

Rhetoric, Narrative, and the Rhetoric of Narratives: Exploring the Turns to Narrative in Recent Thought and Discourses

by
L. Gregory Jones

*Department of Theology
Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland*

Abstract: This investigation of narrative in a variety of disciplines offers more than a survey. If the current intense interest in narrative represents yet another example of Romantic subjectivity asserting its claims against Enlightenment rationalism, then it is merely faddish. A deeper account of narrative's significance is being made, however. It insists that there is no non-narrative way of apprehending reality. For actions to be intelligible they require location in a coherent tradition. Such traditions are sustained by master narratives. Hence, narrative analysis challenges the very distinction between public rationality and private subjectivity; is anti-foundationalist and relativist; and recognises the plurality and particularity of major narrative traditions. Treating postmodernism, communications theory, disputes about non-narrative modes of discourse, and the fragmented character of contemporary narrative-based communities, the author focuses attention on what is genuinely revolutionary in the turn toward "story." Such theorists as Frederic Jameson, Alasdair MacIntyre, James Gustafson, John Milbank, and Hayden White are discussed.

THERE IS A NEED IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT and discourse for a narrative that explains how and why people have become interested in narrative. Or, as I shall argue in what follows, there needs to be some account given as to why no single narrative can adequately encompass all of the interest in narrative that has surfaced. After all, while there has been a surge of interest in narrative in a variety of fields, there have been a variety of turns to narrative—and with somewhat mixed results.

In this essay I want to provide a sketch of the diverse ways in which people have appealed to narrative. In the first section, I describe appeals to narrative that, while criticizing Enlightenment rationalism, still remain within the realm of modern epistemologies. In the second section, I explore appeals to narrative epistemology that seek to move beyond modernity. And in the third section, I explore the interrelations among narrative epistemologies, social settings, and human life.

The Significance of Narrative Within Modernity

That narrative is "in" on the intellectual scene is undeniable. But is this interest in narrative simply the latest in a long line of soon-to-be passing fads? Or is it a notion without which human life and thought is impoverished? The answers to both of these questions, I suspect, is a carefully nuanced "yes." That is, there are some features of the interest in narrative that are somewhat faddish, soon to be eclipsed by some other trend.

Take, for example, much of the fascination around "story." Its appeal derives, at least in part, from the way in which it is a reaction against, and seems to provide a counterbalance to, the dominance of Enlightenment rationalism in modernity. For example, throughout much of the twentieth century, the reigning presumption in a variety of fields has been that a narrative form is inessential, and perhaps even destructive, to the task of providing the best possible explanation of "x" (where "x" can be filled in with whatever a particular discipline is investigating). A "scientific" explanation/argument is all that is needed. From an Enlightenment perspective, explanations are concerned with public, objective facts.

Even so, others have thought that such explanations introduce an aridity into disciplinary discourses. So there has also been a Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment. Whereas the Enlightenment's concern has been with public, objective facts, the Romantics have celebrated private, subjective values. Modernity has been marked by the struggle between the Enlightenment and Romanticism and the concomitant bifurcations of public and private, objects and subjects, facts and values, reason and emotion.

Hence at least some of the interest in narrative is a reflection of the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment. But why has this Romantic interest in narrative become so popular in recent decades? After all, the conflicts between the Enlightenment and Romanticism are a couple of centuries old, but the real surges of interest in narrative have been considerably more recent. I

think there are (at least) three reasons. The first reflects the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment *within* modernity, while the second two reasons reflect attempts to move *beyond* the strictures of modernity.

First, the early decades of the twentieth century were the time when Enlightenment conceptions attained a hegemonic status. Positivist conceptions of science and analytic philosophy seemed to put other areas of inquiry on the defensive. As a response to the claims and presumptions of the positivists, there has been an emphasis on narrative's importance in articulating private, subjective values.

What we really need, so some people have suggested, is to tell more stories. Those stories can help us understand our subjectivity, help us form particularistic (and therefore private) communities, help us form and illumine our "values," and help us nurture our emotions. Stories are not only something that we read to put our children (and even ourselves) to sleep or to help the time pass on the beach, they are important in providing a counterbalance to the world of reason and objective, public facts. For example, theorists such as Stephen Crites (1989), Paul Ricoeur (1984-88), and Charles Taylor (1989) have argued on phenomenological grounds that our subjective experience is narratively ordered. In diverse but overlapping ways, such theorists contend that human existence and human experience are fundamentally narrative in form. I will return to the relation of narrative and human existence in Section III; at this point, I simply want to identify appeals to narrative which link the notion to an explication of human subjectivity.

Moreover, many people are willing to grant that narrative is important to understanding a person's private life, or even the life of a particular community. But that understanding, so it is suggested, is inadequate for the public world. In public settings other forms of understanding and discourse must prevail. Such is the view of the ethicist James Gustafson. Narrative discourse is important because people's "outlooks, values, and visions" are shaped by stories told by their moral communities. Even so, it is only one of four relatively independent types of moral discourse, and as such it needs to be complemented by the more public discourses he identifies as ethical, policy, and prophetic (Gustafson, 1990). I shall return to the issue of narrative as a form of discourse in Section II: at this point, I simply want to identify appeals to narrative which link the notion to essentially the private~or at least non-public~realm.

But perhaps the most significant turn to narrative within modernity has been as a way of forming our "values" and stimulating our imaginations. Such arguments have been advanced by people such as the psychiatrist Robert Coles (1989) in *The Call of Stories*, the lawyer James Boyd White (1985) in *Heracles' Bow*, and several of the lawyers who contributed to a symposium on the "Pedagogy of Narrative" that comprises a recent issue of the *Journal of Legal Education*.¹ There is also the recent surge of interest in the linkages between literature and various fields: religion and literature, philosophy and literature, law and literature, and medicine and literature.

These turns toward narrative, indebted as they are to Romanticism's focus on the world of subjective, private values, should not be denigrated in principle. While there is much that has been written about "stories" that is trivial and/or bad, such scholars as those identified above (among others) have provided some rich reflection on the ways in which stories/narratives help to form our personal lives and stimulate our thoughts, feelings, and imaginations.

Even so, *if* this is what the turn toward narrative is ultimately, or even primarily, about, then the surge of interest is likely to fade. This is because the arguments tend to leave the bifurcations of modernity in place. This turn toward narrative thus *reminds* us of the value of stories/narratives for our lives. The emphasis on narrative serves as a therapy for overcoming the obsessions of rationalism. But once we have been so reminded of the value of stories/narratives, it would seem, we can return to other more traditional preoccupations and arguments in the "public" realm.

Whereas this first reason for narrative's recent popularity is a reaction against modernity from *within* modernity, a second reason for narrative's popularity can be traced to its epistemological significance that moves beyond modernity.

The Epistemological Significance of Narrative

The movement that has come to be known as "foundationalism" reflected an attempt to discover secure, certain, and universal foundations for knowledge. But foundationalist arguments have been notoriously difficult to sustain. Diverse philosophers have criticized particular attempts to provide such universal foundations, while others have simply determined that the search itself is illusory and thus not worth pursuing. Common to these anti-foundationalist arguments is the rejection of the claim that there is a neutral, "god's eye" standpoint from which to adjudicate competing conceptions of knowledge.

By contrast, because there is no "neutral" realm, people have argued that there are only diverse, competing yet overlapping narratives that both present and represent "reality." On this view, narrative is not so much a literary form as an epistemological category that moves beyond and/or away from modernity's bifurcation of objects and subjects, public and private, facts and values, reason and emotion. So, for example, the theologian John Milbank (in press) has argued:

In postmodernity there are infinitely many possible versions of truth, inseparable from particular narratives. Objects and subjects are, as they are narrated in a story. Outside a plot, which has its own unique, unfounded reasons, one cannot conceive how objects and

subjects would be, nor even that they would be at all. If subjects and objects only are, through the complex relations of a narrative, then neither objects are privileged, as in pre-modernity, nor subjects, as in modernity. (p.1)

On this view, there is no “neutral” realm of objective, public facts over-against subjective, private values. What we know inevitably comes to us through some sort of narrative(s).

The claim for narrative’s epistemological primacy does not entail any particular judgments about the kinds of narratives that are told. Take, for example, Hayden White’s criticisms of narrative in relation to historiography. He seems to argue against the place of narrative in “the representation of reality.” He argues that the world does not present itself to perception in the form of “well-made stories.” Rather, it presents itself more in the form of annals and chronicles, “either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude.” Even more strongly, he attributes the notion that sequences of real events have the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events to an origin in “wishes, daydreams, reveries” (1987, p. 24). Narrative, according to White, involves the attempt to put across a morality, typically in the interest of hegemonic power and manipulation.

There are two ways to read the force of White’s claim. The stronger version is that “reality itself” is not narratively ordered but “really is” a matter of chaos, random sequences, “one damn thing after another.” This version of his argument ought to be rejected for the simple reason that there is no non-narrative way of apprehending “reality itself.”

But there is a way of making sense of White’s position by positing a weaker claim. White rejects those narratives which try to put across a morality in the interest of hegemonic power and manipulation, and so he posits a counter-narrative tradition (one also inhabited by figures such as Sartre) which refuses to allow life to be understood in terms of a coherently ordered plot. White’s counter-narrative would thus be understood not as a rejection of narrative *per se*, but rather a rejection of particular conceptions of narrative.

The claim for the epistemological significance of narrative is that what we know, and what we take it that we know, come to us through the diverse, competing yet overlapping narratives of particular cultures, practices, and traditions. Our understanding of ourselves as well as the physical world is inextricably linked to those diverse, competing yet overlapping narratives. This is as true of White’s claim that “reality” presents itself to us as a series of relatively arbitrary sequences as it is of Jewish messianism, Christian eschatology, or Marxist utopianism. Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1989) account of epistemological crises in the philosophy of science, and theologians David Burrell and Stanley Hauerwas’s argument (1989) about the nature of moral rationality, show the significance of narratives for epistemology.

Of course, one of the relevant and important questions is who has the power to write and tell particular narratives.² Once we recognize that there are diverse and competing narratives, then we also need to recognize the interests and purposes people have for narrating their lives, social settings, and the world in one way rather than another. Thus there has been an increasing interest in narratives of women, blacks, the poor, and others who have been marginalized by the dominant conceptions of epistemology in modernity. But rather than allowing such narratives to be confined to the margins of “private,” “subjective” experience, narrative epistemologies argue for the importance of recovering and discovering those voices so they are empowered as people who make claims to knowledge.

Though narratives inevitably involve questions of power, they ought not be reduced to power. Narratives are written, read, and told in the context of particular social, political, and rhetorical contexts. Those narratives not only reflect relations of power, they also seek to persuade people that the narratives provide a better, more comprehensive account of the issues at stake.

This claim about the epistemological primacy of narrative recognizes the provisionality of all of our theories about, and constructions of, our lives and the world. That is, our narratives are always subject to criticism, revision, and the arguments of competing narratives. Even so, this emphasis on narratives does not necessarily entail a rabid relativism. Judgments can be made between narratives, and they can be rationally compared in terms of their persuasive force—though not from some illusory neutral, narrative-independent standpoint. The criteria that are used in making judgments between narratives include (but are not exhausted by) comprehensiveness, ability to explain and/or account for weaknesses or problems in rival narratives, as well as moral and political judgments about the character of the people who are the adherents as well as the protagonists and victims of those narratives.

The relativist fear relies on a faulty epistemology which worries that if we give up “objectivity” there will be nothing left but “subjectivity.” But we need not choose between them; the modern problem of a rabid relativism is dissolved once we recognize that subjects and objects are discovered in and through particular narratives. Arguments may be relative to particular narrative traditions, but that does not mean that then critical judgments cannot be made.

There is a dispute, however, among proponents of narrative that has to do with the question of how critical judgments are made between traditions. The dispute centers upon the question of whether narratives imply a teleology. On one level, this involves the issue of whether the notion of narrative commits a person to an at least partially determinate conception of the Good. This seems to be MacIntyre’s argument both in terms of ethics and the philosophy of science. Insofar as there is such a commitment, such standards as comprehensiveness and the ability to account for the strengths and weaknesses of rival

narratives are important for developing critical judgments.

But on another level, there is a dispute about teleology between such figures as Fredric Jameson (1981, 1984) and Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) that has to do with the relations between epistemology and the social circumstances of capitalist modernity. Jameson argues that narratives do imply a teleology. According to Jameson, such teleology is most adequately understood in terms of the great “master-narratives” of legitimation provided by, for example, Greek fatalism, Marxist utopianism, or Christian redemptionism.³

By contrast, Lyotard posits the effective “disappearance” of such “master-narratives” in favor of a plurality of “local” narratives in conflict with one another. He does this not only because he thinks that in modernity such master-narratives *have* disappeared (because people have stopped believing in them); they also *should* disappear (because of the violence that is done in encapsulating “local” narratives in a master-narrative). Conflicts between “local” narratives may lead to critical judgments, according to Lyotard, but they ought not in any way undermine the plurality of discourses and narratives.

Jameson (1984) responds by positing not the disappearance of master-narratives but rather their “passage underground” where they have a “continuing but now *unconscious* effectivity as a way of ‘thinking about’ and acting in our current situation” (xii).⁴ Whereas Lyotard is content with a conflict of a variety of “local” narratives, Jameson is committed to arguing that the Marxist master-narrative is able to provide a more comprehensive account than its rivals.

While this dispute certainly involves issues of power, it is not necessarily the case that adherence to a “master-narrative” inextricably involves the deployment of rhetorics of social and political power. That adherents of master-narratives have done so is undeniable, but the issues at stake are logically separable.

Our rhetorics, our judgments, and even our knowledge of ourselves and of the world are thus inextricably linked to particular narrative traditions. But this does *not* mean that our discourses or even our reflection *must* be narratively structured. To be sure, the rhetorics of narrative discourses are crucial for our patterns of thinking, acting, and feeling. That is at least part of the reason why the emphasis on the narrative traditions of peoples on the margins has been so important.

Moreover, some of the interest in narrative discourses in, for example, historiography or biblical studies, has arisen because a narrative can provide a “truth”—or, less strongly put, a “perspective”—that is not reducible to the sum of its parts (Roth, 1989). This is, I think, one of the central claims of Hans Frei’s (1974) influential *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei argues that the tradition of reading the Bible as a realistic narrative told a tale whose truth is not reducible to the truth of its component parts. This emphasis on the ways in which narratives provide a distinctive perspective is also true of some of the recent attempts to read the Bible in terms of its literary “wholes” rather than the historical-critical methods that have been primary in the past.⁵

At the same time, however, non-narrative forms of discourse and reflection are both possible and, at least in some circumstances, important. For example, the theologian Nicholas Lash (1989) has argued that narratives present issues and questions for which it is then the task of metaphysics to provide critical reflection. But such non-narrative modes of discourse and reflection presuppose the larger narrative contexts. That is, such non-narrative modes of critical reflection occur within the larger context of the presumptions of a narrative tradition.

Earlier I identified James Gustafson’s proposal that there are four types of moral discourse in medicine, one of which is narrative. I also suggested that Gustafson’s conception of narrative remains captive to modernity’s bifurcations of facts and values, objects and subjects, public and private. I am now in a position to show more clearly why Gustafson’s conception of discourses fails to move adequately beyond modernity.

This is because Gustafson mistakenly presumes that these other forms of discourse are narrative-independent. Take, for example, Gustafson’s conception of “policy” discourse.⁶ That would seem to be a clear case of a mode of discourse that is narrative-independent. After all, people gather together to formulate specific rules and policies that deal with a particular area of social life such as medicine.

But what Gustafson fails to recognize is that while policy discourse is non-narrative, it is clearly not narrative-independent. Either one of two things happens in non-narrative discourses in general, and policy discourse in particular, both of which are decisively influenced by a narrative conception of epistemology.

First, when genuine agreement is reached in a non-narrative discourse, it typically happens because that discourse presupposes a range of agreements within a narrative tradition or overlapping agreements among narrative traditions. So, for example, in biblical studies Stephen Fowl (1990) has suggested that Paul employs the non-narrative discourse of “Jesus Christ is Lord,” which draws its coherence and its intelligibility from a larger narrative account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (p. 200). That is, non-narrative formulations of notions, rules, and principles depend on the shared agreements which exist in a larger narrative tradition or in the agreements of overlapping narratives.

Second, and what typically happens in non-narrative policy discourses in American life in general and medicine in particular, is that those discourses mask the narrative backgrounds (fragmented though they may be) which inform the positions of the adherents. Because there are pressing practical problems that require action, we mask the fundamental disagreements which exist at the level of narrative traditions. Unfortunately, the result of this masking is either the formulation of policies or moral principles whose range of application is indeterminate (so that people of diverse narrative traditions can agree on the principle involved without committing themselves to particular actions) or of policies which express platitudes whose content is virtually

empty (e.g., “always act in the patient’s best interest”).⁷

The mistake which Gustafson and others make is in failing to recognize that non-narrative forms of discourse are *not*, if they are intelligible, narrative-independent. They provide the occasions for other kinds of discussion or reflection, but their intelligibility presupposes larger narrative contexts. Thus, just as there is no neutral “reason” which provides access to objective, public facts, so there is no neutral “discourse” in which adherents of rival narrative traditions address each other.⁸

Indeed the communications theorist Walter Fisher (1987) has recently argued that narrative provides an alternative paradigm to a “rational world” conception of communication. Fisher contends that, contrary to the illusory conception of a “neutral” rationality, what counts as a “good reason” for acting, thinking, or feeling in this way or that is most determinatively influenced by the narratives of cultures, practices, and traditions of which people are the heirs and/or adherents. Further, Fisher argues that such “good reasons” are articulated, defended, and revised in the rhetorical contexts of democratic public moral argument. As Fisher describes the issue, “public” moral arguments are conducted through the rhetorics of competing yet overlapping narratives.⁹

But what is it, then, that accounts for the popularity of positions like Gustafson’s and the extraordinary impact of modes of discourse which seem to deny any relation to narrative? Are people simply still captive to the illusions of modernity and its constructions of “public” and “private”? That is probably at least partly true. But could it also be that notions of narrative discourses seemed more compelling in the relatively homogenous social settings of people like Aristotle, and that in contemporary societies such a sense of narrative discourses has either been lost or hopelessly fragmented because we are the heirs of too many conflicting narratives?

There is, I think, considerable force to this last question. Part of the problem of understanding appeals both to narrative’s significance and its popularity is that contemporary industrialized societies, much less our own lives, seem to be so fragmented that it is difficult to conceive of what narrative unity, or even narrative coherence, might entail. I will return to this issue in the next section. Here, however, I want to note a proposal by the communications theorist Thomas Frenzt which grapples with the issue of fragmentation.

Frenzt (1988) draws on the conceptions of narrative found in MacIntyre (1984) and Fisher (1987) and the tradition of Aristotelian rhetoric in developing his notion of “rhetorical conversations” to deal with the fragmentations of our social settings. As he puts it, “A rhetorical conversation is a narrative episode in which a conflict over opposing moral viewpoints reunites the agents with their own moral histories, with the moral traditions of which they are a part, and—perhaps most important—with an awareness of the virtues” (p. 4).

I would add to Frenzt’s conception two points. First, since each of us is the heir of more than one moral tradition, such rhetorical conversations and arguments occur even internal to a person’s own self-conception.¹⁰ And second, as I have already noted, we need to recognize the role of power in determining who does the speaking/narrating and on what terms. But whether it is within ourselves or among people who adhere to diverse and competing views, rhetorical conversations and arguments are crucial to understanding the significance of narrative discourses and their relation to narrative epistemology.

Moreover, we can even write narratives that reflect our conversations and arguments within and among ourselves about the diverse moral traditions of which we are the heirs. The extraordinary power of the political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain’s *Women and War* (1987), for example, consists in no small measure in her ability to tell a complex tale that includes traditions of political theory, of international relations, of just-war and pacifism, of relations between women and men, and even of her own upbringing as a young girl idolizing Joan of Arc. Elshtain’s complex and illuminating narrative also reveals how sterile and distorted our discourses (including policy discourses!) about war become when they are detached from the larger narrative contexts which give notions such as “just-war” or “pacifism” or “realism” their intelligibility and plausibility.

Even so, the force of the objection that contemporary life is inimical to conceptions of narrative does not easily go away. That is so even once we have rejected modernity’s myth of neutrality and accepted the importance of rhetorical contexts in which adherents of competing yet overlapping narratives seek to persuade each other of the superiority of their views.

That is because the significance of narrative does not, and cannot, remain simply at the level of thought, or theory, or discourse, or style of writing. It must also have some bearing on the particular and concrete lives which people lead today. And on this level, it is paradoxical that there has been a heightened interest in narrative at the same time that narrative—or at least narrative coherence—has seen a precipitous decline in personal and social life. This is a third reason for the interest in narrative, and it too seeks to move beyond modernity—only here the interest is in moving beyond modernity’s fragmentations of our personal and social lives. I turn to this issue in the final section of this paper.

Narrative, Social Settings, and Human Life

The argument that our personal and social lives have become fragmented has been made by a number of people explicitly interested in narrative. I have already mentioned the arguments of Jameson and Lyotard. In addition, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued in *After Virtue* that, in modernity, morality and our moral lives have become fragmented and impoverished by our inability to develop and sustain coherent narratives.

Further, in “The Storyteller” Walter Benjamin (1968) argues powerfully, if also somewhat problematically, that the art of storytelling is coming to an end because of such features of modernity as the rise of the novel (because it undermines the storytelling community by creating a realm of isolated individuals), the obsession with technology, and the dominance of “information.” Benjamin’s argument is powerful, though it is also problematic because he contends that storytelling’s demise has been the result of an irreversible process, symptomatic of the secular productive forces of history that began long before modernity. He is certainly right that we ought not to overdraw the contrast between pre-modernity and modernity in terms of the possibility of narratives, but his claims about storytelling being at an “end” seem to be—as I suggest below—at best overstated.

The sociologist Richard Harvey Brown (1987) makes a point similar to Benjamin’s, though without the presumption that the decline in narratives is irreversible. Brown contends that contemporary civic culture has been eviscerated of narrative forms. He believes “the scope of information, commercial entertainment, social science, and ideology have widened, so much so that today traditional narrative is almost dead. To explain its demise is to account for the collapse of intelligible moral-political discourse in our culture” (p. 143).

This presents a peculiar kind of bind. On the one hand, narrative seems to raise issues of crucial epistemological significance, and narrative discourses seem to be crucial to moral and civic life. But on the other hand, the social settings of modernity seem to undermine, or at least to impoverish, any sense of narrative coherence. How might we understand narrative’s relation to human life in such social settings?

A first step in the argument, advanced most powerfully by MacIntyre (1984) in *After Virtue*, is the claim that narrative explanation is fundamental to an understanding of human action. Contrary to Hayden White’s conception of life being simply random sequences, MacIntyre argues that we do not know how to explain an action except by placing it within a narrative. That is why, according to MacIntyre, the concept of intelligible action is prior to the concept of action as such.¹¹ At this level, making an action intelligible may mean little more than being able to describe several “mini-narratives” that may or may not be coherently linked to any larger narrative.

A second step expands on the notion of intelligible action to suggest that people’s lives can only *adequately* be understood narratively. People who refuse to see their lives in narrative terms thus lack that sense of a “plot” that provides coherence to past and possible futures in the present. This is neither a foundationalist argument that all people understand their lives in terms of a coherently plotted narrative or even the claim that a subject’s life can only—or best—be narrated by that subject. For example, there are cultures where the “self” is not the subject of narratives. Moreover, people with severe mental/emotional or neurological difficulties could be fundamentally disoriented and lack a capacity to understand their lives narratively.

In either case, however, interested and informed third parties can provide such a narrative. So the anthropologist Renata Rosaldo provides such a narrative (“The Story of Tukbaw: They Listen as He Orates,” 1976), for an Ilongot named “Old Tukbaw,” who does not understand himself in narrative terms. Similarly, the physician Oliver Sacks (1987) has provided narratives of people with severe neurological difficulties in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.¹²

This second step, then, involves the claim that we tell narratives about people’s lives in order to understand them and ourselves adequately. Such narratives involve judgments (for example) about tendencies toward self-deception, about re-constructively narrating the past and constructively orienting life toward the future, about seeking to discover a unity to a person’s life (albeit one that inevitably lies on the other side of complexity and is quite different from a “unified” self), and about locating those narratives in relation to the larger social settings and narrative contexts in which people live their lives.¹³

This emphasis on the importance of narrative for understanding human life has been particularly significant in such fields as psychology, medicine, anthropology, philosophy, and theology.¹⁴ Even so, it is unclear whether these turns toward narrative take adequate account of the ways in which particular people’s lives (and hence their narratives) are related to particular social, political, and economic settings as well as larger narrative contexts and traditions.

For example, there is a widespread sense in several different fields that reflections on human life have lost something in the focus on scientific “case” analyses. Correspondingly, theorists have argued that a turn to narrative can help to overcome the inadequacies of a narrow focus on cases. But how and why a theorist thinks narrative provides an alternative reveals a great deal about that theorist’s conception of narrative.

In medicine, several people concerned with “medical humanities” have argued that we need to recover the importance of people’s “stories” to understand how they perceive their illness and what role that illness plays in their own lives. Howard Brody’s (1987) *Stories of Sickness* and Arthur Kleinman’s (1988) *The Illness Narratives* both emphasize the importance of narrative in compensating for a narrow focus on cases. In particular, they argue for the importance of taking time to listen to patients, Oliver Sacks (1987) makes the point more strongly:

To restore the human subject at the centre—the suffering, afflicted, fighting, human subject—we must deepen a case history to a narrative or tale: only then do we have a ‘who’ as well as a ‘what’, a real person, a patient, in relation to disease—in relation to the physical. (p. viii)

All three of these authors, and others like them, have noble motives and are on to something important.

But their arguments about narrative in relation to human life are weakened in two ways. First, they leave the presumption about the “facts” of a case in place, now compensating for its inadequacy by also attending to a person’s “values” in narrative. Second, they focus on the “private” world of individual patients without a correlative concern for how the “public” social settings in which medicine occurs help to undermine their proposals for narrative’s importance in medicine. That is, without a more complex social analysis of the sort provided by people like Benjamin, Jameson, MacIntyre, and Brown, as well as novelists such as Don DeLillo, such proposals will undoubtedly seem to be little more than nostalgic longing for the days of the “good ole” family practitioner. After all, the effects of economic factors, specialization, and bureaucratization all conspire to undermine and/or impoverish the notion of “listening to people’s stories.”

By contrast, some of the work being done on narrative’s importance in human life by psychologists/psychotherapists and by anthropologists is moving beyond such bifurcations of facts and values, public and private, subjects and objects, and also reason and the emotions. For example, Roy Shafer’s (1981) “Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue” explicitly rejects any notion of objective, public facts, and the psychologist Jerome Bruner’s (1987) emphasis on “Life as Narrative” is an attempt to articulate how people construct their worlds.¹⁵

In anthropology, this argument about narrative that attempts to move beyond modernity has been made by such figures as Edward Bruner (1986), Renato Rosaldo (1989). Gregory Reck (1983). Steven Webster (1983), and perhaps most famously by Clifford Geertz (1973, 1988). These figures agree that cases, as generally conceived, are inadequate. By contrast, Geertz’s influential emphasis on the “thick description” of narratives becomes a primary means of articulating both the lives of particular people and describing a culture more generally.

Even here, however, it remains to be seen whether the turns toward narrative by either psychologists/psychoanalysts or anthropologists (or philosophers, or theologians, etc.) will encompass not only the overcoming of the bifurcation between facts and values, objects and subjects, but also the bifurcation of public and private.¹⁶ That is, an adequate conception of narrative’s relation to human life needs to overcome not only habits of thought which have blinded us to the significance of narrative, but also the social, political, and economic contexts which work to undermine, or at least impoverish, the possibility of narrative coherence in people’s lives.

And so a crucial question presents itself to those of us in diverse disciplines. Do we have an adequate conception of narrative that can “register” the dislocations, evils, tragedies, and senses of alienation to which people are subjected and which often dominate their lives?

There is, of course, no way to answer such a question in the abstract. It is, I think, one of the central questions that literary and cultural critics have been wrestling with—sometimes in more, and sometimes in less, illuminating ways. But it is an issue that none of us, regardless of our field of research and writing and speaking, can afford to ignore.

In my own theological work, it raises crucial questions about how we understand God and God’s relation to the world and to human life. But to explore those issues would require a different sort of paper, or actually an attempt at a different sort of narrative, in a different sort of setting.

Acknowledgement: I am indebted to Jim Buckley and Stephen Fowl for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.

Biographical Note: L. Gregory Jones is Director of the Center for the Humanities at Loyola College in Maryland. Dr. Jones is the author of *Transformed Judgment: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Notre Dame Press, 1990), the coauthor of *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 1991), and co-editor, with Stanley Hauerwas, of *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eerdmans, 1989). He is also the author of a study forthcoming in 1995, tentatively entitled *Transfiguring Forgiveness*. Jones serves as the co-editor of *Modern Theology*, an international scholarly journal published by Blackwells in Oxford, England.

Endnotes

1. See, for examples, Elkins, James. R., (1990). The stories we tell ourselves in law, *Journal of Legal Education*, 40, 12, 47-66, and McThenia, Andrew. W. Jr., (1990). Telling a story about story telling, *Journal of Legal Education*, 40, 1-2. More generally, Thomas Shaffer has done a great deal to emphasize the importance of narrative for the law and legal education. Among his many works, see *Faith and the professions*. (Provo: Brigham University Press, 1987). In his most recent book, *American lawyers and their communities*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1991), Shaffer’s argument is less focused on the importance of stories for the law and more on a narrative epistemology that moves beyond modernity.
2. Though I am not persuaded by Michel Foucault’s overall account of epistemology, his arguments about the interrelations of power, discourse and knowledge are significant and often insightful. For an introduction to the range of Foucault’s arguments, see, for example. Paul Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
3. Jameson defends a version of Marxism as a master-narrative; Alasdair MacIntyre defends an Augustinian version of Christian narrative in *Whose justice? Which rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988) and *Three rival versions of moral enquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990).
4. Hayden White’s rejoinder to Jameson is worth noting; “It may well be that the decline of narrative reflects less a condition of decadence than a sickness unto death with the stories that the representatives of official culture are always invoking to justify the sacrifices and sufferings of the citizenry. One alternative to ‘collective unity’ is enforced upon us by a combination of

- master narratives and the instruments of control backed by weapons.” White, H. (1987, *The content of form*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (p. 147).
5. See, for example, Alan Culpepper, (1983), *Anatomy of the fourth gospel*, Philadelphia: Fortress. However, as H. Jefferson Powell has argued, biblical critics ought not to become so enamored of literary approaches to Scripture that they lose complete sight of historical questions and issues. See (1990), Transparency, opacity, and openness in narrative. *Journal of Legal Education*, 40, 1&2, 161-171.
 6. I chose this form of discourse because of Gustafson’s four types, it provides the strongest counter-example to my case. It would be relatively easy to show how the “ethical” and the “prophetic” are modes of discourse inextricably linked to both narrative epistemology and narrative discourse.
 7. For an excellent discussion of the ways in which “applied” ethics fail to come to terms with conflicting narrative traditions, see Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), Does applied ethics rest on a mistake?, *The Monist*, 67, 4, 498-513.
 8. It is only from the illusory “neutral” standpoint and the correlatively weak conception of narrative that Gustafson’s charge of “sectarianism” against Stanley Hauerwas’s use of narrative makes any sense. See also the rather silly reduction of narrative’s significance for ethics as “reading a good story” in Max L. Stackhouse and Dennis P. McCann (1991), A postcommunist manifesto, *The Christian Century*, 108, 2, 45. Such reductions refuse to engage the issues of narrative at the level of epistemology and discourses as they are proposed.
 9. This conception of a rhetoric of overlapping and competing is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the polyphonic discourse of Dostoyevsky’s novels. See *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s politics*, (Caryl Emerson, Ed. and Trans., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.)
 10. This is one of the important underlying claims Charles Taylor makes in the overall conception of *Sources of the self* and this leads him to a subtle—yet significant—difference from MacIntyre’s *After virtue* in how he frames the question of narrative’s relation to human life. Whereas for MacIntyre we find sources for the Good, for Taylor the (ontological) requirement that we determine our relation to Good means that we need to see our life as a narrative of our discovery of how we want to be oriented toward the Good. See *Sources of the self* particularly 51-52.
 11. I discuss MacIntyre’s views on narrative in greater detail in (1987) Alasdair MacIntyre on narrative, community, and the moral life. *Modern Theology*, 4, 1, 53-69.
 12. Sacks has also emphasized the neurological significance of narrative in understanding personal identity in (1990) Neurology and the soul, *The New York Review of Books*, 37, 18, 44-50.
 13. Indeed Leslie Gerber has made this latter point in a powerful critique of Sacks’s account of “Jimie” in *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*. See (1990) The man who mistook his wife for a transcendental subject, *First Things*, 2, 36-41.
 14. For a general discussion of this turn toward narrative by a psychologist seeking to make connections with other disciplines, see Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).
 15. See also J. Bruner. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
 16. See, for example, Talal Asad’s 1983 critique that Geertz is inadequately attentive to the role of power in formulating particular practices and discourse: Anthropological conceptions of religion: Reflections on Geertz, *Man*, 18, 237-259.

References

- Benjamin, W. (1968). The storyteller. In H. Arendt (Ed.) & H. Zohn (Trans.), *Illuminations* (pp. 83-109). New York: Schocken.
- Brody, H. (1987). *Stories of sickness*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Brown, R.H. (1987). *Society as text*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bruner, E.M. (1986). Ethnography as narrative. In V.W. Turner & E.M. Bruner (Eds.), *The Anthropology of Experience* (pp. 139-158). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Bruner, J. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54, 1, 11-32.
- Burrell, D. & Hauerwas, S. (1989). From system to story: An alternative pattern for rationality in ethics. In S. Hauerwas & L.G. Jones (Eds.), *Why Narrative?* (pp. 138-157). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Coles, R. (1989). *The call of stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Crites, S. (1989). The narrative quality of experience. In S. Hauerwas & L.G. Jones (Eds.), *Why Narrative?* (pp. 65-88). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Elshtain, J.B. (1987). *Women and war*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fisher, Walter. (1987). *Human communication as narration*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Fowl, S. (1990). *The story of Christ in the ethics of Paul*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Frei, H. (1974). *The eclipses of biblical narrative*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Frentz, T. (1985). Rhetorical conversation, time and moral action. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71, 1, 4.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and lives*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gustafson, J. M. (1990). Moral discourse about medicine: A variety of forms. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 15, 2, 125-142.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1984). Foreword. In J. Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kleinman, A. (1988). *The illness narratives*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lash, N. (1989). Ideology, metaphor and analogy. In S. Hauerwas & L.G. Jones (Eds.), *Why narrative?* (pp. 113-138). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Lyotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue* (2nd edition). Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1989). Epistemological crisis, dramatic narrative and the philosophy of science. In S. Hauerwas & L.G. Jones (Eds.), *Why narrative?* (pp. 158-190). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Milbank, J. Postmodern critical Augustinianism. (in press). *Modern Theology*.

- Reck, G.G. (1983). Narrative anthropology. *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*, 8, 1, 8-12.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984-1988). *Time and narrative* (Vols 1-3). (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rosaldo, R. (1976). The story of Tukbaw: They listen as he orates. In F. E. Reynolds & D. Capps (Eds.), *The biographical process: Studies in the history and psychology of religion* (pp. 121-152). The Hague: Mouton.
- Rosaldo, R. (1986). Ilongot hunting as story and experience. In V.W. Turner & E.M. Bruner (Eds.). *The anthropology of experience* (pp. 97-138). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and truth*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Roth, P. (1989). How narratives explain. *Social Research*, 56, 2, 449-478,
- Sacks, O. (1987). *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Shafer, R. (1981). Narration in the psychoanalytic dialogue. In W.J.T. Mitchell (Ed.), *On narrative* (pp. 25-49). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Webster, S. (1983). Ethnography as storytelling. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 8, 1, 185-205.
- White, H. (1987). *The content of the form*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, J.B. (1985). *Heracles' bow*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.