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A NARRATIVE MODEL OF SELF CONSTRUCTION

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I

»Self« is an oddball for philosophers and psychologists alike. For though it seems phenomenologically familiar, it is a familiarity that evaporates when we examine it closely. Does my Self include my kin, my car, my alma mater? Does it include my pleasure in participating in this New York Academy Symposium? Nor does this indefinability of the limits of Self get less troubling simply by granting that the self is only an idiosyncratic record of what got built into each person as a result of their varied experiences – a function of so-called individual differences. If that were all there were to it, then different selves would be so radically different from each other that the »other minds« problem would become virtually intractable. So, even granting that selves are in some respects constructed, how can we go about trying to understand what it is that, on the one hand, makes selves sufficiently alike to make them intersubjectively communicable, yet sufficiently unique to be distinctively individual.

With respect to the first of these, intersubjective communicability, self-construction seems often to be in some degree a byproduct of other-oriented activities, like finding where you belong in the social order, or justifying to others your intentions, or rationalizing your disappointments. So to know about your Self, your own or somebody else's, you surely have to know about a lot more than just your own inner feelings, or those of somebody else. Self is, as it were, not only inside you, but »in the world«, in some sort of real world. In this sense, it is both private and public.

But the sheer *existence* of a self-concept must surely depend upon some phylogenetic readaptation that makes it possible for Self to develop in the course of ontogenesis. For humans seem to be uniquely able to distinguish »Self« from »world« in the extended way that they do. Do all organisms have selves? Do new-born infants, severe autists, or the severely brain impaired?[2] What is it that develops?

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There seems now to be an emerging consensus on these topics. I think most would agree that the Self is indeed constructed through interaction with the world rather than being just there immutably, that it is a product of transaction and discourse.[3] Most would also agree that its construction would not occur without there being something special in the human genome. To the philosophers favorite question, »How do I recognize that I am the 'same' self as the one that went to bed the night before, or that went to the analyst the year before?« we typically invoke both genomic and experiential factors – that our self system is intrinsic and self-maintaining, but that we elaborate it and reconstruct it with a view to maintaining and stabilizing our relationship to the world, particularly the social world. So robust is Self that fugue states and split personalities make news.

Yet, despite all this, the self, although seemingly continuous, strikes one as curiously unstable when considered over extended lengths of time. Autobiographies, for example, are typically marked by accounts of turning points featuring presumably profound changes in selfhood: »After that, I was a different person«. As many as a third of self-referent sentences in the corpus of spontaneous autobiographies with which I have worked contain markers of doubt and uncertainty about identity – expressions containing subjunctives, modals of uncertainty, outright Hamlet-like questions, and so on. So it may well be that the more temporally extended self poses problems for the maintenance of self-continuity.

Some writers even go so far as to say that the cohesion of the self over long periods poses a special problem under conditions of rapid cultural change.[4] Selves have, of course, always been taken to be representative of their times, as many students of autobiography have insisted.[5] But it may well be that there is a limit to how much world change any given self can absorb without undergoing a pathological crisis. If this is so, then it is altogether appropriate that the New York Academy of Sciences should now be devoting a series of lectures to the topic of Self, the first in its long history. The series itself is probably a sign that the culture's very view of Self is undergoing a revolution, presumably in response to our rapidly changing world. It is altogether proper, then, that we explore this matter as seriously as we can.

II

Scientists, quite naturally, want to demystify Self. For demystification is our job. But the challenge is to demystify it without obscuring its complexities – particularly its seemingly unmanageable mix of the public and the private. For no doubt Self is an odd mix of the »outer« and the »inner«. Our outer knowledge of Self comes principally from statements that other people make – whether in interviews, in replies to question-

naires, in autobiographies, and even by their so-called »self-revealing« acts in response, say, to praise or blame. Our knowledge of other selves must surely be based in some degree on our self-knowledge, because in making inferences about or in »perceiving« other Selves we doubtless rely on our inner knowledge of our own selves. But conversely, as many have remarked, we also model our conceptions of our own selves on what we observe in others. This poses a puzzling transactional problem with which we shall be much concerned in what follows.

Yet another problem. Even though we would all agree that Self grows out of our encounters with events and circumstances of the worlds in which we live, we also know that those events and circumstances do not, as it were, come ready made. They are themselves constructed, products of self-generated meaning-making. The events of a life cannot be taken as its givens; they are themselves self-tailored to fit our growing conceptions of ourselves, even filtered at the entry port by our perception of the world.[6] So the experienced world may produce Self, but Self also produces the experienced world. And part of that world is the Other, to whom we offer the justifications, excuses, and reasons that are so crucial to self formation. So even the interpersonal setting of our self-accounting makes a difference.

The culture, moreover, prescribes its own genres for self-construction, ways in which we may legitimately conceive of ourselves and others. When the Japanese describe themselves, they tend to emphasize their affiliations; we Americans emphasize our individuality.[7] These cultural genres even implicate the ways in which we may deviate from them – the deviant rebel, dreamer, seducer. A perceptive poet I once interviewed began his autobiographical story by telling me that the attending obstetrician at his birth slapped him on his back to get him breathing – and broke two of his ribs, unaware that he was suffering prenatal osteoporosis. »It's the story of my life«, he went on, »people breaking my bones to do me good, which is how it is when you're a homosexual«. The genre of the suffering victim of society served him well, right back to the moment of his birth!

Yet, there is a sense in which these cultural genres of selfhood also provide an external source of continuity to our conceptions of Self. For they give cultural continuity and stability to our place or position in the cultural world. My attention was drawn to this stabilizing feature of self-telling in Philippe Lejeune's searching discussion of what he calls the »autobiographical pact«, a canonical notion of how to *tell* the story of yourself, which, of course, is also a prescription for how to construct one's own self.[8] Here is his version of the pact: »DEFINITION: Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his (sic) own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality«. (p. 4). This almost sounds like the »felicity conditions« on an acceptable self-telling speech act, or more simply, it is a canonical

version of how to think about Self in our kind of culture. In another sense, it is a description of the basic »self-currency« that we bring to the open market of discourse order to trade some version of our self for the distinctions that the culture has to offer, to use the terms of Pierre Bourdieu.[9] On his view, we offer our conventionalized resources of selfhood to trade on »symbolic markets« in exchange for symbolic »distinctions«. Such trading leads to the formation of what Bourdieu calls our »habitus«, a kind of commodity – i.e., I am not only *me,* but a professor, a speaker at the New York Academy Of Sciences, etc.

This preliminary excursion into selfhood leads to some interesting tentative conjectures, if not to conclusions. The first is that self may not be as »private« or as ineffable as sometimes supposed. For whatever else it may be, Self seems also to be a cultural product – even a product of the discourse in which we engage.[10] It seems to serve as much a *cultural* as an *individual* function, particularly in regulating interpersonal transactions (even institutionalized ones, as in the law, where such concepts as »responsibility« further standardize our sense of selfhood, and as when minors and felons are denied civil selfhood in the legal sense). Self, moreover, seems not just to develop in reaction to a given »real« world-out-there, but rather, to our *making* of events in conformity with the culture's semiotic codes and genres. Yet, for all that, the self thus constructed has great stability.[11]

One expression of that stability is that we cannot resist perceiving ourselves as selves, or perceiving others in that way. These selves seem irresistibly to be operating under their own direction, and even exceptions to this rule presuppose it – as when we see somebody or ourselves as »duped« or »coerced«.[12] Our very view of the social world is built around this fundamental notion of selves interacting with each other. We seem to be organized in such a way as to »see« signs of that self-direction everywhere in our own acts and in the acts of others. What are these signs or cues of selfhood that we find so compelling, and how do they combine to give us such a unique view of ourselves and our conspecifics[13]. They must indeed be ubiquitous and redundant to trip off our perceptions so easily and reliably. So, what makes us think we are in the presence of selfhood?[14] I want to turn to this question now, to the cues that we ordinarily take as indicative of selfhood.

III

For reasons that I will make clearer presently, let me propose the following list of cues or indicators of selfhood.

i. *Agency* indicators seem to refer to acts of free choice, to voluntary actions, and to initiatives freely undertaken in pursuit of a goal. They are legion, ranging from signs of mere hesitation to expressions of intention.

They take the form of language, as in modals of obligation; we judge the vicarious trial and error (VTE) of the rat as agentive; and we regard approach-approach conflict in human in a similar way. Indeed, agency indicators are so familiar and so varied, that they scarcely need to be summarized here. Obviously, signs of impeded agency are seen as fitting the same category.

ii. *Commitment* indicators are about an agent's adherence to an intended or actual line of action, an adherence that transcends momentariness and impulsiveness. Commitment indicators tell about steadfastness, delay of gratification, sacrifice, or of flightiness and inconstancy.

iii. *Resource* indicators speak to the powers, privileges, and goods that an agent seems willing to bring or actually brings to bear on his commitments. They include not only such »external« resources as power, social legitimacy, and sources of information, but »inner« ones as well, like patience, perspective, forgiveness, persuasiveness and the like.

iv. *Social reference* indicators tell where and to whom an agent looks in legitimizing or evaluating goals, commitments, and resource allocation. They may reference »real« groups like one's classmates, or cognitively constructed reference groups like »people who care about law and order«.[15]

v. *Evaluation* indicators provide signs of how we or others value the prospects, outcomes, or progress of intended, actual, or completed lines of endeavor. They may be specific (as with signs of being satisfied or dissatisfied with a particular act) or highly general (as with a sense of that some large enterprise as a whole is satisfactory or not). These indicators tell about *situated* affect as it relates to the conduct of life in the small or large.

vi. *Qualia* indicators are signs of the »feel« of a life – mood, pace, zest, weariness, or whatever. They are signs of the subjectivity of selfhood. »Observed« in another they range from posture and pace to highly stylized verbal expressions, intentional or otherwise. Observed in ourselves, they are indicators of mood, fatigue, general activation. When they are relatively unsituated with respect to external events they are notoriously subject to context effects.

vii. *Reflexive* indicators speak to the more metacognitive side of Self, to the reflective activity invested in self-examination, self-construction, and self-evaluation. We say of another that they are thoughtful or mindful,[16] or that they live well-inspected lives, or that they seem shallow. In experiencing our own self, we distinguish between giving matters at hand »very close consideration« in contrast to »shooting from the hip«.

viii. *Coherence* indicators refer to the apparent integrity of ones acts, commitments, resource investment, self-evaluations, etc. We say of somebody else that they seem »all of a piece« or of our own Self that some particular line of endeavor is »very much a part of me«. These indicators are taken to reveal the internal structure of a larger self-concept

and are presumed to indicate how the particulars of various endeavors cohere in a »life as a whole«.

ix. *Positional* indicators are presumed to reveal how an individual locates himself or herself in time, space, or the social order – where one stands in the »real« world. Most usually, positional indicators become salient when we sense a discrepancy between our own sense of position and some publicly prescribed one – as when we act out of role, or somebody is seen as »uppity«.

IV

This seemingly motley lot of self indicators surely suggests a deeper system that operates when we process cues about selfhood.

Such a system can, I think, be characterized more abstractly, in more general, even more functional terms. Let me propose some of the characteristics of such a general system better to elucidate how it generates such a profusion of self indicators as I have just listed.

1. *Innate modifiability*. It seems to be the case that the experience of Self, one's own or another's, is an »output« from some sort of preadapted processing system. This system initially accepts as input only a highly constrained set of indicators, as seen in infancy, or even in higher primates. It includes such sensory triggers as eyes[17], voice qualities[18], and various forms of movement.[19] These early inputs can be conceived as initial »tokens« of a what will later grow into more inclusive category types whose limits, although initially highly constrained, grow larger through some form of learning or linguistic reconstruction. The early set of indicators grow eventually into something like our self indicator list. The range and variety of viable tokens that fit particular indicator types come under the control of cultural equivalency rules once language is learned. Looked at functionally, such a self system seems to fulfill two functions – a species maintenance function, and an individuation function. To these we turn next.

2. *Enhancement of species mutuality*. Such a self-system as we are considering has as one of its major functions maintaining the viability of a species that adapts culturally to its world. For speciation, wherever it is found, is based upon mutuality and enhanced intraspecific communication.[20] In the human species, with its cultural adaptation, this function is served by mutual self-systems governed by the rule that »other humans are like us in being selves«, that other minds operate as ours do, that we can share attention with others, and that as the system grows, we share common beliefs, expectations, and other intentional states. At a more evolved level, the mark of such viable cultural »speciation« seems to require not only mutuality but the establishment of a shared conception of legitimacy: what particular beliefs may be expected of others and what

they may expect of us, what endeavors can be legitimately pursued, how values should be applied, etc. Legitimacy, under the circumstances, even enters into our way of conceiving our own and others' selfhood: it creates a cultural community where there can even be »forbidden thoughts«.

3. *Individuation of self.* In human-cultural adaptation, self individuation is a complement of cultural speciation: we are individual selves in a community of selves. Individuation has two sides – one epistemic and the other deontic. The epistemic is what we each know and believe individually – our own background knowledge and beliefs. The deontic is what we value, expect, care about, fear, love, etc. The epistemic side has to do with understanding the present, predicting the future, and interpreting the past. We expect ourselves and others, as Selves, to be individuated in both the epistemic and deontic senses. Knowing one's own self is to be consistent in a manner to minimize the helter-skelter of immediacy and impulsiveness of response. Being a good judge of your fellows reduces the surprise stemming from the acts of others. The deontics of individuation – what one values and expects as legitimate – is a poorly understood topic. Efforts to understand what others value and believe to be legitimate have often generated such overly intellectualized doctrines as Rational Choice Theory, Utilitarianism, theories of reinforcement, and the rest. Epistemic and deontic individuation (as experienced in oneself or in others) is (quite anomalously) often ritualized or institutionalized in customs and exemplary myths. Individuation is even preserved in a culture's social system, as in constitutional rights to privacy and in such doctrines as contracts and property rights.

Our list of self indicators is a catalogue of the classes of major cues signalling the presence of enculturated and individuated selfhood. *Agency* indicators are doubtless the most primitive. Even invertebrates can discriminate between their shaking a twig themselves and the twig shaking them.[21] Indeed, such »primitive« agency may constitute what Neisser refers to as the »sensory self«.[22] The other Indicators become differentiated as aspects of what Neisser calls the Conceptual Self.

V

Interestingly enough, the catalogue of Self Indicators mentioned earlier comprises what is generally taken to be in their ensemble the »constituents« of well-formed narrative. They comprise, to borrow the terminology of the great narratologist, Vladimir Propp[23], the »functions« of a narrative. Not that a well-formed story needs all of them, as Propp has noted. For they are often redundant and it is in the nature of story that it makes possible reasonable inferences about missing constituents. *Beowulf,* for example, has little to say about the experiential qualia induced by the mayhem it portrays. Nor do Aesop's fables say much about the social po-

sitioning of its protagonists. Fictional narratives, indeed, can be made notoriously more »realistic« by leaving some Self Indicators unspecified and subject to the imagination of the reader.

Recall that a narrative as classically defined by Burke[24] for fiction, by Hayden White[25] for history, and by Ricoeur[26] in general, represents the interaction of the following constituents:

An *Actor* with some degrees of freedom;
An *Act* upon which he has embarked, with
A *Goal* to whose attainment he is committed;
Resources to be deployed in the above, in
A *Setting* affecting all the above, with
A presupposition of *Legitimacy,*
Whose violation has placed things in *Jeopardy.*

Could it be, then, that what we recognize as Self (in ourselves or in others) is what is convertible into some version of a narrative? Any account that lacks indicators of agentivity, or indicia of commitment, or information about resource deployment, or any indication of social referencing or evaluation, or is without qualia, or any signs of coherence or metacognitive reflexiveness, or finally, any indication of the social positioning of protagonists – such accounts are judged to be not only without a »story«, but as with »no one there«. In brief, such accounts are both without Selves and without narrative

One might even speculate that the specialized genres of selfhood to which reference was made earlier represent ways of highlighting different sets of Self Indicators. Emphasis on Agency signals an adventurous self; a focus on Commitment signals a dedicated self; specialization on Resources signals either a profligate or a miserly self; too much social referencing betells the in-grouper and/or the snob; preoccupation with qualia is the self-contained aesthete. Indeed, what some literary theorists[27] like to call the »original autobiography«, St. Augustine's *Confessions,* is famous for balancing all our Self Indicators.

What can we say regarding the modifiability of the self indicators mentioned earlier? What accounts for the protean shapes that our conception of Self takes – the *extended* Self of William James' famous chapter,[28] or Kenneth Gergen's »saturated self«,[29] or Ciaràn Benson's »absorbed self«[30]? How does self get extended, saturated, absorbed, or whatever?

I want to begin our consideration with an autobiographical fragment borrowed from a recent article of my own. I described myself in childhood as something of a »water rat«, for at about age eleven or twelve I began »hanging out« with a few friends at a certain small-boat dock in my home town. We all learned to perform chores for one Frank Henning who, by some unspoken contract, let us in return keep a clumsy old dory

there. We spent a lot of time on the water. The »sea-going self« that began forming then continues even today. It includes such resources as being able not only to tie a few basic nautical knots, but being able to do so in the dark, upside down, and quite automatically. In the course of things I also became a better-than-average celestial navigator, a skill now made obsolete by satellite navigation. Both my automatized knot-tying and my equally automatized skill with a sextant also contribute to my sea-going self. I am, for reasons that totally elude me, very proud of these skills. But that self is not just subjectively in memory. I pay rather stiff annual dues faithfully and dutifully each year to two rather self-congratulatory cruising clubs to which I was solemnly elected on my »sailing record«. I attend the meetings of neither: Their doings embarrass me a bit. Why don't I resign? Well, I'm not sure.

How did I (my Self) get from the »there« of Frank Henning's dock to the »here« of my present rather embarrassed sea-going self? There are some odd archaisms that I have to account for in the passage. What am I to make, for example, about the ironic satisfaction that I get from being a celestial navigator in an age of satellites? Is the irony essential to maintaining continuity? I even know how to caulk a wooden boat in an age when boats are mostly built of fiberglass and other synthetics. Why does that give me ironic satisfaction? It is surely not that I like antiques, or even antique skills. Indeed, I even have a great fondness for e-mail, for post-modern novelists, for good rap – all of which seems to be at odds with my pride in anachronistic and useless skills. How do I get these all together? Or do these things all live in separate compartments, separate Selves?

How many selves are there, anyway? In an almost forgotten volume, Sigmund Freud once proposed that a person could be conceived as a »cast of characters«, as in a novel or play. He then proposed that what a playwright or novelist does is to decompose himself into a constituent cast of characters, and then construct a story that somehow brings them all together.[31] I think Freud's account probably comes closer to what we do in constructing our Selves (or the Selves of others) than to what a novelist or playwright does. Be that as it may, I think his account provides a suggestive model. And it may also tell us something about the difficulties people encounter in constructing a »longterm« self, a matter mentioned earlier.

For the only way I seem to be able to manage the fusion of the »Self« of that twelve-year-old at Frank Henning's dock and the »me« who is writing this paper is by telling a story. And the moment I start doing so, I become easy prey to the library of such stories that my culture has on offer. I can tell the story in the genre of »the adult (reluctantly) setting aside the playthings of youth«. Or I can use the »conversion-displacement« model of the dynamic psychologist with my present self being a disguised version of me at age twelve. Indeed, an afternoon in the litera-

ry stacks of a university library could easily provide me with quite a stock of other story models that might serve. Some of them would be »righter« than others, in the sense of fitting better, or sounding more »authentic«. But none of them would be »true« in any procedurally manageable sense of that word – no more so than any narrative can be true or false.

VII

So let us look a bit more closely into the nature and structure of narrative. Vladimir Propp[32] argues (as already noted) that the protagonists and events in folk narrative are »functions« of the tale's overall structure. It has been widely supposed, as for example by Northrop Frye[33], that there is a highly limited number of such narrative structures, constituting the »genres« of literature. The rich variety of tales in any culture's treasury fall into these limited genre types. Within any one genre, there are many ways of filling the functions demanded by it. The »hero« of Propps »wonder« tale, for example, is required to be a culturally entitled figure, and for the story to begin appropriately, he must have been left to his own resources by some higher authority. He can be a prince, a young genius, a courageous believer, whatever, so long as he is culturally entitled and left to his own resources. In the wonder-tale genre, he must then go on a canonical quest – for the Grail, for hidden treasure, for an elixir, whatever. It is then required by the genre that he encounter a figure with extraordinary power who offers him some form of supernatural aid in his quest: a tireless horse, an endless golden thread, the gift of tongues, the power of foresight, whatever. To work, the tokens that fill each function must create and preserve the narrative coherence of the whole. The chief protagonist must perform appropriate acts that get him toward proper goals, must deal properly with commitments and persist in overcoming them, must ally himself appropriately and deploy his resources fittingly.

Propp's wonder tales are ancient and smoothed by usage. But new genres emerge that are less smooth and determined in structure. The »inward turn« of the novel[34] in the last century even produced new genres, as in the novels of Joyce or Proust or Musil. The changes in narrative convention that have resulted may even transform our notions of possible selves. Charles Taylor's magisterial *Sources of the Self*[35] certainly suggests that it has. All that seems clear is that our conceptions of selfhood, and even our ways of structuring our private experience of Self, get modified to match the changing narrative conventions of the times. The Romantic dictum that life imitates art certainly sounds less upside down than it used to!

VIII

I want to turn finally to a curious question that emerges from what has been said up to now. If selves are constructed out of or modelled on the narratives imposed on a life, how do these narratives get into the life? How do the culture's narratives work their way inward to the Self? Few people, surely, ever write or think out their lives in a completed or even a fully organized narrative. Most lives are recounted fitfully and patchily: in excuses for this act or in justifications for that belief or desire. We like to say that such local patches of a life are derived from some more *implicit* life narrative that we have »in memory« or »in imagination« or somewhere. But I must admit that, as a person who has written one, and has read and listened to a good many narrative autobiographies, I doubt that there are stored implicit narratives. Told self-narratives are more typically purpose-built for the occasion. And most lives in the process of being told are, as already noted, rather notable for their uncertainties, with their turning points, their ziggings and zaggings, their isolated episodes and events, their undigested details. Well-wrought self narratives are rare. When you encounter them, they seem as if rehearsed. Even that broken-boned gifted young poet lost his way once he got into the nitty gritty of his autobiography.

So what stored internal schema guides our self accounts? I think that question obscures the issue. I would like to propose, rather, that self construction is preeminently a *meta*cognitive pursuit – like reconceiving some familiar territory in order to put it into a more general topography. We create the mountain ranges, the plateaus, the continents, in retrospect, by our reflective efforts: We impose bold and imaginative metastructures on local details to achieve coherence. This is not to say that the local details are not experientially real in our memories or wherever. It is only that they need to be placed in a wider context. Every clinician listening to his patients, every priest hearing confessions, every attorney working up a »case« with a client for litigation – they each know this compelling truth. What is interesting about these professions is that their practitioners are provided with appropriate models to help their clients fashion overall narratives out of the bits and pieces of their lives to fit the purpose at hand. The clinician has his theories; the priest his doctrines of repentance and redemption; the attorney his adversarial procedures for establishing culpability and counter-culpability. But in fact we don't even need professionals to help us most of the time. Most of the time we help each other in the process of dialogue.

Why metacognitive, and why not stored schemas or skeleton narratives? There are very few ordinary occasions when we are called upon to reconstruct »larger scale« versions of ourselves and our lives. Mostly, such occasions come when a physician takes our medical history, or when we apply for admission to a university or club, or fill in forms for

a fellowship and are asked our reasons for applying. And, of course, we do the usual self-construction when we offer reasons and excuses, as already noted. We keep these accounts »to the points to adhere to the Gricean maxims about being brief, perspicuous, relevant, and truthful.[36] But a life story and an extended self in the broader sense is not just about excuses for being late, nor about childhood measles. Whatever they are about, we do not often take much time or trouble constructing them coherently and in detail. We seem to believe, each of us, that if called upon to do it, we have the means readily at hand. There may be another reason for this

I believe that there is something both culturally adaptive and psychologically comfortable about »keeping one's options open« where one's life story is concerned. For fixing the story of one's life, and with it one's conception of one's Self, may shut down possibilities prematurely. A fixed-in-advance life-story creates, to use Amelie Rorty's expression[37], a »figure« with no options. In our social world, the more fixed one's self-concept, the more difficult it is to manage change. »Staying loose« makes repair and negotiation possible. Not so surprising, then, that turning points are so characteristic of the autobiographies we finally write or tell.

Why are we so sure we can spell out our lives and Selves if asked to, despite our reluctance to fix our position? I suspect that the illusion of narrative self-constructability inheres in our confidence in the narrative possibilities present in natural languages. Let me say a word about this.

Some colleagues and I had the good fortune of analyzing the bedtime soliloquies of a child, Emmy, between her second and third birthdays – lengthy monologues after lights were out and parents had withdrawn.[38] Many of these were autobiographic, even by Professor Lejeune's definition. It was a year in which a baby brother was born and in which Emmy entered the noisy, brawling world of nursery school. In her soliloquies she goes over her daily life, seeking to establish what is reliable and canonical, what is steady enough to »should be«. She »tries on« stances toward the people and events recounted, expressing them by such locutions as »I wish that...« or »I don't really know whether...« It became plain to us in the course of this lengthy study that the act of self-accounting – at least, short-term accounting – is acquired almost with the acquisition of language itself.

So something like a »natural language« of artless autobiography seems to be accessible to us from early on in the form of connectives, causals, temporal markers, and the like. But to employ these narratively friendly linguistic forms to create a coherent and extended self-story requires something more than just linguistic skill. It also requires narrative skill and a stock of narratives or narrative components. Giving excuses and reasons for particular acts and justifying our desires does not provide us with such equipment. Such episodic self-accountings do not provide us the means for fitting into a wider cultural surround, or even

for becoming acquainted with the cultural affordances on which our existence depends. All of this requires a more extended form of learning, which we seem rather reluctant to do, except under special conditions.

What then leads people to »move up« to a more comprehensive, more temporally extended, more narratively structured, mode of self-accounting? Why do we ever construct more extended versions of Self, even granting our cautious attitude toward them mentioned earlier? One can easily oversimplify answers to these questions by falling back on clichés – like the alleged need of people to justify their lives when they imagine themselves to be under the gun of criticism, as with the accused politician's apologia so familiar in our times; or the cliché of the narcissist's need to display; or the religious cliché that people, seized by guilt, need to expiate themselves. I think we can do better than clichés.

Indeed, the major impetus to more extended autobiographical self-accounting may be suggested by the very nature of the narratives that we choose to use when we do more extended accounting. Many students of narrative have noted – notably, Kenneth Burke, Hayden White, and William Labov[39] – that the very *engine* of narrative is Trouble[40], sensed trouble, or what we referred to before as *jeopardy.* Narrative, as we know, begins with an explicit or implicit indication of a stable canonical state of the world, then goes on to an account of how it was disrupted, elaborates on the nature and consequences of the disruption, and climaxes with an account of efforts to restore the original canonical state, or to redress its violation. It is specialized for dealing with Troubles created by departures from legitimacy – a meta-genre for encompassing the travails of jeopardy.

Trouble, then, may not only be the engine of narrative, but the impetus for extending and elaborating our concepts of Self. Small wonder that it is the chosen medium for dealing not only with Trouble, but for constructing and reconstructing the Self.

James Young reports that many concentration camp inmates during the Holocaust were obsessed with autobiographically recording the horrors they were living through and often risked their lives to do so secretly.[41] These memories are gripping, but few go beyond mere witness, for to achieve the detachment required for metacognition in the daily life of Auschwitz or Ravensbruck was virtually impossible, for it was precisely detachment that these *Lager* were designed to destroy. But some succeeded, Primo Levi and a few others. Take this excerpt from Levi, in which he is trying to understand what he is experiencing while attempting to reformulate his sense of Self. Tragically, he did not fully succeed, for he committed suicide in despair several years after this was written. But the excerpt tells more about indicators of Selfhood than can any scholarly prose. It is about the author's life at a chemical factory close to Auschwitz where he was sent to work as a slave-chemist, and it is told

preparatory to an account about stealing cerium rods from the factory, returning each night to trade them (as lighter flints) with the camp guards for foods and favours at Auschwitz.

> I was a chemist in a chemical plant, in a chemical laboratory (this too has been narrated), and I stole in order to eat. If you do not begin as a child, learning how to steal is not easy; it had taken me several months before I could repress the moral commandments and acquired the necessary techniques, and at a certain point I realized (with a flash of laughter and a pinch of satisfied ambition) that I was reliving – *me,* a respectable little university graduate – the involution-evolution of a famous respectable dog, a Victorian, Darwinian dog who is deported and becomes a thief in order to live in his Klondike *Lager* – the great Buck of *The Call of the Wild.* I stole like him and like the foxes: at every favorable opportunity but with sly cunning and without exposing myself. I stole everything except the bread of my companions.[42]

Perhaps I have chosen too extreme an example. We obviously do not need such extremity to prompt the process of self-reconstruction. Consciousness raising, which contains a large element of self-reconstruction, is often an accompaniment of being marginalized, placed outside the reassurance of a mainstream. It is when Self is no longer able to function in a fashion that relates us to others and, indeed, to our prior conceptions of ourselves, that we turn to renewed self-construction. If one's self-concept neither serves to give us requisite individuation nor requisite mutuality with the other human beings on whom we depend, it is then that we set out to change Self.

In suggesting that trouble is what impels us to refashion Self, I do not mean to imply that trouble is something decreed by fate, or that it simply comes upon us through bad luck – though there must surely be troubles of that kind, like death itself. Some human beings have a sensibility that permits or impels them to see troubles where other see only a texture of ordinariness. Whether this sensibility comes by dint of intelligence, temperament, or imagination, it seems to drive those gifted with it to deeper Selfhood, to greater instability in holding fast the limits of selfhood, or to both in some uncomfortable mix. The gifted writer, Eudora Welty, calls this sensibility »daring« and she ends her remarkable memoir[43] with these words: »A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within«.

It is in facing troubles, real or imagined, that we fashion a Self that extends beyond the here-and-now of immediate encounters, a Self better able to encompass both the culture that shapes those encounters and our memories of how we have coped with them in the past. The anomaly in all this, and perhaps it is the burden of our human species, is that to ex-

tend and elaborate our version of selfhood, either for ourself or for others, is to make the task of self-construction the more difficult. Metacognition maybe the source of our self-making, but it is not an easy skill.

Perhaps as Kierkegaard hinted, the difficulty lies in the fact that life is lived forward, encounter by encounter, but Self is constructed in retrospect, metacognitively.

In conclusion, then, the Self is both outer and inner, public and private, innate and acquired, the product of evolution and the offspring of narrative. Our self-concepts are enormously resilient, but as we have learned tragically in our times, they are also vulnerable. Perhaps it is this combination of properties that makes Self such an appropriate if unstable instrument in forming, maintaining, and assuring the adaptability of human culture.

NOTES

1. A paper given at the New York Academy of Sciences on 20 March 1995 as part of a series devoted to »The Self«.
2. For a fuller discussion of the interplay of cultural and biological factors in the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of Self construction, see Jerome Bruner and David A. Kalmar (in press), »Self in biological and cultural perspective«, in Michel Ferrari and Robert J. Sternberg, *Self-awareness: Its nature and development,* New York: Guilford Press; also Jerome Bruner, »Self reconsidered«, an invited address to the annual meeting Of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, 8 June 1995; also John Campbell (1994). *Past, space, and self.* Cambridge: MIT Press.
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14. I do not mean to take a stance on the »reality« of the Self by posing these questions; such ontological issues need not concern us now. In certain ways, the questions posed are akin to Turing's test of how you can tell whether it is a human operator or a computer that you are interacting with.
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