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The (Literary) Stories of Our Lives

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It has become a commonplace that *narrative* plays an important, even essential role in our understanding of reality and ourselves. We constantly hear that we experience the world as narratives and communicate our experiences by them; that our memories of the past, our explanations of the present, and our plans for the future take the form of a story.[1] The great story of our time is story itself.

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[1] I will use the terms *narrative* and *story* interchangeably. Also, I will use synonymously the terms *self*, *person* and *personal identity*.

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Narrative is repeatedly claimed to be our most fundamental form of processing, organizing and communicating information. For instance, the cognitive scientist Mark Turner states in *The Literary Mind* (1996) that "most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories."[2] For him, "narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally" (*LM*, pp. 4–5).

Turner indeed thinks that everyday narrative imagining is a *literary* capacity. And he is not alone: Alasdair MacIntyre, for one, believes that people understand themselves and their lives as narratives; for MacIntyre, even ordinary conversations are *dramatic* works, which have their beginnings, middles, and ends.[3] Daniel Dennett, in turn, makes an analogy between selfhood and artistry, claiming that "we are all virtuoso novelists," as "we try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story," namely, our autobiography, in which the "chief fictional character is one's self."[4] Similarly, David J. Velleman states that "we invent ourselves . . . but we really are the characters whom we invent."[5] The psychologist Jerome Bruner goes much further in claiming that narrative does not only *represent* reality but also *constitutes* it. In his view, we organize our experience in narrative form and, further, "our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about

[2] Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), preface; hereafter abbreviated *LM*.

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]), pp. 211 & 215–218; hereafter abbreviated *AV*.

[4] Daniel Dennett, "Why Everyone is a Novelist," *Times Literary Supplement* 16–22 Sept (1988): 1028–1029 (1029). MacIntyre, for his part, thinks that we are never more than "co-authors" of our narratives, as we cannot decide the "plot" of our life by ourselves (see *AV*, p. 213). David Polkinghorne is more modest: we are narrators, not authors, of our "self-stories," as "we do not control all the circumstances that affect the outcome of those stories" (Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 1 (1991): 135–153 (146); hereafter abbreviated "NSC"). Marya Schechtman thinks that we should look at our self-narratives from the point of view of a character, author, and critic, see "The Narrative Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 413–415.

[5] David J. Velleman, "The Self as Narrator," in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism. New Essays*, ed. John Christman & Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 56–76 (58).

them."[6] For Bruner, stories "impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience."[7]

But there is suspicion, too, about narrative. Literary narratologists have been dissatisfied in the wide, superficial use of the concept of narrative in social sciences and the inflation thus caused: they have spoken of "narrative hegemony" (Kreiswirth) and "narrative imperialism" (Phelan), which both lose what is distinctive of narrative and flatten the phenomenon studied.[8] A related concern in literary studies is that narrative imperialism reduces all the diversity and polyphony of literature into ideal models, schemas, and stereotypes. In analytic philosophy, in turn, there has been scepticism about the very concept of narrative and its explanatory power: narrative is difficult to define, and appeal to it does not seem to add much to our explanations of human action.[9]

This essay explores the epistemic significance of narratives. I will first examine the recent philosophical criticism against self-narratives and views on the potential dangers of artistic narratives and argue that it builds on problematic assumptions: the idea that the epistemic value of narrative would equal to its historical accuracy (real-life narratives) or realism and resemblance between the story and the world (literary narratives). Second, I will propose that the narrow concept of *knowledge* applied in the debate is unsuccessful in explaining our use of narratives and should be replaced with the concept of *understanding*. Finally, I will illustrate how the debate on the epistemic value of stories, everyday and literary, takes a new course with the concept of understanding.

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[6] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1–21 (5); see also Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 71 (2004) [1987]: 691–710 (692).

[7] Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories. Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 89; hereafter abbreviated *MS*.

[8] Martin Kreiswirth, "Merely Telling Stories? Narrative and Knowledge in the Human Sciences," *Poetics Today* 21 (2000): 293–318 (311); James Phelan, "Editor's Column. Who's Here? Thoughts on Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism," *Narrative* 13 (2005): 205–210 (206).

[9] See e.g. Paisley Livingston, "Narrativity and Knowledge," in *The Poetics, Aesthetics, and Philosophy of Narrative*, ed. Noël Carroll (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 25–36.

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The critics of narrative explanations (and narrative conception of personhood in particular) object to the idea that one's self could be made into a story. Self-narratives, the stories we tell about ourselves, are said to be situational. It is claimed, for instance, that one's condition affects how one understands and tells one's life. The critics are not concerned with the reality of the events themselves—a divorce, the death of a child, move to another city—, but the selection of the events included in the story, the significance given for them, and the teller's understanding of them, such as the motives the teller sees guiding her and others' actions. The content of self-narratives and the teller's evaluation of their content is said to vary with regard to the purpose of the story, the context of the telling, the audience (real persons or imaginary readers), and the like. Even more: who is really familiar with herself, the critics ask. In addition to psychoanalysis, recent study in neurosciences is used to support critics' doubt on people's self-understanding.

We have various stories of ourselves. Peter Lamarque remarks that we "return to the major events in our lives and recount them over and over in different narratives from different points of view," which makes the idea of unity and coherence crumble away.[10] Lamarque claims that "the more important the event, the more perspectives it invites, thus the more narratives we relate, often in conflict with each other." For him, narrative does not produce unity or personal identity but presupposes it; people who tell narratives of themselves already have a strong sense of self, whereas "those of us without any such self-assurance will hesitate to embark on a grand self-narrative, being too aware of the tensions, inconsistencies and multiple personalities in our lives" (*TON*, p. 64). If we want to use an artistic analogy, we ought to follow Roland Barthes and say that we are not the protagonist of a novel but the whole cast in it.[11]

[10] Peter Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014), 63–64; hereafter abbreviated *TON*. In Lamarque's view, "impression given by the term 'narrative' is of a complete, rounded story with a beginning, middle and end that helps make sense of complex events. The model is historical narrative or the complex narratives of fiction. But personal narratives virtually never attain completeness, closure or unity" (p. 64).

[11] See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1980 [1975]), p. 123.

Our understanding of the significance of past events in our lives and their impact on us changes as our (self-)knowledge develops. We are able to explain some of our actions only afterwards. When being active participants, living our lives forward, we might not have been able to properly reflect our doings. On the other hand, our memories change, and our stories of the past may be anachronistic. Peter Goldie asserts that "the demands of narrativity . . . seem to drag us towards thinking of our past thoughts, feelings, and deliberations as more determinate than they in fact were, and as reflective of an agency of which at the time we seemed quite bereft."[12] *Anagnorisis* or epiphany, the moment of critical discovery or revelation—"the moment I realized that"—hardly exists in life as clearly as in dramatic stories we tell afterwards.

For Galen Strawson, a major worry with self-narratives is our tendency to *revision*: to "engage unconsciously in invention, fiction of some sort—falsification, confabulation, revisionism—when it comes to one's apprehension of one's own life."[13] Strawson argues that one's "telling and retelling one's past leads to changes, smoothings, enhancements, shifts away from the facts" ("AN," 447).[14] This means, he claims, that "the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being" ("AN," 448).[15] The speak of the "truth of one's being" brings along extensive questions—Is personality something innate and stable? How experiences exist before they are told or thought?—but Strawson's remark of revision in storytelling describes a phenomenon familiar to many. Primo Levi, the Italian author known especially for his holocaust memories, says in an oft-cited passage of *The Drowned and Saved* that "[t]he memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the

[12] Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside. Narrative, Emotion, & the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 148; hereafter abbreviated *TMI*.

[13] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17 (2004): 428–452 (443); hereafter abbreviated "AN."

[14] For criticism of the psychological support which Strawson cites for his claim, see Paul John Eakin, "Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism. A Response to Galen Strawson and James Phelan," *Narrative* 14 (2006): 180–187 (184); hereafter abbreviated "NINI."

[15] Crispin Sartwell, for one, claims that we may become trapped in our narratives, being unable to live in the present, see *End of Story. Toward an Annihilation of Language and History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), chs. 1 & 2.

years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features".[16] Levi admits that practice (or "frequent re-evocation") "keeps memories fresh and alive", but he adds that "a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense".[17]

Whose memories actually are our memories? The sociologist Edward Shils notes that one's memory does not consist only of the recollections of personal experiences but from the memories of others, such as one's family members and friends.[18] One ought to add: as they remember and interpret those events.

Of course, a narrative needs to be narrated, and in public telling social norms and conventions guide story-telling: what one can tell and how—think of personal religious or sexual matters, for instance. In public self-narration, one's self seeks form and content from surrounding cultural models, such as a "new mother," a "failed businessman," and the like.[19] Self-narration follows historical and communal structures of meaning-giving.[20]

Moreover, story-telling has various social functions. We tell stories to explain our choices and to illustrate our values to ourselves and others. Conformists among us stylize their stories to match the values of the context; Anthony Kerby goes to argue that "the individual is in fact something of a chameleon, adapting itself very much to the needs of the

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[16] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), pp. 23–24.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 51; hereafter abbreviated *T*.

[19] David Novitz aptly remarks that even introspection is not just about remembering. Rather, Novitz points out that what we can recall about our past depends greatly on the *questions* we ask ourselves, whereas the questions depend on our *purposes* in asking them; purposes, in turn, are largely shaped by *social influences*. David Novitz, *The Boundaries of Art: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Place of Art in Everyday Life* (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001 [1992]), p. 115.

[20] See Dan Zahavi, "Self and Other. The Limits of Narrative Understanding", in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. Daniel D. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 179–201 (181–182). See also Bruner, *MS*, pp. 65–66 & 69.

moment."[21] We tell ironic, exaggerated stories of our failures to amuse our friends and sad stories of the same events to elicit their sympathy, both sort of stories (their public tellings) perhaps helping us to understand and overcome the events. Also, it is tempting to use narratives to affect to people's attitudes (see *NS*, p. 90). Including those of our own: we might underrate our shameful doings in a story as if the story could change the past.

It is often suggested that we constantly balance between *accuracy* and *coherence* in real-life story-telling. Akin to literary narratives, real-life narratives are also built with expectations and twists: what we aimed for, what we expected, what could have happened, and what ultimately happened (see Bruner, *MS*, pp. 13–15). This is required in order to maintain the audience's interest and to convey our expectations and intentions—not to mention emotions—at the time of experience. And in building this tension, the dramatic structures of artistic stories easily sneak in.

On the other hand, the context of telling sets the criteria for evaluation. Police interrogators believe that stories may be true or false, and so believes a poststructuralist making a report of an offence. In turn, we are charitable for a person who in her autobiography embellishes her life and "forgets" certain incidents in her past, for it is so human. In our everyday life, we hear all sorts of anecdotes and gossips, which we value as informative or entertaining, depending on the context and our interests. Narratives draw us in many directions. But the critics of narrative think that things may get really bad, if we bring artistic and real-life stories too close together.

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Lamarque has extensively criticized views that seek to understand real lives in terms of literary narratives. He maintains that literary narratives and our real-life narratives are qualitatively different. For him, the content of a literary work is "perspectival" and essentially given from a

[21] Anthony Paul Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 64; cf. p. 47; hereafter abbreviated *NS*.

particular point of view. This "opacity," as he calls it, "runs deep in narrative representation: tone, irony, humour, connotation, allusion, narrative voice and other aspects of representation colour all narrative that aspires to literary status. Or, more accurately, one should say that readers come to literary works with an expectation, that narrative perspective of this kind is salient, that the modes of representation are significant" (*TON*, p. 166).

Because of the opacity of literary narratives, Lamarque is sceptical of the view that works of literature could directly aid our conception of self, for instance, by offering paradigmatic character types and guiding our behaviour, or by shaping our lives through their structures and plots (see *TON*, viii). He thinks that literary works could serve as models for real-life narratives, *would* they be read in superficial ways or "transparently," "as works to look through but not at" (*TON*, viii–ix). However, Lamarque argues that when we attend to the works as works of literature—that is, opaquely—the parallels with our lives appear strained (*TON*, ix). He claims that to see fictional characters as ordinary people, and their lives essentially like ours, is to "ignore all essentially literary qualities and reduce literature to character and plot at the same level of banality as found in the stories we tell of ourselves" (*TON*, p. 68).

In this view, Nelson Goodman would be trivializing matters when saying that "'Don Quixote,' taken literally, applies to no one, but taken figuratively, applies to many of us—for example, to me in my tilts with the windmills of current linguistics".[22] Superficial would also be Arthur C. Danto, who says that

> [T]he greatest metaphors of art I believe to be those in which the spectator identifies himself with the attributes of the represented character: and sees his or her life in terms of the life depicted: it is oneself as Anna Karenina, or Isabelle Archer, or Elizabeth Bennet, or O: oneself sipping limetea; in the Marabar Caves; in the waters of East Egg; in the Red Chamber … where the artwork becomes a metaphor for life and life is transfigured. . . . [A]rtistic metaphors . . . are in some way true: to see oneself as Anna is in

[22] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), 103; see also p. 104.

some way to *be* Anna, and to see one's life as *her* life, so as to be changed by experience of being her.[23]

Lamarque claims that when we consider iconic literary characters as abstractions and apply them to the real world, we come "to lose everything that makes them literary in the first place," namely, their characteristics crafted in nuanced fictional descriptions (*TON*, p. 68).[24] Moreover, he emphasizes that everything in literary narratives serves aesthetic (or dramatic) purposes: from an external point of view, the reasons which fictional characters have for their actions are chosen to meet "aesthetic, structural and genre-based demands for works of that kind," which means that in literary narratives every detail is *created* and has relevance with regard to the overall design of the work (*TON*, ix & pp. 78–79).[25]

These distinctive features of literary narratives lead Lamarque to conclude that modelling our lives on literary narratives would distort our understanding of reality and ourselves.[26] More precisely, it would lead us to (i) seek meaning where there is mere coincidence, to (ii) let formal structures dictate action instead of rational choice, to (iii) aestheticize our lives, and to (iv) impose a "false teleology" on our lives (*TON*, ix & p. 30). Explanations based on literary narratives might lead to self-deception, such as confabulation; one's considering oneself as a character in a plot would, in turn, be "self-aggrandisement" (*TON*, p. 29). Moreover, a "literary" view of life could constrain one's action and undermine one's sense of being in control of one's life, as one starts to drift the way demanded by the "genre" (e.g. tragedy) and the "plot"—as in Freudian "fate neurosis" (*Schicksalneurose*). And while literary narratives have a dramatic

[23] Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 172, 173; emphasis in original.

[24] However, when praising the richness of art, we ought not to forget the colourfulness of everyday events, the meaningful tones and nuances in ordinary conversation, gestures and facial expressions. Indeed, one could argue that no *textual* presentation can ever reach the complexity of everyday (multisensuous) human encounters.

[25] See also Bernard Williams, "Life as Narrative," *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2007): 305–314 (310–311); Polkinghorne, "NSC," p. 146.

[26] See also Peter Goldie (*TMI*, pp. 161–173) for our "fictionalizing tendencies," such as plotting out our lives, finding agency where it is none, desiring for closure, and thinking in terms of genre and character; and Strawson ("AN," pp. 441–443) for our tendencies to form-finding, story-telling and revision.

closure, Lamarque argues that real lives "just 'terminate', quite often *in medias res*" (*TON*, pp. 29–30).[27]

A truth is that real-life narratives and literary narratives are radically different. But it is equally true that we, or most of us, have a tendency to give our experiences, and memories and plans, a story form. We use narrative in giving meaning (conceivability) and significance (value). Reality is a chaotic and incomprehensible flow, if we have no conception of causality, and life dull and meaningless without purposeful action. In his classic work *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) Frank Kermode says that we cannot stand the "nauseous and viscous" contingency of reality.[28] We cannot bear the randomness or uncertainty of life but need sense, structure and aim. We strive for a closure—which may be emotional, a mere *feeling* of this being it.[29] This is important especially in traumatic cases. What happened to a missing person? We accept a judgement made of a speculation: so it must have been. The need for stories is existential: literature fulfills—and disturbs—this longing for sense.

Those who are critical of the value of real-life and literary narratives base their criticism on two problematic ideas: first, a narrow and contested conception of narrative that is defined in terms of plot and emphasizes unity and coherence and, second, an idea that the epistemic value of narrative lies in its ability to record events.[30] When we approach narrative as a vehicle for understanding, the matter looks different.

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[27] Cf. Jeanette Bicknell, "Self-Knowledge and the Limitations of Narrative," *Philosophy and Literature* 28 (2004): 406–416 (415). Our lives might resemble novels, "but bad ones, cluttered and undisciplined ones," says David Carr ("Life and the Narrator's Art," in *Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman & Don Ihde (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 108–121 (115)). Paul Ricœur, in turn, reminds one of the distinctive temporality of literary narratives (story/plot distinction, iterativity) in his *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 160.

[28] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.136. See Roquentin's encounter with the root of the chestnut tree in Sartre's *Nausea*. For "viscosity," see also Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 646–662.

[29] See Goldie, *TMI*, 70–72. Noël Carroll remarks that we can think of closure as a phenomenological impression of finality, see "Narrative Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 1–15 (4–5); David J. Velleman, in turn, identifies closure with emotional resolution, see "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1–25 (6–7).

[30] The conception of narrative based on coherence and unity is highly contested in literary studies as well as in social sciences, see e.g. chapters in *Beyond Narrative Coherence: An Introduction*, ed. Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo & Maria Tamboukou (Philadelphia:

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In narrative theory deriving from the hermeneutic and phenomenological tradition, self-narration is seen not as reconstruction but construction. Paul Ricœur, for one, says that "we recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false, fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity."[31] We change constantly, and (self-)narration is continuous (re-)interpretation. The literary critic Paul John Eakin argues that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation."[32] Kerby, in turn, proposes that we should speak of the "pragmatic and relative adequacy" of real-life narratives, for "narrative truths" are "more a matter of facilitating understanding and integration than of generating strict historical verisimilitude." (*NS*, pp. 83 & 89–90) This is not to say that autobiographical narratives are free from the facts (or the author's beliefs),[33] but that from the viewpoint of cognition, narratives are not mere record of events.

In epistemology and philosophy of science, philosophers such as Catherine Elgin, Neil Cooper, and Linda Zagzebski have emphasized the value of *understanding* in our cognitive endeavours and thus come near to the hermeneutic and phenomenological tradition. As they see it,

John Benjamins Pub. Company, 2010) and Matti Hyvärinen, "'Against Narrativity' Reconsidered," in *Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory*, ed. Göran Rossholm & Christer Johansson (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 327–345 (328–330).

[31] Paul Ricœur, "History as Narrative and Practice," *Philosophy Today* 29 (1985): 213–222 (214). Likewise, the critic Roy Pascal claims that "autobiographies offer an unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men. Even if what they tell us is not factually true, or only partly true, it always is true evidence of their personality" (Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 1).

[32] Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 3; see also Eakin (*How Our Lives Become Stories. Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), ch. 2) and Eakin ("NINI," p. 181). For a view of plasticity and procedurality of identities in autobiographical writing, see Martin Löschnigg, "Postclassical Narratology and the Theory of Autobiography," in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Jan Alber & Monika Fludernik (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 262.

[33] Nonetheless, autobiographies depict events of which many can never be verified; and where there have been witnesses to the reported events, their testimonies are also subject to interpretation and assessment.

understanding is more important than possessing individual truths and knowledge. Systematizing roughly their views, they hold that:

(i) Understanding concerns the whole phenomenon and cannot be broken into bits.[34]

(ii) Understanding is seeing and creating connections between bits of knowledge.[35] It is about grasping explanatory relationships in a large body of information and seeing causal and conceptual relations between parts of a whole and between the parts and the whole.[36]

(iii) Understanding is giving significance to individual truths.[37] Cognitive progress is not only about gaining new information but deepening what we already know: evaluating the information we have at our disposal.

(iv) Understanding is (in certain interpretations) non-factive. Some truths may be trivial, whereas some falsehoods are useful approximations or idealizations (ideal gas or H_2O, for instance).[38] The advancement of understanding may require deliberate distortion, and accurate knowledge and understanding of the whole can draw us in opposite directions ("TEU," p. 210).

[34] Catherine Z. Elgin, *Considered Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 123; Catherine Z. Elgin, "Understanding and the Facts," *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007): 33–42 (35–36); hereafter abbreviated "UF."

[35] See Neil Cooper, "The Epistemology of Understanding," *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 38 (1995): 205–215 (213); hereafter abbreviated "TEU"; Catherine Z. Elgin, "Art in the Advancement of Understanding," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (2002): 1–12 (3–5); hereafter abbreviated "AAU."

[36] See e.g. Linda Zagzebski, "Recovering Understanding," in *Knowledge Truth, and Duty. Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 235–251 (241 & 244); hereafter abbreviated "RU"; Linda Zagzebski, *On Epistemology* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2009), pp. 144–145; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 96–97 & 192; hereafter abbreviated *TVKPU*.

[37] See Cooper, "TEU," 206; Catherine Z. Elgin, "From Knowledge to Understanding," in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 199–215; Elgin, "UF," pp. 33–42.

[38] Elgin, "AAU," p. 11; see also Catherine Z. Elgin, "True Enough," *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004): 113–131 (131); hereafter "TE"; Elgin, "UF," p. 38; Catherine Z. Elgin, "Is Understanding Factive?," in *Epistemic Value*, ed. Duncan Pritchard, Allan Miller & Adrian Hadock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 322–330.

(v) Understanding comes in degrees and is characteristically a process (*TVKPU*, p. 196).
(vi) Understanding is largely non-propositional. We understand automobile engines, diseases, and the like.[39] The development of understanding manifests itself in the ability to present new, insightful questions, for instance (See e.g. "AAU," p. 5).

Narrative explanations and understanding seem close companions, as causality and evaluation play a central role in both of them. Narratives convey understanding, as they do not only store information but structure and value it; as Kerby remarks, "in the telling we seem also to be immediately involved in generating the *value* of a certain state of affairs or course of action, of judging its worth, ethical or otherwise" (*NS*, 54; emphasis in original). The psychologist Donald Polkinghorne, in turn, suggests that "storied memories retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it. Narrative cognition configures the diverse elements of a particular action into a unified whole in which each element is connected to the central purpose of the action."[40] Nevertheless, the notion of understanding systematized above concerns primarily the natural world and paradigmatically scientific explanations. What it is to understand oneself or the social world?

Self is a complex aggregation of beliefs, emotions, and attitudes. It would be challenging to speak of such an entity as *a whole*, as the notion of objectual understanding implies. Is the object of self-understanding one's present self—one's uppermost attitudes, beliefs and emotions—or some aspect of the self, a personality trait, a way of behaving, and the "unity of life" only indirectly? Perhaps we should not ask too much from self-narratives or any other sort of explanations of the self. Indeed, some have proposed that even brief narrative explanations could have an important role in enhancing our understanding of ourselves. Daniel

[39] Catherine Z. Elgin, "Understanding: Art and Science," *Synthese* 95, 1993 [1991], 13–68: 14; Zagzebski, "RU," p. 242.

[40] Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis," in *Life, History and Narrative*, ed. J. Amos Hatch & Richard Wisniewski (London: The Falmer Press, 2003 [1995]): 5–24 (11).

Hutto, for one, argues for the value of "small narratives" in self-narration, whereas David Cooper claims that we render our actions intelligible by "little narratives".[41] For example, narrative explanations, by which we illuminate our actions with respect to our values and purposes, are our attempts to understand ourselves and to communicate this understanding to others. Such narratives are often fragmentary, and their unity and coherence are ultimately brought in by the reader or hearer; many of our stories are joint accomplishments and produced in dialogues. Also, we should be modest about the idea of *seeing connections*. None of us is able to name the "relevant factors" that have contributed to making of our self, but many of us can tell illuminating stories of formative events, ideals, hopes and fears, influential persons, and the like, in our lives.

The idea of the potential value of *falsehoods* and *idealizations*, in turn, fits well the common idea of self-narratives. Our earlier misconceptions of ourselves—those that we now acknowledge to be false—are an important part of our self-understanding and history (See *T*, p. 50). Moreover, we make deliberate distortions in order to achieve cognitive ends, the falsehoods and idealizations serving our understanding of how things are (see "TE"). For instance, I may think what I was like as a child and imagine being that child as a basis to understand my temper and ways of reacting today, yet acknowledging that my imaginative projection is a simplification. Of course, one's false beliefs about oneself, such as extreme confidence in one's abilities, may be pragmatically useful; still, they do not enhance but distort one's self-understanding. Idealizations are

[41] See Daniel D. Hutto, "Narrative and Understanding Persons," in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. Daniel D. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–15 (12); Daniel D. Hutto, "Narrative Practice Hypothesis," in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. Daniel D. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 43–68 (52–60). See David Cooper, "Life and Narrative," *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* 3 (1988): 161–172 (165). For the relevance of small stories to personal identity, see also Michael Bamberg & Alexandra Georgakopoulou, "Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative and Identity Analysis," *Text & Talk. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse Communication Studies* 28 (2008): 377–396. Yet, it is open to question *how much* we ought to broaden the concept of narrative. It has been claimed that a narrative fragment or a short narrative explanation loses the idea of narrativity, and that the explanatory power of minuscule narrative explanations is not due to their *narrativity* but *causal* dimension, for instance (see Lamarque, *TON*, pp. 63, 65). These remarks certainly require careful exploration. Nonetheless, the problem might look different if we think narrative in *experiential* terms and narrativity in terms of *degrees.*

valuable when they are used as assumptions or hypotheses in an enterprise that aims at solving out how things are.

The *processual view* of understanding also suits the idea of narrative as a continuous, social project. Jens Brockmeier and Hanna Meretoja aptly remark that understanding is not "realized in a single act of comprehension. Subject to dialogue, conflict, and contest, it is a process carried out through revisions and reinterpretations that are, in principle, endless."[42] Our views and attitudes develop; we aim for the harmony of our inner voices and travel there through success and failures. The stories we tell reflect back to us as remarks and questions, gestures and meaningful silence. Understanding affects the understood, and we wander in a lifelong circle.

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As we think of cognition in terms of understanding, the question of the value of narrative now looks different. But where does that put literary narratives—the paradigmatic narratives? There are various ways to explore the value of literary narratives as for the potential to contribute to our understanding of ourselves and reality. I propose that two aspects that ought to be paid attention in exploring the cognitive significance of literary narratives are *processuality* and *artificiality*. The former relates to our engaging with literary narratives and the latter to our exploring them.

As noted, a chief fascination with narrative is its ability to embody emotional and motivational meanings and connect these to the actor's purpose.[43] Narrative illuminates structural dimensions, development, and change. Peter Goldie emphasizes that an emotion such as *grief* should not be conceived as a mental state or event but a process, "a complex pattern of activity and passivity, inner and outer, that unfolds over time" (*TMI*, p. 56). For Goldie, grief "includes characteristic thoughts,

[42] Jens Brockmeier & Hanna Meretoja, "Understanding Narrative Hermeneutics," *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6 (2014): 1–27 (6).

[43] In addition to Polkinghorne, see Goldie (*TMI*, p. 2) and Gregory Currie, "A Claim on the Reader," in *Imaginative Minds*, ed. Ilona Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 169–186 (174 & 176–177).

judgements, feelings, memories, imaginings, actions, expressive actions, habitual actions, and much else besides, unfolding over time" (*TMI*, p. 62). Given their dramatic structures and the kind of engagement they invite, including the central role of anticipation in narrative imagining, literary works provide us an insight into the processual dimension of emotions, such as the causes and stages of grief and sorrow, and the unfolding of actions like punishment or forgiving. It even seems that certain actions and phenomena invite narrative explanation because of their nature; Ricœur famously states that "the whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative."[44] Artistic narratives help us to understand such complex processes. Works such as *The Iliad*, *Hamlet*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and "The Cask of Amontillado" illuminate the abstract concept of vengeance—its motivational and emotional dimensions—and prompt moral philosophical thought on it.[45]

Yet, we should recall the remarks on the qualitative differences between real-life and literary narratives and notice the textuality of insights in literature; to pay attention how the manner of representation shapes the content of a literary work (see *TON*, pp. 149, 151). Our worldly reflections ought to be sensitive to the textual and dramatic aspects of literary insights—the ideas we arrive at in reading literature. Rather than saying that literary narratives show or tell us *what* vengeance ultimately is, we might speak of an "eye-opening effect" and evaluate our insights on functionalist criteria, by their ability to help us in formulating questions on the philosophy and psychology of vengeance, for example.

Moreover, when we explore literary narratives from an "external" viewpoint, acknowledging their artificiality, we gain insight into literary schemes and techniques of storytelling that affect our everyday stories. Goldie suggests that by conceiving the differences between real-life narratives and literary narratives we come to acknowledge our fictionalizing tendencies, our use of distorting artistic models—and that this is a cognitive gain (*TMI*, p. 151). Certainly, at the age of narrative imperialism narrative competence has become a valuable skill. For example, many

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[44] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 75.

[45] See Peter A. French, *The Virtues of Vengeance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001) for a literary-philosophical exploration of vengeance.

literary narrative devices have become part of our real-life stories and incorporated in our cognitive apparatus without us noticing it. Free indirect discourse, for instance, has entered newspaper reporting, and the "narrative turn" in journalism has lead to instances in which journalists describe third person subjective experiences (based on interviews, inferences from behaviour, or mere speculation). Sensitivity to narrative techniques—a skill we refine in reading literature—is a real increase in understanding real-life narratives.[46] Such acuity also help us to observe and disentangle mythical and rhetorical aspects in stories that surround us and affect our values and behaviour: political speeches, advertisements, entertainment, and the like.

Narrative surely is not the only tool in understanding the self, others, or the world, and the various meanings and values associated with literature surely do not reduce into narrativity. Still, it is interesting to notice how the focus on narrativity reorients the age-old philosophical debate on the cognitive value of art. Narrative foregrounds, for instance, questions of the processual nature of cognition and the distinctivity and artificiality of literature, issues of which philosophers have been aware but which they have too often put in the footnotes.

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[46] For the value of errors in the advancement of understanding, see Catherine Z. Elgin, "Ignorance, Error, and the Advancement of Understanding" (manuscript, Internet).