experience about X consistently with this belief. In other words, there is a process of evaluation in which S assesses whether she has reason at hand to suppose that her view of X had shifted over time. This process is itself a slippery one, since most people are biased toward assuming the stability of their attitudes and hence the continuity of their past and present attitudes. In contrast, people who expect change in their views might recollect the past according to the way they think their attitudes have changed in a positive or negative way.

Since many agree that the sense of personal identity necessitates some kind of narrative unity about oneself over time, one might intuitively think that people would be inclined to have meta-beliefs that confirm some kind of a stability. Given such bias, one might think that the recollection process in autobiographical memory may in part operate as an identity stabilizer by increasing the sense of narrative unity. In support for such a thesis Keyes and Ryff (2000) have maintained that changes over time tend to threaten a consistent self-identity. While this might at first sound plausible, Wilson and Ross (2003) show that people do not in general place emphasis on such narrative consistency. Rather, they frequently highlight changes in their attitudes. However, these findings do not contradict the thesis that autobiographical memory may operate as an identity stabilizer. We might say instead that pointing out changes between current and past views can under circumstances be merely another, albeit more complicated way of establishing narrative continuity.

When considering the identity function of autobiographical recollection,

it is useful to look at the trajectory of the narrative. When the question is phrased broadly about past selves and self-identity, individuals tend to perceive their past selves as inferior compared to their present self (Wilson and Ross 2000, 2001). This bias can itself serve a specific function.

> We suggest that people appraise the past in ways that allow them to view their current self favourably. . . . Conceivably, people systematically devalue their distant former selves to create the illusion that they (or their relationships) have improved over time. (Wilson and Ross 2003, 139)

Surely, this is not always the case. Individuals suffering from major depression are typically negatively biased about their view on the past, present, and future. But also in this case, the bias serves a specific, negative function.

Thus, autobiographical memory may at least partly have a function as co-constructing the current sense of identity through establishing particular narrative patterns. In particular, the narrative of improvement seems more attractive and fulfilling than the narrative of stability. It seems likely that the current state is most appreciated if it is contrasted with a more inferior past. In support of this thesis, Wilson and Ross (2003, 139) maintain that people are more inclined to intake a critical attitude when thinking about their past selves than current or even recent ones.

Autobiographical memories are thus malleable, and the impact of current sense of self-identity cannot be denied. The impact, however, flows in both directions: people's recollections may also help alter their current self-regard. Autobiographical self-reflection thus not only involves the co-construction of what is recollected, establishing a link between the author's current view of himself with a set of past experiences, but also takes place in a loop-like, dynamic way: what is recollected influences his self-concepts, yet the recollected material is itself influenced and altered on the basis of his current self-conception.

We have covered a relatively large ground, and it seems sensible to sum up what we have achieved so far in our investigation of the nature of introspection and autobiographical memory—two inevitable factors on which autobiographical writing relies. First, we found that introspection is far from merely being about the detection of independently obtaining thoughts. Our introspective access to our minds is neither direct (in the sense of being perception-like) nor infallible, and whenever we are trying to find out what is on our minds we actually in part co-constitute the states that we "discover." Since there is an interpretative gap between the introspection and the mental state, it is already at this level that the possibility of self-deception enters the picture. The active and co-constituting role of the remembering agent

intertwinement is even more salient when the autobiographer draws on autobiographical memory. The autobiographer recalls the experience, which is intertwined with authorial reflection about the place and meaning of that experience in the overall narrative. Hence, this is the second level in which the possibility of self-deception may arise.

Before going any further, it is important to point out that these specific aspects about the nature of introspection and autobiographical memory do not warrant the inference that there will always or even mostly be self-deception involved in autobiographical writing. The point is merely that due to the nature of introspection and autobiographical memory an "elbow room" opens up, which makes possible self-deception. But of course this need not be the case in all autobiographical writing. Nonetheless, whether or not one can defend and render convincing the thesis about the possibility of self-deception in autobiographical writing will to a large degree depend on what is actually meant by self-deception.

Self-Deception

The notion of self-deception has engendered many debates, and its apparently paradoxical character has led to several puzzling questions. Some of the puzzles arise because self-deception is frequently modeled on interpersonal deception. In the case of autobiographical writing, this would amount to the autobiographer's intentional deception of herself to believe in some proposition, while simultaneously believing the proposition to be false. The paradox arises since the autobiographer has both to believe that proposition while at the same holding a contradicting belief. How would it be possible for someone to hold contradictory beliefs and to intentionally make himself believe something that he knows is false? Moreover, it seems that one cannot at the same time be a deceiver and be deceived: on the one hand, in order for the deception to work the deceived must be unaware of being deceived. On the other hand, for something to be a case of intentional deception, the deceiver has to be aware of deploying a deceitful strategy. Given these problematic issues, some philosophers argue against modeling self-deception on interpersonal deception (Mele 2001). The question is not whether self-deception is possible, but whether it is possible to deceive oneself intentionally. This is not the place to assess the merits of intentional and nonintentional approaches. Instead, I shall argue that autobiographical writing might involve self-deception on both nonintentional and intentional accounts.

Mele (1997, 2001) has argued in favor of an anti-intentionalist approach to self-deception. In the case of the autobiographer this could be demon-

strated in the following way: the autobiographer would be deceiving herself into holding a false belief, through unintentionally treating memories in a motivationally biased manner. Granted, this description of Mele's position is overly simple, but it nevertheless gives us an idea that on a nonintentionalist approach the autobiographer would be pretty much continually deceiving herself. Again, we can speak about degrees of self-deception depending on the context. Much depends on whether the autobiographer is recounting simple facts like "I went to Portugal in 1999," or whether she talks about specific thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that may have occurred.

If we accept the thesis presented earlier that autobiographical memory is strongly bound up with the current sense of self-identity and acknowledge that the autobiographer (unintentionally) recollects her memories in a motivationally biased manner in light of current self-identity, then it would follow that the autobiographical writing never accurately describes the experiential side of what really happened.

Moreover, given the motivational bias and selective recollection, it would seem almost inevitable that the autobiographer constantly deceives herself. In addition, there will be many cases in which the autobiographer's recollection of a particular episode only gives her inconclusive evidence that would not warrant a particular interpretation of the episode: the only thing that she is warranted to conclude in such a case is that the particular interpretation about that episode is *possibly* true. Then we are dealing with interpretations that are *more or less likely* to be true although the limits of interpretation are set: they still have to cohere with our understanding of facts about the world.

Especially in the case of where solid evidence is lacking, it is very likely that the autobiographer will be able to bring about genuinely believing (not just "wishful thinking") a particular interpretation that is in line with her current self-conception and the matching narrative that she perceives as capturing the chain of events in her life. Thus, if we understand self-deception in a nonintentional manner, then we can safely say that autobiographical writing at least sometimes involves self-deception.

If we adopt an intentional understanding of self-deception, the case becomes more complicated. As noted earlier, the intentional understanding requires that the autobiographer holds contradicting beliefs and that she intentionally makes herself believe something that she knows to be false. Nevertheless, I think there is a sense in which autobiographical writing is prone to self-deception, even on an intentionalist understanding. To understand how this is possible, it is important to draw attention to the fact that autobiographical writing is a process that extends over a considerable amount of time. Inevitably, autobiographical self-reflection will surely bring up episodes

that the author is ashamed of and that he would wish had not taken place. Such episodes are good candidates for events that the author might try to consciously deceive himself about or simply ignore. This process does not have to be paradoxical if we take into account that the autobiographer may at first know about his attempt to consciously deceive himself into believing some proposition that he knows to be false, but then, along the process of further reflection and writing, he might simply *forget* about his original self-deceptive intention entirely. However, if he really forgets about the original deceitful intention, then we can actually say that he succeeded in an act of intentional self-deception. As Bermudez (2000, 314) notes

> acquiring a belief is a long-term process involving much careful focusing of attention, selective evidence gathering, acting as if the belief was true, and so forth. It seems likely that the further on one is in the process, and the more successful one has been in the process of internalizing the belief, the more likely one will be to have lost touch with the original motivation.

The autobiographer might start by outlining a chapter about an episode of his life and at first disregard evidence against the false belief that he would want himself to believe. He may start focusing on whatever (weak) evidence may be available that could possibly cover up the facts. While writing and rewriting the chapter over longer spans of time, it is at least possible that he forgets having taken these measures of self-deception and comes to genuinely hold the belief that he at some earlier point had wished that he could bring himself to believe. This is not so unlikely in the case of writing an autobiography, which can span over many years.

But the case does not even have to involve forgetting the original self-deceptive motive. Just think about Pascal's wager. Pascal readily admits that we cannot simply bring ourselves to hold a certain belief (in his case about the existence of God). However, he argues that there is something we can do to increase the likelihood that we at a later point will entertain the belief that we want to have. Pascal's suggestion is that the unbeliever should participate in the practice of religious ceremonies and hope that—given the human predisposition to believe what one practices—one day he will genuinely believe in the existence of God. In such a case, the autobiographer need not even forget his original intention to bring about what he originally recognized as a false belief. Instead, he can simply say that the original intention to deceive himself has actually led him to the right beliefs about past events. In other words, he could simply retrospectively reinterpret the intention to deceive as an early indication of that fact that the belief that he wanted to get rid of was not quite reliable from the start.

Conclusion

Some autobiographies are clearly written with some particular motive (e.g., apologetic) and the reader is prone to ask whether the author is telling the truth or whether the reader is being deceived. Other autobiographies are "unmotivated" and with these the question of deception arises in a different manner. The reader might not just ask herself whether she is being deceived, but also whether the author is deceiving himself. This chapter focused on the question of self-deception in autobiographical writing. In order to answer this question, I have presented a short analysis of two factors that autobiographical writing relies on: introspection and autobiographical memory. In both cases I argued that the process of recollection in part co-constitutes the states that we "discover," depending on our current view of ourselves. In the last part of the chapter, I have presented intentionalist and nonintentionalist approaches to self-deception, and argued that on both accounts it is true that the autobiographer may occasionally deceive himself.

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7

Autobiographical Acts

D. K. LEVY

1

The distant and sometimes indeterminate nature of the past presents practical challenges for autobiography. If there is an ethical challenge in autobiography, it is thought to arise from encountering uncomfortable truths about oneself or one's past. The challenge is that a truthful approach to one's life can overturn comfortable stories one has told oneself or others about one's life. Those comfortable stories may depend upon or engender self-deception, dishonesty, cowardice, or much else. So courage or other virtues are needed to follow through with truthful autobiography, to see past the vice or pathological conditions obscuring a limpid view of one's life. Requiring these virtues is the ethical challenge posed by autobiography. That, in any case, is a familiar view.

I shall argue that the familiar view overlooks or mislocates a prior ethical challenge in autobiography. The first ethical challenge for autobiography lies in the autobiographical *act* of creating autobiography rather than confronting the autobiographical *content* or self-understanding produced during an autobiography's creation. I shall anatomize the elements of an autobiographical act, before arguing that the act is integral to the autobiography (autobiographical content) created. The autobiographical act is a presentation in a medium, with a motive, conveying a judgment of the author's life. The act, so understood, is integral to the autobiography because it gives form to the content. The challenge of the autobiographical act begins with finding creditable motives and secure means for the act and the judgment it conveys. The perils of this challenge mean, I shall argue, principally that one should sometimes not write autobiography.

There are two parts to my discussion: an anatomy of the act of autobiography and a diagnosis of the ethical challenges posed by the act. I shall begin with examples from Murdoch and Wittgenstein. The examples will permit me to anatomize the autobiographical act into its constitutive elements, of which three (motive, medium, and moral judgment) are the loci of ethical challenges. Then I will argue that autobiography is a distinctive kind of creative work that necessarily implicates the author's moral authority in a moral

judgment about his or her life. In the second part, I contrast the practical challenges highlighted in contemporary philosophical accounts of autobiography with the ethical challenges posed by the autobiographical act. To consolidate and illustrate points made about the unity of form and content in autobiography through the integral autobiographical act, I will use remarks by Wittgenstein on his own projected autobiography as an illustrative example. I conclude by enumerating some ethical perils that await the would-be autobiographer.

2

Let's begin an anatomy of the autobiographical act. Diary entries are reasonably considered autobiography when the entries concern the diarist's life, as opposed to someone else's life or utilitarian information-like appointments. The diary entries are self-regarding life writing, which is a working definition of autobiography. I shall distinguish the stories of one's life from autobiography by taking it that stories of lives are constituents of autobiography (and biography), but not identical with autobiography. Autobiography is a *presentation* of a story about a life. The contrasts intended will become clearer below.

Entries from Iris Murdoch's diary are reported in Peter Conradi's biography of Murdoch (2001, 274). Murdoch is nearly thirty when she writes in her diary:

> I need a strongbox to keep this damn diary in. Probably I ought to destroy all the entries of the last 3 weeks. Why am I unwilling to? . . . Must root out the weak desire for an audience (the lurking feeling eg that I write this diary *for* someone—E, P, D, or X, *l'inconnu*, I still believe in l'inconnu—?). Way to sincerity, a long way. (December 13, 1948)

This short passage can show a lot because it is an autobiographical comment on autobiography. First, Murdoch's reference to a strongbox acknowledges that what she has recorded is best kept from other people. She considers that she should obliterate some entries, presumably to ensure their secrecy more than a strongbox could. Of course then the entries would not be secret, they would be *nonexistent*. It is this aspect that gives her pause, for she finds herself reluctant and unwilling to destroy the entries. This suggests that autobiography is existent in some form beyond solely one's apprehension. Autobiography is more than a story one knows about oneself. For whichever stories Murdoch had written in the secret entries are something she apprehends, so she does not need it written down to apprehend it. Rather, she wants it to have an existent form independent of herself. One aspect of the form of auto-

biography is the medium in which it exists, in this case writing. The medium confers an independent existence.

One might object that her reluctance to destroy the entries is solely reluctance to risk her stories to the failure of her memory. No doubt this is a plausible motive and could amalgamate with other motives. However, as we shall note below (section 3) Murdoch does not think this is her sole motive at that time. Indeed, we will also note that she had already been doubtful that diaries could furnish her with evidence to contradict or confirm memories of the past. If this were not enough to reject the objection, much later Murdoch gives her opinion of the root motive of autobiography: "The instinct to keep a diary: to preserve certain moments *for ever*" (October 27, 1958 [Conradi 2001, 274]). This is consonant with the motive I described above. It is moments one seeks to preserve—not a story—by giving them a persistent form independent of the moment and of the autobiographer. To be clear, I am claiming that autobiography functions, if it does, not solely as aides-memoires for remembering moments in life. Rather, the act of autobiography aspires—perhaps *per impossibile*—to give those moments persistent existence. The success or impossibility of the autobiographical act in preserving the past is irrelevant to establishing that an autobiographical act creates autobiography with an independent existence in a *medium*.

Second, Murdoch realizes that her motive for writing the diary springs from her desire for an audience. (This may be a further source of her reluctance to destroy entries.) The important thing for my purposes is, first, her acknowledgment that her acts of autobiography have a motive. She is not writing autobiographically solely to become clear about her own past as if it were solely an effort to see clearly in retrospect. Unlike seeing or noticing in which what is seen appears unbidden, acts of autobiography are more like looking or searching. Each has a motive. One's looking or searching is motivated by what one is trying to find, for example, finding a face in the crowd. My point in calling attention to the motives of autobiographical acts is not to suggest that there is a single motive that is criterial of genuine autobiography. On the contrary, there is no motive that is criterial, but it is criterial of autobiographical acts that there be a *motive*.

The second thing to observe is that where there is a motive, there is the possibility of a moral judgment of the motive. Murdoch criticizes her motive, criticizing it as weak and enjoining herself to root it out. She thinks her desire expresses perhaps her vanity or self-importance—which are themselves judgments of herself as vain or self-important. Of course her motive could have expressed virtue rather than vice, for example, remorse. The point is that autobiographical motives are apt for moral assessment.

Third, at the end of this entry from 1948 there is a subtle shift in the way that Murdoch judges her diary entries. She describes herself as writing for an "audience" including the potentially unknown. The word "audience" is suggestive of performing. One performs for an audience seeking the audience's attention. Murdoch then criticizes herself for lacking and being a long way from sincerity. Sincerity is incompatible with performing *for* others because a performer (usually) seeks a positive response from his audience. Performing is an act based on pretense, so much so we mark candor or sincerity by, for example, noting that someone refused to perform for her audience. This illuminates Murdoch's transition from "audience" to "sincerity."

More important for my purposes, I suggest the focus of Murdoch's criticism of her insincerity is no longer her motive. Instead, the criticism embodies a moral judgment of her life, specifically with regard to her diary writing. That is, she considered that this stretch of her life has been marked by insincerity, one of whose expressions had been these autobiographical acts moved by motives of vanity, and the like. That is the content of a *moral judgment* she makes about her life.

I shall summarize the close reading I have made of this entry in Murdoch's diary. The entry is autobiographical in that it is about Murdoch's life, specifically diary entries from the previous three weeks. The entry results from an autobiographical act that presents autobiography in a medium. In this medium, part of the past is given a form that is independent and persistent. (In this case, the medium is writing.) The autobiographical acts of the diary entries had motives that Murdoch identifies as vanity or similar. The autobiographical act in this entry has a motive to express a moral judgment about the past described by the autobiography, namely, Murdoch has been insincere in her consideration of her past through her diary.

I propose an anatomy, therefore, in which all autobiography is created by an autobiographical act whose constituents include the motive for the act, the medium in which the past is made tangible, and a moral judgment about the past encompassed in the autobiography. Each constituent is necessary and each may be multiple, for example, with compound motives. The autobiographical act is a presentation of the autobiographical content *in* a medium, *with* a motive, *conveying* a moral judgment.

3

I have used one Murdoch diary entry to propose an anatomy of autobiographical acts. I will use another entry to refine the anatomy, especially with regard to the motive for the autobiographical act. A few years later Murdoch wrote:

> There is a lot which I don't put into this diary, because it would be too discreditable—& maybe even more painful. (At least—no major item omitted but certain angles altered—and painful incidents omitted.) (June 14, 1952 [Conradi 2001, 274])

The most striking thing about this example is that it describes an autobiographical omission, in the ethical sense of acts and omissions. As it were, an autobiographical act was contemplated until the author prescinded from the act. Why not proceed with writing that autobiographical passage?

Murdoch's second reason for not proceeding is that it would be too painful. This is superficially puzzling since it could not be painful like the discovery of something unknown. Murdoch already knows what happened, else she could not prescind from writing it. Her pain is not the pain of overcoming difficulties in recovering or recollecting an unknown past. Perhaps the autobiographical act would be painful to undertake because it could require dwelling on painful events or contemplating her vices or vicious actions. In this case, it is important that we have focused on the autobiographical act since it will be the *act* that is painful, not the already known autobiographical content of the past. (This does not preclude further painful realizations about the past after the autobiography is done.)

An alternative explanation of the "pain" Murdoch avoids is that the creation of an autobiographical narrative will give the past more substance or ontic heft than it would have if it were left unexamined, in a recess of memory. In other words, by giving the past a medium more enduring than the temporal, we restrict the distance we can put between us and it. Put yet another way, the autobiographical act creates something (autobiography) that restricts our capacity to alienate ourselves from our actions or occlude our awareness of them. Strange as it sounds, the medium in which the autobiographical act is enacted augments the reality of the past, the confrontation with which can be more painful.

If the past in question is, for example, one's deceit, it is natural that one should desire its attenuation. The motive to attenuate explains prescinding from the autobiographical act. Attenuating the past is compatible with accepting full responsibility for what one has done. One response to the wrong done—and attention to the person wronged—is precisely the wish to annul the past—indeed that could be the essence of remorse (cf. Rosthal 1967, 578). Prescinding from making the past more substantial in an autobiographical work is certainly of a piece with a wish to annul the past. Fulfilling the wish may be hopeless, but it does not discredit attenuating where one can.

Attenuation is one decent reason to prescind from an autobiographical

act and avoiding pain is understandable. Better still is Murdoch's first reason for prescinding from an autobiographical act because not doing so would be discreditable, which I gloss as shameful, ignoble, indecent, and the like. I suggest that the best interpretation of Murdoch is that she is criticizing the motive for the putative autobiographical act. This criticism might apply when the events in life under consideration are not themselves discreditable. It could be discreditable to record the enjoyment of one's legitimate triumph over another person. There might be something indecent about turning immediately to one's diary in response to the death of one's child. The miracle of love attained might be made base by the desire to record it. Sometimes one's tenuous understanding of events in one's own life makes it foolhardy to attempt autobiography. Naturally, where the past in question is itself discreditable, any autobiographical act runs the risk of being a revelry in misdeeds rather than regret. This shows that the *character* of the past (fine or foul) does not determine whether recording it in autobiography is discreditable. This remains true whether the autobiography created is a faithful record with perfect insight and self-understanding. It is the motive in the autobiographical act that determines the act's discredit or not. Therefore, moral deliberation about an autobiographical act must consider the motive for the act, as well as other considerations. The deliberation is in part the search for decent or creditable motives for the autobiography.

The crucial point to acknowledge is that there is no warrant in advance for the existence of at least one motive that is not discreditable. This point mirrors the generality with which Murdoch describes discreditable motives that urge prescinding from the autobiographical act. On this basis, we can conclude that for some presentations of the past it may never make a creditable autobiography, that is, one whose presentation it was ethically sound to undertake. Indeed, the decision to create an autobiography might always begin with the search for a creditable motive.

While one may begin with the search for a decent motive, even where this is assured, without ethically sound means the act may be wrong to undertake. We might not trust the medium of the autobiographical act to permit presenting uncorrupted autobiography—a worry I discuss below (section 8). In short, sometimes we may be unable to trust *ourselves* or the *medium* for an autobiography to realize our motives for an autobiography. Murdoch illustrated this by her response to her own worries about the discredit attaching to autobiographical acts. She presented the past with omissions, alterations, and angles. It was probably not quite falsification, but a selective, mannered *presentation*. No wonder, then, that she did not trust her own diaries as evidence of her past. She wrote earlier:

> Suppose I were given evidence about what I thought at the time. My diaries etc. I think I wd not accept that evidence. I'd still feel I didn't know what my past really was. (October 17, 1947 [Conradi 2001, 275])

Conradi offers another diary entry as a summary of Murdoch's discussion following the entry above:

> So long as one lives, one relationship with one's past *should* keep shifting, since "*re-thinking one's past is a constant responsibility.*" (October 17, 1947 [275])

Murdoch's attitude helps to underscore the merit of my purpose in anatomizing the autobiographical act as I have, because it shows that the act is *integral* to the autobiography. By taking an autobiographical work as the result of a presentation by an autobiographical act, it is clear that an autobiography is distinguished by its form as well as its content. The content comprises the narrative of the past. The form is determined by the material circumstances of the actual autobiographical act presenting the autobiography. The form thus embodies the time, place, medium, and motive by which the act was enacted by the author. By embodying these, the autobiography is a particular distinguished from others, even those with the same narrative content (presuming we accepted a separation of form and content). Therefore, insofar as an autobiography could be evidence for the past, it would first and foremost be evidence for the autobiographical *act*. It would count as one *presentation* of the past, at one time, in one medium, with one motive and embodying the moral judgment of the author at *that time*. Consideration of these factors inherent in the form make licit the diminution of the evidentiary value of autobiography, as Murdoch declares. This diminution must be reckoned sufficient to motivate and legitimate a standing role in the present for an *ongoing* recovery and recollection about one's past. In other words, autobiography from the past is no more authoritative about the past than one's own present thinking about the past.

4

Considering the example of confession will further validate the proposed anatomy of the autobiographical act as well as the relation between autobiographical acts and autobiographies. Confession is an origin-form of the life writing that we have come to know as autobiography. The elements of the autobiographical act enacted in the confessional are plain to discern, though the medium is not writing. The motive for confession is the desire for absolution. The medium is a ritualized conversation with a confessor. The moral

judgment of one's actions as sinful is a condition on the possibility of genuine acts of confession. The formalized ritual of confession in this case may make the autobiography created rather austere. It need not be so, of course. Someone may approach the confessional unsure whether his past is sinful or not. The conversational interaction between confessor and confessant is the medium in which the autobiography—with detail refined and an eventual moral judgment—is enacted. Here the confessional act overlaps the autobiographical act, thereby illuminating how action is essential to the autobiographical act that presents (or creates) autobiography.

Confession need not occur within the ritualized interaction of the church. Consider Ludwig Wittgenstein's confession, which he is reported to have made *several* times during the 1930s to friends and family.[1] He was insistent about the urgency of making his confession, though the person to whom he made the confession was neither an ordained confessor nor someone he had wronged. (He made apologies rather than confessions to some of those he had wronged.) For most of the confessions he read from a prepared text in a clear voice or sat while the text he proffered was read. Of those who recalled the confession, the experience was not one in which Wittgenstein sought anything from his "confessor" but an audience. He sought neither absolution, forgiveness, judgment nor clarification. Most found the process awkward and unrevealing of Wittgenstein's character.

Where should we locate the autobiographical act in this confession? Is the autobiography the text Wittgenstein prepared or is it the confession he presented? I suggest we should consider the act *incomplete* after Wittgenstein had prepared the confessional text containing those things of which he was ashamed. That is to answer the questions by saying the autobiography created is the confession he presented, not the text. The principal reason for thinking so is that Wittgenstein's motive was not to prepare a text. Wittgenstein's motive for the confession is not clear, but most who heard it were doubtful that his motive was self-understanding or a recording of his past. Interpreters and friends orient his probable motive around a desire to remake himself or begin to live a better life free of the vices implicated in the episodes he confessed.[2] The text was the selective precipitate of extensive self-examination Wittgenstein undertook while reflecting on his past. I call it selective because the notebooks in which some reflections took place are in a style and of a length that would be wholly unsuitable to a confession (see Wittgenstein 2002). I suggest therefore that Wittgenstein selected, arranged, and composed the text of his confession in preparation for confessing, not as a record of his misdeeds or as a ward against a return to his vices. In short, the text is not the

autobiography; presenting it in confession is. An additional reason for this conclusion is that if the text were found, its interpretation would be unsound if its preparation for a confessional act was ignored.

Following my proposed anatomy, I suggest we should then conceive Wittgenstein's confession as an autobiographical act whose motive was a kind of exorcism by the trial of confession preparatory to living as a better man. The medium of the confession was the presentation of the confessional text. The moral judgment, like any confession, is that Wittgenstein's conduct had been unworthy, indecent, perhaps sinful.

One consequence of this approach to autobiography is that each of Wittgenstein's confessions is a distinct autobiographical act presenting a different autobiography, yet all relate to the same episodes in his past—that is, all have the same autobiographical narrative content, for example, that lie about his origins. Supposing the text had not changed from confession to confession, one could object to my view claiming that there is just one autobiography and several presentations of it to confessors. Whereas, on my view, a new autobiography is created with each autobiographical act. I claim that there are several autobiographies, not one. The mistake in thinking there is just one comes from thinking that the content was the same at each confession, with only differences in presentation, such as emphasis or nuance. It misunderstands that the act is integral to the autobiography. Thinking of the text as the medium of the autobiography—rather than the confessional act—encourages this mistake. If we were out to establish the facts about Wittgenstein's past—for example, that he told that lie—then the (*ex hypothesi*) unitary character of the confessional text would be a salient focus for our interest. However, if we seek autobiography rather than past facts, then each autobiographical act is important because each conveys the form of the autobiography. Form does not detach from content so readily. For example, Fania Pascal found Wittgenstein's manner in presenting his confession unimpressive. His manner was stiff and at times proud or disdainful (Rhees 1981, 47–52). The effect was to undermine the seriousness and sobriety of his implicit moral judgment of what he confessed. The presentation did not express the contrition criterial of genuine confession, which in turn made the character of the autobiography presented different than it would have been had he been contrite. This shows that the content of the autobiography presented is not identical with the prepared text.

In Pascal's case, we might explain the character of Wittgenstein's confession by its being partially compromised by Wittgenstein's poor command of the medium of a face-to-face spoken confession. If we disregard differences owing to the conversational medium, we might instead seek to distin-

guish autobiographies instead by the moral judgments essential to each. This would be to focus on the autobiographical act, as I have urged. For example, the moral judgment Wittgenstein might make of his past in 1931 would likely vary from the judgment he would make in 1937. The difference could show itself in the manner in which he presented the confessional text; in the way in which he handed it over and stood while it was read; or the introduction he made to the confession when he sent it in a letter. The explanations for his change in moral judgment could be many, for example. an altered moral understanding or having recognized a pattern in his behavior not previously evident. The point is that where our interest is in autobiography—a self-authored account of one's life—rather than facts about the past, we should distinguish autobiographies by the acts that present them, not by the media used to present them. Thus the objection that there is just one autobiography and many presentations should be rejected. Instead, each of Wittgenstein's confessional acts creates an autobiography, because the act is integral to (the form of) the autobiography.

With the example of confession I have shown that the proposed anatomy of the autobiographical act fits a prototype of autobiography, viz. confession. Using Wittgenstein's confession I have sought to underpin the *unity* of form and content in autobiography. I have also emphasized the importance of the moral judgment that is distinctive in autobiography. I shall discuss the centrality of the moral judgment in the next section.

I suggest the media of autobiography could be many, including performance and the plastic or mimetic arts. It is evident that autobiography created in the interpersonal medium of conversation is one in which the medium significantly determines the autobiography created because the medium is shared with the author's interlocutor, who contributes the whole of her perspective and judgments during the act of creation. The points I make below showing the ethical perils of autobiography are easiest to accept, I believe, for the conversational medium. Writing, by contrast, is the medium most like thought in that it can be created by solitary, piecemeal revision over an extended time. I believe my points about ethical peril are more difficult to make in relation to the medium of writing. For this reason, from this point I shall consider autobiography solely in its written form or medium.

5

I have argued for a view of autobiography that focuses on the autobiographical act that presents an autobiography, for example, the act of writing an autobiography. I have claimed the act consists of a motive for the act, a

medium in which the act is enacted, and a moral judgment on the past encompassed by the autobiography. My view proves its worth by allowing us to locate overlooked ethical challenges of autobiography. Before elaborating those challenges, I will address an objection to my view in this section and the next. In so doing I will refine my proposal still further in regard to the moral judgment in autobiography. My anatomy of the autobiographical act, the objection begins, is true of *any* act of creation, including creative writing. They all can have motives, media, and moral judgments. Why suppose the proposed anatomy is distinctive with regard to autobiography?

It is important for my purposes to show that autobiography is distinctive because I shall argue below that the ethical perils of autobiography are peculiar to the autobiographer, that is, the autobiographical actor. If all creative acts carried the same perils, my argument would be undermined. Therefore I shall offer a cluster of arguments showing the distinctive nature of autobiography compared to other creative writing. I shall conclude from these arguments that the moral authority of the author in autobiography is the most important way in which autobiography differs from other writing.

The least significant distinguishing feature of autobiography is its restricted domain, that is, the author's past. Insofar as a work is pure autobiography, the author must remain self-regarding else she will lapse into reportage.

It is clear that as a literary *form* autobiography is distinct, by which I mean that there are literary outcomes that can be achieved solely with autobiography. The proof of this, I suggest, is that there are fictional autobiographies. We should accept that great writers of fiction will have chosen the form because they sometimes supposed it was the sole means to achieve their literary ambitions. If autobiographical form did not have peculiar advantages as a literary means, why choose it? *Jane Eyre* is a fictional autobiography that bears the subtitle "An Autobiography" with the real author Charlotte Brontë noted as the editor, under a pseudonym. For the distinction to which I am calling attention, nothing hangs on the truth of which *specific* aspects of autobiographical form Brontë had judged vital to *Jane Eyre*. We can speculate why her literary project demanded autobiography, by assuming that she wished to convey Jane's inner life. Though written decades before Freud or scientific psychology, the novel is considered a crucial forerunner of the introspective literature of the twentieth century of which Marcel Proust's work is a paramount example. Given Brontë's success in this facet of the novel, it is reasonable to suppose it figured among her aims and therefore her choice of literary form. Her reason for choosing it, I suggest, is that the autobiographical voice belongs to a unique witness to the autobiographer's life. What the autobiog-

rapher says about her life is different in kind to what any biographer *could* say. One might mark the difference by saying the autobiographer attests, while the biographer at best asserts. That is, an autobiographer testifies about her life, thereby creating evidence and investing it with credence or warrant. The biographer, by contrast, solely weighs the warrants of what he asserts. Various caveats might be lodged to allow for the defeasibility of what epistemologists call first-person authority, but the attest/assert distinction marked still applies in general.

6

The attest/assert distinction I have indicated is a significant difference between autobiography and other writing. However, it misses the heart of what autobiography promises. Saying the autobiographer is a unique witness to her life can be understood as an epistemic observation. As it were, the autobiographer is better positioned (epistemically) to observe her life than anyone else, being present at all times and positioned on the "inside." However, put that way, there is nothing unique the autobiographer offers; she just has more of it than anyone else, more observations. Autobiography promises more.

Autobiography promises a moral judgment on the author's life that ultimately cannot be gainsaid, because at the limit the author has ultimate moral authority to judge her life's fruition. By "life's fruition" I mean whether someone has *inter alia* had a good life or a satisfying life or a life of desperation. Certainly the facts will take us not very far in making this determination.[3] The scope of this claim is easily misunderstood. Others may judge the content of someone's life in very many aspects with good authority, for example, whether leaving her husband was a sordid episode. Someone may even venture a judgment about another's life's fruition. But on this question of a life's fruition, at the limit, everyone must yield to the authority of the person whose life it is. Suppose someone who appears to me to have had a life of desperation, unfulfilled ambition, and hardship tells me in the right circumstances that hers has been a wonderful life. At the limit, with what warrant or authority or evidence could I continue to nurture a doubt about her judgment without shading eventually into arrogance or superiority? By "at the limit" I mean after a considered reflection or discussion of the bases for our differing judgments.[4] At the limit, not to yield to someone's authority in the matter of judging her life's fruition would be to wrong her.[5] The wrong might be characterized variously as paternalism, disrespect, lack of recognition, denying her humanity, and the like. My point does not depend on how the wrong is characterized, only that it is a wrong to deny the ultimate moral authority

to someone in the moral judgment of her life's fruition. I will labor the point to avoid misunderstanding.

I am not denying that most of what occurs in someone's life may be judged, morally, by others. Disputes about the correct judgments of many acts, judged as particular kinds, are possible without deference to the actor's judgment. However, judgments about a life, taken as a whole, are unlike judgments of acts. Most obviously, lives cannot be judged under particular kinds, as acts can. The life of a philosopher is not a kind of life, for example. Between two philosophers' lives there may be structural similarities stemming, for example, from the common travails of an academic career. However, internal to each life are its hopes, dreams, satisfactions, interests, ambitions, and the like, which contribute to that life's individuality. No doubt the objects of these also admit judgments with a moral valence, for example, a petty hope. But in two aspects these elements internal to a life cannot be gainsaid. First, no justification can be demanded for having this interest or that ambition, even when the interest is banal and the ambition foolish. Even an ambition agreed to be foolish is within someone's authority to make her own. On what authority could justification be demanded? Second, whether the *complex* of those elements internal to a life have come to fruition in that life is a judgment—a moral judgment—for the person whose life it is. To gainsay, at the limit, her judgment overreaches one's authority, perhaps strains sense, and wrongly denies her proper expectations of recognition for her autonomy, individuality, and like terms.

It is the author's judgment of the fruition of her life that autobiography promises and it is not a false promise. The judgment may not come or it might be made in circumstances that vitiate the autobiographer's moral authority. For example, someone could be in thrall to another person's moral judgment so much that they are alienated from his own. The judgment may be withheld as, in my opinion, occurs in Bob Dylan's autobiographical *Chronicles Volume 1*.[6] Nonetheless autobiography can actualize the potential for the autobiographer/author to exercise her ultimate moral authority in moral judgment over the fruition of her life. No other creative act has this dimension of moral authority (which is part of autobiography's appeal) and it makes autobiography distinctive. That meets and denies the objection essayed at the outset of section 5 above.

Once it is accepted that someone possesses the ultimate moral authority to judge the fruition of her life as a *whole*, there is no reason to deny that authority for *parts* of her life. At points in her life, she has the ultimate moral authority in this regard to judge how her life has gone up to that point. Once we accept this, we should accept her authority over any meaningful interval.

Ultimate authority does not entail infallibility in someone's judgments of her life, though her recognition of a mistake is no trivial matter to outline philosophically. We must also allow that one's moral understanding and thus one's moral judgments will change during one's life. Part of the need to present Jane Eyre's inner life was for the reader to discern the transformation in her moral understanding or sensibility, a transformation Jane herself notes in "her" autobiography.

With the role of the autobiographer's moral authority elaborated, we can return to the anatomy of an autobiographical act. I will not dispute whether it is essential to all creative works that they include a motive, medium, and moral judgment. Let us suppose it is so. I claim that the moral judgment of her life, with her authority, is essential to the autobiographical act. The degree to which this is absent is the degree to which an autobiography is diminished as autobiography.

7

Before proceeding, let me summarize the position at which I have arrived. An autobiographical act is a presentation in a medium, with a motive, conveying a judgment about the author's life. The act is integral to the autobiography because it contributes the form to the content, the content being events from an interval in the author's life. Contemporary accounts of autobiography locate the ethical challenge in the recovery or recollection of the author's past for the content of the autobiography. I shall argue that prior to these challenges are the ethical challenges in the autobiographical act, what I call its deontic control. Among these challenges is finding a creditable motive for the act, secure means for the act, and making the moral judgment of the author's life. For contrast with deontic control of autobiographical acts, I will review the practical challenges to recovering or recollecting the past.

What I shall call the contemporary view of autobiography is one that is bounded between what Garry Hagberg has called two "poles" that are in tension with each other. On one pole we conceive autobiography "as accurately and nonprismatically perceiving what is in the past in and of itself, where the true self-revelatory proposition is one that is verified through correspondence between present utterance and past fact." On the other we conceive autobiography as "projecting onto the past the content that we claim to perceive in it" where what "we perceive in our past is of our present retrospective making" (2008, 204). The first pole reflects a common, realist view of the past being constituted by metaphysically reinforced fact. The second pole reflects the results of modernism in literature and antirealism in philosophy

that place the individual thinking subject as arbiter—sometimes creator—of the past. I take no position between these poles. I cannot here recapitulate arguments for or against; each pole is insightful.

The two poles can be treated as one because both conceive the challenges of autobiography as *practical* problems in the production of autobiographical content, which both conceive as narrative about one's past. As it were, the challenge is to recover the past or recollect it. For the realist, autobiography is difficult because past facts are difficult to apprehend: Facts are temporally distant; the evidence by which they might be inferred is disturbed; and memories of perceptions of facts are decaying and subject to misinterpretation by the autobiographer. The problem of memory could be assimilated as a species of the genus of problems that afflict self-knowledge generally. Nonetheless, if these obstacles were cleared, few challenges would remain for producing autobiography bar the labor required of the autobiographer. Despite differences between the poles, the difficulty for the antirealist is structurally similar. The past is also difficult to apprehend, but because it is essentially indeterminate. Before the past is apprehended it must first be made determinate by a determination of the subject. These determinations are themselves vulnerable to self-deception and its kin, all of which could also be assimilated as species of problems with self-knowledge. However, absent self-deception et al., determinations of the past are not inherently difficulties for producing autobiographical content. Indeed, for the antirealist, it is tempting to think that determinations of the past just are the producing of autobiography after self-deceptions have been unmasked. The views are similar in that both conceive of autobiography as difficult because of impediments in the apprehension of the past.

These are practical challenges because they must be overcome to achieve an end already decided, that is, producing autobiographical content. These are problems in the means to an end. By contrast, the ethical challenges posed by autobiography I locate arise concerning which end to seek, that is, which autobiographical act to undertake. The prior ethical challenge posed is whether to produce it, thus I call it deontic control of production. These challenges are logically prior to difficulties in producing autobiographical content, for ends are logically prior to means. For this reason, all practical challenges having been overcome, even assuming perfect apprehension of the past has no bearing on the ethical challenges in deontic control.

I shall set to one side considerations of confidentiality that could morally inhibit deciding to write an autobiography. Let us suppose for argument that perfect secrecy is possible.

8

I have argued that the first locus of the ethical challenge in autobiography is in the autobiographical act. The specific loci are each of the motive, medium, and moral judgment. Using the proposed anatomy of the autobiographical act, it is evident how each element poses an ethical challenge that places the autobiographical actor in ethical peril. I review each below.

First, every moral judgment, irrespective of autobiography, is an ethical challenge, even if some are easier to make than others. Moral judgments can be made badly in ways that redound morally on the person judging. Made without due deliberation, they are cavalier or callous. Made without seriousness, they are foolish or indifferent. Made to be self-serving, they are corrupt or mere expedience. We can wrong someone by fixing her in a polluted moral judgment. The moral judgment essential to the autobiographical act is no different to any other in the ethical challenge it poses. By an ethical challenge I mean a moment in which the subject is in ethical peril, by which I mean at risk of failing such that she is *inter alia* vicious or remorseful or does a wrong.[7]

Second, motives are the stock in trade of moral deliberation and assessment. I considered above (sections 2–3) motives that would morally urge prescinding from (or restricting) an autobiographical act. To these could be added many more such as impatience, greed, unseemliness, foolhardiness, pride, or immodesty. It is a commonplace that one's motives are a locus of ethical peril.

It could be objected that the motive of all autobiography is self-understanding. In one way this wants an argument. Why as a matter of fact must it be so? Why logically is that motive criterial of autobiography? It sounds more like the voice of theory, silenced by many other motives in evidence—for example, self-justification, glorification, leaving a record for one's posterity—that are not species of self-understanding. In another way, the objection suggests a self-absorption that corrupts the seriousness of other autobiographical motives. The focus demanded in autobiography is sometimes understanding the events in one's life but not oneself, for example, was our love no good from the start; when did the sham begin; my actions were legal but were they dishonorable? Therefore, self-understanding cannot be the motive of all autobiography. The objection should be rejected as wanting an argument as well as proposing as essential a motive to autobiography that is morally corrupting.[8]

The medium of the autobiographical act is perhaps the one in which the

ethical challenge posed is least transparent. The key insight I have sought to express is that an author cannot assume that the medium will prove receptive to the realization of his motive and moral judgment. The risk of distortion indeed corruption cannot be discounted, only mitigated. Wittgenstein's distorted confession to Fania Pascal is one example. It suggested a lack of control. That is right but could mistakenly suggest that the control could be improved with more skill or technique. The mistake is to think that a medium has no material qualities that determine the limits of what may be expressed using that medium. These limits are consequent, as it were, on the material quality of the medium's indissoluble inherence in reality. For example, a canvas is inherently two-dimensional and thus restricts the expression of the three-dimensional. Once it is understood that there are limits, the relationship of author to autobiography always becomes one of creator to *presentation*, in that medium, of his work. Cezanne arguably initiated the awareness for his audience of the material limits of his medium, using visible brushstrokes and exposed canvas to remind the audience that they were viewing a presentation, in a medium, of the artist's subject.

Language, being almost integral to consciousness, is less obviously a medium, though it is. Indeed there are many linguistic media, for example writing, conversation, speech making, drama, and teaching. Joyce is celebrated for his demonstration of the in-principle limits of the material quality of (written) language, but the apotheosis of the effort of such demonstrations is in Beckett's trilogy of novels (1991). Beckett demonstrates that language is not ours to command, but may, as it were, betray our orders and disrupt our expression in writing.[9] I cannot argue for the cogency of Beckett's demonstrations here. I ask that they be granted on the belief that those congenial to philosophical worries about autobiography are also congenial to worries about the transparency of language.[10] Thus even when the medium of a proposed ethical act is (certainly secret) written language, an ethical challenge for the proposed act remains because the medium is the means of the autobiographical act. As with motive, the assessment of the means necessary to an action is the stock-in-trade of moral deliberation. Means that are inadequate, ineffective, or risky all increase the ethical peril of an action. In other words, some autobiography is morally too hazardous because language, in a medium, could fail the author. She would be unable to render the past or her actions in ways that, for example, were truthful, free of vice, or respectful.

A second quite different peril arises also from the limits inherent in the medium of autobiography. Someone may have comforting beliefs about her

past—for example, that she has been decent in dealings with Smith. These beliefs can persist unexamined in the unlit parts of her mind, parts I call unlit because lighting them with considered reflection is avoided for what it might reveal about herself, for example, that she has exploited Smith. Presenting autobiography in language can dislodge uncomfortable truths about ourselves, thereby disrupting our view of our own character. Writing autobiography can precipitate crises of conscience, thereby thwarting our capacity to believe what we want about the past. In part this reflects the way in which autobiographical creations have reality independent of their creators (cf. section 2). Presented "outside" the unlit corners of the mind, the words on the page may ring, for example, false, hollow, or strained. Something similar can occur with the reactions of an interlocutor in the medium of conversation. Said out loud, even to oneself, comforting lies, half-truths, and continued justifications strain the pathological conditions that keep them secure. If one is unwilling or unprepared to confront the crisis of conscience the autobiographical act could spawn, then the autobiography undertaken could be perverted from the start. This is a reason not to undertake the act in the first place. It also illustrates another aspect of the ethical challenge posed by the medium of the autobiographical act.

Rather than the challenges I have reviewed, it could be objected that overcoming self-deception is the principal ethical challenge the autobiographer faces. It is not so. Self-deception, in the sense relevant to autobiography, is being deceived about oneself or one's past. It is not of itself a pathological ethical condition, though it might mask or be symptomatic of one. Sometimes someone is sincerely deceived about herself or her past. She may be mistaken about the springs of her actions, for example, mistaking envy for fear, or her motives may have been essentially indeterminate, so she mistakes them by having supposed them more definite than they were. Sincere self-deception could be cured by psychotherapy that makes no moral demand on the subject, because she comes to recognize her mistake. Self-deception that is a moral fault (i.e., insincere self-deception) requires complicity—in senses that must be given—with one's disbelief about what one has reason to believe (on balance). On the basis of this distinction in self-deceptions, it is therefore a mistake *always* to conceive overcoming self-deception as an ethical accomplishment. It will be an ethical accomplishment for solely some kinds of complicity. Therefore overcoming self-deception is, at most, sometimes a locus of ethical challenge. Moreover, since this challenge is present after the autobiographical act is underway, it is always subsequent to the ethical challenges of deontic control of the act described above.

9

I have sought to demonstrate that the ethical challenges attending autobiography are not those found in the contemporary view of autobiography. The import of my demonstration is that considering the content will not suffice for assessing an autobiography. It is not someone's life that we should evaluate when we evaluate autobiography. It is the work (what I have called the presentation) and that cannot be done without consideration of the act that begat the work. That act is always morally charged. As I have argued, the form of autobiography depends on the exercise of the moral authority of the author in the judgment of her life. In addition, selecting and presenting some events in her life rather than others is a kind of self-valuing about what in her life is worth presenting and what is not. My claim is not that this is problematic in the sense of not possible to do well, but that doing so is ethically perilous. I shall illustrate this consolidated point with an example from Wittgenstein, which will further show again that form and content in autobiography cannot be separated.

> In my autobiography I must try both to recount my life truly and to *understand* it. For example, my unheroic *nature* must not show as an unfortunate irregularity but as an essential quality (not a virtue). If I may explain in a simile: If a street loafer were to write his biography, the danger would be that he would either
>
> a) deny that his nature is what it is,
> or b) would find some reason to be proud of it,
> or c) present the matter as though this—that he has such a nature—were of no consequence. (Rhees 1981, 209–10)

Wittgenstein continues by outlining the variety of distortions in autobiography owing to motive and medium.

> In the first case he lies, in the second he mimics a trait of the natural aristocrat, that pride which is a *vitium splendidum* and which he cannot really have any more than a crippled body can have natural grace. In the third case he makes as it were the gesture of social democracy, placing culture above the rough bodily qualities—but this is a deception as well. He is what he is, and this is important and means something, but it's no reason for pride; on the other hand it is always the object of his self-respect. (210)

On the first distortion enumerated, the author lies rather than pronounce the truth about himself. Lying clearly implicates an immoral motive in autobiography. On the second, it is open whether the misguided mimicry is sin-

cere—a genuine aspiring at an impossible self-improvement—or an insincere self-deception, like an unacknowledged willful pretense. The author's ethical culpability will then vary with what moved him to present himself in this way. The third distortion is least clear, but it could suggest an author who is blocked from presenting a faithful rendering of his life by the culture that saturates a medium for his presentation. For example, explaining his life by reference to an insuperable psychological condition (e.g., melancholy) could be difficult to express in the face of prevailing social pieties about our limitless capacity for self-invention. Wittgenstein concludes with a remark about the peril in self-valuation. On the one hand, an excess becomes pride (in the sense of a vice), while on the other absent self-respect disvalues what is undeniably important in the author being the individual he is and could be presented to be.

The integral nature of autobiography is clear in these passages because Wittgenstein's remarks show the integration of motive, medium, and moral judgment. This means the autobiography is not simply a story about one's past. It is a presentation of a work about the author's past. As presentation or as work, its form is integral. Another way of putting the point I am laboring is that autobiography is a telling, not just a thinking about one's past. Thinking, too, has its perils, but telling even more so, even when you are (in some attenuated sense) telling yourself. The implication of this point generally is that the decision to undertake an autobiographical act is one that cannot be made solely by consideration of the content of the past.

By drawing lessons from this discussion, some concluding points are clear for those endeavors identified as autobiography. First, autobiography is never an innocent quest for self-understanding or understanding of the past. There is always a motive in presenting oneself or one's past. Second, the autobiographical act may have unintended or undesired consequences for the author's self-understanding and for the realization of the motive for the autobiography. Third, most important, sometimes one ought not to write or otherwise make an autobiography. It is not everything that is a fit subject for autobiography. It is not any motive for telling a story of one's life, however truthfully, that is morally decent. Everyone is not capable of faithful autobiography, not least because some media may be disabling. All that being so, I have not claimed there are no decent motives or sound media for autobiography. Motives such as an apologia, a confession, a cautionary tale, to record personal history, or to bear witness to the past with the authority of testimony are all creditable motives.[11] Similarly, some media may prove apt means for an author, on an occasion, for some autobiography. My aim has

been to argue that reflection on the motive, medium, and moral judgment of autobiography is at least as important as overcoming vanities, uncertainty, and self-deception in autobiography.

Notes

1. Rhees 1981, 48, 135, and postscript; Monk 1990, 367–72.

2. Rhees 1981, postscript; Szabados 1995; Wittgenstein 1998, 42e, 46e.

3. Even the enriched facts canvassed in appendix I of *Reasons and Persons* will not take us far. Parfit's purpose in that appendix was different, viz. a basis for *interpersonal* comparisons, not assessments of individual lives (Parfit 1984, appendix I).

4. I have in mind the kind of comparative deliberation about difference discussed in Winch 1972.

5. Moral authority typically commands respect or deference. It is open whether its denial is always a wrong to the person denied. Where the fruition of a life is in question, it is much less open. Cf. Levy 2010, 107–22.

6. It is a strangely detached and distancing work in which Dylan offers very little of himself. Even the title suggests that the work is a product first, a performance second, and autobiography last (Dylan 2004).

7. It is of philosophical importance whether perils entail vice or wrongdoing, but arguing which applies when is more than I can elaborate here. Clearly, for both moral criticism is apt and this justifies calling the peril ethical. Clearly, lack of virtue is an ethical or moral matter. Perhaps being untruthful about another is a wrong done to them, compare perhaps the well-known Murdoch example of M&D (Murdoch 1970, 17). Some wrongs are aggravated by persistent dishonest denial, and the like, about them. For those with whom we have been close, one can reasonably expect a regard that is answerable to truth; this demand for seriousness of regard is a demand for respect. One can be wronged when the demand is rejected.

8. Considerations of this kind are also reasons for rejecting the easy assimilation of philosophical work to autobiographical work, however much both may result in an author's changed character. For this view, cf. Szabados (1992, 1995). Autobiography is, after all, *literature*. Iris Murdoch, who was unusually well placed to comment as an author of literature and philosophy, is instructive on the unbridgeable differences between the two (Murdoch 1982).

9. This is clearest in *Malone Dies*, where the narrator is forever losing control of (his) language, e.g., "A thousand little things to report, very strange, in view of my situation, if I interpret them correctly. But my notes have a curious tendency, as I realize at last, to annihilate all they purport to record" (Beckett 1991, 259).

10. Here Beckett excels Proust in seeing the ethical challenge to the writer. Proust mistakenly saw the writer as a kind of scientist of memory: "The impression is for the writer what the experiment is for the scientist, with the difference that in the scientist the work of the intelligence precedes the experiment and in the writer it comes after the impression" (Proust 1996, 234). Beckett understood that language did not offer a secure venue for interrogating memories or impressions. Similarly, Imre Kertész, a Holocaust survivor and another Nobel Prize–winning writer, claimed a limit to linguistic media when he argued that no language could comprehend the Holocaust without being thereby self-corrupting of itself and its speakers (Kertész 2002).

11. For this last example, one could feel the burden to arrest the distortion of history, cf. Urqhart 2010.

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8

Writing about Others: An Autobiographical Perspective

MERETE MAZZARELLA

What are the ethical responsibilities of an autobiographical writer in regard to writing about other people—people who are (or have been) close to her? I am not a philosopher, and as a literary critic I am an essayist rather than an academic so my answer can only be an essay: an autobiographical essay about writing autobiography but above all an essay in the sense of an attempt.

Autobiography is essentially a social activity, autobiography is a literary form that draws on other literary forms, above all the novel. For most of the twentieth century autobiography was structured very much like the novel in what is known as the tradition of realism, the *Bildungsroman*: the story was that of the protagonist's origins and the experiences on which her or his gradual growth to maturity was based. Origins were represented by parents, whereas siblings and other relatives, friends, mentors, and lovers represented lessons to be learned in the course of the journey of life. The end-result, the vantage point from which the life was reviewed, was—both in autobiographies and in the novels of realism—*either* a fulfilled life based on successful adjustment between youthful idealism and the demands of society *or* disappointment, disillusion, maybe even cynicism or self-destructiveness. The difference is a difference in the degree of the protagonist's sense of autonomy or agency: in a novel where the protagonist is seen to have a high degree of agency and autonomy it makes sense to talk of a hero(ine) and in the same way there are any number of autobiographies in which the protagonist's self-perception is that of a hero(ine). The autobiography of *desillusionment*—like the novel of disillusionment—is more deterministic: the protagonist is seen as victim of both genes and environment, that is, of circumstances but (at least in the case of autobiography) above all as the victim of other individuals.

At least as far as Scandinavian autobiography is concerned, victimhood has been big in recent years. Much of the critical discussion has been about using writing as a means of revenge: in book after book the offspring of famous people have exposed their parents to public humiliation by accusing them of sexual or other abuse, addiction, neglect, or simply lack of love. And both men and women have similarly exposed ex-spouses or lovers. The accused have tended to be people who are still alive; in a number of cases the

accused have answered back in books of their own. The literary establishment has taken sides and there have been endless—mostly futile—attempts to distinguish between objective and subjective truth. Recently it would seem that most distinctions have eroded in the name of "autofiction," a term canonized through a massive, much acclaimed six-volume work by the Norwegian Karl-Ove Knausgård[1] but originally introduced by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 (on the back cover of his novel *Fils*) and used to explode the basic assumption of autobiography, that the narrator and the author are the same person. The discussion continues, however. There is a very common notion of "emotional truth": an example would be the reading of Homer's *Odyssey* in which Ulysses is assumed to have expressed the terrors of his homeward journey and created his own myth by turning natural objects (the rocks of Gibraltar or a volcano) into monsters like Scylla and Charybdis or Polyphemous. Another current view appears to dissolve the concept of intersubjective truth altogether. Not long ago I wrote to the Swedish tax office, waited in vain for an answer, and then wrote again. Finally a letter arrived saying, "We are sorry you feel you have not received an answer."

For my own part I have written a number of autobiographical books but the one I want to discuss here is a mixture of biography and autobiography since it is both about my relationship with my mother and a celebration of her life and the manner of her death: *Hem från festen* (Going Home from the Party) published in 1992. It is a true story at least in the sense that I consistently aim to tell the truth to the best of my ability, but my claim is that writing out of love—and with truthfulness as a guiding ideal—is not necessarily less ethically challenging than writing out of the desire for revenge.

I will start with a more general discussion of what it means to write about other people, regardless of the spirit in which it is done. Over more than twenty years I have regularly taught medical humanities to doctors and medical students and have often had occasion to reflect on the similarities between the clinical gaze and the biographical one. In both cases one is observing other people for a purpose beyond that of simply getting to know them on equal terms, as fellow human beings. In both cases the gaze can be ambiguous and can make the person observed uneasy. One likes to think that the clinical gaze is benevolent, that the doctor seeks to cure or at least to comfort, but in fact it is perfectly possible that his mind is mainly on his research project.

Is it, then, ever possible to see and describe another person without ob-

1. On October 3, 2009, in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen*, fourteen members of his family anonymously protested against the first volume, calling it "the literature of Judas" and adding, "It is a book full of insinuations, untruths, false characterizations."

jectifying her? It is clear that philosophers disagree. Sartre would say no: to him the relationship between the person who sees and the one who is seen is inevitably a power struggle, and it is the one who is seen who is the loser because she loses her freedom. Bakhtin, however—the Bakhtin of *The Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (1990)—would seem to say yes. To him, to be seen is in some sense to be completed, to be supplied with what one cannot see oneself: a full outward image, an exterior, a background behind one's back, a consummation independent of the meaning or outcome of one's own forward-directed life. The term "consummation" is one Bakhtin returns to, emphasizing that it is connected with "compassionate understanding."

My own—tentative—conclusion both as a writer and a literary critic would be that by turning other people into objects of one's own subjectivity, one is making them a part of one's own project, crafting one's version of them, and—if one is published—making one's version public and thereby influencing others. Even a work that is seemingly pure biography—of a historical figure, say—will always in some sense be about the writer. Seeming neutrality may even be more insidious than explicit dislike or hatred: it may veil the fact that the biographer in fact dislikes the person she is writing about or is trying to present herself in a better light by comparison, or is simply concerned mainly with boosting her own ego.

On the basis of my own experience as a writer and with examples from *Hem från festen*, I would like to offer some personal reflections on a number of questions: Which responsibilities follow from writing about a person one loves? It would be meaningless to say that one should write about her "as she is"—who could tell what that would be?—but to what extent does one owe it to her to see her as she sees herself—or prefers to be seen?

And a further question: What difference does it make if the person one writes about is alive or dead? If she is alive she is likely to see and bound to judge what one has written—indeed, it is probably impossible to write about someone who is alive without imagining her judging what one has written. In the case of the recently dead one is still likely to be judged by spouses, children, or friends, but it is possible to convince oneself that their perspective is not necessarily more privileged than one's own. Paradoxically, the perspective of these people may matter less than one's conception of how the dead person herself would judge one: even in death our loved ones remain very much present to us. It is not necessarily that we imagine that our dead suffer ordinary social embarassment; we are more likely to think that they can see into our hearts and minds.

But there is another, possibly more significant difference. As long as a person is alive the narrative of her life remains open, unfinished, it retains an es-

sential unpredictability and freedom. Once she is dead the story has reached closure qua story and since there is always a tendency to interpret narratives in terms of their ending, the death is likely in some sense to influence how the life is interpreted. In the story of saints the death—the saint's manner of dying—is of the utmost significance, so is the sinner Ivan Ilyich's death in Tolstoy's short novella. Tolstoy's story is a moral tale: during his dying days Ivan Ilyich is explicitly punished for a whole life of inauthenticity. Where real life stories are concerned, too, it is with death that interpretation really takes off and there may be endless disagreement about the significance of the life and indeed of the death.

My mother died in 1991 at the age of seventy-one, from cancer of the gall bladder. Since she had always been blessed with robust good health she—and we—were initially stunned by the news of her diagnosis but after a few days she said, "I suppose I had expected to live another ten years or so but dying now feels most of all like having to go home from a party a bit sooner than I had planned. It's a consolation that it was fun while it lasted—and that everyone else will also have to go home sooner or later." As it turned out, she was granted just under three more months, from mid-April to early July. She was operated on but found inoperable—one theme of my book is to criticize a health care system that appeared to consider death primarily as an embarrassment to the medical establishment. She talked openly about dying and thus made it possible for everyone around her to be equally open. In this respect her situation was the opposite to that of Ivan Ilyich, who lived in an atmosphere of hypocrisy until the very end. My brother and I cared for her, she took farewell of her many friends, she made her will, she discussed how her valuables should be shared out, she planned her funeral. She never put any pressure on us to keep her at home, on the contrary she frequently said, "When I get *really* ill you can take me to the hospital." She died at her summer house out in the country, the place she loved most, where over the years she had spent her time growing vegetables, walking in the forest, entertaining friends, reading extensively, painting, and practicing yoga, which she had learned during her years as an ambassador's wife in India.

I had always felt that she was both stronger and more capable than me but as the weeks passed we gradually switched roles. As I was helping her out of bed one day she said, "Now *you* are big and *I'm* little." I was at her side when she died and my brother, my brother's male partner, my son—then just out of college—and my mother's two older sisters were all in the house. We were immensely relieved that she did not have to be taken to hospital, that we were there with her, that she never suffered intolerable pain—it was only on the very last day that we started worrying that she might need morphine. We

were also enormously grateful that she gained such benefit from the yoga in which she believed so strongly: she remained conscious until the very end, she was doing breathing exercises even as her breathing was slowing down and getting more labored. Only a few minutes before her very last breath she smiled at me and whispered, "This is going well—this is going fine—you are doing so well."

The day after my mother told me her prognosis I started keeping a journal: I wanted my remaining time with her to be preserved and recorded, I wanted *her* to be preserved and recorded. Whilst still in hospital she said:

"I'd like to write a book. I mean: I would have liked to write a book. . . . But maybe you can?"
"I'd love to write about you sometime. would you mind?" I answered.
"I'd be happy if you did."

Though she had always been a storyteller I realized there was much about her that I did not know so I started asking her questions about her life. Her reaction was one of happy surprise and soon she was spending part of every morning reminiscing without any further prompting from me. Many of the facts and incidents were familiar to me from before but now she was deliberately and with evident satisfaction reflecting on her life and constructing—or reconstructing—it as a narrative: there was her tomboyish childhood in the Danish countryside, there was her short career as a journalist, there was her marriage to my father, a Finnish diplomat, there were her fifteen years of cheerful, active, and useful widowhood.

Are one's dying days the source of the most authentic recollection and reconstruction?

That depends. It depends, for one thing, on whom one is telling one's story to. At this stage there is, of course, no longer any need for pretense, either to oneself or others, as part of some future-oriented planning, no need for means-end rationalization, or for "political" compromises. But one may still be reluctant to face up to one's shortcomings and failures. One may still be concerned about one's posthumous reputation, how one's immediate family or "the world" will remember one. On the other hand, there is often also a sense of telling one's deathbed life-story to some higher power who is there to see through one and judge one and to whom one has to come clean. Before such a power the perspective on one's life may change: a successful career might come to seem trivial, a professionally disappointing life may come to seem rich in altruism.

My mother's story was told to me and developed as part of a running,

emotionally close dialogue with me. On May 30 I wrote about our breakfast together:

> She describes what father looked like when they met: tall, thin from the war, and pale. /—/ She tells me about their journeys, how much fun the two of them always had on trips. I sense the outlines of another father than the one I've seen: a freer, happier one. Suddenly she straightens up a little and says: "I wouldn't be telling you this if I weren't dying but since I am dying I would like you to know that we were also so very happy together—I mean sexually."

She gropes a little for that last word, and gets embarrassed once she's said it. But after a moment's silence she continues: "Still, maybe it's nice to know that one's father was a good lover."

It is, it is.

At this stage of her life she wanted me to see both her and my father as complete human beings rather than just as parents. I was touched that, with her body wasting away, she could still think of physical intimacy—sex—as an important part of life.

Why do I see ethical problems in writing about her? I had her explicit permission, after all, and, as I must have made clear, wrote not only with enormous affection but with a degree of admiration that was almost as great as the affection—an admiration that was based on something she had quite consciously set about doing: dying a Good Death.

Even at the time I had some qualms about the journal. I do not think I ever actually told my mother that I was keeping a journal. I felt—or rather, I now remember that I felt, yes, there is a difference—that while she was having her very last experiences in life I was *watching* her having these experiences, I was using her or getting ready to use her. The journal helped me deal with my own pain but it also enabled me to establish a degree of emotional distance. Seeing her life as a narrative (as she had invited me to do) I was also already seeing it in literary terms, as a plot unfolding, with events that could be seen as symbolically charged motifs. I was certainly relieved that she died before the pain became unbearable and before we had to take her to hospital, I was immensely grateful that she remained calm and fearless until the very end. But I also found it aesthetically satisfying that she died on the night of her parents' eightieth wedding anniversary, after peaceful hours spent listening to her older sisters talking about what she was like when she was little. It is even possible that I felt that I would have had a less effective story if she had lived much longer.

The journal was usually written in a rush with many incomplete sentences and references comprehensible to no one but myself. Turning it into a book

meant providing context but basically the journal form was retained, present tense and all. This is important, I think, because that way I could convey the nitty gritty of what my mother and I experienced: our daily routines, our changing moods, which included moments of impatience and petty irritation. In the face of the majesty of Death one tends to forget how everyday—and how fraught with everyday frustrations—much of the actual *process* of dying can seem. And how full of trivia one's days are: after all, the trash still has to be taken out. Most important, the journal does justice to the overwhelming sense of uncertainty. Waiting for someone to die one cannot know exactly when or how. My mother had a good death, yes, but that is something I could only be sure of once she was dead.

Though my story is true in a factual sense, the *tone* is the result of a number of choices, choices of focus—as in even the most realistic of photos—but also rhetorical choices. By way of introduction I added a short summary of my mother's life up to the point when she fell ill. The introduction begins, "Actually she should never have been born, not if Grandma Olavia had had her way." The point here is that my mother's grandmother was a stern lady with strong opinions and when my grandparents, who married young, had produced four children in five years she firmly told them that enough was enough. My mother was born less than a year later. The final sentence of the book reads, "It's a good deal more remarkable that someone is born than that she dies." Between them the beginning and the end set the tone—and the theme—of the whole: the relationship between life and death, gratitude for the gift of life, willingness to relinquish life, dying a Good Death.

What could be wrong with this?

First and foremost I now see that other themes, and above all various ambiguities, may have been ironed out as I strove to make this particular theme clear. My mother had certainly very deliberately set about dying a Good Death and she had also explicitly given me permission to write about her life but would she have liked to be presented primarily as a role model for a Good Death? Very possibly she might have had any number of other themes in mind. She might have wanted to be remembered for her yoga or for how she took up oil painting late in life and jokingly called herself "the Grandma Moses of Scandinavia."

The fact of the matter is that my book rather downplays the yoga, in order to make my mother less "odd," that is, easier for the ordinary reader to identify with. In 1992 yoga was far less mainstream than it is now and—significantly—it was an interest I did not share or even particularly sympathize with.

If she had written her autobiography, it is possible that my mother might

have wanted to be remembered both for her early journalistic achievements, which included reporting on civilian life in Finland during the war, and a magazine interview with the Danish writer Karen Blixen—in the English-speaking world better known under her pen name Isak Dinesen. Indeed, she may have made more of the sacrifice of her career upon marriage, a sacrifice that she certainly felt some regret for and which in later life caused her to become quite outspokenly feminist.

When a new Blixen biography (Thurman 1982) appeared, my mother checked it out and said: “Well, at least I have become a footnote in academic research.”

Her tone, it should be added, was wry rather than bitter.

And what about things I say that she might have preferred to have had unsaid? How do I know that she would find it acceptable to have her and my father’s sex life made public?

I don’t. I can’t. But over the years I have talked about my book to hundreds of audiences and I do know that it is specific details like that one that have made her, though dead, come fully alive.

Common wisdom has it that powerful emotional experiences should not be written about at once but I know that this book is better than any book I could write about my mother today, when my memories of her have been fogged over by nostalgia and, possibly, a touch of sentimentality. Its strength is in its very specificity, its immediacy.

Over the years I have, of course, continued thinking of my mother, I have heard more about her from other people—“She was a very private person,” many of her friends have said by which I think they meant that though she was a lively and engaged conversationalist she tended not to talk about herself—but I have not heard anything that has changed the way I see her. Ten years ago I found a letter she had written to a friend when she was forty. Most of it was ordinary family news but suddenly there were a couple of lines that startled me: “The days pass one by one and sometimes I wonder whether it isn’t all meaningless. We grow older, eventually we die, what else is there?” After a minute I realized that the letter was written less than a year after her older brother and his son had drowned on a fishing trip. Rather than be surprised that even she had been capable of despair I should have been surprised that I had been surprised. And at least one thing about the letter seemed totally in character: that she had not sent it.

What does it ultimately mean to claim to understand another person?

It is not like understanding a problem or an explanation, it is understanding someone’s way of being in the world. One’s pain—particularly, I think,

one's emotional pain—is often felt to be uniquely one's own, not to be understood in general terms. An unhappy adolescent does not want to hear, "This is just a stage you're going through"; a terminally ill person (or her relatives) is not likely to be greatly cheered by being introduced to Kübler-Ross's stages of grief.[2] There is much to be said for the American Indian proverb that you do not understand another person before you have walked several miles in her moccasins; more and more I have come to think that we need the concept of "narrative empathy," that is, an empathy that is not only a matter of responding to a specific situation, a specific moment, but one that is far more contextual, one that is based on knowing the other person's story. Being able to help is predicated not only on seeing what is now but also on trying to envision both what has been and what is to come, what is in store for that person.

There is also much to be said for understanding that there may be a good deal a person does not understand. My mother taught me that the claim to understand someone else fully is always suspect, is in fact a kind of imperialism. I would never, under any circumstances, have said to her, "I know exactly what you are feeling." My mother could occasionally be self-revealing but always on her own terms. She often said, "Don't imagine you know everything about me."

Since her death I have often wondered exactly what she meant. I have also wondered why I never asked. I now think that—as when she talked about my father—she may have meant that there were other aspects to her identity than that of mother, the role she had in relation to me. But I also think there was something more to it, something that had to do with what her friends meant when they described her as "a very private person": she was someone who needed space, she hated to be questioned about what she was thinking about; when she was on her way out she hated to be asked when she would be back. She often made it clear that she did not necessarily believe in talking about her feelings. "Talking often just makes things worse," she said. She consistently tore up photographs of herself that she did not like.

I do not, in principle, doubt that a biographer can in some respects see things about a person that the person herself cannot see and I do, indeed, attempt to complement her image of herself with a kind of Bakhtinian "compassionate understanding." But it has seemed to me that my love for her requires me to continue to respect her integrity, not to interpret her with

2. Kübler-Ross 1970. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Kübler-Ross herself has made it clear that her stages were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages but that is nevertheless how they have often been used.

the hermeneutics of suspicion, not to psychoanalyze her. I accept her at face value, as she chose to present herself to me, because that was how I loved her.

In my book I remind the reader of my awareness that my access was only partial. This awareness has also had consequences for my literary technique: I describe her from the outside, I record what she said and did, but I never enter into her consciousness or pretend to know what she was thinking or feeling beyond what she was telling or clearly showing me.

I also make it clear that I was fully aware that other people had access to other parts of her. It seemed important to acknowledge this—and not only out of respect for my mother but also out of respect for all the other people who were close to her, my brother above all. At one point a friend of my mother said, "Yesterday your mother said: 'Merete is my best friend.'" It was a comment that made my heart leap with joy, but I did not put it in the book, in part because my mother had not said it to me, in part because it would have privileged me above my brother, of whom she had almost certainly said—or thought—equally heartwarming things. But however much I acknowledge that my perspective was limited and my knowledge of my mother only partial—and that the perspectives and knowledge of others were as valid as mine—the fact of the matter is that I am the person who has written about her and made my version public. In the public sphere there are no other competing or complementary versions; my version has become what people who never knew my mother have come to know. I am not sure whether there is a genuine ethical dilemma here, but I can imagine that those whose versions are different from mine might feel some resentment. Indeed, I do not know if this is the case and I do not see how I could find out. I could conceivably ask, but even if I asked I could only be sure that the answer was honest if it was in the affirmative.

Should I have asked other people—my brother, say—to read my manuscript before it went off to the publisher? The answer to that question depends on another question which is: how much would I have been willing to change? Not much. And for that reason it seemed better not to add insult to (possible) injury by refusing to concede to (possible) requests.

One might also question the way in which other members of the family are used as minor characters. I very deliberately used my father to provide a contrast to my mother: where I describe her as strong, resourceful, and always optimistic I describe him as weak, unpractical, and gloomy. The difference in temperament was real enough but it is possible that I exaggerate it, and thereby do my father an injustice. An older male acquaintance—who had never met either of my parents—clearly thought so and wrote to me to say, "Do at least have the grace to remember that it was your father who

bought and paid for that summer home where your mother was so busy fulfilling herself!"

Moreover, as soon as the book had been published I could see that I have given my brother a much smaller part than he actually had: toward the end he did a lot of the hands-on nursing. I do not know how he has felt about this, I have not asked. Once again: I would not expect to get a completely candid answer. I have, however, received letters from a number of gay men who thank me for the way I describe my brother and his partner: mentioning their homosexuality in passing but not in any way making a point of it—except very indirectly when I say that it was an enormous help to have two strong young men there to move and carry my mother.

But if the book was helpful in unexpected ways it also caused unexpected damage. When my mother reassured us that she was ultimately prepared to go to hospital she added, "But I don't want to end up in hospital in Salo." The reason—which was obvious to everyone who knew my mother—was that my mother's Finnish was far from fluent and the hospital in Salo (the town closest to my mother's summer home) was totally Finnish-speaking, as opposed to hospitals a little further away where she would have been able to make herself understood in Swedish. In the book, however, I only quote my mother's words and after many years I learned that the staff at Salo hospital had become very concerned and had wondered what they were doing wrong.

During the decades since my mother's death there has been a boom in books with a how-to-approach to dying: it would seem that the more individualistic society becomes, the more people need guidance at each turn in their lives. My intention had been to write a book showing that a Good Death is possible but once it was published—and selling well—I gradually became aware that it was being read as a manual. At the same time I myself was thinking back and realizing how far the Good Death I describe was a matter of fortunate circumstances or even sheer luck. My mother's illness was so brief that both my brother and I were able to take time off from work to be with her for the duration, we never faced the dilemma of having to juggle obligations, we had each other, neither of us ever faced utter exhaustion or helplessness.

Even such seemingly trivial circumstances as the fact that it was summer—and that the weather was good—made a difference: otherwise my mother could not have stayed out in the country, we could not all have stayed with her under the same roof. There were no complications or dramatic crises and my mother was an easy patient. I have often thought how much harder it would have been to take care of my father with his basic tendency toward anxiety.

My book would no doubt have been far more complex and above all more

ambivalent if I had had more hard choices to describe—and to justify. If it had been more ambivalent it might ultimately have been easier to identify with, more comforting, or at least more helpful to the many people who were reading it because they, too, had lost a loved one—but under more challenging circumstances.

Maybe most important of all: my mother and I—and my mother and my brother—had a good and mutually trusting relationship. There was no resentment and above all no guilt. There is no reason to believe that a bad relationship between parent and children automatically improves just because the parent is found to be terminally ill—rather the contrary—and to look after (or to be looked after by) someone you have never felt comfortable with must be almost intolerable. Indeed over the years I have had several letters from readers of my book who have said, "How lucky you are! Your mother is dead and mine is still alive, but you and your mother loved each other—unlike my mother and myself." I can now clearly see that the Good Death I describe is by no means available to everyone. There are no doubt many people who are bitter about the lives they have had, who by no means share my mother's feeling that the party of life was basically a good one. There are people who die in loneliness, with no one at their side to listen to their life story however much they would like to tell it. There are people who are forced to stay on at the party of life long after everyone they know has left.

I can also see that my mother's death is not necessarily the death that everyone would want. There is no one set formula for a good death: today a sudden death, like death in one's sleep, is seen as a blessing, in older times the Christian church would have seen dying without time for confession, repentance, and absolution as the road to damnation. One cannot be normative about death, much less can one legislate. My father, who died in hospital, felt much safer there than he could ever have done at home. Just as I witnessed my mother's death I witnessed his but for most of the last day he was unconscious and I sat at his bedside, watching over him. At one point a young nurse came in and suggested that I hold his hand. "I'm sure it will give him comfort," she said. "We don't know how deep his unconsciousness is." I hesitated because my father and I had never been in the habit of touching each other—in all my life he had only hugged me twice, the first time when I was eleven and getting on a plane all by myself to fulfill what was at that time my heart's strongest desire—to go to boarding school in England—and the second time twelve years later at the door of the church in which he was about to give me away in marriage. Both times I had been taken aback, indeed, both times I had felt that he was hugging me because he thought I was making a bad choice. However, I was anxious to please the nurse and indeed I, too,

had an image of the perfect deathbed scene where hands were being held, so I resolutely reached out and took my father's hand. But I held it in mine for less than a minute because he immediately seemed to grow restless and then pulled it away.

Did I feel let down?

Well, yes, maybe fleetingly but at least afterward I was glad that my father remained himself until the very end. And the incident taught me once and for all that the Golden Rule of the Bible—"Do unto to others as you would have them do to you"—is ultimately less useful than what may be called The Silver Rule: "Do unto others as you think they want things done." It is a rule that deserves to be followed not only in personal relationships but also in professional ones, such as nursing.

To what extent is *Hem från festen* my own autobiography?

As I have said, it is about *my* relationship with my mother, what she meant—and has continued to mean—to *me*. In a sense it is my *Bildungsroman*: it describes a formative period in my life. Like ancient myths or fairytales both the *Bildungsroman* itself and autobiographies based on the *Bildungsroman* tend to describe a protagonist whose character is put to the test. I was tested by my mother's illness and death—though, as I have made clear, in a very benign way. I was allowed to gain autonomy and self-confidence—put simply, my mother empowered me: she gave me the chance to grow up:

> "Now *you* are big and *I'm* little."—"you're doing so well."

My dialogue with my mother continues, because of her I am less afraid of death than I would no doubt be otherwise, and not only my thoughts on the Good Death but also my ideas of a Good Life have grown out of the experiences I describe in *Hem från festen*. More and more consciously I came to see her as a role model. It was from her I learned the importance of combining the intellectual and spiritual life with a loving attentiveness to—and enjoyment of—what is known as everyday life.

Remembering and evaluating one's past are, I am convinced, a vital part of maintaining a sense of a continuing, active self. This point has been made again and again in philosophy—good examples are Kierkegaard who pointed out that though life has to be lived forward it has to be understood backward, and MacIntyre who has said that for our lives to have meaning we need to know what stories we are part of.

Since writing the book I have in some sense continued to see my life as an unfolding story and to evaluate it as such. It has struck me that I very literally think of it as consisting of distinct chapters. Hopefully the result is something of an examined life, not just increased self-centeredness.

Most recently the book has also strengthened family bonds. My son has spent all his adult life in England and the United States and now teaches at the University of Chicago. My grandchildren have not spent much time in Finland, they do not speak my language — Swedish — and they know little about my culture. But as a present for my granddaughter Amelia who graduated from high school in 2013, my son translated the book into English. Reading it, Amelia not only came to know my mother but also saw me in a new light. In an email she wrote, "I've never been able to imagine that you've actually had a Mum. I've never seen you be dependent on anybody." Although we still see too little of each other, she and I, I sense that we are closer than before.

I still feel no ambivalence whatsoever about having written my book. Writing this essay is different, however. It feels oddly instrumental, it feels — a little clinical. I would hate to use my mother for a purpose she would not understand but I hope — no, I truly believe — that she would understand.

As I write this almost twenty-three years have passed since her death. I ask myself whether I see more clearly today than I did then, whether there were self-deceptions *then* that I have become aware of *now*. Indeed, there may well be self-deception at this very moment, witness the last sentence of the previous paragraph. Just as there is a difference between hoping and believing, there is a difference between believing and knowing. But there is definitely at least one thing I see more clearly: I see what my mother meant when she said that she did not think of herself as old. She seemed old to me then but in terms of age I have caught up with her, I am now only two years younger than she was when she died, and I do not feel old, I am still enjoying the party; above all, by no means do I feel ready to go home from it. There is no way I could *then* have this particular understanding that I have *now*, it is an understanding based on time passing and lived experience.

As I write, there is nothing I wish more than that she and I could get together again and talk. There are so many new questions I would like to ask. I would like to ask if she ever felt trapped in the stoical role that she had — very deliberately, I think — chosen for herself. Were there times when she played it for the sake of other people — for my sake, or for my brother's or her friends' sake — because she did not want to frighten us, because she remained protective of us until the very end, because she remained determined that we should not know everything about her? Did she really feel ready to go home from the party? She was still so curious about the future, she was so full of plans: the day before she received her diagnosis she had bought seed catalogues and plants.

(Oh, and as I write this I am of course intensely aware of the seeds and the plants as poignant symbols, literary motifs, and it seems to me an ethical obligation to remember that they were actually there, on a table by her bed.

Every time I talk about this book I have to make sure that I am not only glibly repeating an often-told story of my own making, that I somehow continue to be in touch with the lived reality out of which the story is crafted.)

Was my mother ever frightened? Did she at any point feel despair? When I look at photographs from those summer months there are some where it seems to me that she might have been in considerable pain or possibly just unhappy.

But I may be mistaken, I may be projecting my own fears—the fact of the matter is that *I* do not feel ready to go home from the party.

I think maybe I should tear up these photos as she would most certainly have done.

Or maybe I should keep just one, to remind me of my doubts.

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9

From "I" to "We": Acts of Agency in Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophical Autobiography

J. LENORE WRIGHT

Philosophers interested in the nature and significance of autobiography are familiar with Friedrich Nietzsche's aphoristic claim in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) that every great philosophy has been "the confession of its originator and a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography" (Nietzsche 2008, 11). Although this claim sounds quintessentially German—similar proclamations are made by Fichte and Schiller—it bears out in unexpected ways in the philosophical work of the French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir.

First, Beauvoir's work—literary and philosophical, fictional and nonfictional—responds forcefully and often explicitly to events in her life. For instance, the question, "What has it meant to be a woman?" inspired Beauvoir to write her landmark feminist text, *The Second Sex* (1949). The question was posed by Jean-Paul Sartre shortly before Beauvoir's fortieth birthday. Beauvoir initially resisted Sartre's query, insisting that her status as a woman had made no difference to her life experience or sense of self. After considering the question further, however, Beauvoir writes, "I looked and it was a revelation: the world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths formed by men, and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy" (Appignanesi 1988, 86). In this sense, *The Second Sex* not only conforms to a Nietzschean mode of philosophy as autobiography, but it also exemplifies philosophical autobiography at its best. Beauvoir harnesses lived experience—her own and that of the women she encounters and studies—for philosophical reflection.[1]

Second, Beauvoir's four-volume autobiography, completed over a period of sixteen years and comprising nearly 2,200 pages in the original French, represents the most comprehensive autobiography by a philosopher to date.[2] Her work may also be the longest autobiography in any language by a woman (Pilardi 1999, 40). Beauvoir marshals corporeal experience as well as the dialectical methods of Hegel, the phenomenology of Husserl, and the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss to explain what it means to be a woman. The audience for this momentous endeavor includes Beauvoir herself. She seeks

to understand the situation of the twentieth-century woman as she and other women experience it.[3] Beauvoir presents the self not simply as a life to be narrated but also as "an object to be known and a freedom to be appreciated" (Pilardi 1999, 125–26). Beauvoir gives meaning to the ambiguity that conditions her life, a woman's life, a life circumscribed by others.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the ways in which "being a woman"—being a woman philosopher, specifically—enables Beauvoir to represent the conditions of self-identity from both personal and philosophical perspectives. As she asserts in *The Prime of Life*, "what distinguishes my thesis [regarding women] from the traditional one is that, as far as I am concerned, femininity is neither a natural nor an innate entity, but rather a condition brought about by society, on the basis of certain physiological characteristics" (1962, 291). Beauvoir's autobiographical work resists the solipsism of René Descartes: a self in isolation. By contrast, she represents the self as both singular and collective: a self in relation to others. Her "double voice," to employ JoAnn Pilardi's phrase, is distinctive among autobiographers.

One aspect of Beauvoir's double voice that distinguishes her from other autobiographers is the individuals for whom she speaks. Every autobiographer correlates personal experience with his or her social condition—class, race, geographical location, family origin, religious identification, and so on. As such, all autobiographers have a double voice: an "I" defined by one's context and an "I" defined over and against one's context. But Beauvoir's double voice is different for two reasons.

Beauvoir speaks for women *through* women. Women have endured historic oppression that is universal: oppression rooted in gender. As a member of a biologically and socially defined group—a membership she was born into—Beauvoir understands the common (inferior) status women share worldwide. However, Beauvoir also recognizes that women's experiences of oppression vary according to particular social, political, economic, cultural, and existential situations. She speaks to and for these layers of women's identity in the context of her own life, a life that transcends many forms of oppression. And she speaks for women in relation to men.

Beauvoir also speaks for women *as* philosophers. Beauvoir represents a subset of philosophers who seek to engage and inform philosophical traditions from alternative and sometimes marginal points of reference. By a wide margin, women remain a minority within the discipline of philosophy. Their scholarly work is less known, less recognized, and, at least in Beauvoir's day, less respected by the male-dominant philosophical community. Beauvoir explains and repudiates women's Otherness from the standpoint of both lived and theorized experience. No other woman and no male philosopher can

speak to the situation of women in philosophy with as much credibility as Beauvoir. To explore the particular and universal registers of Beauvoir's double voice, I divide my analysis into two parts: (1) "I, Simone" and (2) "We, Women."

In the first part, I argue that Beauvoir's autobiographical reflections challenge traditional philosophical conceptions of the self by moving *between* the particular and the universal—I am a woman; Woman is the Other. Since "I" (particular) am a "woman" (universal) and "woman" (universal) is the "Other" (particular), it follows that "I" (particular) am the "Other" (particular). This logical move allows Beauvoir to identify herself tacitly as an Other. And yet Beauvoir's ability to articulate an "I" suggests that she is always already more than an Other. Beauvoir cleverly shows that although language compels women to assume the status of the Other, women can change their status. Women, like men, are self-defining. Their existence precedes their essence.

In the second part, I claim that Beauvoir's commitment to the particular—to individual, singular experience—generates a distinctive and authentic voice for women philosophers, one rooted in a phenomenological understanding of experience. By elevating concrete experience within her philosophical analyses, Beauvoir represents women as agents of their own identities in both a philosophical and a political sense. Beauvoir's form of philosophical autobiography demonstrates that solidarity can emerge from singularity.

I begin my analysis with an overview of the history, reception, and use of autobiography as a tool for expressing theories of the self: autobiography as a philosophical endeavor.[4] The purpose of this overview is to provide a context for understanding the significance of Beauvoir's contribution to philosophical autobiography. Although autobiographical representations have been historically male and shaped by patriarchal interests, I contend that Simone de Beauvoir challenges both the masculine and the purportedly unambiguous presentations of the self that appear in Western philosophical texts. Indeed, I stand alongside the sound interpretive work of Nancy Bauer, Debra Bergoffen, Penelope Deutscher, Bonnie Mann, JoAnn Pilardi, and others who rightly argue that the brilliance of Beauvoir's contributions to philosophical autobiography—as well as feminism and philosophy more broadly—is precisely the ambiguity she identifies and integrates into the experience of being human selves and human subjects. True to her conviction that the "me-Other relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship," Beauvoir's self-reflections never collapse into solipsism, a drawback of some autobiographical projects and a risk of autobiography generally.[5] Philosophers would

do well to reflect upon Beauvoir's example of autobiography and reaffirm the ambiguity of existence.

The Development of Philosophical Autobiography

The relationship between autobiography and philosophy is in a sense an ancient one. Socrates accepted the Delphic charge "Know Thyself" as a critical philosophical task and regarded the self, alongside the good, the true, and the beautiful, as a proper subject of philosophical inquiry. In another sense, the relationship between autobiography and philosophy is distinctly modern. The term "autobiography" was coined in the eighteenth century to describe a first-person account of one's life in *written* form.[6] Because Socrates never wrote a word, the first recognizable example of philosophical autobiography may be Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions*, unless, of course, one counts Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations,* Augustine's *Confessions,* or Descartes's *Meditations* as early examples of philosophical autobiography.[7] Locating the intersection of philosophy and autobiography is a thorny task.

One can safely argue, however, that the development of philosophical autobiography as a type of autobiography and a category of philosophy occurs within the context of Enlightenment thought.[8] French, German, English, and Scottish Enlightenment figures regarded self-reflection as a sign and privilege of rationality; that is, a privilege of those who think and "therefore, exist"; a privilege of those who speak as subjects within social discourse; and a privilege of those who enjoy a set of political rights (Descartes 1984, 17). Intent on following Kant's dictum that "to criticism, everything must submit," eighteenth-century intellectuals foster the development of autobiography as a literary genre and a philosophical project (Kant 2010, 55, 56).

The proliferation of philosophical autobiography from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries—Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782/1789), John Stuart Mill's *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (1873)—reflects its Enlightenment origins: a commitment to reason *and* experience as benchmarks of truth. Lived experience becomes philosophical fodder as everyday events and insights are subjected to systematic philosophical analysis. The French *philosophes* Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire (François Marie Arouet), and Denis Diderot fashion first-person essays on topics that range from the high-brow (politics) to the pedestrian (food). In this climate of first-person, critical inquiry, the self emerges as a philosophical problem of its own—a metaphysical topic for independent study as well as an existential problem for the ego that is self-aware.

Descartes addresses and attempts to resolve the problem of the self from a first-person point of view in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*:

> Can I not affirm that I possess at least a small measure of all those things which I have already said belong to the body? I focus my attention on them, I think about them, I review them again, *but nothing comes to mind*. . . . What about thinking? Here I make my discovery: thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist—this is certain. . . . I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason—words of whose meanings I was previously ignorant. (1984, 18–19)

Drawing on the rationalist presupposition that knowledge, characterized by indubitability, is achieved through reason rather than empirical experience, Descartes grounds the existence of the self in thought—clear and distinct thought—arrived at through doubt. He makes his own thought present and public through deductive reasoning and writing. His use of deduction and the confidence he exhibits in deduction as a method for securing true knowledge reflects a central aim of Enlightenment philosophy: certainty. *Not ambiguity*. Certainty in fundamental principles. Certainty in human progress. Certainty in social and political systems. Certainty in the existence of the self—*res cogitans*, a thing that thinks. Yet Descartes and subsequent Enlightenment figures fail to subject every ethical principle, human prejudice, and philosophical supposition to rational scrutiny.

Influenced by both imperialist and democratic attitudes of their age, Enlightenment intellectuals assert both the boon and bane of slavery, class privilege, and male superiority. Rousseau's reformist plan for education in *Émile* fails to live up to the Enlightenment ideal of progress in its retrograde assertion that Émile's fictional fiancée Sophie (and, by extension, all women) should be educated in matters "suitable" to women's "weak and passive nature" (Rousseau 1993, 332).

Although Enlightenment salons, most of which were headed by women, were among the institutions of sociability that expanded philosophical conversations beyond the ruling class, other such institutions—academies, clubs, and coffeehouses—were overwhelmingly or exclusively white, male, and elite (Goodman 1996). In light of such flagrant examples of male centrality, Sidonie Smith maintains that the eighteenth-century notion of self—"individualistic, unitary, and indivisible"—generates hegemonic autobiographical representations, representations that reveal the Cartesian self's underlying urge to dominate and possess the world. Indeed, Smith maintains that eighteenth-century autobiographies are distinctly patriarchal and racist

in character: "The 'I' signs a patriarchal as well as imperial self since it marks the hegemonic space of a white, male territory of selfhood" (1990, 11).

I share Smith's perspective in part. The eighteenth-century "I" is conceived explicitly as a marker of a self-justifying *cogito* and implicitly as the essence of the rational (white) man (Descartes 1984, 17–19). Yet, examples of eighteenth-century, first-person texts by emancipated slaves and women, texts with robust autobiographical dimensions, challenge the reading of the eighteenth-century "I" as a signifier of an exclusively white, male stance. These examples include Olaudah Equiano's slave narratives, Phyllis Wheatley's proto-abolitionist poetry, and the feminist writings of Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft. How do these "Others" throw off their alterity and assume the status of the "I" (and "We")? How do they resist the force of patriarchy? How do they subvert an Enlightenment sense of self and transcend their social and political positions? What should we make of the multiple, indeed ambiguous, "I" that emerges from these texts?

It is precisely the ambiguity these exceptional texts engender that makes the study of self-representation so fascinating. These texts realize—dare I say *embody*—the ambiguity of the self that Beauvoir advances as a subject of philosophical inquiry in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (*Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté,* 1947). In contrast to the Enlightenment self, Beauvoir and Sartre expand and reshape the Cartesian *ego* to be the vessel that also embodies the self that will be, a self that is, as of yet, undefined. This manipulation of the *ego* turns away from a quest to describe the self in certain, definite terms and turns towards a conception of self as undefined and marked by ambiguity:

> To be a "self," that is, a for-itself, a being with transcendence, is already to be free. In that the for-itself is a nothingness, a negativity rather than a substance, the for-itself is marked by a particular characteristic: ambiguity. Ambiguity becomes synonymous with the freedom of the for-itself. Individuals neither participate in a universal human nature nor have an individual, fixed nature. Human existence is ambiguous—uncertain and undefined. (Pilardi 1999, 14)

Diverse autobiographers help us understand ambiguity not merely as a theoretical construct but also as a lived phenomenon. For instance, Equiano, Wheatley, Gouges, and Wollstonecraft demonstrate that progress in the areas of class, race, and gender has occurred and may still occur. They suggest that opportunities for subversion continue to exist within fields of hegemony. They show that patriarchy is not as totalizing as we might fear. Finally, they invite us to reconsider human beings and to investigate whether ambiguity is a condition of human existence, as Beauvoir claims, a condition of the self. Beauvoir contributes to the subversion of grand Enlightenment narratives

by revealing the complexity of human oppression—the complexity of human Otherness, which presupposes an Other that "deserves" to be oppressed. Beauvoir exposes and exploits the ambiguity within the human condition.

Tracking autobiography from the eighteenth century forward, James Olney contends that the ongoing fascination with autobiography is a fascination with the self:

> The heart of the explanation for the special appeal of autobiography to students of literature in recent times has been a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries, and accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted. (Quoted in Smith 1990, 17)

The changing status of the self—the self's increasingly undefined and ethereal nature—is a significant and recurring source of anxiety in twentieth-century autobiography. To improvise on a line from Nietzsche, the self is dead and we have killed it; or rather, post-structuralism and deconstruction have killed it.[9] As modernist commitments to absolute values and universal truths give way to perspectivism and situated knowledge, there remain no fixed, absolute points of view. All that remains are perspectives that emerge from concrete situations in which humans find themselves and out of which they come to grasp reality. The self, once understood as a unitary metaphysical substance and represented as a fixed, essential first person—what I refer to in *The Philosopher's "I"* (2006) as the Inner self—is displaced by an ambiguous signifier, represented as a fluid, constructed rhetorical subject—an Outer self.

As I see it, autobiographical writing operates on both ontological and rhetorical levels. The Inner self, metaphysically conceived, places self-understanding and individuated existence in an ontological framework (self as agent; self as writer). The Inner self operates beyond textual boundaries. The Outer self, rhetorically conceived, places self-understanding and individuated existence in a literary framework (self as subject; self as author). Postmodern thought jettisons the former and exploits the latter. "Since there remains no self, no author/ity, no truth outside discourse," Sidonie Smith concludes that "traditional autobiography loses any special status" (1990, 17). She anticipates the demise of autobiography as represented by modern texts in light of the death of the self.

Smith affirms the projected demise of traditional autobiography. Indeed, she celebrates the dissolution of the [Inner] self into "fragmentary fissures" (15). She hopes the breakdown of the self will make room for marginalized voices—women, people of color, and gays and lesbians among them—who will in turn introduce a new autobiographical figure, a new subjective repre-

sentation of self, into autobiographical writing. Unfortunately, Smith finds little evidence that such a space is emerging (13). She writes: "While postmodern theories often do make a place for the 'feminine' they tend not to offer space to specific women and their experiences of multiple oppressions. Already elided, woman now confronts the impossibility of ever finding a space through which to insert/assert her own agency" (14).

Smith implies that despite the shift from self to subject within postmodernism—a shift away from a metaphysical conception of self as unitary and fixed toward a rhetorical understanding of self as fluid and textually circumscribed—the shift does little to make the subject concrete. This is an important and troubling insight. It means that the subject of autobiographical writing, including a woman's autobiographical writing, serves as a placeholder for the rational (male) self, although the "I" represents a grammatical rather than a metaphysical placeholder. Nietzsche makes this point cryptically in *Twilight of the Idols* when he writes: "I am afraid we cannot get rid of God because we still believe in grammar" (1968, 48). In short, without a radical surrendering of values, "I" will remain male because man remains the absolute value in the unmoving system of patriarchy.[10]

This is precisely where I think Beauvoir can transform our thinking and writing about the self. If the subject or "I" of contemporary first-person texts were conceived phenomenologically rather than ontologically or rhetorically, the subject could mirror specific (different and multiple) forms of lived experience in autobiographical writing. Like the women writers Smith lauds for the diverse subject positions they occupy, Beauvoir uses the subjective self, the concrete individual, as a ground for cultural critique.[11] She shows us that even if we accept that truth is always contested truth, different episodes of an autobiography can still be *more* or *less* true and thus have real-world value, including political value. Intent on discovering the contours of individual liberty herself—the potential (successful or not) of human beings for self-transcendence—Beauvoir describes her aim in *The Second Sex* as follows:

> How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women's freedom and can she overcome them? These are the fundamental questions we would like to elucidate. This means that in focusing on the individual's possibilities, we will define these possibilities not in terms of happiness but in terms of freedom.[12]

It is no accident that Beauvoir moves between the universal (human beings; all women) and the particular (individual women's situations) and appeals

to both scholarly expertise and lived experience. As Bonnie Mann shows in "Beauvoir and the Question of a Woman's Point of View," this movement is central to Beauvoir's philosophical methodology. Mann writes: "Beauvoir's [dialectical] method is characterized by the frequent stating of certainties, which are subsequently destabilized by questions or counter-examples, without necessarily being discarded altogether" (2008, 138). Beauvoir's questions and counterexamples reveal deep inconsistencies in our assumed views of reality, not merely problems with our access to reality.

Beauvoir's version of dialectic, one that does not resolve itself in a synthesis of opposing perspectives, enables her to destabilize the autobiographical "I" on two levels. First, it enables her to speak about and for women in nuanced rather than categorical ways, nuances she uses as a means to both receive and appropriate the world on both a particular and a universal level:

> We will not let ourselves be intimidated by the number and violence of attacks against women; nor be fooled by the self-serving praise showered on the "real woman"; nor be won over by men's enthusiasm for her [biological] destiny, a destiny they would not for the world want to share. We must not, however, be any less mistrustful of feminists' arguments: very often their attempt to polemicize robs them of all value. (2009, 15)

Second, Beauvoir's method empowers women to speak for themselves and chronicle their lived experiences within the phenomenological framework she provides. Near the end of chapter 1 of *The Second Sex,* "Biological Data," Beauvoir concludes that

> these biological data are of extreme importance: they play an all-important role and are an essential element of woman's situation: we will be referring to them in all further accounts. Because the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped, which explains why [women] have studied these data so deeply; they are one of the keys that enable us to understand woman. (44)

Whereas Descartes assumes that the individual mind is the best authority for understanding man (read: human beings), an assumption that frankly warrants the charge of solipsism, Beauvoir avoids the threat of solipsism by recognizing that she is one "embodied person in a world of other embodied people" (Bauer 2001, 51).

I, Simone: Self as Subject and Object

To appreciate Beauvoir's contribution to philosophical autobiography—her (auto)biographing of women's lives and identities—we must understand her

philosophical conception of self. The notion of self that informs Beauvoir's philosophical autobiography is not the self we find in Husserl and Sartre—at least not exactly. It is true that Beauvoir absorbs Husserl's and Sartre's distinction between consciousness (*être pour soi* or being for-itself) and ego (*être en soi* or being in-itself) in her analysis of the self:

> Consciousness, the for-itself, is an unfolding, intentional activity, and when a "self" forms out of this, as it becomes "reflective" or "reflexive" on itself, the result is a fixed structure (though very impermanently) which we call the self and conceptualize as a thing. (Pilardi 1999, 7)

Although Sartre and Beauvoir sometimes align the self with the ego (*en soi*), they also speak about the self (*pour soi*) as undefined, that is, marked by ambiguity. In Beauvoir's account, the self exhibits the dual characteristics of freedom and constraint. Freedom is rooted in the negation of a metaphysical essence or substance of self—no human nature and no feminine essence in the case of women. Freedom is expressed in the self-defining projects of the for-itself and the changing identity of the in-itself; for example, a woman's choice not to marry or bear children and thereby transcend her bodily immanence. Constraint, rooted in the recognition of the permanent subject-object relationship, is expressed by the limits that "objectified" individuals encounter in their day-to-day lives: facticity, the will of individual others pursuing their projects, and the subtle, not-always-conscious, systematic oppression by the dominant group (lower pay, lack of promotion, sexual harassment, and so on).

> Though the individual subject is sovereign and unique, an absolute, the sovereignty of the subject can be "disturbed" in two ways. Both disturbances have to do with the existence of other people, as themselves subjects and as part of a collectivity of human beings. First, the subject can also be an object for others. Second, the subject, though it is an individual, is also a "*Mitsein*," a being with others. (Pilardi 1999, 16)

None of these constraints acts on women alone. Men are situated within and defined by patriarchal interests and subject to objectification in Beauvoir's sense of the term. But women are constrained differently from men by their projected and essential, "natural" function: conceiving and bearing children. Women's being with others—with men specifically—brings into play reproductive possibilities and anxieties. And these anxieties are difficult to resolve.

Pilardi correctly regards Beauvoir's analysis of relationships with others as an expansion of Sartre's ontology. "She [Beauvoir] begins with the axiom that human subjectivity, the for-itself, is active, always moving toward a project" (1999, 16). This is an affirmation of the broadly Sartrean notion that

subjectivity requires justification beyond the self. I can only understand my experience as *mine* if it is in contrast to my understanding of another person's experience as *theirs*. But Beauvoir adds to this ontological framework a mutually-inclusive element: self-justification rests on a recognition and concern for others. "That it [the self] receives it [justification] in the existence of other human beings"(16). On this analysis the sole justification for human existence is others and the struggle for freedom that human beings can engage in on behalf of others: "I concern others and they concern me" (16).

By "concern" Beauvoir means more than (1) my instrumental concern for strangers, (2) my compassionate concern for strangers in certain emergency situations, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and (3) my preferential concern for particular others (family and friends). She has a political meaning in mind. She calls forth the ways in which individual lives and identities are conditioned and mediated by other people, policies, and ideas. For instance, my life and identity as a woman are conditioned and mediated by particular biological, social, and economic forces. They are also conditioned by me. To justify my existence in the world—and, by extension, to justify the existence of others—I must accept responsibility for my life and identity by engaging in a struggle for freedom, such as challenging gender bias in whatever form and location it appears. My struggle is not an individual struggle; I am one person among a class of people identified as "woman." ("I" entails "we"). And "to will oneself free," Beauvoir argues, "is also to will others free" (16).

To wit: to will myself free is also to will others who are similarly constrained free. Yet Beauvoir does not rest with this formulation of the self-Other relationship. Instead, she develops a rich phenomenological account of self, a self that is bound up with others and defined by concrete subject-object struggles. The meaning of my life and identity is always contestable. "Concern" is both political and ethical. Her account challenges traditional philosophical conceptions of the self as a unified, isolated, "thinking" entity. By contrast, Beauvoir's self represents a series of dialectical doubles that arise from phenomenal experiences: subjective-objective; ontological-rhetorical; ethical-political; and, as we will see, existential-gendered.

Pilardi characterizes the (dual) self in Beauvoir's work as the "existentialist self" and the "gendered self." Although the existentialist self emerges in the philosophical work of others, including Sartre's work, Pilardi correctly observes that the "gendered self" is a unique contribution to phenomenological accounts of the self. The existentialist self gives meaning to consciousness (*être pour soi*) which without "reflection remains empty and 'unselfed;' a nothing (nothingness)" (40). Pilardi offers little direct explanation of the gendered self and its relationship to being (*pour soi* and *en soi*), but it appears

that the gendered self gives meaning and concrete expression to the freedom the existentialist self seeks.

I recognize, for example, that elements of my life are at once contingent and, at least for the moment, determined. I recognize that I exist and am free to engage in self-determined projects in the world. I must also recognize that my existence and ability to engage fully in self-determined projects is shaped and often constrained by the fact that I am a woman. As Beauvoir herself demonstrates throughout *The Second Sex*, the limitations placed upon women's freedom are particular to women's embodied situation:

> There have always been women. They are women by their physiological structure; as far back as history can be traced, they have always been subordinate to men; their dependence is not the consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not *happen.* Alterity here appears to be an absolute, partly because it falls outside the accidental nature of historical fact. A situation created over time can come undone at another time—blacks in Haiti for one are a good example; on the contrary, a natural condition seems to defy change. In truth, nature is no more an immutable given than is historical reality. If woman discovers herself as the inessential and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring about this transformation herself. (2009, 8)

Beauvoir's gendered self is not merely a byproduct of consciousness. It is a byproduct of a specific series of conscious moments in Beauvoir's writing life, namely, her analysis of women in *The Second Sex* (Pilardi 1999, 40). Hence, the gendered self speaks through and for the lived ("feminine") experience of women subjects in both a philosophical and a political sense: as interpreters of their own identities, and as agents of their own lived experience. As Nancy Bauer argues, philosophizing from lived experience—"from the fact of one's experience as a sexed being"—entails a rejection of the divisions that operate within both Descartes's (mind-body) and Sartre's (subject-object) philosophies of self. To demonstrate the originality of Beauvoir's work, Bauer argues that Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity constitutes a rewriting of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, a rewriting "motivated by Beauvoir's giving a face—and a body—to the master and to the slave" (2001, 81).

The power of Beauvoir's autobiographical voice rests in its representation of women as both a subject and an object of experience—a free (existential) and constrained (gendered) self. Bauer remarks: "To be a fully realized human being requires that a person, man or woman, develop a consciousness of himself or herself as inevitably, simultaneously, both a subject and object" (81). Utilizing this subject-object voice throughout her philosophical autobiography, Beauvoir communicates the distinct, bifurcated condition

of women in the twentieth century: a condition of immanence in domestic life and reproduction (constraint), and a condition of transcendence in the world-making activities in which women could then engage (freedom). Here again Bauer shows how radically Beauvoir deviates from the masculine world of philosophy in which she resides: Beauvoir's "'new' idea of transcendence in *The Second Sex*—the idea that the failure to achieve transcendence might not be an individual's fault but rather the effect of systematic oppression—is so alien to Sartre's way of thinking" (138).

It is important to recall that Beauvoir's configuration of women as subjects-objects does not always mirror her own life situation. For example, she chooses not to marry or bear children, and she is privileged enough not to have to work as a maid or in a factory. However, her analysis of women's situation effectively shows that women are historical subjects and objects, not individuated, biological subjects and objects. "Woman of *The Second Sex* is a cultural object," Pilardi writes, adding that "no other existentialist had written on a cultural object." What Pilardi means by the term "cultural object" is "an object structured by specific institutions, specific holy writings, specific sufferings, and into the creation of a detailed picture of a system, the patriarchal oppression of women" (1999, 35). Ursula Todd recounts Beauvoir's justification for the use of the first-person pronoun in autobiography as both a subjective and objective expression. Todd writes:

> She [Beauvoir] was sometimes referring to her own generation's experience of particular historical events. In this way, she saw that her autobiographical project was able to assume a testimonial and universal dimension and so she rejected the accusation of narcissism in writing several volumes of memoirs. She observed that her use of the autobiographical "I" was also gendered, because her autobiography foregrounded a woman's perspective on historical events and thereby challenges the masculinism of a universalist perspective. (2009, 133–34)

By configuring women as both subjects and objects, Beauvoir creates an entry point for women's voices into the traditionally male discursive landscape of philosophical autobiography. Following Beauvoir's example, women can define and describe themselves in terms of distinct phenomenal experiences (lives as women philosophers) rather than a unified metaphysics (a common female essence) or a deconstructed self (textually bound personae). The embodied and sometimes contradictory experience of being women and philosophers—the need to cope with social expectations related to both body and mind—is not foreign to men, though it is different for them. The reality that women bear and nurture children and are defined essentially by

their reproductive function, over and against their rational capacities, poses challenges for women individually and socially. The recognition that such views precede any and all instances of real, embodied women reinforces the disembodied logic that underlies Western thought. When Beauvoir writes, "I am" in response to the question, "what is a woman?" she is asserting that her body is the body of a woman (Bauer 2001, 71). Women can enact political agency by engaging in a struggle for freedom as a member of a collective group of human beings whose lives are biologically, socially, and culturally mediated in similar ways.

Accepting Beauvoir's model of self-understanding and following her subject-object analysis to its logical end, we see how Beauvoir preserves the ambiguity of the female subject, a subject that *speaks* the lived historical and ontological difference of gender. Her phenomenological method embraces the metaphysical ground from which women act and the rhetorical ground from which women define themselves. Phenomenological experiences temporarily stabilize (but do not permanently fix) a woman's historical essence, connecting her with other women; autobiographical ("I") expressions destabilize woman as a cultural object, freeing her to define herself. Together, the similarity of women's experiences and the ambiguity that define women as individuals allows women to speak as both "I" and "we"—to be both individual and collective subjects and objects of women's experience.[13] The development of an empirical phenomenology rooted in Beauvoir's work allows phenomenological differences between men and women's experiences to emerge in non-hostile ways. Helen Marshall provides us with a good beginning:

> Phenomenological approaches share a concern with collecting, and where possible, collating the understandings of experiences found amongst various populations. . . . When feminists engage in the exploration of their own or other women's experiences, either in the form of consciousness raising or as formal research, it is with the explicit aim of understanding better how and why women are oppressed. . . . I do not mean to suggest that philosophers should set out to do empirical studies of the body when they aim to change our thinking about it. I do, however, think that it would be useful to look at existing empirical work to test, refine, and add insights to the theoretical. (Marshall 1999, 64–65)

It is still essential for women to speak individually and collectively about women's lives to loosen gender-based constraints on their freedom. Even if we ignore how postmodern language limits discussion about women and by women to a well-educated minority, a more fundamental problem with postmodern thought is that "skepticism discourages activism" (Scales, 40). All

iterations of postmodern thought—postcolonial theory, antiessentialism, deconstruction, and queer theory, for example—are forms of skepticism. As such, they revolve around individual differences and relative choices rather than commonalities and group identity. Since solidarity (perceived or real) is foundational to collective action, postmodernism "precludes the possibilities of political commitment" (Scales, 40). Beauvoir understood the need for women to produce shared, collective, phenomenologically rich accounts of their lived experience.

We, Women: Self as One and Many

Beauvoir reinforces the shift from a purely metaphysical to a phenomenological conception of self when she makes the female subject the center of her analysis in *The Second Sex*. "I am a woman," she asserts in response to the question, "What is a Woman?" (2009, 5). (She adds her better-known response, "Woman is the Other," secondarily.) Beauvoir's elevating of herself *qua* "I" (first) and herself *qua* woman (second)—a powerful revision of Descartes's *cogito*—is significant for several reasons (Bauer 2001, 54).

First, it undermines the essentialist teleology of Cartesian man: thought as man's essence and the purpose for man's existence. In Bergoffen's words, "Beauvoir's account of ambiguity challenges the idea of a self that is structured according to a singular, unified desire" (2001, 159). Second, it models the phenomenological order of human experience: my own conscious awareness of objects occurs before my encounter with other people whose experiences impinge upon my own conscious experience. In this way, Beauvoir challenges Descartes's presentation of self-awareness as *necessarily* an experience in solitude—an experience of "I" not "we," an experience of utter and profound metaphysical isolation (Bauer 2001, 61).

To fully understand the relationship between self and Other in Beauvoir's philosophical autobiography, we must recall what she is reacting against: the mind-body dualism that undergirds the Western intellectual tradition, particularly the rationalist tradition of Plato and Descartes. Cartesian logic, the source and sole justification for mind-body dualism, assumes an opposition between subject and object and, by logical extension, man (rational subject) and woman (reproductive object): "Descartes insists on an absolutely sharp line between the person, the subject, and the rest of the world, the object."[14] It is the Cartesian formulation of subject-object opposition that Beauvoir challenges when she argues that "because subjectivity isn't inert, folding back on itself (*sur soi*), separation, but on the contrary, the movement toward the other, the difference between the other and me is abolished" (Beauvoir 1944,

9). Although it is unclear on Beauvoir's account whether I could recognize the moment when the difference between the other and me is abolished—so long as subjectivity involves *movement-toward*, there exists a distinction between the other and me—it is clear that the philosophical opposition between subject and object becomes gendered over time. Beauvoir's critique of subject-object opposition is also a critique of male-female opposition.

The genealogy of gender from a philosophical perspective begins with Plato's dialogues. In the *Phaedo* and *Meno* we are told that the mind exists independently of the body. (Plato's epistemology assumes the view that the soul preexists in the realm of the Forms.) The soul or mind falls into a body and endures a physical birth, whereupon it forgets what it once knew. Once the body dies, the soul returns to the realm of the Forms where it embraces the Good and enjoys perfect knowledge. The mind is, therefore, transcendent and superior to the body, and the body is an impediment to rational thought.[15]

Modern thinkers not only reinforce Platonic dualism, they identify the self almost wholly with the mind and rational thought. When Descartes posits thought as the essence of the self, the body becomes an accidental or inessential feature of the self—the body operates in the external world. If we accept a binary logic, if we accept that men and women are ontologically different (as perceived by morphological differences), and if we accept that man is a rational creature, a mind, then woman is *ipso facto* not a mind.

Once women are categorically associated with their bodies, the next logical (and arbitrary) step is to associate women with reproduction. And once women are associated with reproduction—their natural and essential function biologically and socially—they are cut off from their rational capacities. They are, therefore, cut off from full human rights, which are extended to men by virtue of their rationality, including access to education.

Initially working within this male-female dichotomy, *The Second Sex* traces woman's secondary status to the identification of the male as the ideal human type: "Humanity is male," Beauvoir begins, "and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (2009, 5). If woman were Other in the sense of facticity, woman would be considered autonomous. But she is Other in a more elaborate sense, where the very concept of Otherness includes autonomy, unpredictability, and uncontrollability. She would not *need* to be systematically oppressed if she were not already autonomous to a certain degree. Indeed, what deprives woman of her freedom, Beauvoir reasons, is her assumed femininity, her sexual identity, her *re*productivity: "She [woman] is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called 'the sex,' meaning that the male sees her essentially as a

sexed being. . . . She is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (2009, 6).

Despite some critics' claims to the contrary, Beauvoir acknowledges the differences that exist among women around the world, but she observes that despite their differences they share one common experience: they are dependent persons. In short, she argues that human culture evolves from a basic duality between Subject and Object. This duality is rooted in human consciousness and gives rise to a hostility toward the opposing consciousness. This hostility then attaches itself to the division of the sexes. Men become subjects and women objects in this hostile, dualistic structure of consciousness. We sometimes idealize the second term, but it is never the dominant one, never the one given absolute value.

As the subject, as the source of value, men define humanity. And in defining humanity, men create, invent, and pursue a freely chosen future. They invent tools and create values that allow them to transcend the repetition of life. Women, bound by their bodies—bound by their immanence in reproduction—are imprisoned in the repetition of life, unable to subdue nature or control their futures. Thus, women are denied their own humanity. Whereas men actively create their destiny, women passively accept their uncertain existence. Men are free. Women are dependent on men—and remain so—because of the advantages their status of the Other affords them: social standing and economic security. But all hope is not lost. Once we expose femininity as a cultural construct, thinks Beauvoir, we can empower women to become independent makers of their own destinies. Women's inferior status is a condition of—not an essential fact about—women's positions in life. And this condition can change, as she famously avers: "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" (2009, 283).

Disavowing the self-Other dichotomy by arguing that all human beings are subjects and objects for themselves and for others, Beauvoir dispenses with the oppositional rhetoric that typifies other versions of existentialist philosophy as well as early feminism: "To see clearly, one needs to get out of these ruts; these vague notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality that have distorted all discussions must be discarded in order to start anew" (2009, 15). The solution is ethical:

> To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them; while she posits herself for herself, she will nonetheless continue to exist for him *as well:* recognizing each other as subject, each will remain an *other* for the other; reciprocity in their relations will not do away with the miracles that the division of human beings into two separate categories engenders: desire, possession, love, dreams, adventure;

> and the words that move us: "to give," "to conquer," and "to unite" will keep their meaning; on the contrary, it is when the slavery of half of humanity is abolished and with it, the whole hypocritical system it implies that the "division" of humanity will reveal its authentic meaning and the human couple will discover its true form.[16]

Beauvoir concludes in *The Second Sex* that the privileging of the mind within a dualistic system is in effect a privileging of man as the human archetype (and thus a denigration of woman and her humanity). Alternatively, Beauvoir nicely problematizes the self-Other relationship by claiming that humans are self *and* other. She subsequently exploits the movement between subject and object positions—a dialectical rather than dichotomous relationship between the ontological and rhetorical dimensions of being—to explain the paradoxical nature of her own life as a woman. Mann explains:

> This capacity itself emerges as a result of a situation: that of being a woman who has not suffered the lot of women to the extent that others have; that of being a woman who has had many of the privileges and opportunities that men traditionally enjoy; that of being a woman who has moved between worlds and retains her footing in more than one place at a time; that of being what, from a masculinist point of view, is a contradiction in terms: a woman who is also a philosopher and a writer. (2008, 144)

Appropriating Husserl's account of intentionality, Beauvoir advances a two-stage relation between consciousness and the world:

> As both receptive to the event of being and constitutive of the meanings of the world, consciousness is an ambiguous constellation of contesting desires. As the desire to receive the world (the first moment of intentionality), it is also the desire to impose its will on the world (the second moment of intentionality). Unlike the patriarchal subject who operates according to the second moment's intentionality of the will and who insists on identifying the desires of this will with the desires of the subject, the ambiguous subject moves between the desire to be and the desire to let be. (Bergoffen 2001, 160)

For Beauvoir, genuine self-consciousness arises in light of our desires to receive and appropriate the world that render us multiple or doubled rather than one. Beauvoir's desires render her a philosopher and a woman; a subject and an object; a free (existentialist) and constrained (gendered) self (Bergoffen 2001, 159). The desire to transcend her particular family situation, to achieve greater degrees of freedom and self-fulfillment, such as economic independence and political activism—the desire for a life beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother—shapes the self Beauvoir becomes. Bergoffen writes, "The desire to have and the desire to be are at bottom expres-

sions of the desire to appropriate the world" (159). To be fully human—or in Beauvoir's words, "to aspire to full membership in the human *Mitsein*"—is to aspire to being with others: to be on equal footing with men but not like men; that is, to share with men the capacity to define oneself and set one's own course in life (Mann 2008, 136). Bergoffen continues:

> As the passive desire to have, I satisfy this desire through the Other who is. As the active desire to be, I satisfy it directly. These desires, according to Beauvoir, fall within the second moment of intentionality. When expressed by subjects who experience themselves as ambiguous, they can be the stuff of liberatory politics. (2001, 159)

Self-transcendence is difficult for women precisely because of the particular object position they occupy. Beauvoir articulates this position most clearly in volume 2 of *The Second Sex*, "Lived Experience":

> It is a strange experience for an individual [man] recognizing himself as subject, autonomy, and transcendence, as an absolute, to discover inferiority—as a given essence—in his self: it is a strange experience for one who posits himself for himself as One to be revealed to himself as an alterity. That is what happens to the little girl when, learning about the world, she grasps herself as a woman in it. The sphere she belongs to is closed everywhere, limited, dominated by the male universe: as high as she climbs, as far as she goes, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that block her path. (2009, 311)

Self-transcendence is also difficult for women because there are fewer models for women to follow. To exercise their freedom fully, women must not (indeed, cannot) become just like men: "clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex" (4). Because of women's experience of systematic oppression, they must work collectively for the freedom they wish to enjoy. Here is Beauvoir's call to action:

> We can see why all comparisons where we try to decide if the woman is superior, inferior, or equal to the man are pointless: their situations are profoundly different. If these same situations are compared, it is obvious that the man's is infinitely preferable, that is to say, he has far more concrete opportunities to project his freedom in the world; the inevitable result is that masculine realizations outweigh by far those of women. The only way open to those who have no chance to build anything; they must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future; resignation is only a surrender and an evasion; for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation. This liberation can only be collective. (664)

There is some irony in Beauvoir's claim since she managed a good deal of liberation on her own. But she shared with Sartre an abiding belief that

groups of individuals bound by a common desire will achieve greater degrees of success than individuals working alone. She was especially committed to the women who sought her guidance and political aid: Colette Audry, Kate Millett, Yvette Roudy, Anne Zelensky, and her adopted daughter Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir among them. By bringing theory to bear on the situations of women in a systematic way, Beauvoir empowered women to speak generally as well as particularly about themselves—not *either* universally *or* concretely but in collective and singular voices.[17] She understood that until the universal transcends the differences between us, sociopolitical movements like feminism will implode under the strain of their own instability (Jackson 1993, 398).

Beauvoir's account of freedom demands that men and women redefine the self-Other relationship in cooperative rather than oppositional terms. "Recognizing the law of the other does not mean my annihilation as a subject. In this social order, one can recognize another as law giving without forfeiting the possibility of returning to the subject position. In this ambiguous world, the very meanings of the terms subject and object would be transformed" (Bergoffen 2001, 161). It also demands that human beings move beyond an existential awareness of their own individual freedom to an active struggle for the freedom of others (Bauer 2001, 151–52). I argue that Beauvoir's act of writing herself, her engagement in philosophical autobiography, instantiates the freedom (existential and political) she requires for genuine human agency.

The political implications of Beauvoir's self-Other relationship are twofold: (1) free speech and (2) genuine engagement with others (Bauer 2001, 151). "I will fight, then, against those who would like to stifle my voice, prevent me from expressing myself," Beauvoir writes; and "I will fight for the political freedom of others" (151–52). This revision of the Cartesian (and Sartrean) mode of philosophy situates self-understanding in the relation between self and Other.[18] By repositioning the self, by making self-understanding relational in nature, Beauvoir creates a rhetorical space for women to assert their agency in the world, an agency that is already and always split. "It took her being overcome by a sense of her own ambiguity," Bauer argues, "the contradiction she felt between the sense of herself as a potential author of an autobiography and as what is called a woman, to find her voice with the concept [of self] philosophically" (2001, 237). Beauvoir's "I" autobiographs a woman philosopher who is painfully aware of the ambiguity that defines her existence. Beauvoir's form of philosophical autobiography demonstrates that solidarity not only can but must emerge from singularity.

Conclusions

Beauvoir's philosophical autobiography introduces a new mode of philosophizing about the self in three ways. First, by making the status of women personal, by "laying her own identity on the line," as Nancy Bauer puts it, "by offering nothing less than herself as the object of a philosophical investigation," Beauvoir transcends the paradigm of (masculine) philosophical autobiography initiated by Descartes—the isolated self, detached from others, and opposed to the world.[19] This is no inconsequential achievement. In Bauer's estimation, this amounts to nothing less than a complete rethinking of what philosophy is (2001, 23). By integrating the metaphysical and rhetorical dimensions of phenomenal experience—experience women feel in both existential and gendered registers—Beauvoir shows that human freedom is realized with, rather than over and against, others. Second, by presenting alternative constructions of self-identity and providing mechanisms for collective action, Beauvoir breaks through the barriers that philosophy has erected against women and leads beyond the self to a community of selves: a community of women philosophers among others. Third, by destabilizing the "I" of traditional philosophical autobiography, Beauvoir generates an alternative mode of philosophical autobiography. In Pilardi's words, "chronology is not primary in Beauvoir's autobiographies; what is primary is the continual philosophy of her life experiences: her writing, her relationships with Sartre and others and the importance of the 'history' in her life" (1999, 44). Simone de Beauvoir's model of philosophical autobiography—her use of the "I" to represent a dual or double self—preserves the freedom and multiplicity of existence without repudiating the metaphysical (and ungendered) dimension of being. "This model," Bauer argues, "reconceives philosophy as a mode of self-transformation and self-expression that stands or falls at one and the same time on its uniqueness—on, if you will, its originality or particularity—and on its representativeness: that is, the degree to which its particularity can be taken as an instance of something universal" (2001, 45).

Regardless of how one defines philosophical autobiography and regardless of which questions it raises, Beauvoir shows that philosophical autobiography is a concrete path to self-transcendence for men and women. To be human is to be a being-for-itself (consciousness) and a being-in-itself (ego; self; person; "I"). It is also to be a being with others (a human *Mitsein*) (Pilardi 1999, 3). Too often philosophers overlook the role of autobiographical analysis in the formation of philosophical discourse: the ongoing practices of self-reflection by which philosophers probe the nature of reality and the

meaning of human existence. Beauvoir teaches us that one cannot do philosophy without enacting autobiography.

Notes

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1. In addition to Beauvoir's own use of the term "lived experience" in *The Second Sex* and elsewhere, Eleanore Holveck titles her 2002 exploration of Beauvoir's literary and metaphysical perspectives *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Lived Experience*. Interestingly, her first chapter is titled, "Can a Woman be a Philosopher?"

2. The four volumes in English translation include the following: (1) *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*; (2) *The Prime of Life*; (3) *Force of Circumstance*; and (4) *All Said and Done*. JoAnn Pilardi helpfully includes the number of years and pages that Beauvoir devotes to her autobiographical work.

3. Pilardi's stated purpose in writing *Simone de Beauvoir Writing the Self* is "to find the self that Beauvoir crafts for her reader and herself" (1999, 7).

4. As I argue in *The Philosopher's "I": Autobiography and the Search for the Self* (2006, 2–3), certain forms of self-narration and certain kinds of autobiographies lend themselves to an explicitly philosophical classification. For instance, some writers incorporate philosophical concepts and discourse into the recounting of the self and/or their lives. Others write from within the tradition of philosophy; that is, they write as individuals who teach and write philosophy. I contend that the term "philosophical autobiography" applies to both kinds of texts. Moreover, I claim that autobiographical philosophers use self-narration as a method of self-examination. For each, autobiography is a mode and means of philosophical exposition; an interpretation of lived experience in which a particular image of oneself emerges *as a result of* one's ontological views of the self and *in response to* the rhetorical forces shaping self-representation. Because of its dual ontological and rhetorical function, philosophical autobiography necessitates a philosophical analysis, not merely a literary or historical reading.

5. Beauvoir 1970, 72–73. It is important to acknowledge, as nearly every Beauvoir scholar has, that Beauvoir's sources for understanding the self-Other relation are G. W. F. Hegel and Edmund Husserl.

6. The Oxford English Dictionary reports that the first recorded instance of the term "autobiography" appears in 1797. The entry reads, "Self-biography. We are doubtful whether the latter word be legitimate: it is not very usual in English to employ hybrid words partly Saxon and partly Greek: yet autobiography would have seemed pedantic. Despite these pedantic origins, autobiography is easily recognizable in this familiar sense, meaning 'an account of a person's life given by himself or herself, esp. one published in book form.' It is a relatively rare example of an enduring everyday word which uses the prefix auto- where we might substitute self- nowadays, being less concerned about, or aware of, taboos surrounding etymological miscegenation." "Autobiography," *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/public/auto (accessed October 12, 2012).

7. Another way to define philosophical autobiography is as an account of one's self that draws on established philosophical theories and concepts and speaks in a philosophical register.

8. As I explain in n. 4, the term "philosophical autobiography" refers to the use of autobiographical elements as a mode and means of philosophical exposition; an interpretation of lived experience in which a particular image of oneself emerges *as a result of* one's ontological views of the thing we call "self" and *in response to* the rhetorical forces shaping self-representation.

9. I am grateful to Christopher Cowley for the reminder that Hume had already cast doubt on the existence of the self two centuries earlier. Like Nietzsche, Hume was a man who lived before his time.

10. Pilardi (1990, 30) argues that "patriarchy is an unmoving structure," a foundation whereby males hold all significant power—familial, religious, political.

11. The writers Smith lauds include Beryl Markham, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Maxine Hong Kingston (Smith 1990, 21). Beauvoir herself tells us in *The Prime of Life* that to communicate what was original in her experience, she eschews philosophy for literature: "I knew that it was toward literature that I must orient myself" (1992, 178).

12. Beauvoir 2009, 17. Beauvoir is using "dependence" here to mean *conceptual* dependence, i.e., the definition of Woman as essentially in terms or in relation to Man.

13. The ambiguity of Beauvoir's work is a source of intrigue and inspiration for me. Interpretative disagreements abound among Beauvoir scholars. As I study her work and attempt to bring Beauvoir scholars into conversation with one another, the ambiguity of Beauvoir's work serves as both a sign of the ambiguity of existence and an opportunity to thrust myself into the freedom that defines me (*pour soi*) and informs my sense of self (*en soi*). I celebrate the growing community of women philosophers that the ambiguity of her work generates. How appropriate that Beauvoir's self-reflections instantiate collective work by women, for women, and about women.

14. Bauer (2001, 53) quotes Susan Bordo.

15. Plato, *Phaedo* 70c–72d and *Meno* 80d–81d.

16. Beauvoir 2009, 766. Pilardi describes existentialist ethics as the "cure" for woman's situation (1999, 27).

17. "Women," in this sentence refers to a social unit or "series," to use Jean-Paul Sartre's language, a collection of individuals bound by a desire to unite, not a biologically determined group. Iris Marion Young appropriates Sartre's concept of "serial collectivity" in useful ways (Boxer 2001, 156–57).

18. Recall Pilardi's explanation (1990, 37) of Beauvoir's addition to Sartre's ontology: self-justification through others.

19. Bauer cites the superb work of Susan Bordo who rightly claims that Descartes insists on an "absolutely sharp line between the person or subject" and the rest of the world or "object" (Bauer 2001, 53).

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10

Fraudulence, Obscurity, and Exposure: The Autobiographical Anxieties of Stanley Cavell

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Little Did I Know, the much-anticipated memoir of Stanley Cavell, was published in the autumn of 2010.[1] Coincident with the book's publication Harvard University arranged a public symposium at which an international gathering of colleagues and students came together to celebrate, in the presence of Cavell and his family, the philosopher's life and work. James Conant set the tone early, remembering that for many of those present Cavell was "what the Germans call one's *Doktorvater*" (Conant 2011, 1006). For its registering of parental as well as pedagogical role, of "the ways in which the responsibilities and concerns of a dissertation supervisor can gradually shade off into those of a parent," Conant's German term was acknowledged as particularly incisive. Again on behalf of himself as well as his colleagues Conant was further moved to describe intellectual and affective attitude just as likely occasioned by this doubling of personal and pedagogical circumstance, to describe "the ways in which the obligations and anxieties of a *Doktorsohn* can correlatively come to bleed into those of a son" (1006).

No doubt for Conant and his co-symposiasts there existed on this rarefied Harvard occasion a very particular weight of personal and philosophical obligation, a distinct if evanescent accountability on being asked to speak about, and so in some sense to speak for, the famed philosopher and his highly idiosyncratic corpus. It is characteristic of Cavell to acknowledge if not fully to account for this idiosyncrasy, to recognize his style of philosophizing as calling for some measure of defense, even justification, while holding back on defense or justification outright. Tending to invoke at such self-reflexive junctures the therapeutic registers of a later Wittgenstein ("If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say, 'This is simply what I do'")[2] this practice of Cavell's is vulnerable to more or less charitable interpretation. The former will align the contemporary philosopher's patience and resourcefulness—his willingness to wait and his shading of response over assertion—as likely homage not only to the twentieth-century Wittgenstein but to the nineteenth-century Emerson and Thoreau.[3]

At least one prominent reason for Cavell's disciplinary idiosyncrasy, as Conant recognizes early in his Harvard remarks, is the intrusion into his philosophical work of the personal voice, of the honestly and anxiously autobiographical "I." Such intrusion is easily taken as concrete evidence of disciplinary transgression, a notable lack of self-control, an unchecked tendency to self-indulgence. Cavell in his own words chronicles a life-long desire "to remain between, to refuse sides," "to keep a number of strata of ideas moving in the same direction," "to treat every word or note I set down with absolute attention and ambition" (2010, 13, 391, 285). The cost of such spiraling self-consciousness is measured in turn as "the persistent danger of abusive obscurity" (391). Self-awareness and self-criticism aside, between the reception of Cavell's earlier and Cavell's most recent work Conant is quick to observe an interesting parallel—that commentators on *Little Did I Know* are just as likely to bristle at the perceived intrusion into this autobiographical writing of "the properly philosophical" (2011, 1005).

In careful memoir no less philosophical than private, *Little Did I Know* rehearses the great themes of Cavell's philosophical career: Avoidance and Disappointment, Grace and Redemption, Therapy and Love. Such themes are most helpfully situated against the intellectual backdrop of Cavellian skepticism, against the philosopher's very particular understanding of our epistemological and moral claims on other things and other people. Ranging from Shakespearean tragedy to Hollywood film Cavell's intuitions on skepticism develop with an anxiety and urgency markedly at odds with the accepted styles of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Such idiosyncratic philosophical voice has inspired both cultish devotion and disciplinary censure and *Little Did I Know* is, in many ways, an accounting for this idiosyncrasy—an attempt to place philosophical practice within the broader contours of human experience. Given Cavell's career-long obsession with avoidance, with the disappointingly human tendency to shy from honesty or to shrink from revelation, such practice of accounting is doubly significant.

With reference to three particularly persistent anxieties of *Little Did I Know*—(1) the fear of fraudulence, (2) the fear of obscurity, and (3) the fear of exposure—I aim in this chapter to push further on Cavellian accounting and accountability. Of course, it is important to this reading that fraudulence, obscurity, and exposure might be established as anxieties characteristic of the human *as such*, and that Cavell's response, in turn, might therefore count as exemplary. I would appeal again in this context to the philosopher's lifelong engagement with skepticism. On Cavell's idiosyncratic picture, our lives with other selves are fully risky and fully fraught; we stand constantly to be missed

or mired or actively denied by those around us. The philosopher urges that it is a human tendency not to embrace our shared uncertainties but to avoid them, to close our eyes to other human persons in all their separateness and in all their complexity. Such closure marks not only an ignorance but also an outright annihilation of the other person. Moreover, it is in the undramatic and the daily that these tragedies are most frequently and most damagingly played out. In Cavell's own words,

> in the everyday ways in which denial occurs in my life with the other—in a momentary irritation, or a recurrent grudge, in an unexpected rush of resentment, in a hard glance, in a dishonest attestation, in the telling of a tale, in the believing of a tale, in a false silence, in a fear of engulfment, in a fantasy of solitude or of self-destruction—the problem is to *recognize* myself as denying another, to understand that I carry chaos in myself. Here is the scandal of skepticism with respect to the existence of others; I am the scandal. (2005b, 151)

Thus for Cavell, the writing of the self has epistemological as well as ethical implications. Continually mindful of our relationships with other persons as always and essentially in question, it is of the highest importance that we present our own selves as fully authentic, fully open, fully sincere.

As demonstrated in the 2010 Harvard remarks, Cavell's anxieties and obligations as philosophical writer are transposed to philosophical reader in equal measure and force. If not precisely "*Doktorvater*" to "*Doktorsohn*" the relationship here is presumptive of full responsiveness and responsibility. Cavell has always written with complete philosophical and literary ambition (and surely the prose of *Little Did I Know* moves finally into the poetic register so beautifully anticipated by *The Senses of Walden*) and it is incumbent on his reader to respond in kind, to match this highly considered register with due attentiveness and care. Imperative here is the imagination of philosophy as interpretive just as much as it is expressive. With his own practice counting as exemplary Cavell recommends to his philosophical audience a distinctive mode of philosophical *reading*.

Fraudulence

Early in his teaching career at Berkeley, Cavell is invited by the guest of a friend to play with him at the piano a four-hand arrangement of a Schubert string quartet. Encouraged from a young age by his virtuoso mother, Cavell was at this point a skilled pianist who had studied composition and performance at the Juilliard School. His eventual leaving behind of professional

music for professional philosophy had been the definitive move of his early life. Surprised at the guest's invitation Cavell nonetheless agrees on this occasion to perform. What follows is his account of the guest's reaction:

> We were into the piece, perhaps as far as getting into the development section of the first movement, when I noticed, vaguely, that my partner on this occasion was somehow restive on the bench. Without stopping playing, he rather shouted at me: "Are you *reading*?" meaning reading this at sight for the first time. I stopped playing. I was flushed with some version of anxiety, as if I had not produced something but only promised something I could not produce. I made up a hurried excuse and left the room; indeed I wound up going for a walk and not returning that day. Some secret had evidently been revealed. Inviting what threat? Was the shout of surprise produced by pleasure or by pain? And suppose, as not infrequently happens to me, I had instead of a connection felt an estrangement from my display of some talent, the keyboard now not an invitation and extension of will but a barrier to it, and had made a fool of myself. (2010, 190)

This is neither the first nor the only occasion where accomplishment assumes for Cavell the character of the undeserved or the accidental. Those occasions pertaining to music invariably involve his inability (or presumed inability) to sight-read; those occasions pertaining to writing invariably involve his inability to produce extended work of originality or substance. Delays in completing a first book or PhD dissertation are prominent causes of the latter and feed into a mounting awareness of lost or squandered precociousness: "I was thirty-three years old, pushing around, wherever I turned, a barrow of fragments" (384). Anxieties of unattainable promise are equally pertinent to Cavell's early relationships with women, particularly those women he most respected and those who most respected him. That nothing real or substantial fully justifies these women's respect, that such respect might at any moment be withdrawn following disappointment or inadequacy, are for Cavell potentialities painfully alive. The young philosopher fears, in his own words, "that I will not prove to be better than I am" (234). He perceives a gulf between self-perception and perception by others of the self, "the discrepancy between my lack of conviction in what I could show and the conviction it seemed to create in others" (211).

Such fear is peculiarly double-edged. As gradually becomes clear following his telling of the incident at the piano, Cavell is mindful of personal inability but he is equally mindful of personal ability actually demonstrated or made manifest. In the case of sight-reading from a score of music, Cavell confesses openly to "the fear of *showing* my ability to read" (emphasis added). This fear is narratively involved with that of his handwritten PhD manuscript

burning in an apartment fire before anyone can read it. The connections here are not immediately obvious and tracking their significance is complicated by psychoanalytical as well as philosophical context.[4] It seems at least that the unifying anxiety might crystallize for Cavell in the issue of the right to speak—more specifically, the right of one to speak for another. In sight-reading music, of course, and as Cavell is at pains to point out, "there is no such obvious distinction between reading and speaking. There, to read is (in its obvious form) to speak" (192).

And yet, both sight-reading music and writing philosophy are interpretive processes, processes advancing subjective understanding still charged with universal claim. Approval or acceptance in interpretation registers something completely different from approval or acceptance entailed by more logical or scientific modes. Neither based on objective particulars nor extrapolating from a general rule, what is at issue is a personal understanding that claims or hopes for but cannot straightforwardly *guarantee* recognition from another. One might say that there is a burden of proof on the one that interprets to convince his audience of the worthiness of the particular item or performance; stakes of responsibility and responsiveness are characteristically high.[5] For Cavell as philosopher and musician, disquieted over the years by certain audiences' impatience with or grudging reception of his work, the process of interpretation is necessarily troubled, necessarily fraught. Of course, skeptics will argue that the very possibility of recounting an instance of personal excellence with genuine modesty remains in question—that Cavell is anxious about having a skill admired but he is *no less* anxious to communicate to his reader the evidence of this skill. Here we are pointed to the tension in any autobiographical work between personal honesty and personal justification.

In his 1967 essay, "A Matter of Meaning It," Cavell had argued that all modernist artworks were characterized by the possibility of fraudulence (1979b, 213–38). With examples ranging from the music of John Cage to the drama of Samuel Beckett, Cavell underlined the lack of settled discourse within which modernist art might be explained or justified. When it comes to modernist works of art there is simply no stable authority—no fixed framework of reference—to help us distinguish between the authentic and the fake. Cavell underlined in a similar manner the lack of standing discourse for the procedures of philosophy. There is no special domain for philosophy, he urges, no "special class of persons to be called philosophers, who possess and are elevated by a special class or degree of knowledge" (1989, 161). For lack of appeal to a stable Platonic authority attempts to distinguish between the genuine and the not-so-genuine never reliably get off the ground. Philosophy exists, in other words, in a modernist condition and like all modern-

ist artworks it is highly susceptible to fraudulence. Fraudulence attends for Cavell every example of philosophy's writing, forcing questions "of intention and seriousness and sincerity" (1979b, 225) and raising in turn the specter of philosophical responsibility.

Seeking to establish that "philosophy can accept no authority beyond itself," that "there is no formal criterion of philosophy," Cavell has more recently elaborated:

> The persistent threat to philosophy is not, or not alone, irrationality (in the form of bias or superstition or fanaticism, any of which argumentation can serve) but fraudulent seriousness, call this sophistry, born with philosophy, as it were its envious (because despised) twin. I take Nietzsche's call for joyfulness, following Emerson's, and Austin's and Wittgenstein's punctual hilarities, as expressible of the irreducible vulnerability of philosophy to false seriousness. (2005c, 168)

The implicit suggestion here is that philosophy must continuously question and continuously reaffirm its own identity. Because of its vulnerability to "false seriousness" it must continuously account and answer for its existence and for its development. In practice this is a matter of accepting responsibility for one's continuing use of philosophical language, of realizing what is at stake every time we express ourselves philosophically, of not taking philosophical expression for granted. Cavell makes a similar point when writing of philosophical authority: "Philosophical authority is non-transferable . . . each claim to speak for philosophy must earn that authority for itself" (1989, 19).

Certainly this nontransference brings to philosophy's practice heavy burdens of responsibility. Every act of philosophical writing must prove anew its exemplification of "philosophy"; every writer on philosophical topics must claim anew the title of "philosopher." Notwithstanding these heavy burdens, their assumption in direct response to threats of intellectual or interpretive fraudulence might explain to some extent Cavell's embrace as a young adult of philosophy or, more specifically, his embrace of philosophy in his leaving behind of music. In *Little Did I Know* Cavell writes of "philosophy's irreducible demand to constantly bring itself into question" (2010, 182). This observation echoes others made throughout his career, most notably in the foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?* Here denying the accepted distinction between philosophy and "meta-philosophy," Cavell clarifies that he wishes his remarks about philosophy to be taken as "nothing more or less than philosophical remarks." He elaborates: "I would regard this fact—that philosophy is one of its own normal topics—as in turn defining for the subject, for what I wish philosophy to do" (1979b, xviii). Perhaps philosophy on

this Cavellian picture offers a reprieve from fraudulence in its very ability to allow fraudulence to become for itself an issue—just as all topics of the meta-philosophical are necessarily topics of philosophy. At the very least, it is surely significant that Cavell finds his first reprieve from fraudulence in an early act of philosophical writing. Professor Donald Piatt's response to Cavell's first semester work at UCLA is "extravagantly favourable" (2010, 246) and significantly, if surprisingly, Cavell accepts the professor's acceptance:

> The work did not promise more than it delivered, whatever that was. I did not feel that Piatt had been duped by it, but that he saw its desperation and aspiration for the raw things they were, and could allow its lunges for originality and heightened sense to be justified by its talent and diligence, or say, by some comprehensible, even in a disorderly world, necessary, taunting between imagination and ignorance. (246)

Again frustrating the edifying movement "between imagination and ignorance" fraudulence surfaces once more in Cavell's readings of Emerson. Famously calling in "The American Scholar" for intellectual responses original and nonrepetitive, Cavell's Emerson is dedicated to "a fantasy of finding your own voice . . . as if most men's words as a whole cried out for redemption" (1989, 114). The term "redemption" is most usually understood in its Christian sense as salvation from sin through Jesus' sacrifice. Like many of his privileged terms "redemption" for Cavell has no settled meaning. It is most often used in the context of language or expression or poetry and not surprisingly finds its most resonant application in his invocations of Romanticism. In exploration of the *Biographia Literaria* Cavell writes of Coleridge's concern "to preserve or redeem genuine poetry from its detractors and its impersonations . . . and to demonstrate that this preservation is bound up with the preservation or redemption of genuine philosophy." Cavell continues:

> This contesting of philosophy and poetry and religion (and politics) with one another, for one another, together with the disreputable sense that the fate of the contest is bound up with one's own writing, and moreover with the conviction that the autobiographical is a method of thought wherein such a contest can find a useful field, and in which the stakes appear sometimes as the loss or gain of our common human nature, sometimes as the loss or gain of nature itself, as if the world were no more than one's own—some such statement represents the general idea I have of what constitutes serious romanticism's self-appointed mission, the idea with which I seek its figures. (1989, 43)

Significant here is Cavell's notion of the ideal philosophical writing as informed crucially by the autobiographical, as offering an edifying response to skepticism, as *redemptive*. In the sense in which he is using the term, redemp-

tion refers both to the redemption of philosophy by autobiography (autobiography, in his own words, as a mode of philosophical discourse exemplifying "our common human nature"), and the subsequent redemption of the human person; thus the idea works on the aesthetic as well as the existential level. That philosophy might be redeemed by autobiography echoes Cavell's calling for a greater expressiveness in philosophical writing and a greater attentiveness to philosophical language.

"Redemption," of course, implies a fallen state, a loss of direction or value, a need for restoration. External judgments critical if not punitive are directly implied. Typically the writer of an autobiography seeks some version of the redemptive in his return to personal principles, his recourse most usually in the latter years of his life to a plain and courageous honesty. He hopes for respect and understanding and for the delicate renewal of reputation. In this process, reader response is of course central; the autobiographer depends on his audience to both grant and maintain his redeemed state. For Cavell, "redemption" maintains further its interesting economic sense of sale and reclamation. Formative years working in his father's pawnshop underline the significance of accounting fully for one's actions in dealing with the vulnerability and the valuables of others. Indeed, Cavell's father finds his own particular redemption in this context; he is painted by his son as a shop-owner of integrity and compassion.

Like many terms in his critical-philosophical lexicon, "redemption" operates for Cavell on further levels of significance. More than personal acts of renewal or justification, more than shared appreciation for personal value and vulnerability, "redemption" carries linguistic if not literary connotation. What is implied is the need to take responsibility for one's own words, the need to rescue words and sentences from usages long ossified and obsolete. The task here is to *really mean what we say*, to redirect a patient and comprehensive interest to the everyday words we share in common. Only by such careful rededication might we recover interest in ourselves and in our lives. For the philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language—and this philosophy includes for Cavell, of course, the genres of autobiographical philosophy and philosophical autobiography—such interestedness is the central achievement or task. Counseling the redemption of language through autobiographical and philosophical writing Cavell indeed suggests that our personal words have become forgotten (repressed or somehow *lost*), that it is a central task of an autobiographically informed philosophy to find words as if for the first time. If we are to read *Little Did I Know* as an attempted act of personal redemption, then, we must do so fully mindful of the philosopher's desire to see *all modes* of the philosophical as redemptive.

Obscurity

Family business ventures in Atlanta and Sacramento marked Cavell's Depression-era childhood with constant movement and upheaval. No sooner had he settled into one form of life—no sooner found confidence in one particular social situation with attendant intricacies of language and behavior—than he was forced to uproot and relearn, to assimilate as best he could complex codifiers of American junior high and American high school. Painfully exacerbating the attendant feelings of difference and alienation, and measuring the distance from his own appearance and that of neighborhood and classroom peers, the propriety of clothes was a persistent worry:

> Even when I happened to put on a piece of clothing I liked looking at—I think of a sweater of alternating blue and green wide stripes—I couldn't decide whether it was right to wear the shirt collar in or out of the round neck of the sweater. What did people do? How did what was done weigh against the way each looked in my estimation? My father was thought by my mother to be a good judge of jackets. That judgement came into play once a year, buying a new suit for me to wear in synagogue for the High Holidays. Besides, my trust in his judgement was compromised by the unfaded memory of his once looking at my feet—I remember this as from the years still on Atlanta Avenue—and saying that I wore out a piece of shoes every three weeks, whereas he wore the same shoes for ten years, longer than I had existed. He could not have made himself more incomprehensible to me if he had told me that he had not removed the shoes now on his feet, day or night, for ten years. I gathered that our differences were not only measureless, but somehow meaningless. The offer of the message was not so much that I was wrong, as if mistaken in my conduct, but that I was destructive and strange. (2010, 91)

Familial strangeness and destruction are persistent threads in *Little Did I Know* as the rages of Cavell's father terrorize this small household with violent outburst or oppressive silence. That this father to this son "could not have made himself more incomprehensible" betokens a lack of willingness to even try, a lack of willingness on the part of the parent to risk honesty or vulnerability for the sake of the child. Recounting at a companion point of the memoir his unsettling sense of his childhood existence as something to which his father was entirely "indifferent," Cavell interprets this sense as yet another example of his own inadequacy, his own awkward aptitude in "being strange" (27). The young Cavell is forced to move states and schools several times over but his father never recognises the consequent emotional or social upheaval. If anything, he resents his son even further as he is the continual recipient of his mother's sympathy and love. In multiple moments missed and

misunderstood, indeed, Cavell's father fails to register the complexities of his son as in any way significant. One might say that he fails to occupy his son's everyday. In Cavell's distinctive understanding, of course, our epistemic relations to other people hinge not on knowing but on acknowledging them; it is a matter less of accumulating facts than of accepting what is already in front of us. Thus such failures of acknowledgment—such victories of obscurity or triumphs of avoidance—are not only damaging but damagingly formative.

At the very least this filial incomprehensibility exacerbates for Cavell his "recurrent sense of intractable oddness" (517), his pronounced feeling of difference from those around him. As a young boy he has trouble finding comfort in blue jeans, wondering in particular "how other boys' jeans ever got to be old, worn with wear, hence to conform to their bodies" (83). His own clothes seem entirely wrong; protecting his hands to play piano, his own body seems distant and strange—"not as if it were not mine, but as if I were wrong for it" (83). This feeling of difference translates to a feeling of exceptionality taking different forms at different stages of the philosopher's life, "sometimes as the thought of being too young, sometimes too old, sometimes too Jewish, sometimes too American, for some too philosophical or serious, for others too literary or excitable, say, exuberant" (84).

Struggling with this strangeness to himself and to others Cavell finds philosophical comfort in readings of the later Wittgenstein. "Wittgenstein's advance," Cavell writes, "is to have discovered the everyday and its language themselves to be esoteric, strange to themselves, one could say." "It is with our inheritance of language," he continues, ". . . that it continually misrecognizes or (mis) understands itself. Instead of saying we are full of mistakes about what is closest to us, we might say of ourselves that we are filled, as Thoreau might say, with misgiving" (2010, 415).

One way of understanding this point is to emphasize with Cavell the extraordinariness of the everyday, the fact that everyday language and gesture are not underpinned by certain logic or structure but are based if at all on human agreement. Language is profoundly *disappointing*, in other words; it never entirely succeeds in hooking us up with the world or with others. There is always a mystery or an obscurity to words, a sense either that they are not doing enough (not providing direct access to the real) or doing too much (giving too much away about our own selves). Language, then, is never entirely under our control. As Cavell frames the point in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, "You always tell more and less than you know" (1989, 83).

For Cavell's ordinary language philosophy it is a methodological principle that we return our expressions to the ordinary or the everyday, to those contexts and routines where language and behavior carry communal meaning.

As touched upon earlier, philosophy for Cavell has no standing discourse, no accepted assembly of standards or styles. Philosophy has "no knowledge of its own" (2010, 250), in other words; thus its power must lie in recovering what we already know. Understanding such impetus of renewal, we can appreciate Cavell's temptation to align the central task of philosophy not so much with analysis but with description. Of significance here is the patient redirection of attention to cultural products (stories, dramas, films) long ossified by conventional understanding—redirection of attention to the ordinary *as if it were extraordinary*. Ideas of redemption are once more in play.

A prime example is Cavell's calling to Americans not to cede their cultural inheritance but to bring it continuously into question. His moral perfectionist readings of Fred Astaire's dance routines in *The Band Wagon* (taken unproblematically in Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* as outright gestures of racial domination) are cases in point as Cavell's critical method in this context is to describe carefully and patiently what actually happens in the opening scenes of Minnelli's film. He takes no detail for granted and dismisses no gesture as unimportant. Such an approach forms the basis for Cavell's recovery of *The Band Wagon* as a cultural acknowledgment of racial domination, "an acknowledgment or recognition not *as* domination but *of* domination" (2005b, 70). Put differently, and earned only in the wake of heightened critical attentiveness and patience, Minnelli's film is read not as a product of white supremacy but as a challenge to its existing structures.

"In dealing with obviousness, re-formulation is essential groundwork" (2010, 516). From Beckett and Shakespeare to Coleridge and Minnelli the obvious and the ordinary take on new meaning in Cavell's work. I would nonetheless claim that there exists in his writing a niggling tension between recovering the obvious and *avoiding* the obvious. Cavell is resistant to the type of writing that allows for no interpretation but repetition, the type of philosophy that encourages no response except faithful rehearsal of its signature concepts and terms. In "its general cultivation of competitive obscurity and paradox and brilliance" he therefore resists the French-German outburst of the 1960s and '70s.[6] Blanchot is described as harboring "a horror of understanding" (525); Derrida's fun, Cavell says, "goes philosophically sour" (536). At the same time, Cavell confesses to his own invitations of the obscure, to "a perverseness or ostentatious tempting of rebuke that arises from time to time in my writing that I do not understand, a sort of horror of stating the obvious while at the same time my medium so often and essentially involves the status of the obvious" (187).

What this confession amounts to is not altogether easy to grasp. It does, however, highlight a significant strain on Cavell's writing as a whole. In his

early essay "An Audience for Philosophy," Cavell had revealed that he was persistently troubled by the perceived obliqueness—the perceived *obscurity*—of his written expression. "No doubt there is a danger of evasion in this spiralling self-consciousness; perhaps one should indeed search for more congenial work. Just as there is a danger of excusing poor writing in insisting upon the complexities of the consciousness one is at each moment attempting to record, or to acknowledge" (1979b, xxiii). In Cavell's defense Paul Jenner (2002) has argued that in the midst of this potentially evasive (or "spiralling") self-consciousness, it is not that philosophy is being evaded but rather *preserved* under difficult conditions. On this reading, such an apparently dissembling passage represents neither indecisiveness nor undecidability but instead seeks to record a tension. Recording tensions, of course, brings us back to Cavell's self-perception as a philosophical modernist.

Undoubtedly Cavell's writing holds itself to the most testing conditions and standards. Richard Poirier has described poetry as "necessarily hard work, a wriggling, a screwing, a turning of words" (1992, 129), but this characterization might just as well describe the labor of Cavell's prose, the characteristic "sweating" of his language. Here we are reminded of his own remarks on Emerson: "His language is in continuous struggle with itself, as if he is having to translate, in his American idiom, English into English" (2005a, 8). The philosopher, Cavell urges, must master his subjectivity and make it exemplary. This is by no means an easy task and Cavell gestures to its difficulty in his reading of Kierkegaard, Thoreau, and Nietzsche. The writing of these figures, Cavell claims, "takes the form it does, of obsessive and antic paradox and pun, above all of maddening irony. As if to write towards self-knowledge is to war with words, to battle for the very weapons with which you fight" (1979a, 352). Here we might take Cavell's claims for his philosophical heroes as covert instructions for his own reception, as a warning that his own prose battles continuously not exactly to move forward but more to maintain the precision of his thought. This warning is captured nicely in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. Here Cavell writes of philosophy that its success "is not to get anywhere (else) but to find itself, where it is" (2005b, 98).

Cavell hardly strives for clarity or transparency; indeed, it is impossible to paraphrase his work. Like poetry his philosophy is not reducible to concepts, meanings, or propositions. Bound up with his philosophical concerns is a unique employment of key words, phrases, and motifs, recurring lexical and topical emphases often only apparent to the initiated reader. It is interesting, indeed, that by these poetico-philosophical acts Cavell can sometimes eschew the narrativizing or storytelling practices of the traditional autobiographer. We might say that at certain moments he is concerned more domi-

nantly with the expressive, concerned less with sense-making and more with performance. Tentative comparison might be made here with the lyric poet who, in uniquely expressivist linguistic acts, shows an alternative route for the self's articulation. Certainly Cavell, in his readings of the Romantics (of Wordsworth and Coleridge particularly), is fully attuned to the idea of the poet as perfectionist.

Notwithstanding this poetic achievement, however, Cavell's sometime privileging of expression over narrative has produced a paradoxical situation. For all the philosopher's talk of the importance of philosophical "intimacy" or "autobiography" his writings can be strangely distancing. They will never inspire in his readers the same winning familiarity or comfort as that inspired by the prose of Richard Rorty, say, or Martha Nussbaum. This lack of easy familiarity or interpretive access might in turn problematize Cavell's avowed desire to remain scrutable to his intellectual peers and predecessors, to "stay within earshot" of the analytic tradition. In this context, and here we are returned to Atlanta and Sacramento and the growing pains of a precocious intellect, the philosopher is taken not so much as wrong but as discursively eccentric—not mistaken, exactly, but "destructive and strange."

Exposure

The only child of a working mother and father, uprooted from extended family in myriad house moves across the American Southwest, Cavell spent much of his childhood disconnected and alone. Several years younger than his classmates his academic precociousness made it near impossible to find friendships in his own grade. By the time he was eleven, with his mother in the evenings playing professional piano for a local radio station, he was often left after school to fend completely for himself. With painful understatement he recounts the resulting senses of alienation and limitless time:

> To recognise the end of the day and get to bed, I developed the ritual of eating a box of Oreo cookies together with a can of applesauce. But really the ritual is equally describable as an effort to stop myself from eating the entire box of cookies, a sequence of five (was it?) pairs, each pair stacked in a pleated pliable plastic cup, and from finishing the accompanying applesauce, having conceived the idea that this was not a sensible diet. I slowed the eating by inventing new ways of going through the cookies. . . . But each night I lost the battle to stop eating before the package and the can were emptied. I recognize that to this day I unfailingly at the end of a meal leave some portion of food, if sometimes quite small, on my dish—as if to reassure myself that I am free. (2010, 107)

Cavell in loneliness and disconnection typifies the modern figure of skeptical estrangement. The fact of skepticism, "the reminder that I am not, and I am alone, that, break bread together as we may, we will sleep in our own dreams, and never fully awake" (539), assumes very early a personal truth. In more standardly philosophical terms what is in question in the skeptical problematic is an essential limitation when it comes to knowledge of other people, a constitutional separation from those persons around us. In Cavell's writings skepticism takes an idiosyncratic twist emerging as an everyday challenge requiring not argumentative or intellectual refutation but lived acceptance—"acknowledgment" in his guiding term. Beginning in *The Claim of Reason* (1979) with a detailed excursus on Wittgensteinian criteria, and finding extended expression in the unlikely contexts of Shakespearean tragedy, Romantic poetry, Beckettian farce as well as Hollywood film, Cavell's work wishes to reveal how our lives with other persons are not grounded in intellectual certainty but in human convention, in the astonishingly complex background against which our everyday judgments take place. It is this establishment of shared criteria—and not any objective theories of mind or of knowledge—that allows us to think and to communicate in language. Indeed, given that there are simply no definitive criteria by which we might confirm the existence of another as another (given, in Cavell's words, that the other "can present me with no mark or feature with which I can *settle* my attitude" [1979A, 433]) our relationship with other people is not properly characterized as one of knowledge at all. More dominantly in question is the *willingness* to acknowledge. Thus inflected Cavell's readings move from epistemology to ethics.

In her evocative essay "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," Cora Diamond presses further on Cavellian acknowledgment. Recognizing that acknowledgment brings in train heavy responsibilities for us and for other people—responsibilities that press upon us and flatten us into feeling ordinarily vulnerable, ordinarily disappointed—highlighted in Diamond's essay is Cavell's very particular use of the word "exposure." Diamond writes:

> Being exposed, as I am in the case of "my concept of the other," means that my assurance in applying the concept isn't provided for me. "The other can present me with no mark or feature with which I can *settle* my attitude." . . . [Cavell] says that to accept my exposure, in the case of my knowledge of others, "seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be"; it implies acceptance of not being in what I may take to be the ideal position, what I want or take myself to want. (Diamond, 2008, 71)

Cavellian exposure is interpreted by Diamond to imply a less-than-ideal subject perspective. My decisions or attitudes toward other people are impossible to root in grounds certain or fixed or in any way definitive. When it comes to other people I cannot be sure. I am called upon to take a risk. I am "exposed," one could say, I am vulnerable to mistake or to rebuke or even to tragedy.

Tragic potential glossed by Diamond as "endless room for double-dealing and deceit" (72), such emphasis conjures Cavellian readings of *King Lear* and *Othello* prompting us further to acknowledgment and its ethical task. Unless we acknowledge other people in all their complexity, unless we recognize in them the full implications of their sexuality and separation, their humanity and their existence are altogether jeopardized. So Desdemona for Othello and so Cordelia for Lear. Though Diamond's particular interest in her essay is our lack of a stable intellectual framework within which to assess the ethical treatment of nonhuman animals, her comments on Cavell apply just as pertinently to our treatment of other people. No doubt Cavell's Lear and Cavell's Othello are background presences in the writing. "We are exposed," Diamond writes, "we are thrown into finding something we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise" (72).

Of course, in the context of writing—in particular a writing revelatory of the self—the term "exposure" assumes a further significance. Vulnerability and disappointment are once more if very differently implied as anxieties related to writing are sometimes those of the *over*-expressive. In attempting to word my experiences in life and in language the attendant danger is that I unwittingly give too much away, that I leave myself dangerously open to disagreement or to rebuke. Arguably acknowledgment of a particular kind is what any autobiographer seeks. Such acknowledgment is certainly not guaranteed by the fact alone of autobiographical writing as latent in my personal experiences (latent, more specifically, in my attempts to account for my experiences) is the possibility that these experiences will not chime or harmonize with the experiences of another. Though I may enter in good faith and with good reason claims epistemological, moral, or aesthetic, these claims hold the very destructive potential to be denied outright. And if claims are rooted neither in objective criteria nor in acceptance by our linguistic or communal peers what value or significance do they hold at all? Cavell in attempting an answer admits that his career in philosophy, in its beginning and in its development, has revealed the overexpressive—the philosopher's *saying too much*—as a persistent and potentially stultifying fear. It is rivalled only by the fear of the *under*-expressive—the philosopher's *not saying enough or not saying enough honestly.* Between these dual poles of the expressive Cavell's prose

has characteristically spiraled and settled. It has exposed itself and its writer to disciplinary censure and praise.

Recounting the reaction to his first books (*Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The World Viewed* as well as *The Senses of Walden*), Cavell ventures with painful honesty that his offerings "were treated more like thefts," that "I had the unmistakeable sense of having said hello a number of times without anyone saying hello back" (2010, 497, 521). He had elaborated at an earlier point: "The writing had cost me something, in such a way, perhaps, that it has to, and should, cost the reader something. I did not feel that I wished to make my reader pay a price" (442). It is hard to know exactly what to make of these words. Implicit at least is Cavell's acknowledgment of his work as viewed publicly as in some way incomprehensible, even inexpressive. He has from his earliest papers been acutely aware of the perception of his writing as professionally maverick if not downright scandalous. This public view, however, does not seem to carry untold weight or worry.

It seems that the tension more dominantly arises when Cavell considers the assessment not of the public (we might say the "disciplinary" or the "discursive") but of the private, the acceptance or otherwise of his work by the reader individual or intimate. Suspended also is the idea of Cavell's own reader as working, just as effortfully as he does, for sense and significance—the idea that the meaning of the philosopher's words are not to be straightforwardly given but to be interpretively achieved: "it has to, and should, cost the reader something." A complication or qualification still surfaces as Cavell admits in the same breath that he "did not feel that [I] wished to make my reader pay a price." Perhaps in tension here is the philosopher's desire both to be easily and intuitively heard *and* to be properly acknowledged, to have his reader take him in as easily and naturally as he himself takes in Emerson and Thoreau but with the companion recognition that none of these writers (himself included) are as easy, as interpretively "transparent," as they first appear. Cavell doesn't wish his reader to assume the cost of his own expressive anxieties. He nonetheless places a weight and a value in their *working* toward comprehension.

With care such tension might be mapped onto Cavell's strained relationship with the discipline of philosophy more generally. It is clear from his extensive oeuvre that he wants both to bring into question the procedures of philosophy, to illuminate alternative modes for philosophy to take, and to remain within earshot of the analytic tradition that trained him. If such an enterprise strikes one as Sisyphean (and Richard Rorty, for one, has asked if the discipline of philosophy has caused Cavell so much trouble why he doesn't just leave it, why he doesn't just "slough philosophy off" with happy aban-

don) one might remember again Cavell's emphasis on the *difficulty* of philosophy in its modernist condition. Philosophy is no longer to be taken for granted as something with an accepted standard or style to fall back on with untroubled confidence. The writing of philosophy, rather, must be struggled and strained with on an everyday basis as we struggle and strain with our exposure to other minds. Though not the most intuitive, such a connection is entered most explicitly in Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* where he writes early on of "the connection of writing and the problem of the other" (1979A, xviii).

As Richard Shusterman argues, writing, for Cavell, "is not merely the formulation of texts and ideas but a deeply personal, deeply ethical work of self-critique and self-transformation" (2007, 208). It is a challenging, a stretching, of one's actual self. Given the manifold varieties of philosophical exposure it is clear that Cavell's autobiographical impulse doesn't equate to a writing of the self in any way anecdotal or easy or happily straightforward. Indeed, Cavell's autobiographical impulse is distinctive in its foregrounding of the difficult. Such self-conscious difficulty aims to challenge rather than to simplify, as any reader of Cavell's memoirs (*Little Did I Know* as well as his 1994 effort, *A Pitch of Philosophy*) will accede. As ever with Cavell, there is in the difficulty of this writing a political as well as a philosophical point, a point captured nicely by Shusterman: "If one challenged his 'aversive,' difficult style as an obstacle to democracy's egalitarian aims," Shusterman writes, "Cavell might counter that an imposed accessibility or easy style would be false to the struggle for self-knowledge and self-transcendence that is equally central to democracy's project" (209).

Cavell's difficult style testifies to the manifold perils of expressiveness and exposure. That as humans we are condemned to a disappointing finitude, that we are never fully settled in our attitudes toward other people and are always entirely vulnerable to their rebuke or denial or grievance, destines our every attempt at writing to the self-conscious and the unsure. Nonetheless, a compensatory power prevails. This is the democratically ideal self-transcendence that emerges from expressions fully honest and fully sincere, the democratically ideal self-transcendence persistently giving voice to those intuitions fugitive, risky or only partly complete. In exposing himself, one might say, Cavell illuminates the path for others.

Conclusion

For the philosophy that develops from ordinary language, Cavell takes it as a methodological principle that all knowledge must first be authorized as knowledge-of-the-self. Before we can claim agreement from others, in other

words, we must ensure the stability and integrity of our own experience; we must demonstrate both willingness and ability to stand by our every observation and judgment. Only by such expressive effort might we authorize ourselves as masters of the native, full investors in the everyday. The risks attendant upon such an autobiographically informed philosophy are given personal and philosophical expression, or so I have argued, in the peculiarly Cavellian anxieties of fraudulence, obscurity, and exposure. At stake for Cavell in taking on these risks is the very possibility of philosophy—philosophy, at least, captured in one of his many definitions as "the effort to bring my own language and life into imagination" (1979A, 125).

Of Cavell's most recent critics Naoko Saito is among the most perceptive in aligning this commitment to ordinary language with the commitment to philosophy-as-autobiography. In exploration of the expressive thus representative self, Saito demonstrates the peculiar power of Cavell's simultaneously philosophical and autobiographical "I," his seemingly paradoxical combination of the personal and the transcendent. Particularly in Cavell's readings of Emerson Saito finds an idealization of reading *as such.* In this context she recounts Cavell's practice of the ideally interpretive as offering an articulation of the self's experience so precise, so comprehensive and so responsive that it might stand, simultaneously, as an articulation of the experience of others. "The acknowledgment of the partiality of the self is an essential condition for achieving the universal," Saito writes (2009, 253), capturing nicely the epistemological and moral claims Cavell wishes to make. In full hope of another's agreement, and in full knowledge that one's agreement is staked on merely personal grounds, one exposes one's argument (and oneself) to rebuke. Still, such hazardous exposure is the only mode of expression to properly capture the contingency—the "uncertain necessity," in Cavell's own words—of shared language and gesture.[7]

Fraudulence, obscurity, and exposure: as Cavell's anxieties are ineluctably rooted in the ordinary or the everyday, in the "accidentally decisive" (2010, 291) coming to constitute a life, all three are revelatory of the internal connection between the philosophical and the autobiographical. This return of one's expressive anxieties to the grounds and tribunals of the everyday is offered in Cavell's memoirs as a personal gift, philosophically performative as it is instructive. Perhaps unsurprisingly several of his *Doktorsohns* have been moved to respond, attending with philosophical care to the rich particularity of Cavell's most recently published work.[8] In its author's own words *Little Did I Know* is the private achievement of a single figure, passing by "just this edge of things in just this broken light" (2010, 521). In fully *meaning* what it says, most crucially, it enters a claim to speak for others.

Notes

1. Cavell never explicitly comments on his choice of title. Implicit at least is the idea of the philosopher (and autobiographer) now rooted in sounder epistemology, lately knowing much more about self and about others. Were it not for Cavell's perfectionist insistence—that the ideal self is always to be quested after, that the ideal self is never finally to be achieved—one might push further on the implication that in autobiographical writing the self is finally perfected. With "little did I know" there is a note also of rueful acquiescence. Perhaps this is in relation to disciplinary controversy unintentionally caused.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §217, cited in Cavell 1990, 70.

3. Cavell continually asks the philosopher to lose the desire to speak first, to value response over assertion, to work with "an attitude to our pursuits that is precisely unimposable and unrewardable" (ibid., 10).

4. Cavell's discussion is prompted by a series of visits to his psychoanalyst following the breakdown of his first marriage.

5. For insightful discussions of the intimacy between the philosophical and the aesthetic judgment in Cavell's work, see Mulhall 1994, esp. pt. 1, "Patterns, Agreement and Rationality" (21–75), and Hammer 2002, esp. chap. 4, "Art and Aesthetics" (92–119).

6. In the mid-1960s and 1970s a number of continental philosophers (among them Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan) came to international prominence. Notorious as much for linguistic complexity as for theoretical radicalism, this loosely defined collective of "poststructuralists" straddled the related disciplines of philosophy, critical theory, and literary criticism.

7. In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell writes that here is a "necessity" to criteria. This "concept of necessity," Cavell writes, is "not tied to the concept of certainty" (1979a, 40).

8. For its inaugural 2013 issue, *Conversations* (the first academic journal dedicated entirely to Cavell's work) has called for papers addressing any aspect of Cavell and the autobiographical. See https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ojs/index.php/conversations/index.

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