Narrative, Identity and Modernity

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I

In the introduction to their recent interdisciplinary collection, Lewis and Sandra Hinchman offer some suggestions for the recent 'narrative turn' in the humanities. First, in contrast to theories that impose a mechanistic model of human behaviour, narrative emphasises the active, self-shaping quality of human thought. Second, narrative can be used as an 'act of resistance' to mainstream social science and philosophy which is often insufficiently attentive to the plurality of stories that cultures and sub-cultures tell about themselves. Third, narrative embeds social phenomena firmly within the 'web of communication' out of which they arise (Hinchman & Hinchman 1997, p. xiv). This paper offers a response to the question of why narrative is significant for political philosophy. In the work of the three thinkers considered below (Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Hannah Arendt) the themes identified by Hinchman and Hinchman are taken up and developed in different ways. All three thinkers adopt a narrative conception of the self and all three thinkers argue that political philosophy has a fundamentally narrative character. However, there are important differences in the way the relationship between narrative, identity and political philosophy is conceived. In each case I want to consider what the focus on narrative contributes to understanding identity and what it offers political philosophy.

Rather than focusing on formal properties of what it is to be a person, MacIntyre, Taylor and Arendt move their attention to questions about the modern identity - questions about the beliefs and values that constitute who we are. To develop a narrative conception of the self is to draw attention to the extent to which our identity is shaped with and by others. Such a conception makes questions of ends and beginnings central and foregrounds aspects of the self which have an inescapably temporal dimension such as integrity, authenticity and remembrance. Thus to think about the self in this way is to open up questions about the political realm which are often suppressed in mainstream political thought.

1 The last two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in narrative across a wide range of disciplines including history, law, philosophy, anthropology, theology, sociology, psychology, literary studies and politics. Interdisciplinary collections include Mitchell (1980); Hauerwas and Jones (1989); Nash (1994); Newman (1996); and Hinchman and Hinchman (1997). A useful introduction to the role of narrative in History, Literature, Psychology and social science research is provided by Polkinghorne (1988).

2 MacIntyre, Taylor and Arendt are not, of course, the only political thinkers for whom narrative is central. Others include: Lyotard (1984; 1988); Walzer (1987); Rorty (1989); Nussbaum (1990); and Benhabib (1992).

3 For example, forms of neo-Kantian or utilitarian political thought which focus on a single aspect of what is to be a person such as rationality or will.

4 For example, Rawls insists on a separation of the public and private person and relegates comprehensive conceptions of the good and commitments to ultimate ends to the private realm (Rawls, 1992; 1995). He insists, contra Habermas, that political liberalism does not need to engage either with questions of truth or with questions about the philosophical conception of the person (Rawls 1995, p.150). Even if the practical problems are surmountable here, Rawls' later turn to a more situated understanding of his own project makes this claim highly questionable. For his part, Habermas argues that 'issues of the good life ... are accessible to rational discussion only within the unproblematic horizon of a concrete historical form of life or the conduct of an
To make narrative a central concern is also to raise questions about the nature and scope of political philosophy itself, for once we turn to questions about the substantive origins and ends of individuals, the philosopher has to see his or her own activity as situated in time and space and in relation not to some eternal realm of truth but to an ongoing process of human enquiry.

'We begin to think where we live' as Raymond Williams so nicely puts it (Williams 1989 p. 32). But we also think 'when' we live. In discussing the work of MacIntyre, Taylor and Arendt, I also want to show how each engages with the problem of locating themselves as thinkers within the trajectory of modernity. Jonathan RŽe has suggested that

Philosophy is a branch of writing concerned with a particular kind of experience. Just as elegies are concerned with the loss of people you love, so works of philosophy deal with events when you find meaning slipping away from you, and you recognise the vacuity or friability of convictions which you used to think were as solid as a rock.

(RŽe 1991, p. 82)

MacIntyre's pursuit of integrity; Taylor's search for authenticity; and Arendt's plea for remembrance respond to the themes of fragmentation, disorder, loss of meaning and displacement which run through the work of all three thinkers.

II

And to be educated into the culture of a liberal social order is, therefore, characteristically to become the kind of person to whom it appears normal that a variety of goods should be pursued, each appropriate to its own sphere, with no overall good supplying any overall unity to life

(MacIntyre 1988, p. 337)

MacIntyre's narrative of modernity is constructed to show how it has come to seem entirely natural to us to eschew questions about the ultimate ends of human existence. The Enlightenment project of providing an independent rational justification of morality marks the end of a world view in which morality, law, aesthetics and theology were unified in a complex whole. The key premise of such thinkers as Kant, Hume and Diderot is that there must be some aspect of human nature that would explain and justify moral rules. Yet each comes to a different conclusion about what the significant feature of human nature is and about what moral rules and precepts might follow from it. We are the heirs of the resulting conflict over the foundations of moral enquiry and over substantive moral judgements. What we now call moral discourse, according to MacIntyre, is reduced to 'the invocation of one premise against another' and a 'matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion' (MacIntyre 1985, p. 8). MacIntyre sees the Enlightenment attempt to think about human nature, morality and reason in abstraction from historical and social settings as fatal both for individuals and for philosophical enquiry.

The dislocation of the individual from a teleological order leaves the modern self bereft of a secure identity. The modern conception of the individual is, MacIntyre argues, intimately bound up with the development of the modern nation state and the market economy. Both institutions are driven by the idea of efficiency rather than an overarching conception of the good. Rulers of modern states justify their authority on the basis that they provide security for individuals which allows them the freedom to pursue their individual ends. Defenders of the market economy claim that it is a neutral mechanism that does not favour any particular form of life. So in both cases the good is privatised.

individual life' (Habermas 1990, p. 105). But he is then forced to recognise that the morality of discourse ethics is secured at a price. The dislocation of morality from ethical life will make it ineffective in practice unless some effort is made to reverse 'the abstractive achievements of decontextualisation and demotivation' (Habermas 1990, p. 106).
Liberal societies further compound this fracturing of the self by compartmentalising life into discrete spheres so that norms governing activities in different areas of life - home, school, the workplace, political institutions, places of religious worship and so on are discrete. Thus neither the integrity of the individual nor the integrity of philosophical enquiry are achievable within the structure of modern Western societies. Someone who attempts, for example, to observe the same ethics of truthful disclosure in conversations with their family members, business colleagues and political opponents 'will acquire a reputation not for integrity, but for social ineptitude' (MacIntyre 1998, p. 236).

The history of modernity is characterised, then, by the fracturing of individual identity and the fragmentation of moral discourse. It is not surprising that a conception of the self as an autonomous chooser of ends seems plausible to us. The 'ghostly' self that Sartre captures in his early writing - a self that is nothing but its possibilities - or the emotivist self whose choice of ends seems arbitrary, can only appear in a setting which has already descended into what MacIntyre describes as a state of 'grave disorder' (MacIntyre 1985, p. 2). Under such conditions we should not be surprised that procedural political philosophy has come to predominate. But MacIntyre insists that claims about what is right cannot be made independently of claims about what is good for historical individuals.

Having written modernity as a history of decline, MacIntyre claims it is necessary to jettison the whole ethos of modernity in favour of a tradition which situates both philosophical enquiry and individual identity within a teleological history and which therefore restores the integrity of both. Over the last decade, he has developed and refined a position which he describes as situated within the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition. Aristotle argues that the good can only be realised and the virtues exercised in a political community where citizens share the common aim of leading a good life. Without making the connection between rationality and human purposes and contexts, moral language falls into incoherence. MacIntyre thus seeks to rework Aristotle's insights to provide an account of human life that will give us an ideal of human living against which we can develop an account of the virtues and a coherent conception of the self. His reworked Aristotelianism involves three central terms - practices, narratives and traditions.

Virtues are those human qualities that enable us to achieve the goods that are internal to the practices in which we engage. So what is good is not a matter of subjective preference or choice but is defined in relation to something larger than and logically independent of the individual. Practices are rule governed - those who take part must accept the rules and standards of the practice. The individual's own preferences, tastes and attitudes must be subjected to the common standards of the practice. But individuals are involved in a variety of practices which have different internal standards and goods. How is it possible to order and reconcile these conflicting demands? If this question cannot be answered, MacIntyre's position is no advance on the condition of modern societies described above. The question of what makes a good life is thrown back on the individual and we are left precisely in the subjectivist position that he wants to avoid. It is here that MacIntyre introduces the concept of narrative which allows him to specify the virtue of integrity.

To make sense of the idea of integrity requires that we think about human life as a whole. We can do this if we think about our lives in terms of a unique story beginning with birth and ending with death. Our actions and words become intelligible only within a narrative setting - when we embed them in ongoing projects. Our life stories fit us into a common world in which others can understand the meaning of our words and actions and hold us accountable. Furthermore, our identity is shaped

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5 For an example of the liberal characterisation of 'economic man' see Gautier (1992).
6 MacIntyre defines a practice as 'any coherent and complex form of socially established human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended' (MacIntyre 1985, p. 187).
7 A tradition is defined as 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition (Ibid, p. 222).
by the kinds of stories we are told. Stories give us 'scripts' for what constitutes success or failure within a particular community. 'Deprive children of their stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words' (MacIntyre 1985, p. 216). MacIntyre therefore describes his narrative conception of the self as a 'complex metaphysical conception' which has three central dimensions. First, a person has the same body throughout his or her whole existence; second, identity as one and the same person entails undertaking projects extended in time within a community of others who can call each other to account; third, a person's life has to be understood as a teleologically ordered unity - as a quest for the good of life as a whole. So 'each particular life as a whole exists in its particular parts, in that range of particular actions, transactions and projects which are the enacted narrative of that life, and as the life of that one particular body' (MacIntyre 1990, pp. 196-7). This account is intended to capture the totality of what it is to be a person. In this sense it is very unlike most analytical accounts of personal identity. It is of course necessary for MacIntyre's account that human beings do have bodily continuity, some continuity and reliability of memory, some stable character traits, the capacity for recognition and so on, as well as communally shared understandings and beliefs. However, what it is to be a person cannot be reduced to any of these elements.8

The completion of MacIntyre's moral scheme requires the concept of tradition. To engage in a practice, including the practice of philosophical enquiry, is to be involved in a common enterprise not only with contemporaries but also those who have lived before us. MacIntyre's account of tradition-constituted draws on the work of Thomas Aquinas. What the end or telos of human existence is, is not adequately answered by Aristotle. MacIntyre appeals to Aquinas in order to show how Aristotelian philosophy might be made compatible with Augustinian Christianity. A theological view of a final end is necessary, according to MacIntyre, in order that a full account of morality can be given.

What is at issue here is in part the answer to the questions: in what larger story or stories, if any, is the story of each individual embedded? And in what larger story is that story in turn embedded? And is there then a single history of the world within which all other stories find their place and from which the significance of each subordinate story derives?

(MacIntyre 1990, p. 144)

MacIntyre's affirmative answer to this question raises some difficult questions.9 Given the evident disagreement between modern individuals over what constitutes a good life, how can such a position be defended? One of the most important elements of Aquinas' work, for MacIntyre, is the method Aquinas adopts for approaching the rival traditions of Aristotelianism and Augustinian Christianity. Aquinas does not seek to judge the validity of the claims from a position which takes the Augustinian view to be beyond challenge. Neither does he seek to judge the two bodies of work against some standard external to both. There is no neutral standard of rationality which can be invoked to arbitrate between two rival traditions of enquiry. What he does, is to try to understand each tradition from within and then to identify the kinds of challenges they pose to each other and to look for a way in which these challenges can be answered using the resources each tradition provides. Thus tradition-constituted enquiry has an essentially narrative character. To take the enquiry further one must situate oneself within the tradition and initially narrate how the argument has proceeded so far. MacIntyre thus seeks to defend the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition on the basis that it is the best account of moral enquiry so far.

8 MacIntyre argues that the 'problem' of personal identity only becomes a problem when a certain kind of understanding has been lost. In the aftermath of a tradition which relied on a shared belief in life-long accountability and the teleological ordering of a life, personal identity can only be understood in terms of such elements as bodily continuity or psychological continuity (MacIntyre 1990, p. 199).

9 This position departs significantly from the position MacIntyre sets out in After Virtue in which his account of a narrative quest seemed to leave room for a plurality of goods. Thus Horton and Mendus object that MacIntyre's present commitment to Thomism as a particular tradition seems to entail much more than commitment to the idea of tradition-constituted enquiry as such (Horton and Mendus 1994, p. 13). This is indeed the case and follows from MacIntyre's remarks on the relation between rational enquiry and identity discussed below.
Now, whilst this is a neat solution to the problem of how to avoid both abstraction and relativism in philosophical enquiry, MacIntyre still has to confront the problem that there are now rival and competing traditions with different criteria of what constitutes a 'best account'. This is the task he sets himself in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. He concludes that the tripartite hostilities between the heirs of the encyclopaedic tradition, post-Nietzschean genealogy and Thomism are 'struggles in progress'. 'To continue writing the history of these unfinished debates is also inevitably to participate in them' (MacIntyre 1990, p. 215). What MacIntyre's argument points to here is the relation between philosophical enquiry and the alignment or commitment of the philosopher. The philosopher does not occupy a neutral vantage point but is situated within a philosophical tradition. Although we may change our allegiance as we encounter more powerful arguments, we cannot stand outside of all traditions. To make this point another way, we can consider the question MacIntyre poses about someone who has not yet given their allegiance to some coherent tradition of enquiry and who is confronted with moral issues such as conscientious objection or positive discrimination. Different traditions of enquiry offer rival positions on these issues and rival conceptual apparatus for coming to an answer. How is such a person to respond? The initial answer, MacIntyre suggests, will depend upon who the person is and how he or she understands herself.

What the problems are, how they are to be formulated and addressed and how if at all they may be resolved will vary not only with the historical, social and cultural situation of the person but also with the history of belief and attitude of each particular person up to the point at which she finds these problems inescapable. Rationality and identity are bound together.

(MacIntyre 1988, p. 393)

Thus MacIntyre situates the thinker initially within his or her biographical narrative. We have seen that MacIntyre argues that liberal political cultures produce a particular self-understanding. So how do we escape our initial starting point? Philosophical enquiry begins with problems that arise concretely within the life of a particular individual. It proceeds through a process of dialectical confrontations with different answers to how these problems can be addressed. This is how MacIntyre sees his own philosophical quest. But in the course of this process of enquiry, we can appeal not only to our contemporaries but also to the works of past philosophers. Thus MacIntyre's Aristotelian/Thomism can be seen as both arising out of experience and transcending the limits of that experience. However, resolving conflict at the level of philosophy is not enough. How is thought to be returned to the world of lived experience? Or, to put it another way, how is philosophical narrative to be reunited with biography?

MacIntyre's more directly political writing focuses on what kind of political community and what kind of institutions are necessary for the achievement of individual integrity and for rational political enquiry. The modern state is deemed incapable of providing either. He argues that in modern Western societies philosophical activity has become a professionalised pursuit divorced from both institutional politics and wider social and political life. Despite the fact that government policy can have devastating effects on whole communities, citizens are largely excluded from political debate and decision-making. Furthermore, political debate is not rational, open and systematic but often piecemeal and dominated by powerful individuals or corporations with vested economic interests.

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10 In an interview with Giovanna Boradori, MacIntyre says that all rational enquiry begins from 'some contingent historical starting point, some occasion that astonishes sufficiently to raise questions'. Pre-rational stories become rational philosophical accounts as their adequacy is put in question and new arguments systematically developed. He describes his own encounter with the Gaelic oral tradition, liberal humanism, Marxism and Christianity in terms of an ongoing attempt to construct a better account of moral and political life (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 261-2).

11 'The modern state is a large, complex and often ramshackle set of interlocking institutions, combining none too coherently the ethos of a public utility company with inflated claims to embody ideals of liberty and justice' (MacIntyre 1998, p. 236).
Since he thinks that attempts to reform the political system from within always end in collaboration and attempts to overthrow the political system always degenerate into terrorism, MacIntyre argues that we need small-scale political communities that can act as active sites of resistance. The kind of political community that MacIntyre advocates would embody a shared practical understanding of the relationships between goods, rules and virtues. It would have to be small-scale so that it could be protected from the incursions of the state and the market economy and so that it could allow its citizens the opportunity for deliberative participation in decision making. The only genuinely free markets, MacIntyre insists are those that are local and small scale so that no-one is denied the possibility of the kind of productive work without which they become socially and politically excluded as well as economically deprived (MacIntyre 1998).

Some critics have objected to what they perceive as an authoritarian tendency in MacIntyre's work. This is a reasonable complaint since MacIntyre often seems to be prescribing what the reader should think rather than inviting the reader to take part in the argument. The problems which arise out of modern life are solved at the level of philosophical reflection. Yet MacIntyre is pessimistic about the possibilities of achieving any political resolution to these problems. There can be no neat fit between the kind of local politics he recommends and the politics of the state. 'For the state and the market economy are so structured as to subvert and undermine the politics of local community. Between the one politics and the other there can only be continuing conflict' (MacIntyre 1998, p. 252). MacIntyre's narrative of modernity is a narrative of decline - constructed to show the cost in terms of integrity that modern life demands. Other critics have rejected MacIntyre's account of the Enlightenment; his interpretation of Aquinas; and his characterisation of liberalism. These disputes are likely to be ongoing. Whether, we agree with MacIntyre's assessment of modern liberal society or with his narrative of modernity will depend on who 'we' are - on our own biographical narratives and on the traditions of enquiry within which we think. But at the very least, MacIntyre reminds us that the social and political order is not given but achieved and that it is not achieved without remainder.

III

In the preface to Sources of the Self Charles Taylor describes his book as 'an attempt to articulate and write a history of the modern identity' and to 'show how the ideals and interdicts of this identity... shape our philosophical thought, our epistemology and our philosophy of language largely without our awareness' (Taylor 1989, p. ix). Taylor claims that in order to arrive at an adequate understanding of ourselves as individuals we need to get a clear view of the transformations that characterise modern society and culture. This project of understanding and articulating the modern identity is urgent, Taylor argues, because failing to see the richness and complexity of our situation leads not only to an impoverished life for the individual but to fragmentation in the social and political sphere. He therefore offers us a narrative of the modern identity which attempts to trace the sources that have shaped us and to situate the modern self within a historical trajectory which provides us with a sense of direction and progress. The ideal which guides this trajectory is the ideal of authenticity - or being true to one’s own way of being. In his more directly political writing, Taylor draws on the ideal of authenticity to develop a politics of recognition.

Whilst Taylor agrees with many of MacIntyre's criticisms of modernity, he believes it is possible to recover from within modernity sources of a more authentic self-understanding which can help us guard against the malaises to which modernity is prone. In the first part of Sources of the Self Taylor sets out the philosophical framework for his enquiry. Human beings are, he argues, 'self-articulating
animals’ engaged in a continual process of enquiry and reflection about what makes life worthwhile (Taylor 1989). The relation between identity - understood as an individual’s orientation in moral space - and language is crucial. Frameworks of meaning and ideas of the good, become available for people in a given culture within history. Belief in God or in human rights is possible because there is a religious language and a political language which expresses such things.

Taylor also wants to argue that there is a particular form of linguistic articulation which is essential for human beings understood as beings with a consciousness of their existence over time. We cannot have a sense of self in the present without retrieving the past we have lived. Narrative is described by Taylor as an inescapable feature of human life. An adequate understanding of our own identity requires a narrative account of how we came to be who we are (Taylor 1989, p. 48). Narrative also offers a way of understanding the self as a unity. Taylor wants to stress that to be a self is to have concerns; to be the kind of being for whom things matter. Both past experiences and future hopes are constitutive of identity and it is the ability to narrate these things that provides the continuity of identity. Through narration I make sense of my past and shape my future. What is of concern are not discrete actions but the shape of my life as a whole.

Taylor argues that we can only acquire an identity or sense of self within a linguistic framework of moral commitments and beliefs (Taylor 1989, p. 27). These frameworks of meaning and value which shape identity must be acquired within a linguistic community. This is not to say that individuals cannot achieve a critical distance from their community of origin. We may reject the identity and moral orientation of our original community and give our allegiance to an alternative good but this only changes 'the webs of interlocution' within which our identity is defined. There is no position outside such webs of interlocution (Taylor 1989, p. 39).

The attention that Taylor draws to the deep connection between self and others is particularly important when thinking about the nature of social and political life. One way in which individuals strive to make sense of their own life stories is to try to connect them to a greater pattern of history, whether it be Christianity or the coming revolution or the retrieval or continuance of a national culture. Narrative is the form in which we both structure our life stories (biography) and the stories of the communities within which those life stories are lived (history). In fact, this is what Taylor seeks to do in writing his history of the modern identity. In 'Philosophy and its History', Taylor argues that the activity of philosophy involves redescribing what we do or think in such a way that our reasons are brought more perspicuously to light; or the alternatives are made more apparent; or we are better enabled to take a justified stand to our actions and thoughts. This activity of articulating what has been lost in order to understand where we are now involves going back to the sources or origins of our present understanding. This is why philosophy is inescapably historical and why narrative is a particularly appropriate form for philosophy (Taylor 1984).

Like MacIntyre, Taylor seeks an account of the self which does not reduce selfhood to reason or will or desire. Speaking of the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment thought, he writes

To see a human being as in some way compounded of different elements: faculties of reason and sensibility, or soul and body, or reason and feeling, was to lose sight of the living, expressive unity; and in so far as men tried to live according to these dichotomies, they must suppress, mutilate or severely distort that unified expression which they have it in them to realize.

(Taylor 1979, p. 2)

Taylor agrees with MacIntyre that modernity threatens to fracture this expressive unity. In The Ethics of Authenticity, Taylor claims that we are living through a period in which people frequently experience a sense of loss or decline. What troubles us about modern society is characterised by Taylor under the heading of ‘three malaises’. These are the growth of individualism; the primacy of instrumental reason; and the loss of political freedom. In one sense the growth of individualism is a cause for celebration. Moderns believe that individuals have a right to determine the shape of their
own lives and that they are not bound by an order that transcends the individual (Taylor 1992, p. 3). However, the achievement of this freedom is not an unmitigated gain. Whilst older moral orders locked individuals into a hierarchical order of being and hence were restrictive, they were also the source of meaning and significance. So that whilst we are, in one sense, liberated by their demise, we also experience a sense of loss of purpose and direction. Instead of seeking answers in a divine or purposive order outside of the self, the individual is thrown back on his or her own resources and hence the horizon of significance narrows.

The primacy of instrumental reason, Taylor's second malaise, is linked to this loss of a wider moral horizon. Again there are gains and losses here. Whilst it is a gain that we take individual well-being seriously, the loss of a sense of higher value external to individual happiness leads to a situation in which everything is measured in terms of gains and losses for particular individuals and social goods become secondary. In describing the third malaise of modernity, Taylor draws on de Tocqueville's notion of 'soft despotism'. As people become increasingly self-interested, they become increasingly less active in the political realm which results in a threat to political freedom.

These three modern malaises: the fear of a loss of meaning, the eclipse of ends in the face of instrumental reason and the loss of political freedom should not, however, lead us to adopt the kind of anti-modernist stance that MacIntyre advocates. Taylor is anxious to point out the gains made through the development of modern science and the development of a liberal culture. So how are we to address our anxieties about modernity? Taylor's claim is that we need to recover the moral ideal which underpins the growth of individualism and instrumental reason - the ideal of authenticity. We can then see that what many critics of modernity attack is not the ideal of authenticity as such but debased or deviant forms of this ideal.

Those appeals to authenticity that justify ignoring whatever transcends the self: for rejecting our past as irrelevant, or denying the demands of citizenship, or the duties of solidarity, or the needs of the natural environment... should be seen as a self-stultifying travesty.

(Taylor 1992, p. 22)

The main sections of Sources of the Self are devoted to a narrative account of the facets of a distinctively modern understanding of the good comprised of several interwoven strands: our notions of inwardness; the affirmation of the ordinary life of work and family as locations of value; and the development of a conception of the expressive power of the creative imagination and of nature as source. These historical developments crystallise in what Taylor calls the ideal of authenticity towards which 19th and 20th century individuals strive. If we bring this ideal more sharply into focus, Taylor argues, it can be used to help us reform our current social and political practice.

Taylor argues that in a highly centralised, bureaucratic state, ordinary people have little or no access to decision making procedures. The media that provide the common space for deliberation are often driven by narrow or particularly powerful interests that prevent certain voices from being heard. To be free is to act in accordance with beliefs and values which, after reflection, we endorse as good and which we can claim to be our own. We cannot be free in any meaningful sense if we do not have the capacity to critically reflect on our beliefs and values and if we are governed by norms and rules over which we have no influence. This positive view of freedom links personal with political freedom in a strong sense. Taylor argues that a vital public sphere is essential to provide the space for critical reflection and for participation in the political realm (Taylor 1995a). However, unlike MacIntyre, he believes that an equilibrium can be found between the party-electoral system of the liberal state and thriving, decentralised advocacy movements which have a real possibility of influencing policy. He argues that what we need is a network of 'nested public spheres' and a party-electoral system with 'porous boundaries' (Taylor 1995, p. 286). Only if citizens feel they have a genuine voice will they have a commitment to the political community.

Membership of a political community requires more, according to Taylor, than being accorded basic political rights. Modern societies are complex and the individuals that inhabit them have complex
identities configured in a variety of ways. Ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, religious belief, professional ties, historical consciousness, personal commitments and so on combine to produce distinct identities. In ‘The Politics of Recognition’, Taylor returns to the question of authenticity. Authenticity is described here in terms of the unique identity of individuals or groups which has to be recognised as worthy of respect. To the extent that such distinctness is ignored, glossed over, or assimilated to a dominant or majority identity, the individual or group will suffer harm. ‘And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity’ (Taylor 1994c, p. 234). To the extent that individuals or groups feel their distinct identity is not recognised or mis-recognised, they will be unable to identify with the wider political community.

For people to feel responsible for the future of a country and participate in it, they must be recognized for who they are. Without a certain cross-recognition, the electorate tends to divide itself to the point of territorial separation or, like African-Americans, of moral separation which impacts on the whole society.

(Taylor 1998, p. 253)

The predicament which defines the modern identity, then, is how to negotiate the conflicting demands that history bequeaths us. Once the unity of a theistic horizon of meaning is shattered, we are left with a diversity of goods which claim our allegiance. Taylor’s account of the modern identity and his ‘politics of recognition’ is more open ended than that provided by MacIntyre. Taylor’s narrative of modernity is essentially a story of progress accompanied by potential dangers which, given sufficient vigilance, we can avoid. However, despite allowing that there are many ‘authentic’ ways of life, Taylor’s account is not as open as it first appears.

He describes his work as providing a schematic map of moral sources. Largely these fall into three domains: the theistic grounding of morality; the naturalism of disengaged reason which has developed into scientistic forms of understanding; and Romantic expressivism and its modernist variants. The privileging of disengaged reason over other goods can lead to what Taylor sees as a distorted mode of being. Taylor’s theistic commitment, as he admits, in the end militates against providing a non-partisan view. His own alignment is explicitly set out in the last few pages of Sources of the Self where he claims to find naturalist humanism defective and the theistic perspective ‘incomparably greater’ (Taylor 1989, p. 518) but so far, Taylor has only issued promissory notes for an account of how such a claim might be sustained. In the meantime, Foucault and Derrida, for example, are deemed to be proposing deviant forms of authenticity because they fail to acknowledge those demands that emanate from ‘beyond the self’ (Taylor 1992).

Critics have also raised objections to both the selectivity and the homogeneity of Taylor’s account of modernity. Quentin Skinner has argued that Taylor’s omissions make his narrative of the modern identity overly contrived. Even as an account of contemporary liberalism there is not enough acknowledgement of the objections levelled against liberal values by, for instance, feminist theorists. This relates to a second line of criticism in Skinner’s paper which addresses the issue of power in relation to the success of narrative interpretations. Skinner suggests that what we need, and what Taylor does not provide, is an understanding of what enabled our particular conception of the self to gain victory. Taylor describes the story he tells as a story of epistemic gain. Skinner suggests that historians tell a rather different kind of story. For example, regarding values centring on family life and the ethic of work, Skinner writes

Historians have tended to be impressed by the number of powerful groups that had an interest in patronizing and encouraging the growth of these values at the expense of older and more familiar conceptions of the moral life.

16 Pushed by Richard Rorty to explain why he suggests that anything created by human beings will be merely comparably other (Rorty 1994, p. 100). Taylor responds that deep ecologists and theists concur in their rejection of such anthropocentrism. He believes that there is something which humans have not created and to which they may be inspired to respond. Yet he is unable at this point to articulate what this is and says he feels himself to be ‘far out on a limb’ (Taylor 1994, p. 213).
Thus Skinner raises questions about authorship and authority. Taylor claims to speak for 'us' but would feminists or African-Americans write the sources of their selves in the same way? Taylor recognises that the identity of the philosopher and the narrative of modernity he or she writes are inevitably intertwined but does not address the issue of his own authority to write a synoptic account of modernity.

IV

Once asked, by Hans Morgenthau, whether she was liberal or a conservative; where she was positioned within the 'contemporary possibilities' of political thought, Hannah Arendt replied 'I don't know and I have never known. And I suppose I never had any such position.... And I must say I couldn't care less' (Arendt 1979, p. 333).

Arendt's refusal of such labels does not reflect a lack of concern with the alignment or commitment of the political thinker. On the contrary, she was intensely interested in how the contemporary thinker is situated within the history of Western philosophy, within the history of modernity and most importantly within the history of the twentieth century. Like MacIntyre and Taylor, Arendt insists on the importance of the connection between narrative and identity but, as we shall see, the narratives of modernity that she presents in her work and her understanding of the role of the theorist are very different.

In The Human Condition, Arendt argues that the creation and sustaining of a common world is a condition of the existence of unique human beings. She describes the natural world as characterised by its cyclical rhythms: the movements of the planets, the changes of season and the growth and death of particular individuals within the ongoing evolution of different species. Insofar as human beings are part of nature, life follows this cyclical pattern but human life also has a linear dimension. We have a life-story that runs from birth to death and which cuts through the undifferentiated cycle of nature. The construction of such a life story requires a specifically human world. Arendt distinguishes the effort to sustain life at the biological level (labour); the building and sustaining of a distinctively human physical environment (work); and the disclosure of unique selves (action). The reality of a common world is dependent on the 'common sense' generated by being with others, by sharing common objects, concerns and meanings. Arendt therefore emphasises the need for sociability and communicability. She also stresses that the human condition is one of plurality. Within the world which we share with others we occupy different locations. This is precisely why there is a point to public life. When others act and speak we see and hear from beyond our own experience. So the public realm is the guarantee of objectivity.

The shared world that is created through action and speech has an intangible quality - Arendt refers to it as a 'web' (Arendt 1958, p.183) or 'fabric' (Arendt 1958, p. 95). Thus remembrance is essential if human action and speech are not to be futile. Remembrance may be achieved in many ways but it requires the creation of something durable or even tangible: poetry, painting, the written word, and monuments all contribute to the sustaining of a world over time.

Without remembrance and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfilment... the living activities of action and speech would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been.

(Arendt 1958, p. 95)

17 The other 'conditions' of human existence are life, natality, mortality, plurality and the earth. Arendt uses the term 'condition' to mean something like the conceivable limits of a recognizably human existence (Arendt 1958, p.11).
Human beings have a uniqueness which makes each individual distinct and irreplaceable. The philosophical perplexity that arises when we try to define what human beings are points to our inability to ‘solidify in words the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech’ (Arendt 1958, p. 181). However, the web of human relationships, the inter-action of unique individuals, produces stories and it is through the possibilities of narration that we acquire an identity. The world which we hold in common can extend across generations to the extent that significant stories can be passed on. Our own life stories are shaped by the history of the world we are born into as well as by the interweaving of our experience with others.18 Arendt reminds us that we are therefore sufferers as well as actors. She insists that neither the reality of the world nor the uniqueness of individuals should be taken for granted; for both can be destroyed. Under political conditions which reduce human plurality to a single perspective, both the reality of the world and what is distinctively human in it are threatened.

Arendt does not attempt to reflect on the human condition as a detached observer. Her understanding of her own situation as a political thinker is shaped by the horrific events of two world wars, the holocaust and the rise of totalitarian regimes. She situates herself as a thinker squarely within the history of the twentieth century and takes seriously the task of making thought adequate to events. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Totalitarianism Arendt describes totalitarianism as something more than tyranny and violence on a massive scale - it presents a radical threat to human existence as such. Terror and ideology combine under totalitarian rule to create a mass of undifferentiated beings out of what was once a plurality of unique individuals.

The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing.

(Arendt 1986, p. 438)

Arendt was convinced that there was no philosophical tradition within which totalitarianism could be understood or explained. Thinkers of the modern age, especially those of the nineteenth century, had mounted a challenge to the tradition of Western thought - against its religious, metaphysical and political certainties. But Arendt insists that the implications of totalitarian domination 'go far beyond the most radical or adventurous ideas of any of these thinkers' (Arendt 1993, p. 27). The continuity of the Western tradition is, Arendt argues, irrevocably broken. The contemporary thinker therefore is faced with a 'past that has lost its authority' (Arendt 1993, p. 28). But this break with the past which renders our identity insecure demands greater not less responsibility.

Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us.

(Arendt 1986, p. viii)

For Arendt, facing up to the reality of the twentieth century required something other than conventional political science or political philosophy. Political science, according to Arendt, retreats from the perspective of the human world, seeking an archimedean, non-human vantage point. From a distance and looking at large masses of people we can detect evidence for any number of ‘patterns’. Political science has no difficulty in producing explanations but, for Arendt, the events of the twentieth century need confronting, not explaining. Traditional philosophy is also inadequate for this task because it involves a retreat from the world of common sense to the inner life of the mind which

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18 For an interesting discussion of Arendt's account of the self, see Duvall Jacobitti (1997).
is not shared. In attempting to confront totalitarianism Arendt develops a kind of critical storytelling rooted in her own experience but also seeking to draw on the experience others.  

Arendt did not attempt to write about the causes of totalitarianism because to do so would suggest a level of determination which she wanted to deny. Neither did she attempt to write a straightforward history of this phenomenon because she wanted to claim that something unprecedented had happened. Furthermore, history preserves the past and this presented Arendt with a dilemma - how to write historically about something which she did not want to conserve but on the contrary felt engaged to destroy (Arendt, 1953). Arendt was committed to producing an account that would capture the reality of what she terms 'homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth' (Arendt 1986, p.vii). Benhabib suggests that through her innovative approach Arendt was able to 'do justice to the memory of the dead by telling the story of history in terms of their failed hopes and efforts...' (Benhabib 1996, p. 88). In seeking to discern the 'elements' that crystallised into totalitarianism, antisemitism, the decay of the nation state, racism, and expansion for expansion's sake, Arendt draws on a variety of material. More straightforward historical material and conceptual analysis are combined with biographical narratives of Varnhagen, Disraeli and Lord Cromer; references to the literary works of Conrad, Kipling, Proust and T. E. Lawrence; and accounts of particular historical incidents to construct 'the fabric of history' (Luban 1983, p. 246). Arendt did not write her book in an academic style which suppressed passion, for it was her view that to write about the concentration camps without expressing moral indignation and seeking to arouse it in the reader would be morally culpable.

Even prior to the second world war, Arendt had adopted the approach of examining an issue through the life of a particular individual. Her study of German romanticism took the form of a biography of Rahel Varnhagen. In this study, Arendt deals with the problems of Jewish assimilation in the early nineteenth century. The subject matter of the book is described by Arendt as 'the manner in which assimilation to the intellectual and social life of the environment works out concretely in the history of an individual's life, thus shaping a personal destiny' (Arendt 1957, p. xiii). Rich descriptions of lived experience can provide exemplars which aid our understanding of political events. Such narratives can engage the reader's imagination in such a way that he or she 'sees' something which he or she could not have been told.

This kind of exemplarity is again employed in Men In Dark Times. Here, Arendt takes up the theme of how the power of certain ideological structures can mask even the most shocking events and make us immune to the human reality of those events. It is because of the power of 'speech that does not disclose' that illumination is unlikely to come from theories and concepts that are abstracted from experience. The conviction that the lives and stories of individual men and women can shed light, albeit weak, onto such obscurity comes from Arendt's faith that what actually happens between people can be remembered and recognised. The themes of communication, reconciliation with the past, publicity and accountability run through all of the essays in this volume and are exemplified in different ways by the virtues and failings of the characters whose lives she narrates. In what she describes as a 'digression' in her essay on Lessing, Arendt writes that the particular gifts of the poet and the historian are connected to a more fundamental human ability that we all share.

And we who for the most part are neither poets nor historians are familiar with the nature of this process from our own experience with life, for we too have the need to recall significant events in our own lives by relating them to ourselves and others.

(Arendt 1973, p. 29)

What the poet or historian is able to do is to form a narrative that we recognise as resonating with our experience. This recognition gives the story a place in the world and, as long as that recognition

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19 Arendt herself did not explicitly address the question of her distinctive methodological approach. For useful interpretations of her understanding of political theory as critical storytelling see Luban (1983); Disch (1993); and Benhabib (1996).
persists, a permanence. To grasp the meaning of our own or other actions we must recreate in memory what has happened and capture it in a way which leads us to recognition. Such recognition is also a form of reconciliation with the past. Storytelling cannot be divorced from the experience it narrates. So Arendt concludes 'No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story' (Arendt 1973, p. 29).

Through the placing of actions within a narrative structure, we can try to make sense of the past and give action a meaning. But this meaning cannot be fixed. Human beings act into a world of other actors. There is never any certainty that action will achieve its goal. Furthermore, the diverse perspectives from which actions can be seen will yield up different narratives and there is no archimedean point from which we can settle the question of meaning once and for all. Since the past (or at least some of it) is recorded in various ways, the question of meaning is also open to future generations. To confine the meaning of human actions within the framework of a single theoretical approach denies this openness. So Arendt writes

Insofar as any 'mastering' of the past is possible, it consists in relating what has happened; but such narration, too, which shapes history, solves no problems and assuages no suffering; it does not master anything once and for all. Rather, as long as the meaning of the events remains alive... 'mastering of the past' can take the form of ever recurrent narration. (Arendt 1973, p. 29)

In her essay on history, Arendt distinguishes the modern attempt to discern meaning in History from the attempt to preserve human deeds and words from oblivion which characterises the ancient understanding of history. Arendt's essay on Karl Jaspers takes us further towards understanding her own conception of history. She writes that what distinguishes Jaspers from both Kant and Hegel is that he believes neither in the 'melancholy haphazardness' of political action nor in the existence of a secret cunning force that manipulates man into wisdom (Arendt 1993, p. 96). Jaspers' philosophy is premised on the idea of 'limitless communication' - that meaning can be found and the past made sense of only through the constant extension of the human web of communication.

This returns us to Arendt's understanding of the importance of the political realm. The possibility of that 'enlarged mentality' which is a condition of judgement rests on the sustaining of a common world inhabited by a plurality of unique individuals. Arendt takes her bearings in her work on judgement from Kant.20 The capacity for thought and judgement are dependent on inhabiting a world in which others appear and act and on being able to communicate freely with others. Judgement requires the capacity to think from another's perspective. But this act of imagination is dependent on human action.

It is Arendt's contention that mass societies pose a threat to human action. She therefore rejects the logic of mass democracy since the voter can only consent or refuse to ratify a choice which is made without him and this choice is affected by techniques of propaganda and political advertising which turns the relationship between representative and elector into one between buyer and seller. (Arendt, 1965). Arendt therefore locates genuine political action at the level of ordinary citizens' attempts to act in concert for the achievement of a common aim. The constitutional state safeguards the legal person and sets limits to dissent. But a living democracy, for Arendt, requires political activity which has the capacity to disrupt and challenge the routine operations of the party-electoral system. Through the narratives of extraordinary political action set out in On Revolution, Arendt undertakes a work of remembrance which aims to alert the political imagination to the political possibilities we tend to forget in the face of powerful bureaucratic and ideological forces.

This conception of the relationship between the politics of the nation state and radical political action is not one of a comfortable fit between the two. The problem with Taylor’s suggestion of the need for

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20 In particular, Arendt draws on Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgement and his political writings such as 'Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren'.
'porous boundaries' between civil society and the state is that local political action tends to get colonised by the state.\textsuperscript{21} Arendt’s sense of the relationship between these two levels of politics is more akin to MacIntyre’s conclusion that between the two there is inevitable and irreconcilable conflict. However, unlike MacIntyre, Arendt does not seek the consolation of philosophy. She insists that thought must not only take its bearings from the world of lived experience but must be sure to remain bound to this world. She thus attempts to reverse what she sees as the privileging of thought over action in the history of Western philosophy. Whilst MacIntyre and Taylor construct philosophical narratives which seek resolution in an end beyond the human world, Arendt sees the sustaining of a human world as an end in itself. Such immortality as human beings can possess is achieved through the human act of remembrance.

V

We are now in a position to suggest an answer to our initial question of the significance of narrative for political philosophy. All three thinkers considered above develop a narrative conception of the self which is contextual, dialogical and developmental. This way of thinking about the self is captured succinctly by Anthony Paul Kerby’s suggestion that whilst the body may be seen as the permanent locus of our insertion into the world and the material basis of continuity, it is the events that unfold through this locus that generate the meaning of our existence, and these events and their meanings are grasped in consciousness through narrative (Kerby, 1991). Thinking about the self in relation to narrative entails thinking about how the continuity of identity over time is achieved. The unity of the self is then understood as the unity of character and temporal dimensions of the self such as integrity, authenticity and remembrance are foregrounded. If we think about the self as a distinct individual whose identity is formed and sustained through narration then the self cannot be conceived in isolation from others. The language through which we attempt to articulate our experience is the language of a particular historical time and place. We achieve selfhood in dialogue with others and the possible configurations of identity are historically delimited. MacIntyre, Taylor and Arendt all point to the ways in which identity is shaped by the social and political order - the roles we inhabit, the division of labour, the logic of the market, the political discourse of liberalism and so on. The kinds of selves we are and the kinds of selves we can be are linked to the way social and political life is organised. All three thinkers suggest ways in which the political order can pose a threat to the identity of both individuals and groups and all three suggest that such threats can only be offset by political activity amongst ordinary citizens which, in generating new narratives can challenge the dominant narratives of the state.

Acknowledging the relationship between narrative and identity entails recognising that philosophy is not an activity that takes place outside of established patterns of meaning. The philosopher is situated within a particular history from which he or she draws the resources for critical reflection. However, that history can itself be ‘written’ in different ways. We have seen how MacIntyre and Taylor both seek to situate themselves within the history of modernity and yet produce different accounts of that history and its philosophical resources. Thus to acknowledge the narrative elements of philosophy is to question the status of philosophical enquiry and to raise questions about the authorship of philosophical accounts.

One of the claims that is frequently made on behalf of narrative is that, in contrast to models, causal explanations and abstract philosophy, narrative remains close to the episodes of human life. Whilst philosophical narrative may achieve this aim it does not necessarily do so. Both MacIntyre and Taylor insist that truth is always provisional and meaning is only established within human history yet they both posit an ultimate source of meaning beyond the realm of human events. If we do take the

\textsuperscript{21} Jeffrey Issacs makes this point in his book Democracy in Dark Times. ‘Parliaments, courts and bureaucracies are indispensable, but when civic associations are reduced to being the target constituencies of politicians and the supplicants of judges and bureaucrats, they are on the road to ruin’. Issacs suggests that ‘this tension between civic initiative and mass political organization is the terminal condition of modern democratic politics’ Issacs 1998, pp.121-122.
'narrative turn' in political philosophy we need to remain alive to the dangers of constructing philosophical narratives that achieve closure at the level of thought which can not be achieved in the world. Narrative, as many postmodernists have pointed out is not immune from the problems of abstraction.\textsuperscript{22} Philosophical narrative is at its best when it is a genuine attempt to 'think what we are doing'.

\textsuperscript{22} See for example Lyotard (1984); Derrida (1980).
References


