

THE PLACE OF ACTION IN NARRATIVE SELF-UNDERSTANDING

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DECLARATION

I, Klara Andersson, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

My thesis offers a critical interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding in *After Virtue* (1981). It aims to reveal a deep tension at the heart of this account of the self that tracks several of the most important conflict lines in western thought. This tension is revealed by examining closely how MacIntyre's conception of narrative intelligibility and his social philosophy relates to his claims—posed from the perspective of action theory and practical reason—that human life and action take narrative shape.

Impact Statement

I intend for this work to contribute to the literature surrounding Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and related debates about virtue ethics and the self.

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Introduction

My thesis offers a critical interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding in *After Virtue* (1981). It aims to reveal a deep tension at the heart of this account of the self that tracks several of the most important conflict lines in western thought. This tension is revealed by examining closely how MacIntyre's conception of narrative intelligibility and his social philosophy relates to his claims—posed from the perspective of action theory and practical reason—that human life and action take narrative shape.

Having a sense of self involves having ideas about who one is. Most fundamentally, this phenomenon involves grasping oneself first-personally as being continuous through time and as being distinct from others. At the pre-theoretical level, we might say that the sense of self is grounded in the experience of conceiving of oneself as a distinct being with an identity and a personality that are more or less coherent and at least somewhat consistent over time. Without a sense of self, a person would struggle with things like making commitments and conceiving of projects, and it seems, with forming and maintaining relationships. Moreover, the notion of a sense of self is needed to make sense of things like self-esteem, self-improvement and integrity.

The sense of self is, at least at the pre-theoretical level, a fuzzy concept that is hard to pin down in any straightforward manner. A fruitful approach to capture the phenomenon at this level is to turn to literature. Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man* offers an illuminating contrast between the unified kind of selfhood that characterises 'men of action' and the fragmented, inconsistent, essentially modern figure that is himself. Richard Moran has offered the following compelling articulation of this contrast in Dostoyevsky's work:

The ‘men of action’ are composed of stable qualities, personalities, from which their actions flow with the force and inevitability of laws of nature, whereas for himself every action is as much undoing as doing, proceeding from no fixed character that he is aware of, other than the pervasiveness of spite and self-undermining themselves. The very idea of possessing qualities, good or bad, is unavailable to him. As soon as he begins to describe himself in the first pages of his confession, his self-consciousness intervenes and forces him to withdraw the characterization, and ultimately any characterization of himself: ‘I could not become malicious. In fact I could not become anything: neither bad nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero or an insect,’ for the reason that ‘an intelligent man cannot seriously become anything; only a fool can become something’.¹

Dostoyevsky’s *Underground Man* exemplifies the archetype of the fragmented, evanescent, modern self in strict opposition to which MacIntyre develops his theory of the narratively unified self. His theory of self-understanding aims to provide a basis for re-establishing the kind of unified pre-modern self that is necessary to underpin the return to virtue ethics that he advocates in *After Virtue*. Contextualising this contrast in these terms, we are now moving on from laying out the issue of the unified self in pre-theoretical terms to the theoretical realm where my discussion from now on will be squarely situated.

Again, MacIntyre takes it as his task to explain the phenomenon of having a sense of oneself and one’s life as a unified whole. Importantly, I speak of *a* phenomenon here, rather than of two distinct phenomena. I borrow this thought from Richard Wollheim.² This points to a grounding assumption that I will rely on throughout this project: namely, that having a sense of what it is to be a person involves having a sense of what it is for a person to lead a life.

¹ Richard Moran, “The Story of My Life”, in *The Philosophical Imagination: Selected Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 299.

² Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

From the first-personal perspective, this means that if I am to have a sense of who I am, I must also have a sense of what my life is like. On this view, selfhood is inherently related to the living of a life.

A human life extends over time and is therefore the kind of thing that can be decomposed into temporal parts. These temporal parts are the events of my life. Besides all being events that I happened to be present for, what is it that holds these events together—i.e. what is it that makes those events *my life*? The form of the answer that we are looking for is that of a unity-relation. Any theory that can provide the answer will thus be relational. This way of framing the question implies that whichever theory turns out to be true will also provide the essence—the shape—of a human life. Vindicating the notion of a whole human life will involve two necessary and related forms of unity.³ First there is agential unity, which is theoretically the primary notion. Agential unity is achieved by allowing us to intelligibly perceive the self as the source of its actions. The stronger the account of agential unity, the more the self that is unified along this dimension will resemble Dostoyevsky's men of action, whose actions appear to flow directly from their stable and consistent personalities. Second, there is temporal unity. In line with Wollheim's idea, the temporally unified self is simply a human life, or, perhaps more accurately, the life of an agent. This immediately raises the question of how to understand the relationship between the notion of the self, agency, and humanity. I will return to this issue below.

It should be noted that an important limitation of the scope of my investigation concerns the broader metaphysical issue of personal identity. MacIntyre himself takes his theory of the narrative self to bear on this question.⁴ Nevertheless, I will throughout my discussion treat the

³ This useful distinction is drawn in J. David Velleman, "The Self as Narrator", in *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ His exact claim is that the relationship between the concepts of narrative, intelligibility and accountability on the one hand and the concept of personal identity on the other is one of mutual presupposition. AF 251.

question of self-understanding as distinct from metaphysical debates about personal identity. This limitation is reflected in the thought that experiences that are in everyday parlance referred to as losing one's sense of self or no longer knowing who one is don't need to be understood as having any bearing on a person's metaphysical identity.⁵ Correspondingly, acknowledging that a person's qualities are necessary for picking out the person who she is, thereby informing her sense of self or her sense of identity, doesn't commit us to thinking that those same qualities would play any role in determining her identity at the metaphysical level. Throughout my discussion, numerical identity with the self and numerical distinctness from others will be presupposed. My terminology will reflect this limitation. I will not speak of the unity of the person or of personhood, but rather of the self and selfhood. In turn, the notion of the self will be used to refer to the self in one's sense of self: that is, as primarily a first-personal, experiential notion—not a metaphysical one.

MacIntyre's theory of narrative self-understanding begins from the idea—omnipresent in western culture—that a life might be thought of as a story. The central idea is that the unity of a human life can be arrived at by conceiving of life as taking narrative shape. In other words, the unity-relation that is needed to provide a sense of self is here conceived of as being one of narrative unity. On MacIntyre's view, narrative unity can vindicate both agential unity and temporal unity. It is clear that a view that conceives of a human life as a story will place some emphasis on the temporal dimension of the self: *I am* my story, or, put somewhat differently, my temporal extension is my story.

This story will, like all stories, have some kind of internal coherence or overarching theme. Furthermore, it has a beginning, middle and ending, and the role and meaning of the components that make it up are understood in relation to each other and the overarching

⁵ I borrow this idea from J. David Velleman, "Introduction", in *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4-5.

narrative as a whole. Narrative provides unity by conferring a specific kind of intelligibility or coherence. A narrative accounts for the explanatory relations among its events, and contains direction and a unifying theme. Part of what I aim to do is to offer an interpretation of MacIntyre's conception of narrative form beyond these general features. My interpretation will give special attention to teleology, causality, and temporal unity. As I will seek to show, these are the most important formal features of narrative shape upon which MacIntyre relies to defend his claim that a human life is to be understood as taking narrative form.

MacIntyre's theory of narrative self-understanding involves defending what I will henceforth refer to as the *Narrative Action Argument*. It contains the following four premises:

1. Narrative form constitutes a unity-relation
2. Agency is the essential form of human life
3. Action takes narrative form
4. A human life takes narrative form

From these premises, it is thought to follow that human life is unified and that we thereby arrive at a sense of self. This thesis is an examination of MacIntyre's prospects for defending the Narrative Action Argument, focusing solely on his account in *After Virtue*.

As I've mentioned, my subsequent chapters will address the question what the specific narrative form of intelligibility involves on MacIntyre's account. Before getting to that, however, it is useful to consider a contrasting case, drawn from a reductionist view of narrative. To this end, let us consider Aristotle's notion of plot or *muthos* as set out in the *Poetics*.⁶ On this account, a narrative is good if it organises the events that make up its

⁶ A contemporary version of this account of narrative has been advanced by Noël Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection", in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

component parts so that each event follows its antecedent as a matter of necessity or probability.

Plots are either simple or complex. (...) The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole, I call simple, when the change in the hero's fortune takes place without Peripety [Reversal] or Discovery; and complex, when it involves one or the other, or both. These should each of them arise out of the structure of the Plot itself, so as to be the consequence, necessary or probable, of the antecedents. There is a great difference between a thing happening *propter hoc* and *post hoc*.

For Aristotle, the narrative relation that holds between the events of the plot can be understood in causal terms. If this is all that is meant by narrative, then it is easy to vindicate the idea of there being a structural fit between action and narrative (as the third premise of the Narrative Action Argument posits), as long as we're endorsing a causal theory of action. However, the fact that this view of narrative intelligibility isn't distinct from other types of explanation should naturally lead us to be suspicious of its theoretical import. Hence we may (somewhat trivially) ask why we should speak of narrative relations at all, and whether that notion could even carry any meaning outside the context of a story.

On MacIntyre's definition, an essential feature of narrative form is that it has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. It also has a unique, internal coherence. This is part of what the first premise of the Narrative Action Argument—setting out the claim that narrative form constitutes a unity-relation—expresses. If all that is required from a good story is that its events are causally ordered, as Aristotle appears to suggest, it isn't clear where the notion of narrative unity is supposed to come from. And if there is no unity, no wholeness to the narrative, then it isn't at all clear what it would mean to say that the events of the story are to be interpreted in light of the whole. There is nothing in this reductionist view of narrative intelligibility that could itself provide the story with a beginning and an ending, or a unifying

theme. Unity would have to be provided by some external, nonformal feature of the story, e.g. its subject matter. This fact on its own reveals that the Aristotelian view of narrative (regardless what we think of it as an account of narrative form) doesn't have the resources required to unify a life in the pertinent sense. Were I to understand my life as a story according to this logic, I would have to think of it as a chain of events—each of which I could explain in terms of what came before—but without any unifying theme, and more importantly, without a sense of authorship. Thus this narrative model faces the same issue that causal theories of action face: it leaves the agent out, conceiving of her merely as the site of causal-psychological processes. The Aristotelian, reductionist view of narrative intelligibility is thus a particularly bad candidate for providing us with the very notion that we are concerned to provide, namely a sense of self. This view, it seems, doesn't have the necessary resources to provide either agential or temporal unity. Although MacIntyre sees himself as working in the Aristotelian tradition, his conception of narrative form and narrative intelligibility cannot be drawn from the *Poetics*. As my discussion of *After Virtue* will show, however, other parts of Aristotle's œuvre have much to contribute to MacIntyre's project.

Above, I discussed Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man* to draw out the deep contrast between the modern conception of the self and the narratively unified self that is the subject of this thesis. I now wish to shine the light on the rift between the modern and the pre-modern paradigm by considering yet another modern text. To appreciate the depth of this rift, it is useful to look beyond discussions that revolves strictly around the notion of the self. My hope is that doing so will offer us some insight into the formidable nature of the task that MacIntyre sets himself in *After Virtue*.

To this end, I will turn to political scientist Marshall Berman's reading of *The Communist Manifesto* as a modernist text. Consider first this famous passage from the *Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, all men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.⁷

Part of what this passage is offering is an articulation of the idea that the material conditions of society shape social relations. Of course, this claim is at the very heart of historical materialism. Even without any complete or explicit endorsement of historical materialism, however, the more general idea that the self is formed by the social context in which it exists, which in turn is affected by material conditions, is independently plausible. It isn't clear that MacIntyre can even accommodate this idea, however, given that part of what he is trying to do in *After Virtue* is to offer an account of how we—the actual, historically and socially situated we—can recuperate a sense of history, continuity and time. At the very least, this is doubtful if we accept Berman's idea that Marx and Engels do indeed capture something of the nature of modernity and modern society. Consider first the following passage, in which Berman observes that, on their view, everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down:

'All that is solid'—from the clothes on our backs to the looms and mills that weave them, to the men and women who work the machines, to the houses and neighbourhoods the workers live in, to the firms and corporations that exploit the workers, to the towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all—all these are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or

⁷ Extract from *The Communist Manifesto* cited in Marshall Berman *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (London and New York: Verso, 2010 [1982]), 95.

dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms.⁸

Next, Berman asks what kind of people can live in, and be shaped by, such a society:

What kind of people does this permanent revolution produce? In order for people, whatever their class, to survive in modern society, their personalities must take on the fluid and open form of this society. Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change: not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through. They must learn not to long nostalgically for the ‘fixed, fast-frozen relationships’ of the real or fantasized past, but to delight in mobility, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men.⁹

It appears correct to think of this kind of people, with their ‘fluid and open’ personalities, as an army of Underground People. According to Berman’s interpretation, these are the kind of people that are produced by modern society. Given that the features of modernity that Berman, following Marx and Engels, identifies are still highly present in our own late modern or post-modern society, it is clear that accepting this reading of historical materialism obliges us to conceive of ourselves in a similar light—as fragmented and fluid.

It should now be clear why MacIntyre’s project in *After Virtue* must be understood as being strictly opposed to even a weak reading of historical materialism. The very possibility of providing a notion of the unified self, and therefore a defence of virtue ethics, depends on the falsity of the materialist story that Berman tells. If we really do live in a society which turns us into Underground People, unifying our lives in the pertinent sense—in narrative or other terms—will be impossible. Having established as much, it should at this point be noted that

⁸ Ibid. 99.

⁹ Ibid. 95–6.

this discussion has merely aimed to situate MacIntyre's project with regards to some crucial and long-standing theoretical conflict lines (even more than he himself already does in the book). I will only return to this specific opposition at the very end of this thesis. For now, it is my hope that it has provided additional insight into the sort of views and commitments that MacIntyre's account is developed in opposition to, and the nature of the challenge that he sets himself. Moreover, I take it that it exemplifies the idea that properly understanding MacIntyre's work requires looking somewhat beyond the boundaries of a narrow conception of philosophy and its history.

Here is what I will be trying to do over the course of my two chapters. My first chapter will examine the idea of narrative self-understanding in the light of the part of MacIntyre's oeuvre that he is perhaps best known for, namely his communitarian social and political philosophy. The focus of this chapter is chiefly interpretive. It aims to situate the notion of narrative self-understanding in MacIntyre's overall project in *After Virtue*, and also to make the stronger interpretive claim that neither his notion of narrative intelligibility, nor his social philosophy can be properly understood independently from the other. MacIntyre needs a notion of intelligibility or understanding that is both compatible with the idea that the self and action are socially and historically constituted, and which also has temporal unity among its structural features. The notion of narrative intelligibility that he develops in *After Virtue* is, as I shall suggest, a good candidate for supplying precisely that—with one important qualification. As I will suggest at the end of this chapter, MacIntyre's endorsement of a psychological interpretation of intentional action will need to be replaced with a non-psychological interpretation in order to be compatible with his notion of narrative intelligibility. This claim functions as an opening for my next chapter, in which one of my main aims will be to consider the implications of this modification.

My second chapter examines MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding from a different angle, namely that of the philosophy of action and practical reason. The question that I will aim to address is whether the claim that a human life is temporally unified in line with MacIntyre's conception of narrative form is compatible with a plausible account of intentional action and practical reasoning. I begin by discussing MacIntyre's conception of what he calls the temporal ordering of intentions. Temporal ordering of intentions, or true descriptions of an action, is how MacIntyre attempts to make the move from his account of agential unity to an account of the temporal unity of the agent. The thought is that, because true descriptions of actions are the building blocks of narrative, ordering them according to the stretch of time to which they make reference amounts to situating them in and rendering them intelligible in the light of a story—the story of the agent's life. My critical reading of this part of MacIntyre's account will result in the argument that his claim that actions are rendered intelligible in this way is importantly flawed. Specifically, his account of the temporal ordering of intentions collapses into his account of causal ordering. In other words, my claim will be that the mereological relation between the different-level action descriptions that MacIntyre discusses is explanatorily powerful because it expresses causality, not because it is temporal. Having argued as much, I observe that to argue that actions are rendered intelligible by being placed in a temporally extended, teleologically structured narrative, MacIntyre needs to offer something beyond his account of temporal ordering as it is articulated in AF.

Rather than directly examining the prospects for filling this gap by drawing on other theoretical resources in AF, I then explain why the spirit of my criticism of the temporal ordering of intentions risks leading to an unproductive and wrongly conceived project of supplying an account of the importance of temporality for basic human understanding. It is wrongly conceived, I argue, because the way of approaching the problem seems to imply examining the importance of temporality for understanding human action and human life as

something strange and too far removed from everyday lived experience. Having flagged this risk, I move on to examining MacIntyre's strategy for avoiding posing the question about temporality in this way, namely his insistence that our very existence is necessarily historical and temporal in character. I suggest that the necessity of integrating this dimension of human life at the very root of his account of the unified self, rather than as an add-on to agential unity, is what motivates his controversial and metaphysically charged claim that 'stories are lived before they are told'.

This claim is part of MacIntyre's defence of the third and fourth premises of the Narrative Action Argument, which posit that human actions and a human life take narrative form, and at this point I turn to discussing the most important criticism that this idea has been met with—what I will call the Distortion Problem. The Distortion Problem is the objection that conceiving of human life and action as taking narrative form somehow distorts or falsifies what it is like to live. After outlining my preferred interpretation of this objection and its import, I consider MacIntyre's prospects for pushing back against it, returning to his account of intentional action. I argue that even though it could perhaps (although this is doubtful) push back against the Distortion Problem, the incompatibility of a psychological reading of intentional action with MacIntyre's notion of narrative intelligibility that follows from his social philosophy means that endorsing this strategy would result in there not being much left of his theory of narrative self-understanding to defend. The kind of self that would result from opting for this strategy couldn't be socially and historically constituted, and therefore not narratively unified, in the sense that the discussion in my first chapter described.

I conclude that this observation is symptomatic of a deep tension that runs between the two dimensions of AF that my respective chapters have covered. Hence, this tension provides the structure of my critical reading of MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding. I

conclude my second chapter, and this thesis as a whole, by attempting to articulate some dimensions of this tension.

Chapter 1: Narrative intelligibility, agential unity and the socially constituted self

1. Introduction

The idea that the self is to be understood in narrative terms, and that a human life should be thought of as a story even while we are in the midst of living it, may appear a strange and surprising idea. This chapter aims to show how this initial sense of strangeness is alleviated when the idea of narrative self-understanding is considered in the light of the part of MacIntyre's oeuvre that he is perhaps best known for, namely his communitarian social and political philosophy.¹⁰ Understanding the nature of the kind of self that MacIntyre is attempting to unify through narrative will illuminate crucial dimensions of his notion of narrative intelligibility. Beyond this, it will reveal why narrative modes of understanding should be thought of as a serious candidate for theorizing about the self and action, given MacIntyre's communitarian commitments.

I mean for this interpretive stance to be read as polemical to some degree. My motivation for engaging in this partial defence of the plausibility of narrative theorizing about the self springs from the observation that the critical engagement with MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding has generally failed to read MacIntyre as he should be read—that is, as a systematic philosopher. As I will argue in the next chapter, a more analytic approach to interpreting MacIntyre's strategy for supplying the notion of temporal unity will reveal certain important, but not insurmountable, flaws in the account. Acknowledging these flaws,

¹⁰ Even though MacIntyre himself rejects the communitarian label I will follow common usage and refer to his views under that label.

however, is entirely compatible with recognising that narrative forms of understanding may be one of the best, or possibly even *the* best, forms of explanation available given what MacIntyre needs. He needs a notion of intelligibility or understanding that is both compatible with the idea that the self and action are socially and historically constituted, and which also has temporal unity among its structural features. The notion of narrative intelligibility that he develops in *After Virtue* is, as I shall suggest, a good candidate for supplying precisely that—with one important qualification. As I will suggest at the end of this chapter, MacIntyre's endorsement of a psychological interpretation of intentional action will need to be replaced with a non-psychological interpretation in order to be compatible with his notion of narrative intelligibility. This claim functions as an opening for my next chapter, in which one of my main aims will be to consider the implications of this modification.

The focus of this chapter is chiefly interpretive. It aims to situate the notion of narrative self-understanding in MacIntyre's overall project in *After Virtue*, and also to make the stronger interpretive claim that neither his notion of narrative intelligibility, nor his social philosophy can be properly understood independently from the other. MacIntyre himself doesn't make this link clear enough in *After Virtue*, and neither do most commentators. I shall speak of MacIntyre's social philosophy or his communitarianism to refer to the following claims: (i) the self is inherently socially and historically constituted; (ii) human actions are transactions: they are part of a social process of meaning-making which aims at making sense of both actions and agents; and (iii) being intelligible in one's actions, both to oneself and others, is the mark of agency, and a necessary basis for engaging in the narrative quest for the good life.

Roughly the first half of this chapter will provide some fairly detailed background on MacIntyre's project in AF, including his philosophical motivations for offering a theory of the unified self. As we will see, MacIntyre needs a notion of the unified self in order to formulate his catalogue of the virtues. For MacIntyre, every moral philosophy has a particular sociology

as its counterpart, and he characterises his account of the unified self as part of the particular understanding of social life that is required as an underpinning of his virtue ethics.¹¹ This story about his motivation is standardly acknowledged by commentators, and they are correct in pointing to its importance for getting at MacIntyre's theoretical need for the unified self. My claim is, however, that this story, with its emphasis on morality, has been the focus of commentators at the expense of MacIntyre's social philosophy in discussions about his account of narrative self-understanding.

In the second half of the chapter, I show how closely intertwined MacIntyre's notion of narrative form and his social philosophy are. An important dimension of what I will seek to do here is to offer an interpretation of how MacIntyre defends the second premise of the Narrative Action Argument, namely the claim that agency is the essential form of human life. As we will see, MacIntyre understands the self and its character or personality as given through agency. As such, my discussion of the nature of MacIntyre's conception of narrative intelligibility will importantly involve an examination of his account of agential unity. As we will promptly discover, MacIntyre's notion of narrative intelligibility is more demanding than the kind of understanding that standard theories of action and agency seek to offer. A reason for this is the fact that MacIntyre's takes it as his goal to offer a theory that fits with the idea that our chief interest is not in understanding or rendering intelligible individual actions. Rather, in line with his virtue ethics, our interest is in understanding and rendering intelligible the agent herself. For MacIntyre, we achieve this by understanding each of the agent's actions as segments in her individual story. The standards of narrative coherence against which actions are understood and evaluated will thus be unique to each agent.

¹¹ AF 260.

This flexibility of narrative form means that its basic, formal features are few. I identify four such fundamental features from my reading of *After Virtue*. On my interpretation, MacIntyre's conception of a story takes narrative form to comprise teleology, causality, and temporal unity. Over the course of this chapter and the next, I take my aim to be to offer an interpretation of how MacIntyre defines each of these notions. In the present chapter, my focus will be on teleology and causality, whereas the next will be mainly concerned with temporal unity.

Any detailed engagement with MacIntyre's communitarianism will notice that the view can plausibly be charged with relativism. This issue is beyond the scope of this thesis. My argument is not to be read as a full-fledged defence of any aspect of MacIntyre's account. At this point my ambitions are much more limited than that: I merely aim to show why MacIntyre's notion of narrative intelligibility must be read in the light of his communitarianism, and further that reading it thus shows why the modification I alluded to above is necessary to preserve the coherence of the view.

2. Background and motivation

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) contains the boldest, most far-reaching theory of the narrative self in recent Anglo-American philosophy. His account of narrative self-understanding, however, is merely a part of a much broader project.¹² Drawing on a wide array of insights from Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and Kuhn, MacIntyre embarks on the eminent task of offering a serious alternative to post-Enlightenment moral philosophy. MacIntyre's

¹² Although my focus is limited to AF, what I say here will bear on the question how to interpret aspects of MacIntyre's subsequent work as well.

attempt at offering such an alternative involves an endorsement of a version of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Before beginning to develop his constructive contribution to moral theory, however, MacIntyre offers a diagnosis of modern morality and moral language.

Modern moral philosophy, he argues, is in grave disorder. According to his diagnosis, all we late modern or post-modern people have in terms of morality are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, fragments that have been abstracted from the contexts that gave them their significance.¹³ Largely unaware of this state of things, we nevertheless continue to use key moral terms and expressions. The most familiar conflicts in modern moral life are *in principle* irresolvable because they share the feature of conceptual incommensurability.¹⁴ This means that even though each of the arguments may be logically valid, we have no rational way of weighing the claims of the rival premises. This is because they rely on different normative or evaluative concepts. (Indeed, the term incommensurable means to have no common measure.) MacIntyre offers the following example of a typical contemporary moral debate, framed in terms of two familiar rival moral arguments:

- a) Justice demands that every citizen should enjoy, so far as is possible, an equal opportunity to develop his or her talents and his or her other potentialities. But prerequisites for the provision of such equal opportunity include the provision of equal access to health care and to education. Therefore justice requires the governmental provision of health and educational services, financed out of taxation, and it also requires that no citizen should be able to buy an unfair share of such services. This in turn requires the abolition of private schools and private medical practice.

¹³ AF 3.

¹⁴ MacIntyre borrows the term conceptual incommensurability from Thomas S Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962). Indeed, the history of western ethics that he offers in AF and his diagnosis of modern morality are both of a distinctly Kuhnian flavour.

b) Everybody has a right to incur such and only such obligations as he or she wishes, to be free to make such and only such contracts as he or she desires and to determine his or her own free choices. Physicians must therefore be free to practice on such terms as they desire and patients must be free to choose among physicians; teachers must be free to teach on such terms as they choose and pupils and parents to go where they wish for education. Freedom thus requires not only the existence of private practice in medicine and private schools in education, but also the abolition of those restraints on private practice which are imposed by licencing and regulation by such bodies as universities, medical schools, the A.M.A, and the state.¹⁵

MacIntyre takes this debate to be representative of the shape that contemporary moral disagreements tend to take. What happens in debates of this type is that once we trace our rival arguments back to their rival premises, ‘argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion’.¹⁶ Modern morality, in other words, have no rational grounds.

For MacIntyre, fully appreciating the gravity of the present situation, as well as identifying the possibilities for recourse, requires understanding how this situation came about. As this shows, the idea that understanding something necessitates knowing its history—or its story *tout court*—is recurrent in MacIntyre’s thought and applies beyond the topic of the self.

MacIntyre, in keeping with the boldness of his overall project in *After Virtue* (henceforth AF), rejects the disciplinary boundaries of the modern academy. Here, as in most of his work, philosophy, history, and sociology go together.¹⁷ As I hope to show in this chapter, in AF,

¹⁵ AF 8-9.

¹⁶ AF 9.

¹⁷ One of MacIntyre’s crucial methodological stances is his endorsement of historical philosophy, following Hegel and R. G. Collingwood. Collingwood occupies an important position in early 20th century debates in the philosophy of science and he is often considered one of the foremost proponents of the disunity of science, against Carl Hempel’s and others’ claims in favour of methodological unity. As we saw in the introduction, it is

narrative modes of understanding constitute the link between philosophy, history, and sociology. The history of modern morality that MacIntyre tells, then, isn't a chronicle that merely describe the causal order of events. It is a narrative history, with its own unity and its own particular internal logic.

MacIntyre traces the present disorder in morality and moral language back to the way that Enlightenment thinkers attempted to rationally ground morality once classical Aristotelianism and medieval theism had been rejected. Importantly, the rejection of these traditions entailed a rejection of a teleological conception of human nature, and with it an unproblematic notion of moral truth. This moral vacuum produced what MacIntyre refers to as the Enlightenment project of justifying morality. For MacIntyre, the three major contributors to this project were Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard. None of their attempts to ground morality were successful. Given the nature and form of those attempts, MacIntyre argues that we should be unsurprised by their lack of success; in fact, because of certain flawed starting assumptions, the failure of the project was unavoidable.

Hume, Kant, and Kierkegaard all agreed that justifying morality had to begin from the characterisation of some feature or features of human nature. The rules of morality were then to be justified by reference to those features: they would be the rules that a being who possesses precisely such a human nature could be expected to accept. MacIntyre argues that the moral rules that the Enlightenment philosophers tried to justify using this strategy were quite traditional, not to say conservative. It is surprising, moreover, that Hume and Diderot, who thought of themselves as philosophical radicals, came to largely share Kant's and Kierkegaard's view of the content of morality.¹⁸ A crucial part of MacIntyre's historical argument is the claim that the moral rules that these Enlightenment thinkers sought to justify

apt to think of narrative modes of explanation as a humanistic alternative to purely scientific modes of explanation, even though the former also relies on causal explanation to some degree.

¹⁸ AF 55.

had in fact originally been devised to transform untutored human nature and enable it to realise its *telos*. In other words, they are fragments from a prior moral paradigm. This reveals a major tension in the Enlightenment project. Given that the original function of the moral rules and precepts in question had been to transform human nature, it is implausible that those very same rules and precepts would be the ones that untutored human nature by itself would accept.¹⁹ At the very least, MacIntyre argues, it is implausible that they could be justified by reference to the features of untutored human nature alone.

MacIntyre's historical argument about modern morality is designed to achieve a shift in our view of 'who we are and what we do'.²⁰ We need to envisage our 'radical incapacity' to use moral language, to be guided by moral reasoning, and to define our transactions with others in moral terms. According to MacIntyre, achieving the necessary shift in viewpoint and appreciating the extent of the disorder of modern morality is impossible through the methods of analytic philosophy or phenomenology.²¹ A historical account is crucial, and such an account must be told in three distinct stages. A schematic articulation of the structure of this telling runs as follows: at the first stage, morality was in order and moral life flourished. At the second stage, morality suffered catastrophe, and at the third stage, morality was restored, but in damaged and disordered form. This history takes narrative form: it isn't a mere chronicle that only traces the causal relations between events. It is a history about decline and fall, and as such its very form suggests certain evaluative standards. As MacIntyre argues, the fact that the narrative can be divided into stages shows that it presupposes 'standards of achievement and failure, of order and disorder'.²² It is this use of narrative history, in the vein

¹⁹ This interpretation of the tension that MacIntyre's historical argument reveals comes from Samuel Scheffler, "Review: After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory by Alasdair MacIntyre", *Philosophical Review* 92, no. 3 (1983).

²⁰ AF 3.

²¹ As I will discuss in my next chapter, MacIntyre's rejection of phenomenology is somewhat overdrawn. In fact, his account of narrative self-understanding does involve an understanding of the experience of time that at some points does appear close to a phenomenological understanding.

²² AF 3.

of Hegel and Collingwood, that constitutes the basis for MacIntyre's diagnosis of modern morality. Even though the schematic, three stage formula he outlines is meant to be read as offering an ideal model, it can be applied almost seamlessly to his history of modern morality. The exception is that MacIntyre doesn't in fact think that Aristotelian virtue ethics fully succeeded in rationally grounding morality—a point I will return to below. If we momentarily bracket this point, however, we can read MacIntyre's historical argument as he means for us to read it. On his view, the first stage of the story corresponds to the ancient period, the second to the moment where classical Aristotelianism and medieval theism were abandoned, and the third to modern morality. This is the narrative about decline and fall, order and disorder, that he tells about western morality. Even though my concern with narrative modes of understanding will mainly be in reference to MacIntyre's notion of the self, I take this discussion to have shown how far-reaching his reliance on narrative form is throughout AF. Unlike MacIntyre's argument about the narrative self, I will not seek to evaluate this historical argument, however.²³ Before moving on from the historical argument about morality, an additional role that this argument plays in AF should be pointed out.

Besides—but related to—the shift in our self-understanding, MacIntyre's historical argument is designed to reveal the choice that faces the moral philosopher of the present day: the choice between Aristotle and Nietzsche—between reconstructing a teleological theory of the good to provide a basis for moral truth, and moral nihilism. MacIntyre at once credits Nietzsche with being the only philosopher who has sufficiently appreciated the disorder of modern morality and treats him as his chief opponent. Importantly for our purposes, the unified self that is presupposed by Aristotelian virtue ethics finds its inverse mirror image in the completely

²³ An attempt at such an evaluation can be found in J. B. Schneewind "Moral Crisis and The History of Ethics", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1983).

fragmented, all but absent self of Nietzsche's philosophy.²⁴ The Nietzschean self, or nonself, is reminiscent of the Underground Man. Even though Nietzsche's genealogy of morals gets many things right according to MacIntyre, it misses one crucial thing: that the failure of the Enlightenment project can be traced to its rejection of Aristotle's ethics. This disagreement between MacIntyre and Nietzsche points to the way in which MacIntyre will go on to contrast his own project with Nietzsche's, namely by taking his task in AF to be to show why we should return to the Aristotelian tradition in ethics, as well as laying out the prospects for sustaining that return. Achieving this, for MacIntyre, is the only way to avoid being forced to embrace Nietzschean moral nihilism.

This over-arching project is the driving force of AF as a whole. Now, let's move on to the question how the account of narrative self-understanding fits into this project.

3. Providing the catalogue of the virtues and social teleology

Given that the subject of the narrative self is theoretically prior to MacIntyre's fully formulated virtues ethics, we needn't spend time on the specifics of this part of his account. It will however be helpful to note that MacIntyre's ethics takes the virtues (plural) to be primary, not rules and not virtue (singular). He furthermore rejects the view, which he ascribes to Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas, that all virtues are compatible and require each other. For MacIntyre, virtues may conflict, and they may even conflict in a tragic manner that isn't to be traced to some character flaw in the agent.

²⁴ In this context it is interesting to read Nietzsche's essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", in which he, among other things, seeks to defend the claim that the power to forget is more important than the power to remember. This essay is included in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

In AF, one of his chief goals is to offer a catalogue of the virtues. This attempt proceeds in three consecutive steps. MacIntyre offers three partial, but compatible and complementary, accounts of the virtues as functions of practices, a human life, and traditions respectively. The virtues are teleological, and the task that MacIntyre sets himself is to provide an answer to the question what the virtues must be if they are to sustain excellence in human practices, human life, and traditions. Given my interest in the unity of the self, my main concern is the second step, but my discussion of MacIntyre's social philosophy in this chapter will also draw heavily on the third. The question that guides MacIntyre's theorising at this stage is what the virtues would need to be to be able to sustain the good life. This ethical question presupposes the unity of a human life. MacIntyre is highly aware that the unity of a human life cannot be presupposed but needs to be argued for philosophically—his diagnosis of modern morality and its accompanying conception of the fragmented self brings out the need for such an argument at this particular moment. Pre-modern philosophy, or rather the pre-modern world, took the unity of the self for granted to the point of never motivating any explicit articulation of any account of it. In contrast, for us, now, to provide a rationally defensible account that is nevertheless in accordance with the Aristotelian tradition requires raising the following question:

Is it rationally justifiable to conceive of each human life as a unity, so that we may try to specify each such life as having its good and so what we may understand the virtues as having their function in enabling an individual to make of his or her one kind of unity rather than another?²⁵

Before proceeding to examine MacIntyre's answer to this question, let me say something more about his motivation for being concerned with this question in the first place. Asking why MacIntyre finds his first, tentative account of the virtues as functions of practices lacking

²⁵ AF 236.

will allow me to both do justice to the urgency to the task of vindicating the unified self and begin to flesh out his particular conception of teleology.

At the first stage of MacIntyre's attempt to identify the virtues, they are conceived of as aiming at excellence in human practices. Here a virtue is defined as 'an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods'.²⁶ MacIntyre's notion of a practice departs somewhat from ordinary usage and is used to refer to

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized 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 powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²⁷

Kicking a football with skill isn't a practice, but the game of football is. Bricklaying isn't a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips isn't a practice; farming is. Other examples of practices that MacIntyre cites include the natural and social sciences, and painting and music. Clearly, the second part of his definition is the most original. Achieving excellence in a practice—if it is to genuinely counts as a practice in this very particular sense—must involve arriving at a deepened insight into what excellence means in the context of that practice. This makes sense in the context of the examples MacIntyre mentions: achieving excellence by making a prominent scientific discovery will almost certainly involve a changing conception of what the possibilities for further such discoveries are.

²⁶ AF 222.

²⁷ AF 218.

Nevertheless, MacIntyre argues that achieving the virtues understood in terms of practices is insufficient to ensure that one is in fact living a good life. He goes on to observe three different ways in which a human life taken as a whole can still be defective if informed only by the virtues understood in this way. First, a life lived in accordance with the virtues understood as functions of practices would be pervaded by too many conflicts and too much arbitrariness, because the claims of one practice might conflict with the claims of another. As we saw, MacIntyre thinks that a plural account of the virtues that allows for the possibility of tragic conflict is preferable to the Aristotelian account of the virtues that doesn't allow for such conflict. However, the degree of conflict that is entailed by an account where the virtues are defined in relation to practices risks resulting in the kind of disorder that is characteristic of modern morality. 'If the life of the virtues is continuously fractured by choices in which one allegiance entails the apparently arbitrary renunciation of another, it may seem that the goods internal to practices do after all derive their authority from our individual choices'.²⁸ Thus the modern self with its 'criterionless choices' reappears and pushes to the side whatever authority the virtues were supposed to have.

Secondly, there are certain virtues that cannot be fully conceptualised without an overriding conception of the *telos* of a whole human life. MacIntyre takes justice and patience to be such virtues, since both require us to be able to order various goods according to some overriding criterion.²⁹ On the Aristotelian view, justice is defined as giving to each person their due or desert. Desert, in turn, is defined in terms of a person's contributions to the goods which provide the foundation for human community. Assessing desert—which is a relative notion—requires having a way to order the goods internal to practices, including the goods internal to the practice of creating and sustaining community. Thirdly and finally, there is one virtue

²⁸ AF 234.

²⁹ AF 235.

which couldn't be specified at all without reference to the unity of a human life—namely that of integrity or constancy.³⁰ This virtue, which ought to be recognised if one is to follow the Aristotelian tradition, has to do with singleness or purpose with respects to a whole life. It therefore presupposes the unity of a life.

Having arrived at an appreciation of the urgency for MacIntyre's theory of providing an account of the *telos* of a human life, it is apt to consider his particular conception of teleology. In this connection we should note that MacIntyre does not think that either classical Aristotelianism or medieval theism actually succeeded in grounding morality rationally, even though he sometimes gives that impression. Most importantly for our present purposes, he rejects Aristotle's biological or metaphysical teleology as false. The notion of teleology that he prefers, however, is still Aristotelian in nature, rather than consequentialist or utilitarian. MacIntyre argues that it is Aristotelian in at least three ways.³¹ First, it endorses a number of concepts and distinctions that are also relied on by Aristotle's ethics—notably voluntariness, the distinction between the intellectual virtues and the character virtues, and the relationship of both to natural abilities and the passions and the structure of practical reason. Secondly, MacIntyre claims that his account can accommodate an Aristotelian view of pleasure and enjoyment. On this view, enjoyment of an activity supervenes on the successful activity so that the successful activity and the enjoyed activity coincide.³² Thirdly, MacIntyrean virtue ethics is Aristotelian in the way that it links evaluation and explanation.³³ As the reader will no doubt already have guessed, MacIntyre follows the Aristotelian tradition in that he doesn't recognise the modern fact/value distinction. He argues in this connection that genuine understanding of human life requires allusions to virtues and their negative counterparts, such

³⁰ AF 236.

³¹ AF 229.

³² AF 230.

³³ AF 231.

as justice and injustice, courage and cowardice—that is, to things that won't be recognised as facts by proponents of the fact/value distinction.³⁴

MacIntyre's teleology may be Aristotelian, but it isn't naturalistic. Rather, he refers to his account as relying on a 'social teleology'.³⁵ A plausible way to interpret this is to say that his ethics expresses the view that actions are right or dispositions good if and only if they are necessary for or conducive to some end or good that doesn't need to be the goal of any *natural* striving.³⁶ At the first stage of the argument about the nature of the virtues, the idea of social teleology is relatively intuitive. MacIntyre's discussion of practices reveals the sense in which his teleology is social, beyond the point that practices are themselves socially established. The possibility of transformation in our conceptions of excellence, which is itself driven by human action, distances us from the notion that these excellences can be derived from nature. It is much less straightforward how this conception of teleology carries over to the level of human life. The *telos* of a human life, we might think, is most plausibly conceived of in naturalistic terms, as rooted in human nature. This is precisely what MacIntyre denies, however. He further denies that the *telos* consists in human flourishing. This part of the account follows from MacIntyre's conception of the self as socially and historically constituted. If the very nature of a self is constituted by the social and historical context in which it exists, it is clear that what its good is would also need to be derived from that context. This point is, as we shall see, absolutely crucial for understanding MacIntyre's ethics, and indeed his entire project in AF. As I've previously indicated, I will return to this important but neglected point below, after having told the standard, morality-focused story about what MacIntyre is doing in the book.

³⁴ AF 232.

³⁵ AF 229.

³⁶ This interpretation is given in William K. Frankena, "Review: MacIntyre and Modern Morality", *Ethics* 93, no. 3 (1983): 586.

MacIntyre's endorsement of a kind of teleology that is rooted in the social raises some questions about how he conceives of the category of the human, and about the relationship between the human and the self. I will, once more, return to these questions below when discussing MacIntyre's view about the socially constituted self. For now, we may note that MacIntyre's rejection of naturalistic teleology in itself could be understood as situating him in some (relative) proximity to modern moral philosophy, given the possibility that the natural category of the human can no longer be coherently conceived of as the pertinent ethical category. Kantian approaches, for instance, take little or no interest in the category of the human, but instead take abstract notions like 'person' or 'rational being' to be morally salient. Although I'm not yet in a position to fully argue the point, this might tentatively lead us to think that MacIntyre's positioning of his theory in opposition to modern moral philosophy is slightly exaggerated.

For MacIntyre, the *telos* or unity of a human life is a narrative quest for the good. He borrows the notion of a quest from medieval philosophy. This notion has two important features. First, it is part of the very idea of a quest in this sense that it isn't a search for something that is already adequately characterised or known. The quest is a process, and, crucially, it is 'always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge'.³⁷ The quest will involve asking the following two questions: 'What is the good for me?' and 'What is the good for man?' The second question amounts to asking what each answer to the former question must have in common. Secondly, however, even though a quest is by nature open-ended it cannot be initiated without any idea of the human good. At least a partly determinate conception of the final *telos* is required. This conception, MacIntyre thinks, can be drawn

³⁷ AF 254.

from the deficiencies he identified in the idea of the virtues as functions of practices. As he puts it,

it is in looking for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good.³⁸

Of course, exactly in which sense this quest—the *telos* which is ultimately supposed to be the unifying principle of a human life—is to be understood in narrative terms is the question that I am trying to address. As I have suggested, MacIntyre attempts to vindicate this conception of the *telos* by showing that human action takes narrative shape, and that, therefore agency and the temporally extended self—which, as per Wollheim’s idea, equals a life—also do. The way I have expressed this previously is by noting that the third premise of the Narrative Action Argument—i.e. the claim that action takes narrative shape—is necessary for its fourth premise, which sets out the narrative shape of a life, to follow. As we saw in the introduction, the success of this strategy in turn relies on the correctness of the prior premise that agency is the essential form of human life. My discussion below will seek to show how MacIntyre’s social philosophy offers necessary support to these claims.

4. Narrative intelligibility and narrative form

Most fundamentally, the claim that action takes narrative shape relies on the closely related ideas that action is teleological and that intelligible action is more fundamental than ‘mere

³⁸ AF 254.

action', or action as such.³⁹ The theoretical primacy of intelligible action is necessary for the claim that action takes narrative shape to even get off the ground: narrative is a mode of intelligibility. As such, the notion that action takes narrative shape and the claim that unintelligible action is defective or less than action go hand in hand.

The following section will seek to show that the primacy of intelligible action on MacIntyre's view depends on his social philosophy. To repeat, by his social philosophy, I mean the following claims: (i) the self is inherently socially and historically constituted; (ii) human actions are transactions: they are part of a social process of meaning-making which aims at making sense of both actions and agents; and (iii) being intelligible in one's actions, both to oneself and others, is the mark of agency, and a necessary basis for engaging in the narrative quest for the good life. In other words, narrative intelligibility is what underpins agential unity on MacIntyre's view.

In AF, the theoretical primacy of intelligible action is given support in a way that accords with MacIntyre's avowed methodology. He attempts to derive a philosophical claim about the bounds of agency from a sociological observation about how we tend to draw the distinction between agency and patiency in everyday life. MacIntyre observes that the most basic distinction we tend to draw in discourses and practices that refer to action is that between human and nonhuman beings. Human beings can be held accountable for their actions and be asked for an intelligible account: nonhuman beings cannot. Stated like this, this appears untrue: if the ways we tend to assign accountability to some beings but not others is the criterion to go by, young children and people with certain kinds of disabilities or mental illness would fall on the side of the nonhuman. The fact that MacIntyre himself recognises this suggests that he is willing to accept that these categories of people are defective *qua*

³⁹ Even though he doesn't explicitly argue the point, MacIntyre implies that 'action as such'—that is, the analytic category that would include both intelligible and unintelligible action—isn't theoretically meaningful.

humans, in the sense of being unable to achieve the *telos* of human life, that is, the good life. What he is doing here, of course, is to run the notions of ‘agent’ and ‘human’ together, all in line with the second premise of the Narrative Action Argument, according to which agency is the essential form of human life.

Enlightenment thinkers who vindicate the notion of agential unity in terms of autonomy have rightly been criticised for treating people who are less than fully autonomous as somehow less than human, and therefore unable to live well and be moral. Since MacIntyre rejects the notion of the autonomous agent, aiming a similar charge at him must be done on a somewhat different basis. I do think there is some room to make this charge, not with reference to autonomy, but with reference to the notion of agential unity as MacIntyre’s understands it. Although I’m merely flagging this potential issue rather than engaging with it here, we should keep in mind that the idea that selfhood requires that one is narratively intelligible both to oneself and to others is demanding enough to render it inaccessible for what is perhaps a larger share of people than we should be comfortable with.

This idea finally brings us to the fact that, for MacIntyre, crucially, the notions of a person, agency, and action are all inherently social. One important dimension along which one might be unable to achieve the good life for a human being, then, has to do with one’s ability to be part of a society or a community. This ability, in turn, is intimately tied to one’s ability to appear intelligible to other people, and one’s ability to understand and make sense of them. Intelligibility, in other words, is the very basis for agential unity on MacIntyre’s view. The remainder of this chapter is concerned with offering an interpretation of MacIntyre’s notion of agential unity. This is a crucial part of what I have referred to as his social philosophy, and thus forms a part of my broader aim in this chapter, namely to show that MacIntyre’s case for understanding the self and action in narrative terms can only be properly understood by considering it in the light of his underlying social philosophy. As such my discussion will

illuminate MacIntyre's defence of several of the premises of the Narrative Action Argument—the second one, according to which agency is the essential form of human life, and the third and fourth ones which stipulate respectively that action and a human life take narrative form.

Consider the following quote:

To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent's intentions, motives, passions and purposes. It is therefore to understand an action as something for which someone is accountable, about which it is always appropriate to ask the agent for an intelligible account. When an occurrence is apparently the intended action of a human agent, but nonetheless we cannot so identify it, we are both intellectually and practically baffled. We do not know how to respond; we do not know how to explain; we do not even know how to characterize it minimally as an intelligible action; our distinction between the humanly accountable and the merely natural seems to have broken down.⁴⁰

Here, MacIntyre raises the possibility of action that is 'apparently intentional' and intelligible action coming apart. If the intention with which the action is apparently performed cannot be rendered intelligible, it cannot be explained or responded to by others. Where this is the case, the person's participation in her community—which is, among other things, a community of meaning—will be impeded. And, more to the point, if we cannot intelligibly identify the intention with which the action is performed, we will not be able to describe—and hence identify—the action as an action. For MacIntyre—for reasons that I will describe in more detail below—this ultimately means that the agent's status as an agent will be in question. There is no structure within which her agency can be intelligibly understood as the locus from

⁴⁰ AF 243.

which her actions flow. In other words, no agential unity can be derived. MacIntyre continues by offering some examples of such occurrences:

And this kind of bafflement does indeed occur in a number of different kinds of situation; when we enter alien cultures or even alien social structures within our own culture, in our encounters with certain types of neurotic or psychotic patients (it is indeed the unintelligibility of such patients' actions that leads to their being treated as patients; actions unintelligible to the agent as well as to everyone else are understood—rightly—as a kind of suffering), but also in everyday situations.⁴¹

The most illuminating part of this passage is the parenthesis. It reveals precisely how closely the notions of agency and intelligibility are tied on MacIntyre's view. Again, if a person cannot be understood, she cannot be treated as an agent, and this in turn means that there can be no basis for identifying a self. To understand these issues better, it is necessary to consider MacIntyre's social philosophy in some detail. Let's look first at his conception of a the socially and historically constituted self.

Once more, MacIntyre's discussion is framed in terms of accountability. The emphasis on accountability is unsurprising, given that what MacIntyre seeks to do in AF is to defend a brand of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, of course, endorses the moral primacy of the agent over that of particular actions. This is one way in which it differs from modern moral traditions, which take actions to be of greater moral relevance. Accountability, we might say, attaches to the agent. This way of putting things points to the corresponding, important aspect of MacIntyre's theory of action: even though it is about the intelligibility of action, our main interest is in understanding the agent, i.e. the source from which actions flow.

⁴¹ AF 243.

MacIntyre's philosophy—and the very notion of narrative intelligibility—exemplifies a pre-modern emphasis on particularity and local features. As he puts the point, 'what the good life is for a fifth-century Athenian general will not be the same as what was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth-century farmer'.⁴² On MacIntyre's view, social circumstances and social identities are morally relevant. What is good for me depends on what is good for someone who inhabits the social roles that I inhabit. Mine and everyone else's social roles are inherited; from family, city, tribe, nation. This can be expressed by the claim that one's social identity is provided by, and coincides with, one's historical identity. The social identity that I have inherited gives my life moral particularity and constitute my moral starting point. Social identity, then, is normative for MacIntyre: one's social identity carries with it certain debts, expectations, and obligations. This idea is once again contrasted with modern moral notions such as universality and an ethics based on principle and choice. From the standpoint of modern individualism, I can choose who I am. Moreover, MacIntyre writes that it is my choice whether to assume responsibility for e.g. the actions of my parents, or for the actions carried out in the name of my country. This almost sounds like a caricature of modern individualism—especially the latter claim about the lack of moral weight of citizenship. At the very least, the claim is implausible in the context of democratic citizenship. However, these abstract claims do appear more plausible when some particularity and historical distance is added. MacIntyre's examples of the individualist attitude are striking and worth quoting in full:

Such individualism is expressed by those modern Americans who deny any responsibility for the effects of slavery on black Americans, saying 'I never owned any slaves'. It is more subtly the standpoint of those other modern Americans who accept a nicely calculated responsibility for such effects measured precisely by the benefits they

⁴² AF 255.

themselves as individuals have indirectly received from slavery. (...) And of course, there is nothing peculiar to modern Americans in this attitude: the Englishman who says, 'I never did anything wrong to Ireland; why bring up that old history as though it had something to do with *me*?' or the young German who believes that being born after 1945 means that what the Nazis did to the Jews has no moral relevance to his relationships to his Jewish contemporaries, exhibit the same attitude...⁴³

For MacIntyre, trying to cut oneself off from one's past amounts to deforming one's present relationships. This is because there can be no moral starting point without the moral particularities supplied by one's social and historical identity. The quest for the good must start from somewhere. The quest for the good must, in fact, begin from the particular and move towards the universal. Recall that the second question involved in the quest for the good concerns what each person's good have in common.

One obvious and urgent objection arises at this point. It may seem as though MacIntyre's account of the social and historically constituted self gives very little room for individuality. If the roles we are born into contribute to determining what the good life is for us, what, if any, possibilities are there for abandoning or challenging those roles? Clearly, if social change and social progress are to be at all conceivable, such possibilities must exist. In this connection a brief qualification that MacIntyre makes should be mentioned. One mode of expressing or living out one's social identity, he argues, is to rebel against it. In doing so, one is still recognising it as one's moral starting point. As far as I can see, reconciling this idea with what MacIntyre says about the relationship between social identity and the good requires treating social roles as instances of what he calls *traditions*.

As I mentioned earlier, traditions are the third category with regards to which MacIntyre develops his catalogue of the virtues, besides practices and a whole human life. Like his

⁴³ AF 255-6.

notion of a practice, MacIntyre's notion of a tradition is somewhat different from familiar usage. Most fundamentally, traditions are the vehicles by which the meanings of practices and institutions are transmitted over generations. However, MacIntyre stresses that traditions mustn't be understood in conservative or static terms. Rather, a living tradition is an 'historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition'.⁴⁴ To illustrate, MacIntyre gives the example of a university. When a university is the bearer of a tradition, its existence over time will be partly constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and what it should be. Within a tradition, the pursuit of goods goes beyond a single generation, or a single human life. The main role that traditions play in MacIntyre's virtue ethics is to provide practices and human lives with their necessary context. When MacIntyre goes through the exercise of conceiving of the virtues as functions of traditions, he is left with a single, crucial virtue: that of 'having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one'.⁴⁵ It could be said, then, to be the virtue of perceiving the particularity of one's situation—the particularity that conditions all future possibilities.

On the interpretation I suggest, understanding social roles as bearers of traditions can accommodate social change. If we conceive of them thus, the fact that traditions are constituted by argument and conflict leaves room for the redefinition of and the rebellion against the social roles that one happens to have been born into. Indeed, such rebellion—insofar as it might be thought of as an authentic manner of acknowledging one's moral starting point—can be understood as exemplifying the kind of virtuous behaviour that MacIntyre identifies with reference to traditions. The most effective rebellions, we might

⁴⁴ AF 257.

⁴⁵ AF 258.

think, are the ones that begin from the most precise insight into the nature of what one is rebelling against.

Having outlined MacIntyre's conception of the socially and historically constituted self, I will now go on to discuss his conception of action and agency. Afterwards, I will be in a good position to discuss my main claim of this chapter, namely that there is a natural fit between MacIntyre's social philosophy and his notion of narrative form.

5. Actions as transactions

Actions, for MacIntyre, aren't just things that I do detached from any meaning-giving social context. Rather, human actions are *transactions*.⁴⁶ Just like the self, they are socially constituted on the basis of narrative intelligibility.⁴⁷

It needs to be made clear that MacIntyre's idea is not that agential unity is arrived at through an activity of self-narration. According to MacIntyre's social philosophy and its implications for narrative intelligibility, I am not the author of my own story: I am merely a co-author.⁴⁸

What I am able to intelligibly do or say depends on what the people around me do and say.

This is so in two ways. At the first level, other people's actions, both past and present, put constraints on my actions. As MacIntyre artfully puts it, 'We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being the main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.'⁴⁹ This is fairly straightforward. The second sense of the notion of co-authoring has to do with what stories, or what kind of narrative coherence,

⁴⁶ AF 245.

⁴⁷ The social aspect of MacIntyre's theory of action makes it somewhat similar to Wittgensteinian theories that conceive of intelligibility in terms of rules and conventions.

⁴⁸ AF 247-8.

⁴⁹ AF 248.

are available in my society. This likewise relies on the actions, past and present, of other people.

Relying on the notion of co-authoring, MacIntyre begins his defence of this idea by arguing that human actions are ‘the deeds of those who have words’.⁵⁰ Human actions speak as much for their agents as do their words. Human actions, then, are essentially tied to the primary vehicle for meaning and intelligibility in human life, namely language. This is one elementary structural component in the claim that human action takes narrative form. MacIntyre relies on this idea to argue that the conversation, understood widely enough, can be thought of as taking the form of human transactions in general. Conversational behaviour—that is, verbal, transactive, directed behaviour that aims at intelligibility—can be generalised to such things as ‘battles, chess games, courtships, philosophy seminars, families at the dinner table, businessmen negotiating contracts...’⁵¹ It is curious that all MacIntyre’s examples of the general category of human transactions so straightforwardly involve several agents. The way I read him, what he says about conversations and transactions must generalise to human action in general. In other words, human actions *are* transactions. If this is right, even something that I do alone should fall under the category of things that take conversational form, by virtue of its reliance on social standards of meaning and intelligibility—of being part of a larger story. I myself must naturally also understand my own actions and formulate my own goals with reference to those same standards. If this weren’t the case, it is hard to see how the actions of an individual agent could be understood in narrative terms.⁵²

The move from the conversation, to human transactions, and then to actions in general is an important step in the argument. MacIntyre’s strategy is to assimilate human action in general

⁵⁰ AF 245.

⁵¹ AF 245.

⁵² As I will seek to show in my next chapter, this will become even clearer once we consider the idea in the light of certain tensions in MacIntyre’s account of the role of causality and temporality in intentional action.

to the form of the conversation, and then to argue that conversations take narrative form. To this end, he asks what is involved in rendering intelligible a conversation that one overhears. Following the thread of a conversation involves bringing it under a description that brings out its degree and kind of coherence. Is the conversation ‘a drunken, rambling quarrel’, ‘a serious intellectual disagreement’, ‘a tragic misunderstanding of each other’, or ‘a struggle to dominate each other’?⁵³ Depending on which one we settle on, the formal constraints that determine what can intelligibly be said within the context of the conversation will be known, as will the kind of resolution that the conversation takes as its goal. It does seem right to say that conversations in general have a sense of direction and aim at working things out (at least to a minimal degree, if there is to be a sense of direction at all). What is said should be understood in terms of that goal. Given this, the notion that conversations are teleological in the relevant sense appears plausible. MacIntyre argues moreover that the conversation takes narrative form in that they involve reversals and recognitions, digressions and subplots. They move towards and away from climaxes. For MacIntyre, making out the internal logic of conversations amounts to allocating them to genres. For this to be true, it seems that ‘genre’ must be understood broadly, beyond established literary conventions. This itself needn’t be a problem for MacIntyre’s view. The story form is flexible and, as the history of literature shows, allows for a lot of invention. As long as he can defend the claim that action and narrative share the same basic, formal features (teleology, causality, temporal unity), there is room for diversity with regards to what form or character particular narratives take.

I’m happy to accept the claim that conversations take narrative form. It seems clear to me that the weaker link in MacIntyre’s story about the narrative form of human action is the prior

⁵³ AF 245.

assimilation of all human action to the conversational form. This, however, will be part of my discussion in the next chapter.

6. Particularity and causality

Having examined MacIntyre's conception of agential unity and narrative intelligibility in the light of his social philosophy, we are now in a better position to appreciate what MacIntyre's emphasis on specificity and particularity amounts to. What narrative coherence is doesn't simply vary between cultures: it varies between individual stories. Narrative modes of understanding, then, can provide the level of specificity that MacIntyre's virtue ethics needs. It is potentially illuminating to compare MacIntyre's employment of narrative understanding with a Wittgensteinian account according to which the intelligibility of human action is to be derived from culturally specific rules, practices and conventions.⁵⁴ MacIntyre's emphasis on cultural particularity makes his account similar to accounts in this tradition.⁵⁵ There are some important differences, however.

First we should observe that the Wittgensteinian understanding of action is clearly inferior to the narrative one if, as is the case for MacIntyre, our primary interest is in understanding and making sense of the agent, rather than of individual actions. Rules and conventions work at a social or communal level and don't make any difference between individual people in their application. As such they may help us render individual actions intelligible, but they will not tell us much or anything at all about the agent that is their source. Because narrative intelligibility is defined in terms of the individual story of the agent, however, making sense of an action according to the narrative model will involve gaining understanding of the agent

⁵⁴ Peter Winch is a notable example of someone who have espoused this view.

⁵⁵ This similarity is unsurprising once we consider the fact that MacIntyre's own work in the 1950s and 1960s can be characterised as belonging to this Wittgensteinian tradition.

herself. In this sense it is preferable not only as an account of the temporal unity of the agent, but as an account of agential unity as well.

Part of the reason why MacIntyre's narrative account does a better job than the Wittgensteinian account at establishing a tight connection between the agent and her actions is its ability to seamlessly incorporate an element of causality. As Donald Davidson has argued, even though placing an action in a pattern or context may make it intelligible, this is insufficient for explaining it.⁵⁶ For Davidson, patterns or contexts on their own cannot be appealed to to explain how reasons explain action, since they contain both reasons and actions. For the former to explain the latter, they cannot both be included at the same level in the explanatory framework—i.e. the pattern or story. MacIntyre takes causality to be an important element in narrative understanding, and in this he agrees with the dominant view among narrative theorists in Anglo-American philosophy.⁵⁷ On this standard view, part of the explanatory force of narrative is that it allows us to see how one event follows from another.

We should be unsurprised, however, to find that MacIntyre rejects the idea that action can be understood in terms of causal laws. The idea of narrative laws is antithetical to what MacIntyre takes to be an important virtue of narrative, namely the flexibility of narrative form and the variety of what may constitute narrative coherence. The idea that there should be narrative laws clashes entirely with the emphasis on particularity that distinguishes MacIntyre's account. Again, narrative coherence is that it is defined in relation to particular stories and cannot be generalized or universalised across different ones. Narrative form simply denies that some particular event must always—as a matter of law—follow from some other event. Of course, this is one of the most important ways in which narrative modes of understanding differ from scientific explanation. This is also, as we saw in the introduction,

⁵⁶ Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ I.e. J. David Velleman and Noël Carroll.

intrinsically linked to the fact that narrative, unlike a theory of action in terms of causal laws, can be conceived of as a unity-relation.

The role of causality in MacIntyre's conception of narrative intelligibility, then, is not defined in terms of laws. What MacIntyre does claim is that actions are caused by reasons. In other words, his position is that teleological explanation is a form of causal explanation. Action descriptions, on this view, have to do with the interpretation of meaning, but this is taken to be compatible with causal explanation. This is the component that completes his account of agential unity, and the last part of this chapter will be spent fleshing out his view of the role of causality in understanding action as well as identifying a potential problem for his account.

MacIntyre appeals to causality to identify true descriptions of actions.⁵⁸ He begins with the observation that a segment of human behaviour can be correctly described in a number of different ways.⁵⁹ To the question 'What is he doing?', answers such as 'digging', 'gardening', 'taking exercise', 'preparing for winter', and 'pleasing his wife' may all be possible answers. Some such answers will characterise the agent's intentions, and some will characterise unintended consequences of his actions. MacIntyre, as we have seen, is interested in the descriptions under which the behaviour—the action—is intentional (recall the theoretical primacy of intelligible action). On MacIntyre's theory in AF, actions are caused by causally efficacious beliefs and intentions.⁶⁰ He employs the term causal ordering to refer to the process of picking out the true description(s) of an action. Ordering intentions according to their causal efficacy allows us to identify what MacIntyre refers to as the *primary intention* with which an action is performed. The claim is that if we don't know the agent's primary intention, we wouldn't be able to correctly characterise what he is doing.⁶¹ The primary

⁵⁸ His initial discussion of action explanation is highly reminiscent of Davidson's "Action, Reasons, and Causes".

⁵⁹ AF 239.

⁶⁰ It isn't clear whether MacIntyre takes intentions to be irreducible or not.

⁶¹ AF 240.

intention is the intention without which the agent hadn't performed the action in question intentionally. For example, if the agent professes to be gardening with the intention to please his wife, would he continue gardening if he were to cease believing that it pleased his wife? Or, if he takes himself to be gardening with the intention both to please his wife and to take exercise, would he continue gardening if he ceased to believe that gardening constitutes exercise? Would he continue if his beliefs changed on both accounts? Asking this kind of questions allows us to isolate the agent's primary intention and thereby correctly characterise what he is doing. The fact that identifying the primary intention requires considering the relevant beliefs of the agent clearly expresses the idea that this is meant to be understood in psychological terms.

This account of the role of causality in explaining action immediately raises a problem for MacIntyre's view. Specifically, there is some important tension in the idea that a psychological reading action explanation could be squared with the social and historical notion of narrative intelligibility that I have discussed in this chapter. If this is right, this would be an important, although at this point not unfixable, problem for MacIntyre's account of agential unity. At the very least, it seems clear that a non-psychological account would be much preferable to a psychological one in the light of this important aspect of MacIntyre's notion of narrative intelligibility.

The most obvious way in which this is the case has to do with MacIntyre's emphasis on traditions and context. As Richard Moran has argued, this emphasis precludes the possibility of there being a particular description under which someone is doing something.⁶² In other words, the idea that an action is intentional as a matter of some thought or belief about a description that the agent has must be incompatible with narrative intelligibility as MacIntyre

⁶² "The Story of My Life", 309.

has presented it so far. We see this when we consider the number of descriptions that are relevant to the narrative understanding of a person's action. Rendering an action intelligible by placing it in a narrative involves, as we have seen, employing descriptions that make reference to various institutional settings and practices—its entire social and historical context. Moreover, and as we will see in more detail in my next chapter, it involves employing layers of descriptions that make reference to different stretches of time. Given this, there is no way that all the relevant descriptions can figure in the agent's thoughts as she performs the action in question. The upshot is that MacIntyre's respective accounts of narrative intelligibility and practical reason come apart, and this is clearly an unacceptable result. The claim that he is trying to defend, of course, is that action and practical reasoning both take narrative shape. If he cannot defend this claim, his theory will not be able to provide either agential nor temporal unity of the self.

A straightforward way in which MacIntyre could avoid this problem, however, would be to endorse a non-psychological account of intentional action, for instance one along the lines of the one presented in Anscombe's *Intention*. Where there is no reference to the agent's thoughts or beliefs at the time of acting, there is room for the multiplicity of descriptions that narrative intelligibility requires. Such an account would also be compatible with what MacIntyre says about accountability. Looking at Anscombe's original example of a man pumping water, we note that the man could tell someone what he is doing if asked, and that he knows what he is doing in virtue of doing it intentionally, but not because he is entertaining any particular thought in that moment.⁶³

Given that a non-psychological account of action could easily resolve the problem that I have charged him with here, why doesn't MacIntyre endorse such an account? His stance on how

⁶³ *Intention*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1957), §23.

to think of intentional action is indeed no accident. MacIntyre appeals to the psychological interpretation of intentional action in order to supply a certain experiential notion of ‘the story as lived’, or a narrative notion of lived experience. This appeal is made in anticipation of the major objection that his account of narrative self-understanding has been charged with by critics—what I in my next chapter will call the Distortion Problem. At the core of this problem is the charge that taking up a narrative stance towards one’s life somehow distorts or falsifies what it is like to live. To respond to it, MacIntyre needs to vindicate the notion of what we might call ‘the lived story’. As I will seek to argue, he appeals to a psychological interpretation of intentional action to arrive at precisely such a phenomenological understanding of the claim that action takes narrative shape.

In this chapter I have tried to situate the notion of narrative self-understanding in MacIntyre’s overall project in AF, as well as examining the idea of narrative self-understanding in the light of the part of MacIntyre’s social philosophy. I have sought to defend the claim that neither his notion of narrative intelligibility, nor his social philosophy can be properly understood independently from the other. Finally, I have suggested that MacIntyre’s endorsement of a psychological interpretation of intentional action will need to be replaced with a non-psychological interpretation in order to be compatible with his notion of narrative intelligibility. Without further ado I hereby conclude this chapter to move on to my next chapter where I will continue my reading of AF by addressing the question, already raised here, how his notion of narrative intelligibility fits with his theory of action and practical reasoning.

Chapter 2: The narrative self, practical reason and temporal unity

1. Introduction

My first chapter argued that MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding is best understood in the light of his social philosophy. I further argued that narrative form as MacIntyre conceives of it can accommodate the notion that the self and action are socially, historically, and culturally constituted if his view is slightly modified. Specifically, MacIntyre's endorsement of a psychological interpretation of intentional action will need to be replaced with a non-psychological interpretation in order to be compatible with his notion of narrative intelligibility. With this modification, we can better perceive why MacIntyre should be drawn to narrative modes of understanding. Another reason for the fit between narrative intelligibility and MacIntyre's social philosophy is the fact that narrative is a unity-relation: it has a beginning, a middle, and an ending, as well as a sense of direction and internal coherence. Together, these features of narrative form make it a *prima facie* strong candidate for MacIntyre's philosophical needs in *After Virtue*. Narrative form, it seems, can vindicate a conception of the self as both socially and historically constituted and temporally unified in the pertinent way.

Whereas my focus in the preceding chapter was on how to interpret the notion of narrative intelligibility from the perspective of MacIntyre's social philosophy, this chapter will examine MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding from a different angle, namely that of the philosophy of action and practical reason. It will hence continue and refine the discussion about intentional action that I began at the end of the last chapter. The question that I will aim to address in the present chapter is whether the claim that a human life is temporally unified in

line with MacIntyre's conception of narrative form is compatible with a plausible account of intentional action and practical reasoning. I will argue that it is not, and that this in turn reveals a deep tension that runs throughout MacIntyre's thought in AF.

I will begin this chapter by discussing MacIntyre's conception of what he calls the temporal ordering of intentions. Temporal ordering of intentions, or true descriptions of an action, is how MacIntyre attempts to make the move from his account of agential unity to an account of the temporal unity of the agent. The thought is that, because true descriptions of actions are the building blocks of narrative, ordering them according to the stretch of time to which they make reference amounts to situating them in and rendering them intelligible in the light of a story—the story of the agent's life. My critical reading of this part of MacIntyre's account will result in the argument that his claim that actions are rendered intelligible in this way is importantly flawed. Specifically, his account of the temporal ordering of intentions collapses into his account of causal ordering. In other words, my claim will be that the mereological relation between the different-level action descriptions that MacIntyre discusses is explanatorily powerful because it expresses causality, not because it is temporal. Having argued as much, I observe that to argue that actions are rendered intelligible by being placed in a temporally extended, teleologically structured narrative, MacIntyre needs to offer something beyond his account of temporal ordering as it is articulated in AF.

Rather than directly examining the prospects for filling this gap by drawing on other theoretical resources in AF, I then explain why the spirit of my criticism of the temporal ordering of intentions risks leading to an unproductive and wrongly conceived project of supplying an account of the importance of temporality for basic human understanding. It is wrongly conceived, I argue, because the way of approaching the problem seems to imply examining the importance of temporality for understanding human action and human life as something strange and too far removed from everyday lived experience. Having flagged this

risk, I move on to examining MacIntyre's strategy for avoiding posing the question about temporality in this way, namely his insistence that our very existence is necessarily historical and temporal in character. I suggest that the necessity of integrating this dimension of human life at the very root of his account of the unified self, rather than as an add-on to agential unity, is what motivates his controversial and metaphysically charged claim that 'stories are lived before they are told'.

This claim is part of MacIntyre's defence of the third and fourth premises of the Narrative Action Argument, which posit that human actions and a human life take narrative form, and at this point I turn to discussing the most important criticism that this idea has been met with—what I will call the Distortion Problem. The Distortion Problem is the objection that conceiving of human life and action as taking narrative form somehow distorts or falsifies what it is like to live. After outlining my preferred interpretation of this objection and its import, I consider MacIntyre's prospects for pushing back against it. It is at this point that I return to his account of intentional action. As I hinted at at the end of my previous chapter, MacIntyre interprets intentional action in psychological terms in anticipation of the Distortion Problem. I now consider the full costs of this strategy. I argue that even though it could perhaps push back against the Distortion Problem, the incompatibility of a psychological reading of intentional action with MacIntyre's notion of narrative intelligibility that follows from his social philosophy means that endorsing this strategy would result in there not being much left of his theory of narrative self-understanding to defend. The kind of self that would result from opting for this strategy couldn't be socially and historically constituted, and therefore not narratively unified, in the sense that the discussion in my first chapter described.

I conclude that this observation is symptomatic of a deep tension that runs between the two dimensions of AF that my respective chapters have covered. This tension has structured my own critical reading of MacIntyre's account of narrative self-understanding as well as

MacIntyre's formulation of his broader project in AF. In my final section, I attempt to articulate some dimensions of this tension.

2. Deriving temporal unity from agential unity

My first chapter gave an interpretation of MacIntyre's account of the socially and historically constituted self understood as an account of agential unity. As I argued, the self that is unified in this sense can intelligibly be understood as an agent. Both the agent herself and her surroundings have access to the story (which in turn is embedded in longer-term stories) with reference to which her action can be rendered intelligible. As I further argued, not any story will do—the causal component of MacIntyre's account functions as a criterion of truth: the true description of the action must refer to the intention (or the reason) that actually did cause it. (I will say more about the role of causality in MacIntyre's account in the present chapter.) The upshot of this is that we are now in a position to appreciate the way in which agency is essential to the unified self on MacIntyre's view—in accordance with the second premise of the Narrative Action Argument. In connection with this, we should recall the crucial assumption, borrowed from Wollheim, that has guided my reasoning throughout this project. According to this assumption, a human life is identical to the temporally extended self. It is on this basis that I have referred to the self and a human life interchangeably. This idea illuminates what I take MacIntyre to be doing in the part of his account that I will examine in this chapter, namely, to attempt to derive temporal unity from his account of agential unity. The narrative character of practical reason—of making sense of the actions of oneself and others—is thus called on to form the basis for the notion that a human life must also be conceived of in narrative terms. And, because narrative is a temporally extended unity-relation, if this is right the temporal unity of a life would follow.

MacIntyre's narrative theory of temporal unity of a human life is an exercise in mereology. Like any whole, a human life (understood as a unified whole) is constituted by its parts. As we saw in my first chapter, the relevant parts of a human life, of a self, are actions. We saw that the self is unified at one level through action and agency. To move from there to the temporal unity of a life, MacIntyre must give an account of the appropriate way to understand how the parts relates to the whole, and vice versa. Given that we are concerned with unity across time, MacIntyre must furnish an account for the way that actions, understood as temporal parts, make up a life.

MacIntyre refers to the process of identifying the primary—that is, the most causally efficacious—intention as the causal ordering of intentions. On his view, there is another, related way in which intentions must be ordered if we are to understand what someone is doing, namely according to their temporal extensions. This is the step of the argument where MacIntyre most markedly goes beyond standard theories of action in his conception of what is required for intelligibility. Temporal ordering is the key to making the move from agential unity to the temporal unity of the self, and MacIntyre refers to it as the temporal ordering of intentions.

His discussion of temporal ordering, like the one about causal ordering, begins from the observation that there will be multiple correct descriptions of the same action. The idea is that these descriptions can be ordered according to their different temporal extensions. The agent may very well be 'pleasing his wife' in the short term, but he may also be 'trying to save his marriage' in the longer term. Consider MacIntyre's own example of such multi-layered action descriptions. A compatibly correct set of answers to the question 'What is he doing?' include 'writing a sentence', 'finishing his book', 'contributing to the debate on the theory of action',

and ‘trying to get tenure’.⁶⁴ As this example shows, the intentions that underpin these true descriptions can be ordered according to the stretch of time to which they make reference. It is natural to interpret this example in mereological terms. On such an interpretation, ‘writing a sentence’ and ‘finishing his book’ are to be understood as temporal parts of ‘trying to get tenure’. Temporal ordering of intentions (or true descriptions) is absolutely crucial for understanding action on MacIntyre’s account. He argues that the behaviour that we are trying to explain only becomes fully intelligible when we know what the *longer* and *longest-term* intentions invoked are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer. In other words, an action becomes intelligible when we know its narrative history and the wider aims and intentions which point to the continuation of the narrative of which it constitutes a segment.

This is a strong, but *prima facie* not implausible, claim. It isn’t wrong to say that I’ll only fully understand what you are doing when writing a sentence on the condition that I know that you are finishing your book and trying to get tenure. On MacIntyre’s account, it isn’t sufficient for understanding an action to correctly describe it with reference to the reasons or intentions that are its cause. Such an understanding might be sufficient for attributing rational agency to the human in question, but it doesn’t say much about her beyond that. Importantly, it doesn’t allow us to evaluate the actions or the virtues of the agent (once we have identified her as such), given that they are to be evaluated in the light of the agent’s own narrative quest. This is why any answer to the question what someone is doing isn’t going to be properly informative until it makes reference to longer temporal stretches—that is, to the stories of the agent and of her social and historical context. As we saw in my last chapter, this is why social

⁶⁴ AF 241.

and historical context is needed for anything that deserves to be called intelligibility, according to the conception that MacIntyre's theory necessitates.

The demandingness of this notion of intelligibility is utterly striking. Rather than assessing the broader matter of its plausibility, however, I would like to raise a prior, more analytic worry about the way MacIntyre lays out what he says about the temporal ordering of intentions.

Let's look at his own example again. MacIntyre states that a compatibly correct set of answers to the question 'What is he doing?' include 'writing a sentence', 'finishing his book', 'contributing to the debate on the theory of action', and 'trying to get tenure'.⁶⁵ These descriptions are then to be temporally ordered, thereby achieving something like a teleological, narrative structure. According to one way of looking at things, however, it may seem that MacIntyre lacks sufficient licence to meaningfully refer to this kind of ordering as temporal at all. According to this suggestion, referring to the relations that hold between these different descriptions as temporal doesn't add anything in terms of increased understanding or intelligibility. Let me show what I take this worry to involve.

My suspicion is that temporal ordering is close to or actually does collapse into causal ordering on MacIntyre's view. If I'm right about this, the implication is that he fails to show that actions are rendered intelligible by virtue of being placed in a temporal sequence. This in turn would imply that his theory of action doesn't actually rely on anything like narrative intelligibility, given that an essential feature of narrative form is temporality. If this is right, the larger project of unifying a human life through narrative cannot succeed in its present formulation. And of course, if this cannot be done MacIntyre's virtue ethics lacks the foundation it needs. Clearly, then, if this worry can be sustained it is extremely serious for the view.

⁶⁵ AF 241.

Michael Thompson has offered an analysis of the word ‘because’ in the context of intentional action which—after some minor tweaking—provides a useful framing for articulating what the problem with MacIntyre’s notion of temporal ordering is.⁶⁶ In the section in question, Thompson takes it as his aim to defend what he calls naïve action theory or naïve rationalisation. More specifically, his claim is that an analysis of the word ‘because’ can be employed to defend the idea that sub-actions that are themselves intentional can be explained in terms of the intentional action of which they constitute parts. Although Thompson isn’t directly concerned with practical reasoning, he himself acknowledges that what he says about intentional action can be applied to such discussions as well, and hence I take my present use of his account to be legitimate.

Thompson is concerned with what he calls intentional actions proper, by which he means—following Davidson and Anscombe—actions that are ‘intuitively continuous and divisible, that take time, and that can be interrupted’.⁶⁷ This category, which is taken to primary, excludes such secondary phenomena as mental acts and beginnings-to-act. According to Thompson, intentional actions understood in the former sense can be identified by attending to the following formula: ‘X’s doing A is an intentional action (proper) under that description just in case the agent can be said, truly, to have done something else *because he or she was doing A*’.⁶⁸ In more metaphysical terms, the idea might be expressed by the claim that an event (or process, whichever category we think actions belong to⁶⁹) is an intentional action proper just in case it is the cause of its own parts. For example, I’m only breaking an egg because I’m making an omelette; here, my making the omelette is justly conceived of as the intentional action proper, with reference to which its parts must be understood. As we saw in

⁶⁶ Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 112.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 106.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 112.

⁶⁹ David Charles has recently argued that the most plausible way for philosophers working in the Aristotelian vein to understand actions are as processes rather than events. “Processes, Activities, and Actions”, in *Process, Action, and Experience*, edited by Rowland Stout, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 20-40.

my previous chapter, MacIntyre seems to define the notion of a primary intention—i.e. the basis he identifies for correctly describing intentional actions—in line with this idea. At this point we should note that Thompson, unlike MacIntyre, in no way relies on a psychological understanding of intentional action. However, this difference between him and MacIntyre needn't be a problem for the present discussion. Recall that I also suggested in the previous chapter that MacIntyre's account would be improved if he modified precisely that aspect of his theory, i.e. if he abandoned the psychological understanding of intentional action and replaced it with a logical one. In line with this suggestion, in the present discussion I'm assuming that MacIntyre isn't tied to the psychological interpretation.

So again, for MacIntyre, the primary intention is the intention with reference to which the action in question is correctly described or identified. It seems right to say, using MacIntyre's own terminology, that whatever else the agent is doing as part of the action A whose description refers to the primary intention is only done because she is doing A. Like Thompson puts it, the intentional action can in a sense be said to be the 'cause of itself'. This isn't true for its parts: the primary intention with which they are performed extends beyond them.

What I have tried to do so far is to assimilate the modified, non-psychological version of MacIntyre's account of causal ordering to Thompson's analysis of intentional action in terms of the word 'because'. The next step in making my original claim about temporal ordering is to show how natural it is to rethink MacIntyre's claims about temporal ordering in causal terms. To make this point, I will rely on an especially effective example that Thompson employs to represent the idea that the parts of an intentional action proper are to be explained in terms of the whole. The example involves the action of pushing something across a certain path and runs as follows:

Let it be, then, that I have pushed a stone along a certain path from α to ω , and that this is a completed intentional action of mine. It must also, of course, be that I have pushed the stone from α to β , if β is a place about halfway along the path from α to ω . And as I began to push off from α it would have been as much true for me to say, “I am pushing it to β ” as “I am pushing it to ω .”⁷⁰

This example is especially effective in that it allows us to represent the parts of the whole in spatial terms, as distances on a line. I want to borrow this form of representation to think about temporal extensions. Recall that the category of intentional actions that Thompson is concerned with are durable—i.e. they extend across time. Given this, we see that the pushing of the stone from α to β will constitute a temporal part of the pushing of the stone from α to ω .⁷¹ The segments of the whole, however we identify them (e.g. as α to β , or β to γ , or α to γ), can then be temporally ordered, just like the segments in MacIntyre’s own example about writing a book. This is all true: like MacIntyre argues, different action descriptions do refer to different stretches of time, and they can be ordered accordingly. The problem, however, is that this observation risks becoming trivial. By assimilating Thompson’s example to MacIntyre’s example about temporal ordering, I hope to have come some way towards showing that it isn’t at all clear what is added in terms of explanation or intelligibility by taking up the temporal perspective when seeking to understand an intentional action, in addition to the causal one. Temporal ordering of true actions descriptions, it seems, actually does collapse into causal ordering on MacIntyre’s view. Articulated differently, my claim is that a so-called short-term description of an action (‘writing a sentence’) doesn’t in fact get its intelligibility from being placed in a temporally extended narrative, but from the fact that it is done *because* the agent is also doing something else (‘finishing his book’). The mereological

⁷⁰ *Life and Action*, 107.

⁷¹ This is where I’m moving beyond Thompson’s own use of this example.

relation between the two descriptions, then, is explanatorily powerful because it expresses causality, not because it is temporal.

The same point can be expressed by using a slightly different case: one where the temporal ordering of true action descriptions doesn't just risk becoming trivial, but is impossible altogether. Let's begin from the observation that the work that temporal ordering is supposed to do on MacIntyre's account relies on the fundamental assumption that true action descriptions can *always* be temporally ordered. In fact we have good reason to question this assumption.⁷² Suppose that I am watering my friend's plants while she is on holiday. By watering her plants, I am fulfilling a promise to her. 'Watering my friend's plants' and 'fulfilling a promise' are both true descriptions of what I'm doing. Notice that the primary intentions which make those descriptions true refer to the very same stretch of time. The relation that hold between these two intentions could still rightly be described as temporal: simultaneity is a temporal relation. The point is, however, that it isn't clear how they could be temporally *ordered*. This puts pressure on MacIntyre's claim that the *only* way to render a true description of an action intelligible is by reference to longer-term descriptions.⁷³ My watering of my friend's plants is made intelligible in the light of my simultaneously fulfilling my promise to her: the former must be understood with reference to the latter. What this reveals is that even though temporal ordering is impossible in this case, causal ordering is still possible. I am watering my friend's plants *because* I am fulfilling my promise to her.

My discussion of Thompson's example might have arisen the suspicion that actions that can be causally ordered can also be temporally ordered, just by virtue of the fact that we are concerned with durable actions, and that I represented the parts of the whole as the shorter-term parts of a longer-term whole. I take it that this latter example shows why this suspicion is

⁷² Moran makes a similar objection in "The Story of My Life."

⁷³ AF 241.

wrong. The fact that the descriptions in this case can be causally but not temporally ordered of course shows that those two kinds of ordering do come apart. This, in turn, is why any attempt to smuggle in an account of temporal ordering by letting it piggyback on the much more plausible possibility of causal ordering is necessarily illegitimate. In other words, the explanatory force of the temporal ordering of true action descriptions cannot be derived from causality, but must be defended on separate, independent grounds.

What I have argued so far is that MacIntyre's attempt to defend the explanatory force of temporal ordering in AF fails. Hence to argue that actions are rendered intelligible by being placed in a temporally extended, teleologically structured narrative, MacIntyre needs to offer something beyond his account of temporal ordering as it is articulated in AF. Fortunately, the fact that he is obliged to admit that causality vindicates much of the explanatory force of narrative form doesn't stand in the way for the possibility of filling out the account. As we saw in the context of MacIntyre's historical argument about modern morality in my previous chapter, it is (at least in principle) entirely possible to combine causal, teleological explanation with e.g. historical modes of understanding. I will examine the prospects for doing precisely that by drawing on some of the resources from MacIntyre's social philosophy, which I discussed in my previous chapter, below.

Rather than engaging directly in that task, however, at this point I would first like to pause, step back, and consider the intuitive plausibility of the idea that human actions can be rendered intelligible by being placed in stories, and that human lives can themselves be thought of as stories. Think of, for example, our common practice of writing and reading biographies. To be able to interpret MacIntyre's project with any degree of accuracy and charity, this intuitive, familiar idea must be kept firmly in view.⁷⁴ Although I think that my

⁷⁴ Like I suggested in my previous chapter, this is where many commentators of AF fail.

argument about his failure to attribute any explanatory power to the temporal ordering of true action descriptions is correct, I also think that the spirit of this criticism—as well as MacIntyre’s own presentation of causal and temporal ordering, which sometimes appears to rely on too many unstated assumptions of analytic action theory—risks leading to an unproductive and wrongly conceived project of supplying an account of the importance of temporality for basic human understanding. It is wrongly conceived because the way of approaching the problem that my previous discussion encourages seems to imply examining the importance of temporality for understanding human action and human life as something strange and too far removed from everyday lived experience. In his discussion of causal and temporal ordering of action descriptions it is as though MacIntyre for a moment abandons the boldness with which most of AF is written, and somewhat uncritically accepts a philosophical idiom whose main assumptions fit badly with other dimensions of his project. Despite MacIntyre’s attempt to underplay it, on any critical interpretation of AF this important tension must be made to rise to the surface.

On my interpretation of AF, what MacIntyre ultimately is forced to do to avoid the uncomfortable, wrongly conceived question about the precise explanatory force of temporality is to insist that our very existence is necessarily historical and temporal in character, and that we couldn’t even understand the notion of human life without this notion.⁷⁵ This insistence—which on its own is extremely plausible in my view, and even more so if one accepts MacIntyre’s social philosophy given its historical bent—is the source of one of the most controversial remarks that he expresses in AF, namely the claim that ‘stories are lived before they are told—except in the case of fiction’.⁷⁶ In order to articulate what this could

⁷⁵ It is interesting to observe that this idea sounds as though it is derived from phenomenology, and the tension between that observation and the fact that MacIntyre explicitly rejects phenomenology as a potent philosophical method (AF 3). It seems fair, in the light of the present discussion, to say that his rejection of phenomenology is somewhat overstated.

⁷⁶ AF 246.

mean, MacIntyre cites literary scholar Barbara Hardy, who writes that ‘we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative’.⁷⁷ According to this remark, narrative is the very structure by which we live and breathe. If this is right, its utterly foundational role in our lives can plausibly be considered a reason (in addition to its relative formal flexibility) why narrative intelligibility is so elusive and so hard to pin down. On this view, narrative is in a sense everywhere, structuring our very thoughts about ourselves, our actions and time. In other words, it is the chief vehicle of meaning in human life.

The metaphysically charged claim that stories are lived before they are told appears to square well with MacIntyre’s conception of the socially and historically constituted self, and with his related notion of social teleology. In fact, it seems that narrative would have to be conceived of precisely as being foundational and prior to representation in this sense in order for these other dimensions of MacIntyre’s systematic theory to make sense. As we saw, at the core of MacIntyre’s social philosophy are the claims that the self, as well as action and agency, are socially and historically constituted. It follows that the human good cannot be naturalistically derived, but has to be derived from the very same social and historical context as the self. As I argued in my previous chapter, narrative form is able to supply the structural features that any notion of self-understanding that is to agree with this social account must vindicate—namely, teleology, causality, and temporal unity. Building on this, we are now in a position to appreciate at a deeper level why it is that narrative and what we might call lived experience must go together on MacIntyre’s account: it is because of the difficulty involved in vindicating the temporal and historical character of human life and action in other ways. This dimension of human life must so to speak be posited from the very beginning. As my discussion of the temporal ordering of action descriptions suggests, treating temporal or

⁷⁷ AF 245.

historical understanding as an add-on to a causal, teleological conception of explanation is a misguided, or at least a thoroughly unproductive, approach.

Having suggested as much, let's continue to refine MacIntyre's claim that stories are lived before they are told. MacIntyre writes (with his usual flair) that 'narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration'.⁷⁸ In an illuminating discussion, Richard Moran rejects a trivial interpretation of this claim, according to which all that stories are lived before they are told means is that the events in question precede the account (whether narrative or not) that is given of them.⁷⁹ Of course, the claim that MacIntyre makes is that it is the events of the story themselves that take narrative form, independently of their representation. The challenge, then, is to account for the relation that, on MacIntyre's view, holds between the living of an event and narrative form. Like Moran puts it, the suggestion seems to be that 'we are talking about a relation that the living of an event cannot have to a mere list or an unsorted set of photographs', but something that it must have uniquely to narrative.⁸⁰ MacIntyre needs the notion of the story as lived to provide something beyond the kind of factual accuracy that such other forms of records can provide. It is clear that some notion of lived experience or life as it is lived is relied on by MacIntyre throughout this part of the account. The task in my next section will be to try to give a critical interpretation of precisely this notion, and to link it to some other important dimensions of the theory.

3. The lived story

⁷⁸ AF 245.

⁷⁹ "The Story of My Life".

⁸⁰ "The Story of My Life", 307.

MacIntyre's claim that stories are lived before they are told, or that lived experience itself takes narrative shape, is emphasised in anticipation of the major challenge that his account of narrative self-understanding faces. This challenge rests on the claim that conceiving of a human life in narrative terms somehow distorts what it is really like to live. Because of this general aspect, I will refer to this problem as the Distortion Problem. The idea, articulated slightly differently, is that there is something fundamentally wrong in conceiving of practical reasoning as taking narrative form.

Some philosophers who have pressed this objection have claimed that conceiving of one's life in narrative terms can only be done retrospectively, and that this narrative stance therefore is incompatible with practical reasoning. An early articulation of something like this worry comes from Kierkegaard, who in his *Journal for 1843* writes the following:

It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition, it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting point from which to understand it—backwards.⁸¹

As Bernard Williams notes in his discussion of this quote, the general claim that life cannot be understood in time doesn't strictly follow from the fact that I'm never in a position to understand my life in the only way it can be understood, namely backwards.⁸² For that to be the case, another assumption has to be added: the claim that I am in a particularly privileged position, compared to other people, to understand my own life in time. It isn't necessary to evaluate Kierkegaard's stronger, more general claim about understanding life in time, however. Our interest in the above quote comes from the point it makes about an individual

⁸¹ Quoted in Bernard Williams, "Life as Narrative", *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2007): 309.

⁸² *Ibid.* 309.

person's understanding of, and living of, her own life. The problem, as Kierkegaard formulates it, has to do with the lack of an appropriate standpoint. There seems to be no stance where understanding one's own life across time, i.e. as a temporally extended self, can be combined with the living of that life. If this is right, it's clearly a problem that extends far beyond MacIntyre's account of self-understanding in specifically narrative terms. Rather, it would be a problem for *any* account that attempts to provide the notion of a temporally unified human life, using that notion to underpin an ethical account where character and actions are evaluated in the light of that life as a whole.

Most immediately, it appears that a challenge for any account of this kind would be to vindicate the unpredictability of human life. If I am to live my life in accordance with what we might call the ethical shape of my life as a whole, I need to have a sense of what that whole looks like. But, as Kierkegaard forcefully notes, there cannot be a standpoint from which I could arrive at such a sense whilst being in the midst of living my life. MacIntyre is aware of this problem, and I read his employment of the medieval notion of a quest as his most direct attempt at countering it. Recall that, as we saw in my previous chapter, it is part of the very idea of a quest that it isn't a search for something that is already adequately characterised or known. The quest is a process, and, crucially, it is 'always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge'.⁸³ Now, is the open-endedness of MacIntyre's notion of a narrative quest sufficient to allay Kierkegaard's worry? Without getting too deep into things just yet, we might think that it does a respectable job at vindicating unpredictability, at least if we understand this latter notion in a fairly crude and unrefined sense. MacIntyre allows that when engaged in my own, particular narrative quest, I don't know what will happen in the future, or how my life will end. What is crucial to note, however, is that of course MacIntyre makes the notion of a narrative quest part of his account

⁸³ AF 254.

at a not unimportant cost. If reaching a good and virtuous life is to be done on the basis of narrative coherence, it seems that the full story—the full narrative arch of one’s life—must be known. MacIntyre makes much of the idea that narratives, as well as human lives, have beginnings, middles and endings. What point is there in mentioning that there are such endings, however, if we cannot know what they are, and thereby be guided by the shape that they endow the full story with? As literary theorist Roy Pascal has argued, the ending of a story is of supreme importance in that it alone can establish the unity of all elements of the story.⁸⁴

Some might think that MacIntyre’s introduction of the notion of a narrative quest weakens the account to the point where it is no longer able to do what it takes as its primary task to do, namely unifying a human life to the degree that it can underpin his version of Aristotelian virtue ethics. MacIntyre really is balancing on a knife’s edge when negotiating this very difficult challenge. I’m not going to take a stand on whether the notion of a narrative quest allows MacIntyre to ultimately succeed in countering it, but it is important to appreciate both just how difficult the challenge is, and how much depends on resolving it. It is immensely difficult because, as we’ve seen just now, resolving it must involve striking a balance between offering a notion of a unified human life that is robust enough to be able to guide practical reasoning and moral behaviour, and respecting the clear limits of the human standpoint as we move through life. If this issue cannot be resolved, the prospects for any contemporary—post- or late modern—attempt to defend Aristotelian virtue ethics are very dim. More generally, the fragmented, modern self would seem like the only possible starting point for any attempt at developing a moral theory.

⁸⁴ Roy Pascal, “Narrative Fictions and Reality: A Comment on Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 11, no. 1 (1977): 45.

Having observed as much, it is now time to move on from this somewhat simplified version of the Distortion Problem and MacIntyre's response and dig deeper. Unpredictability, in fact, is only one issue among the class of issues that the Distortion Problem is concerned with. Crucially, even if it could vindicate unpredictability, Kierkegaard and likeminded philosophers still wouldn't be satisfied with MacIntyre's account, on the grounds that taking a narrative point of view on one's life involves a shift towards an external perspective that is too far removed from human life as it is lived. Even though we could understand unpredictability in a broader sense, it still would fail to fully capture this more general dimension of the problem.

A different version of the Distortion Problem that is in line with this broader idea, and that allows us to draw out some crucial dimensions of MacIntyre's account of the narrative self has been offered by Sartre.⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ Sartre, unlike Kierkegaard, takes aim specifically at the idea that a human life can be thought of as a story. For Sartre, at the core of the objection is the claim that narrative form is itself inherently falsifying. This claim can be traced to a familiar Existentialist theme, namely the idea that there is a clash between the stance or point of view that we take when we are in the middle of living our lives and carrying out our projects, and the one we take when we look back on, or tell the stories of, our lives. According to this line of thought, the narrative or recollective stance can only be an external perspective, and this implies that it cannot coincide with the perspective of life as it is lived. Meaningful patterns

⁸⁵ Barthes's *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953) contains a very similar, albeit more dogmatic, account.

⁸⁶ In this context we may note that Sartrean existentialism is one of the so-called modern philosophies in explicit opposition to which MacIntyre develops his own account in AF. Because of the sharp separation between the individual self and the social roles that she plays on the Sartrean view, such a self cannot be the bearer of Aristotelian virtues. As MacIntyre writes, 'For a self separated from its roles in the Sartrean modes loses that arena of social relationships in which the Aristotelian virtues function if they function at all. The patterns of a virtuous life would fall under those condemnations of conventionality which Sartre put into the mouth of Antoine Roquentin in *La Nausée* and which he uttered in his own person in *L'Être et le néant*. Indeed the self's refusal of the inauthenticity of conventionalized social relationships becomes what integrity is diminished into in Sartre's account'. AF 238.

are only accessible from an external perspective, not as we move through life. The following quote from narrative theorist Louis Mink expresses this idea extremely well:

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. Only in the story is it America which Columbus discovers and only in the story is the kingdom lost for want of a nail.⁸⁷

The narrator, on this Sartrean view, cannot be a character in the story, because the narrator requires a broader temporal perspective than that which is available to the characters as they figure in the story. Only the (apparently omniscient) narrator can describe how Columbus discovers America. To relate to one's own life as a story, then, must mean relating to it as one relates to the lives of other people—that is, in a way which allows us to make out forms of coherence between character or personality and action that aren't accessible from the first-person point of view. The criticism can be expressed in broader terms by the claim that the first-person point of view has been lost, and with it the unique freedom that it offers. From the first-person perspective, one's own attitudes and decisions appear revocable: it is only from the external perspective that they acquire meaning and can be traced back to one's character. Since the narrative stance excludes the proper first-person perspective on the self and one's life, it implies too much solidity, too much necessity. Given that it obscures human freedom in this way, it seems that Sartre would think of it as a form of bad faith.

Both Moran and Pascal have argued against Sartre's claim that narrative form is inherently falsifying.⁸⁸ Given that, in my view, the weaker version of the Distortion Problem that can be

⁸⁷ Louis O. Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension", *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 557-8.

⁸⁸ Moran, "The Story of My Life"; Pascal, "Narrative Fictions and Reality".

extracted from their criticism is more plausible than the original Sartrean version, I will describe this criticism to get a better view of what the challenge actually asks of MacIntyre. On Moran's and Pascal's view, rather than falsifying lived experience, the narrative stance involves a shift in perspective—one that is compatible with truth, or reality.

The Sartrean charge of falsification or unfaithfulness begins from the claim that there is a difference between what is available from the narrative, allegedly external point of view and what is available to the person experiencing the events of the story. So, borrowing one of Mink's examples, the information conveyed by the sentence 'her hopes would go unfulfilled' is available to the narrator but not the character. So far so good. However, why should we think that it is to falsify things to describe the person's hopes as unfulfilled? Assuming that they really would go unfulfilled, that description does indeed correspond to reality. This isn't the sense of falsification that Sartre has in mind, however. Moran offers a more apt interpretation of what the Sartrean charge of falsification amounts to. On Moran's reading, the most general idea is the thought—recognisable from other philosophical contexts—that reality cannot be captured in language.⁸⁹ Applied specifically to narrative, Moran characterises the Sartrean criticism as follows:

In addition, in order to make sense of the idea that the retrospective form of narrative is falsifying, we would have to think of the narrative as projecting the future perspective back into the depiction of the 'lived experience' at the time of the events themselves, and to see the form of narrative as seeking, but necessarily failing to capture, this 'lived experience'.⁹⁰

Of course, we don't need to understand narrative as aiming at this kind of phenomenological correspondence. Indeed, expressed like this it sounds like a pretty strange idea, one which

⁸⁹ Moran cites Wittgenstein's discussion of the language of sensations as an example of an account that draws on similar ideas.

⁹⁰ "The Story of My Life", 307-8.

appears to be at some remove from everyday conceptions of a story. The idea is important, however—clearly, we are approaching a clear tension that, as I will discuss shortly, bears directly on aspects of MacIntyre’s account. Moran concludes his discussion of Sartre’s claim that narrative form is inherently falsifying—that ‘there can be no true stories’—by observing that there is something right about the thought that there is a discrepancy between what is available to the narrator and what is available to the character in the story, namely patterns of meaning. Meaning is indeed a matter of perspective, and of knowledge: the patterns that provide meaning by reference to narrative coherence necessarily stretches into the future towards an ending, beyond the agent’s present standpoint. This idea does not amount to the claim that stories are inherently falsifying, however. Discussing the example of Oedipus, which is illuminating in that it involves a delusion, Moran writes the following:

Here it is impossible, and contrary to the demands of story-telling for the story to reflect the lived experience of Oedipus himself, but of course this disparity between the story and the life-experience does not mean that the story distorts or falsifies the life. For the story we tell of Oedipus is true, he is the killer of Laius; he just doesn’t realize it at the time when we first encounter him on stage. In a case like this, even though there is this essential disparity between the story and the life, it is the lived-experience that is distorted or falsifying, not the story that is told.

As this example shows, Sartre is wrong in claiming that it is always the story, rather than the agent’s lived experience, that is false. Seeing this allows us to proceed with a more accurate understanding of what the Distortion Problem involves.

I want to make one last point before concluding this section. It is helpful to note that Pascal gives a slightly different formulation of the shift in perspective that is involved in taking up the narrative stance, in terms that at first doesn’t appear to focus as much on the availability of knowledge. On his view, stories are (again) not contrary to reality, but should rather be seen

as ‘abstractions, projections of actual relationships isolated from some of the associations with which in real life they are bound’.⁹¹ This view of the narrative stance appears *prima facie* compatible with a type of case where the agent possesses knowledge of all aspects of her situation. What she is doing by adopting the narrative stance is simply to focus her attention on a limited number of those aspects. This is a misreading of the narrative stance, however, simply because in order to know what aspects to abstract from the weave of immediate experience, the agent must still make reference to patterns that extend beyond her present standpoint.

So, with this qualification I hereby conclude the present section by observing that it is clear that even this weaker, more plausible version of the Distortion Problem constitutes a serious challenge for MacIntyre. For narrative to be able to guide practical reasoning and ground the virtues, it must be able to supply meaning that is accessible to the agent in the moment of acting (or living). Moran and Pascal agree that it may not be able to provide the required kind of meaning, i.e. meaning derived from narrative coherence. For MacIntyre’s theory of narrative self-understanding to stand, then, he must deny that the narrative stance even involves the kind of shift in perspective or focus that Moran and Pascal take it to involve. What could the basis for such a denial be? As I hinted at already in the previous chapter, MacIntyre appeals to a psychological understanding of intentional action to furnish such a basis. So, it is now time to return to MacIntyre’s theory of intentional action, and fully spell out the seemingly unavoidable tension that runs through MacIntyre’s account of narrative self-understanding in AF.

⁹¹ "Narrative Fictions and Reality", 49.

4. Action descriptions and the lived story

What MacIntyre attempts to do is to appeal to the idea that performing an action under a description—where that description is based on the beliefs and intentions that the agent is consciously holding at the time of acting—amounts to the claim that action takes narrative shape, or that stories are lived before they are told. On this view, the agent is ‘doing something under a description’. (It is assumed here that descriptions of actions are the building blocks of narrative.) Is this strategy doing enough to push back against the Distortion Problem? How much energy we should spend trying to determine this depends on how we weigh the promise of resolving the Distortion Problem and defending the claim that stories are lived before they are told against the costs that attempting to do so using this particular strategy entail for other dimensions of MacIntyre’s theory. As I will explain, I’m not inclined to opt for defending MacIntyre’s psychological reading of intentional action over my suggested non-psychological replacement, which, as I previously argued, can accommodate his notion of narrative intelligibility.

Recall that I ended my previous chapter by arguing that MacIntyre’s psychological understanding of intentional action cannot accommodate the notion of narrative intelligibility as it figures in the parts of his account in AF that concern the claim that the self, action and agency are socially and historically constituted. As we saw, the primary reason for that is that understanding an action in narrative terms involves references to a multitude of descriptions that situates it in its particular social and historical context, and it is simply not possible to square this requirement with the idea that the agent should hold thoughts that form the basis for all those descriptions in the moment of acting. To remedy this problem and leave sufficient room for his rich (and in my view, compelling) conception of narrative intelligibility, I suggested that MacIntyre adopt a non-psychological account of intentional action. One of my aims in the present chapter has been to show why one might think that this

isn't an appealing option for MacIntyre, or, at the very least that he cannot resort to this apparently straightforward solution without losing some of the possible resources his account can enlist to push back against the Distortion Problem.

It is worthwhile to think about for a moment what opting to keep MacIntyre's psychological account of intentional action would imply for the rest of his theory in AF. Most straightforwardly, it appears impossible to reconcile with the claims that the self and action and agency are historically and socially constituted through narrative in the sense that MacIntyre in fact argues. Whatever notion of intentional action and agency that would remain if we were to opt to keep the psychological interpretation would be too thin and one-dimensional to at all fit with MacIntyre's communitarianism. The rich weave of historically formed meanings that MacIntyre's argues contributes to constituting the self would have to be peeled off, simply because there is no space for such complexity and richness if the claim that action takes narrative shape is understood in psychological terms.

It also isn't clear what happens to the notion that actions are transactions, or to the idea of co-authoring. Recall MacIntyre's strategy to argue that all actions take the form of a conversation to place emphasis on the thought that action relies on meanings that is expressed in language, and which therefore are shareable, or social. It appears difficult to reconcile the idea that I perform an action under a description that refers to a thought or belief that I'm holding in my mind at the time of acting and co-authoring. The psychological interpretation doesn't appear to give much room for the common project of interpreting actions and agents that co-authoring involves.

Hence, even if the psychological account could in fact resolve or disarm the Distortion Problem, there wouldn't be much left of MacIntyre's theory of narrative self-understanding to

defend. However, if MacIntyre abandons his psychological conception of intentional action, it isn't clear what could provide the notion of the story as lived—in other words, what could back up his claim that stories are lived before they are told. Drawing on Moran's interpretation of MacIntyre, I have discussed the possibility of appealing to the notion of lived experience to ground this controversial claim. I'm happy to accept that this is the most intuitive way of approaching the issue. I'm not sure, however, that there aren't other ways in which what MacIntyre needs could be supplied. Exploring the prospects for finding other ways to do that goes beyond the scope of my project, but it is clear that the question is far from exhausted.

5. Conclusion

At this point it is time to conclude my discussion. I have argued that MacIntyre's conception of narrative intelligibility cannot be reconciled with the account he offers of intentional action. Modifying his account of intentional action, however, comes at the cost of losing the most direct resource MacIntyre's account has for countering the Distortion Problem. It is clear, then, that MacIntyre's attempt to offer an account of narrative self-understanding fails.

The tension that is revealed by my critical reading of AF runs extremely deep between the respective dimensions of AF that I have focused on in my two chapters. In closing I will offer a few brief remarks on what I take this tension, which has to a large degree structured the internal logic of my entire project, to involve.

MacIntyre's work finds itself at the very centre of multiple of the major conflicts in western thought. As we should now be in a good position to appreciate, his work exemplifies the difficulties involved in attempting to bridge oppositions between modern individualism and a focus on the social and structural realm; between a modern focus on change and an entirely

different pre-modern understanding of time and history. Both of these conflicts are permanently in the background of MacIntyre's thought in AF, and therefore crucial for understanding his thought. AF may furthermore be said to engage with and challenge a number of other oppositions, such as that between scientific and humanistic forms of understanding, and to some degree between analytic and continental philosophical traditions. MacIntyre's bold engagement with such a large number of major theoretical conflicts is laudable, even though he ultimately fails to reach his aim of providing a notion of a narratively unified self for his virtue ethics. I'm convinced that philosophy has much to gain from seeing more work carried out in the spirit of AF.

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