

Hope, Narrative and History

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the question of whether hope is a virtue, focusing specifically on hope with respect to human history as a whole. First, a phenomenological analysis of action, drawing particularly on the work of Carr, is used to show that action typically has a protentive-retrospective narrative structure. It is argued that hope, in the most general, basic sense, is exhibited in this structure, and consequently that hope is implicit in all meaningful action. Hope in a richer sense is exhibited in longer-term projects with the same structure, where there is necessarily more uncertainty and a need to maintain commitment over a longer time-frame. This kind of hope, rather than a basic condition for action, is more appropriately termed a virtue. The argument that hope is a virtue is contextualised by a discussion of rival conceptions of teleology and the human good. The Platonic conception suggests pursuing the good involves transcending temporality, whereas the Aristotelian conception acknowledges the fundamentally temporal nature of human life. However, both Plato and Aristotle neglect the historical character of human life. The social construction of personal identity and whole life narratives is discussed, leading on to the role of history in creating the framework for meaningful life narratives. The importance of historical hope is examined with reference to the contributions of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Lukács and Benjamin. ‘Traditionalist’ and ‘progressivist’ modes of narrativising history are argued to be inadequate, and a ‘messianic’ mode, inspired by Benjamin (and Kierkegaard), is proposed as an alternative. ‘Messianic’ hope, based on the principle of solidarity with the oppressed throughout history is argued to be a valuable virtue.

Hope, Narrative and History

Introduction

Is hope a virtue? This is the question that drives the following enquiry, although I do not hope to answer it comprehensively. I will say something about what I think hope is in the most general sense, but will then go on to focus more specifically on what I term ‘historical hope’. But firstly, it will help to make some preliminary remarks to ground my use of the term virtue and, more broadly, the whole project of *evaluating* hope.

I begin by identifying myself as a human being; that is to say, a member of the class of human beings, and furthermore a member of a *moral community* of human beings. To begin a piece of philosophy with a self-identification may seem strange, but I am simply stating what I think is a presupposition of moral discourse. To engage in most, if not all, moral discourse one must suppose oneself part of a wider group to whom the discourse pertains. I would add that to engage in moral discourse *philosophically* one must take other members of this group to be *potential fellow participants* in moral discourse, and suppose it possible to achieve at least some degree of shared moral understanding with at least some of these fellow participants. A moral community – in the broadest sense of the term – is precisely this: a group of potential fellow participants in moral discourse, i.e. discussion and reflection on how to live.

I regard ‘humanity’ as a moral community in this sense, and I am committed to the ultimate priority of this broad, inclusive moral community over narrower moral communities. The latter – defined in terms of shared circumstances or commitments – certainly exist, and indeed provide the more immediate and concrete context for most moral discourse. Even so,

no particular moral community can stand in for the moral community of humanity as a whole. Accordingly the notion of *inclusive solidarity* is crucial to the conception of historical hope I will later outline. I freely acknowledge this is more a matter of commitment than argument, since I do not recognise any other principles of moral discourse as more fundamental. Nonetheless I do intend to say more, throughout this inquiry, to clarify the commitment made here.

I have labelled my approach ‘inclusive’ but others may object that it excludes non-human species. In fact, I do not intend the qualifier ‘human’ to restrict in advance the moral community to members of the human species, however biologically defined. It is simply that, speaking for myself, it is other human beings that I can imagine as potential fellow participants in moral discourse. Therefore it seems to me that exploration of our shared humanity is the most viable starting-point for moral reflection. Although embarking on moral discourse and reflection without any pre-understanding of what it is and who it pertains to is surely impossible, the correlative notions of moral community and shared humanity are not intended to predetermine or prelimit the boundaries of the moral community or what it means to be human. These are among the central questions of moral discourse itself. It must also be noted that exclusion from the moral community does not entail exclusion from moral respect and consideration. Indeed, I would suggest that we should see ourselves as members of an *ecological community* (of which the human species is but a small part), and that our relation as a moral community to this ecological community is of the greatest moral import.

Given that moral discourse must begin somewhere, any objection to starting with an open and contestable notion of ‘shared humanity’, must present an alternative (or reject moral discourse altogether). I will briefly highlight two such alternative approaches that might explicitly reject any notion of humanity playing a role. The first starts with the claim that

there is a transcendent source of value, and furthermore insists that to conform ourselves to this we can and must wholly transcend our humanity in some way. Whereas this approach could be termed religious or spiritual (in a broad sense), the second, rather than appealing to a ‘higher’ source of value, simply embraces the possibility of transcending ‘human nature’ and the ‘human condition’ through technology. This second approach could be termed ‘moral transhumanism’, although I will not consider here how far it can be accurately imputed to specific thinkers labelled as transhumanists.

I do *not* intend to simply bracket, still less dismiss, spiritual or transhumanist perspectives for the purpose of my enquiry. In fact, I suggest that their shared emphasis on transcendence reflects an important insight; it is just that I interpret this insight *as an insight into what it means to be human*. Paradoxically, it is part of our shared humanity, I want to suggest, to seek to go beyond any restrictive conception of human nature or the human condition. (And consequently, I would argue, restrictive notions of human nature are inhuman and immoral.) The idea of total transcendence – whether spiritual or technological – *may* make possible a totally different and incommensurable form of evaluation. I acknowledge this. But I nonetheless propose trying to make sense of life, in all its richness, diversity and fluidity, on the basis of a presumed shared humanity.

What implications does this have for the concept of virtue? On a simple definition, a virtue is a character trait – a disposition or set of dispositions – conducive to living a good human life (understood to encompass moral goodness). What constitutes a good life for human beings need not be determined only or primarily by ‘human nature’, but such a definition of virtue does suggest that, at the very least, being human somehow *conditions* what it is to live a good life. As my appeal to shared humanity implies, I would support this claim; but have I not

undermined any attempt to identify and describe ‘virtues’ by conceding the fluid and self-transcending tendency of human beings?

My immediate response to such doubts is to propose that we adopt, at least provisionally, a *pluralistic* conception of virtue. It is reasonable to expect that there will be multiple different and incommensurable *profiles of virtue*: different ways of living of good life, different character types, each admirable in their own way. In moral discourse, acknowledgement of this can stand alongside debate about which people and lives are admirable or most admirable; but neither this debate nor the assertion of the value of pluralism are meaningful without the presumption that we can find *some* common ground through moral discourse as a community. Not only does the idea of shared humanity reconcile universalism and pluralism; by doing so, it makes both more plausible and robust. Of course, the corollary of this is the need for constant examination of whether a given moral judgement or instance of moral discourse concerns the universal form of virtue or a specific profile of virtue.

This, then, raises the question of whether hope is a universally significant virtue or only belongs to some profiles of virtue. This depends on the precise conception of hope in question. I suggest that hope in its broadest, most fundamental sense is, universally, a prerequisite for virtue. However it is less clear that every virtuous person could be described as ‘hopeful’ in a fuller sense. Later, I examine a more specialised variety of hope – historical hope – and go on to identify yet more specialised varieties of it. One of these I judge to be more virtuous than the others; and I suggest the others have potentially vicious characteristics. My evaluation of the varieties of historical hope is based on criteria which I take to be universal; that is to say, intrinsic to the very idea of an inclusive human moral community. However, since I am not setting out to give a comprehensive account of every form of hope, I cannot claim that the form of historical hope I champion is a virtue that every

virtuous person possesses or even that they should aspire to possess. My more modest ambition is to show that it is crucial to many profiles of virtue, and furthermore that cultivating it (where possible) would remedy some forms of vice.

The Teleology of the Human Good

I have proposed that moral discourse begins from reflection on our shared humanity. For the purposes of this inquiry into hope, I take as my starting-point what I trust are relatively uncontroversial claims about the temporality and sociality of human life. There is, for us, an asymmetry between past and future which determines what it means for us to be present in the world and to act in the present. Furthermore, we find ourselves in the presence of others, and sharing the present with them. Typically we are dependent on others, not only for our physical survival and (if we're lucky) comfort, but also to engage in many of the activities we judge worthwhile (including many activities that we do not engage in 'with' others). Conceptions of our temporal and social existence may vary widely, and attitudes towards them all the more, but it is hard to deny that these are significant and universal aspects of being human.

Our existence as temporal beings becomes meaningful through teleology. That is to say, what we do, and what happens to us and around us, is meaningful insofar as it happens *for* something, usually something *that is not wholly present*. Very often we take actions and events to be reaching or leading towards a *future* goal. However, it may be mistaken, or a simplification, to suppose that an action or event's telos is necessarily located in the future. It is often more helpful to see the telos as the whole temporal sequence, spanning past, present and future, and *including* both the present action or event and the future goal one is moving

towards. Also, it may be possible to conceive of a telos for temporal action that is in itself non-temporal.

An example may help to amplify the point that one's 'goal' is not always simply a defined endpoint, but may be to complete, or make whole, what one has done. Imagine playing a piece of music. To do this well, you need to think ahead to end of the piece, and anticipate concluding it well; but the silence after the last note has faded away is surely not the *goal* of playing the piece. Nor is the audience's applause or your personal satisfaction at the performance: these are primarily *recognitions* of an achievement, rather than achievements in themselves. Your telos, while playing, is the *whole* piece, stretched as it is over past, present and future. It is temporal, but not located at a single point in time.

What could it mean for temporal doings and happenings to have a non-temporal telos? I will not attempt to determine here whether such a notion can really be made coherent. I merely note that Plato may be interpreted as putting forward a theory to this effect, in which any purposeful activity (or ordered natural process) has an eternal Form as its 'goal', the ultimate telos being the Form of the Good. For Plato there is of course no real prospect of grasping the Forms without transcending temporality in some way, whether this is regarded as simply an intellectual achievement or higher spiritual state. Nonetheless, temporal processes need not be worthless or senseless: their ordered wholeness, while imperfect, may approximate the perfect wholeness of the Forms.

The drawback of Plato's account is that it is tricky to articulate clearly the relationship between temporal existence and the non-temporal Forms. On the other hand, it is precisely because the Forms are timeless and transcendent – transcendent of particularity, whether or not conceived as metaphysically separate from the phenomenal world – they that seem able to

provide an independent standard of value, a non-arbitrary set of goals. It is one thing to say that one's goal when playing a piece of music is the whole piece, but why play music at all, and why that piece? A Platonist can give an answer: because music – and some pieces better than most – can approximate the Form of Beauty.

Besides the metaphysical puzzle concerning the relationship of the Forms to the world of our experience, the other issue with the Platonist view is that rather than coming to terms with temporality as fundamental feature of human life, it encourages us to yearn after an entirely non-temporal form of being. It's not that Platonism cannot offer us an account of what makes a good human life – it can. It encourages us to seek a wholeness, a harmony, in ourselves that approximates, albeit imperfectly, to the eternal wholeness and harmony of the Forms. But although this psychic harmony is achievable in time, it is still a static ideal; there is no sense that the narrative arc of a one's life can attain a kind of wholeness, unless perhaps it consists in a gradual freeing of oneself from attachment to the temporal world of sensation and appearance.

The Aristotelian approach provides an alternative here. Anthony Rudd draws attention to the contrast between Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of teleology, emphasising the way Aristotle's notion of the good life is rooted in biology, in contrast to Plato's more metaphysical conception. I concur with the Aristotelian naturalism that Rudd describes (but does not endorse) insofar as I accept that the characteristics of human beings as a species are one starting-point in our discourse as a moral community. But the element of Aristotle's teleology that I find most helpful is his emphasis on the importance of life as a meaningful whole. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he writes of happiness that "it cannot be achieved in less

than a complete lifetime”;¹ I will return to this suggestion later, and argue that one important orientation of hope is towards the completion of one’s whole life narrative.

Rudd’s main focus is Kierkegaard’s account of the human good, and Rudd argues that Plato operates with a Platonic conception of teleology, Christianised so that God takes the place of the Forms at the ultimate telos of human life and source of goodness. However, I would argue that the element missing from both Platonic and Aristotelian teleology is an awareness of the historical dimension of human life, and that this is clearly present in Kierkegaard’s work, distinguishing him sharply from both Plato and Aristotle. By his own admission, Rudd’s interpretation of Kierkegaard focuses on what Kierkegaard calls ‘Religiousness A’, which Rudd writes “is more or less Platonism – the belief in an ‘Eternal’, first principle of Goodness from which the temporal world derives, and the proper relation to which is our ultimate *telos*.”² Rudd concentrates on Kierkegaard’s Religiousness A so that his own Kierkegaard-inspired account need not incorporate the specific Christian elements of Religiousness B. This is understandable but the downside is that this ignores the way Kierkegaard grappled with the question of the individual’s relation to history. This is the question I will address in the concluding part of this enquiry, drawing not only on Kierkegaard’s work but also the work of Walter Benjamin. Both can be seen as part of a tradition of ‘messianic’ thinking about history, but Benjamin is different from Kierkegaard in that he is chiefly inspired by Jewish rather than Christian messianic thought, and also because he secularises this tradition, or least brings to the forefront its liberatory political dimension.

¹ Aristotle, *Ethics* (bk.1, ch.7), trans. by J. A. K. Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p.39

² Anthony Rudd, *Self, Value and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 144

Narrative and Basic Hope

In the previous section, I outlined how, as temporal beings, we find meaning in teleological structures which span past, present and future. These meaning-conferring temporal structures can be appropriately characterised as ‘narrative’, if not simply referred to as narratives. I will say more later on about the relationship between ‘narratives’ in this sense and narrative artefacts. By narrative artefact I mean something like a play, a novel or an anecdote, which typically has an identifiable narrator and intended audience. It might be supposed that the term ‘narrative’ applies primarily to narrative artefacts, in which case I am using it in a secondary, analogous sense to refer to the ‘narratives’ through which everyday life itself becomes intelligible and purposeful. For the moment, it suffices to note that we can – and frequently do – think of events and actions in life as having a beginning, middle and end, and as such, having a degree of coherence and intelligibility. This temporally-extended wholeness can be termed ‘narrative unity’.

My initial claim is simply that life is permeated with narrative. I will attempt to substantiate and elaborate upon this claim through a deeper examination of the phenomenology of action, drawing on the work of David Carr. Then I can move on to establishing the stronger claim that we can and should aspire for our whole lives to have narrative unity. After that, I will discuss the embeddedness of life-narratives in history and the prospects for the narrativisation of history. The vital importance of hope should become clearer in the course of the discussion.

Carr’s key insight is that action has a protentive-retrospective structure. In our experience, action is not broken down into discrete units. Ordinarily we do not act by planning out and initiating a chain of causes and their predicted effects; rather, we act by directing or

redirecting the perpetual flow of our minds and bodies into the future. I do not think, ‘if I move my hand forward I can pick up the coffee cup’; rather it is *by and through* anticipating my hand on the handle that I reach out. This is protention. Thus, as an engaged actor in the world, I make sense of the present in the light of an anticipated future. I do not – except perhaps rarely – grasp the present as it is ‘in this moment’, and neither do I experience it primarily as the outcome of past events, although I do experience it as the fulfilment (or frustration) of past protentions. As Carr puts it:

Since in acting we pretend or intend the future goal, rather than just picturing it, there is a sense in which it occupies the center of our concern in action and reflects back and determines the present and past. There is indeed something quasi-retrospective about action, as if we were located at the end and from its point of view arranged and organised the present.³

Action is retrospective as well as protentive because it must be shaped by the telos it reaches towards. Situations in which we have to modify our action ‘mid-flow’ provide the clearest illustration of this. Imagine crossing a square: anticipating yourself entering the building on the far side, the entrance draws you towards it in a straight line. But then you notice someone else taking a diagonal path across the square and adjust your protended course, working backwards from the building to plot a course that will get you there without a collision.

Of course, it can never be guaranteed that I will reach my destination. Action depends on anticipations that may never be fulfilled. Hope, of a kind, is therefore a fundamental precondition for meaningful action. Hope, in its broadest sense is protention and retrospection: to anticipate an intended future and work backwards from it so that there’s a chance of completing one’s action successfully. Carr cautions:

³ David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p.38

This emphasis on the future-orientation of action and of the end in organizing “backward” in time the various phases of the action that are the means to its realization, must not obscure the fact that the agent is still rooted in the present. Though his concern is in the future *he* is still in the present. Any retrospective element in action (looking back on it as completed) can only be a quasi-retrospection [...] protention encloses the envisaged future and unites it with the present and the past, but the whole action, thus unified, stands vulnerable to the real future which can intrude on the action in the rudest way.⁴

Our ‘vulnerability to the real future’ explains the importance of hope.

Hope and Life Narratives

As temporal beings, we inhabit a ‘moment’ which is in fact only intelligible in terms of its temporal horizons of receding past and oncoming future. We never experience an entirely discrete, finite moment, graspable in itself; but neither do we ever experience time, or life, as the completed whole to which we might imagine these passing moments to belong. There are of course innumerable actions in our pasts that we can reflect on as completed, and many actions available to us in the present that could be brought swiftly to completion; but usually, if not always, these individual actions are meaningful or worthwhile because they figure in longer-term projects of broader scope. While occasionally we may feel that such a project has reached completion, we live for the most part in the midst of such projects, their prospects uncertain and vulnerable to the intrusions of reality (to once again paraphrase Carr).

At this juncture, I wish to emphasise just how fundamental narrational structure is to our lives as agents and subjects in an intelligible world. But doing this invites challenges. How far can the analogy with narrative artefacts be justified, especially given our condition is generally one of incompleteness and uncertainty? What if, when we try to get a view of the bigger picture, aspirations to narrative unity are revealed to be unrealistic, even delusional? It might

⁴ David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p.39-40

be argued that I have generalised too much from a phenomenological analysis of one kind of agency; so to defend my approach I must begin by explaining why this analysis can plausibly be regarded as highlighting something deep and fundamental about human temporality.

There would be no experience without the temporal organisation of moments. And this confers meaning, in a broad sense, on each moment: it makes it possible to (begin to) understand *why* such-and-such occurs, and what follows from it. Why, then, have I focused on the narrative structure of *action*, rather than argue for the narrative structure of experience in general? The main reason is that by focusing on action I hope to correct for the pervasive philosophical bias towards seeing ourselves as passive perceivers (or ‘experiencers’) first, and active agents second. I suspect, in fact, that our capacity and tendency to narrativise *all* events derives from our mode of life as agents. A key difference, of course, between what we *do* and what we just *observe* is that the former has a teleological, and not merely a causal structure. That is to say, a desired or intended future shapes what we do now, as well as our present actions shaping the future (hopefully such that it fulfils our desire or intention). When we observe the actions of other agents, the same teleological structure can be discerned, although we naturally stand in a different relation to it than to our own actions, and this also varies greatly depending on the congruence or divergence between our own and the other’s telos. When we observe other events, it is tempting to interpret them purposively as well. It is clear that this can be misleading, for instance when someone superstitiously believes that the rain malevolently contrives to fall just as they step outside. Nonetheless, it may still be illuminating even when it seems clear that no singular ‘agent’ literally exists: to think or speak of the purposes, goals or intentions of, for instance, a political party can be helpful, even unavoidable, despite the risk of misleading oneself (which hardly absent when one seeks to interpret the motivations of an individual, even oneself).

I suggest but do not here defend the proposal that the teleological thinking that structures our experience as active agents is a fundamental component of all experience, and that this is the phenomenological root of all narrative. In any case the primary function of the word ‘narrative’ is to refer to human artefacts – told stories. These are complete, in a way that lived narratives rarely are, but while events passively observed may only seem loosely analogous to narrative artefacts, there is a closer analogy between narrative artefacts and teleological action, given that the latter aims toward an end, some kind of a completion or closure, whether or not it arrives. Of course as the audience, or even the narrator, of a narrative artefact we may feel more like a passive observer of events than a participant, but this is clearly a feature of their artificiality as artefacts, which the creators of these artefacts often seek to overcome. Paradoxically, fictions are often deemed more ‘truthful’ – that is to say, true to life – when they create the illusion of involvement.

So, to summarise, while all intelligible experience depends upon a synthesis which produces what could be loosely described as a meaningful narrative, this is clearest in the case of action which is truly teleological. Furthermore, since teleological action aims towards an end it is in this way more like the most obvious examples of a narrative such as a novel, which is complete and contains its end. Of course there are vital differences between a lived narrative and a narrative artefact; and indeed one key difference – the openness of the future in a lived narrative – is central to my analysis of hope. So we must tread carefully to justify the use of the term narrative and avoid this being misleading. It seems that the term ‘narrative’ primarily refers to the narrative artefact. However, what I am suggesting is that the lived narrative, in which the future is open, is ontologically speaking more fundamental. So while our use of the term narrative has to be justified by analogy to narrative artefacts, this use of analogy is bolstered by the claim that the phenomenon described is the more basic phenomenon which makes possible, and motivates, the creation of narrative artefacts. Also it

is significant that while a story is being narrated it often creates a sense of openness; and this is often, if not always, aesthetically significant. The ‘choices’ made by the protagonist of a novel matter to us because we feel they could have acted differently. We allow ourselves to wonder what they will do even though we know this has been predetermined by the author. Indeed I would venture that many aesthetic effects arise from the tension between the sense of openness for the reader while reading and the predetermined character of the text. When we get to the end we may experience a kind of satisfaction that what we anticipated – or failed to anticipate – as just one possibility among many turns out to be the character’s ‘destiny’. Now we could interpret this in two opposite ways. If inclined towards determinism, we might regard narrative artefacts as revealing the truth about life – we feel free, and as if the future is open, whereas in fact it is only because our epistemic powers are limited that we cannot ‘read ahead’ in our own life story, i.e. perfectly predict the future. My preferred interpretation is that what is revealed is precisely the artificiality of the narrative, and the satisfaction comes from the illusion being dispelled so that one can appreciate the ingenuity of its creator.

To reiterate the key point of the previous section: the asymmetry between the closed past and the open future is a crucial feature of ‘lived narratives’; and while narrative artefacts do not typically have this feature, they often seek to create the illusion of asymmetry for their audience, in order to better imitate lived narratives. The significance of past-future asymmetry in our experience underlies the importance of hope. I have argued that hope in a broad, basic sense is necessary for all action, precisely because the openness of the future means that the protended completion of one’s actions are always in doubt. Hope in richer sense – the kind of hope that we are most likely to become explicit conscious of *as hope* – emerges with respect to the longer-term projects the completion of which is more distant and uncertain. Longer-term, broader-in-scope projects can be characterised by uncertainty in at

least two senses. It may be that a project's ultimate goal is relatively clearly defined but it is uncertain whether and when this goal can realistically be achieved; take for instance finding the cure for a disease. Or it may be that a project's ultimate goal is not clearly defined; it is uncertain what would count as completing it. Here a further distinction might be made: between projects which are completable in principle and projects which are open-ended. To hark back to an earlier example, compare composing a piece of music with being the band that performs it. How the piece should end may not be clear when one composes the beginning, but one would normally presume that it should have an ending (of course this example is complicated by the fact that pieces are not usually composed 'in order', but I trust the point is clear enough nonetheless). By contrast, a band is a project which does not seem to require a defined endpoint at all. It will no doubt come to end at some point, but the reasons for this can be perfectly arbitrary and 'external' without this necessarily making it an abortive project. Examples such as this may seem to undermine my application of the concept of narrative unity to people's real life projects. However, if we keep at the forefront of our minds that a project's telos may be the whole temporally-extended project, not just its culmination or outcome, the absence of a single clearly defined endpoint seems less of an issue. At any point in a project – or at least at many points – one could be said to be making something whole, 'completing it' in a sense, although not necessarily in a final sense. That is to say, were the project interrupted where it might have continued, one could still say it had a fitting ending. Here, again, we find that on closer inspection there is more similarity than dissimilarity between lived narratives with narrative artefacts. For the ending imposed on a story is never entirely without arbitrariness: the novelist could always add an extra chapter, extending further some thread of the narrative. Formulae such as 'and they lived happily ever after' hint at this. In life as in literature, this does not make it impossible to achieve wholeness, albeit an imperfect wholeness.

Our analysis of the narrational character of life, and of the openness of lived narratives, highlights two important points about hope. Firstly, while hope is obviously a set of attitudes and dispositions oriented towards the future, it is also retrospective. To be hopeful is to anticipate completing past projects. It is not typically characterised by forgetfulness towards the past or a disregard for the past. There may be instances in which ‘blocking out’ the past is a psychological precondition for cultivating hope, but the capacity to do this is not integral to hope. Rather, to the extent that erasure of the past from one’s narrative is necessary this delineates a limit on the capacity of hope to make actions and events meaningful by incorporating them into a narrative. Secondly, hope is a set of attitudes and dispositions related to possibility. To be hopeful is, fundamentally, to recognise the openness of the future, to anticipate success while acknowledging the possibility of failure. Furthermore, it is a cognitive capacity and disposition to identify the specific opportunities one’s situation affords to continue projects in a meaningful way or bring them to a fitting conclusion, thereby contributing to their wholeness – their narrative unity – irrespective of whether a final end is envisaged or achieved.

We can take this analysis further by elaborating further what constitutes a hopeful orientation to past and future, and distinguishing hope from other dispositions. With respect to the past, hope understands that the future towards which one acts can retrospectively alter the meaning of the past, by reconfiguring the whole to which past actions and events belong. The truly hopeful person, therefore, not only sees the possibilities for continuing or completing projects that have hitherto progressed smoothly, but may also see possibilities for reviving projects that appear to have failed. Of course, the closed nature of the past means that the unrealised possibilities of the past on which we frequently dwell must, in some sense, remain unrealised. Two people may rekindle a youthful romance decades later, reopening a narrative that appeared to be over, but they cannot literally go back to their youth and continue the

relationship at that time. The break in the relationship is redefined as a hiatus rather than a final parting, but it is not erased altogether. Still, I would like to suggest that a certain attitude towards these many definitively unrealised former possibilities – or ‘ex-possibilities’ – characterises the hopeful person. Many people feel a generalised regret or bitterness when they reflect on what might have been; unrealised past possibilities weigh on them, often depleting their sense of present and future possibility. It is easy to feel that since most past possibilities were necessarily unrealised, that one’s past sense of possibility was an illusion, giving rise to apathy and resignation in the present. This may be accompanied by an explicit denial to oneself of the openness of the future; the adoption of a fatalistic or deterministic viewpoint. Alternatively, one may feel overwhelmed by the dizzying array of future possibilities. Such a feeling is of course possible quite apart from any reflection on the past, but reflection on the past may heighten it. In the context of an immensity of unrealised possibilities, the actual path one’s life has taken can seem bafflingly arbitrary, and that’s not to mention all the actions and events one may specifically regret. This may leave one in a state of acute anxiety and indecision, afraid to act as any action seems at best arbitrary or at worst bound to be regretted. The hopeful person is somebody who does not succumb to any of these fallacies or to the attitudes or dispositions that spring from them.

In connection to this, it is worth noting that the past-future asymmetry is liable to be misinterpreted. Kierkegaard makes this point, when (writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus) he asks whether the unchangeableness of the past is the unchangeableness of necessity, the implied answer being ‘no’. He goes on to say: “If the past become necessary, the opposite conclusion could not be drawn with respect to the future, but on the contrary it would follow that the future would also be necessary.”⁵ Kierkegaard here highlights the

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard (as Johannes Climacus), *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.77

temptation to fall into some kind of fatalism when one reflects on the closed nature of the past. The hopeful person does not fall into this temptation; rather, when they reflect on the past not only do they recognise the many possibilities that might have been, this reinforces for them the many possibilities open in the future.

I have emphasised that hope is a set of attitudes and dispositions related to possibility, but I must also emphasise that, on my interpretation, hope is quite distinct from the capacity for prediction. Optimism and pessimism are very closely related to prediction, but I suggest hope is not, even though some capacity for prediction may be necessary for hope. The accurate and effective perception of possibilities requires, no doubt, that you are capable of judging what is more or less likely. Nonetheless, hope is not a matter of *believing* that things will turn out well, but an openness to the possibility of things turning out well, an open-mindedness that makes one attentive to whatever opportunities there may be to influence events for the better. To put it another way, optimism is a doxastic disposition – a disposition to have positive beliefs about the future – whereas hope is more of a perceptive and agentic disposition, a capacity to perceive how a better future might be brought about and a tendency to act accordingly. It follows that hope better deserves to be regarded as a virtue than optimism.⁶ Optimism and pessimism can be seen as biases that potentially skew one's capacity for prediction, whereas hope is (in part) a cognitive capacity in its own right. However, that is not to say that hope is wholly free from bias and immune to its dangers. Hope is a disposition to notice opportunities for things to go right; given human cognitive limitations (i.e. we can't notice everything), such a disposition *may* make someone less likely to notice risks, chances that things will go wrong. The capacity and disposition to see opportunities for positive action is generally more empowering and useful than the capacity and disposition to notice

⁶ Terry Eagleton also emphasises the distinction between hope and optimism. Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)

everything that could go wrong, which limits one to responding reactively. However, both can be valuable; so insofar as there is trade-off between them, it is possible for a less hopeful person to be equally virtuous, in a different way, as a more hopeful person. It also follows from my analysis that an optimist and a pessimist may be equally hopeful, although strong pessimism is probably psychologically incompatible with hope (and both excessive optimism and excessive pessimism may be regarded as vices). These possible variations illustrate my earlier point that there are multiple *profiles of virtue*.

Besides distinguishing hope from optimism, it is also vital to distinguish it from fantasy. When one fantasises, one imagines a desirable future which is at best a remote possibility, as a form of escape from an unsatisfactory present and past. Hope, by contrast, is at least realistic enough to be practically oriented: as I have made clear, it is a disposition to perceive real opportunities for positive change and to act accordingly. For this reason, hope is a virtue; fantasy on the other hand, although it may occasionally contribute in a small way to well-being, is on the whole morally neutral – and potentially a vice. The distinction between hope and fantasy helps to make clear why hope is a retrospective as well as a future-oriented virtue. Hope looks for a coherent narrative linking one's actual past and potential future. Fantasy breaks away from the real narratives of life to indulge in a free-floating fictional narrative.

Whole Life Narratives and Personal Identity

In the following section I aim to expand the conception of hope, examining hope in relation to whole life narratives and historical narratives. To do this we must turn our attention to the social context in which meaningful narratives unfold. The projects which give our lives meaning always (or nearly always) have a social dimension. Firstly, many of projects we

engage in are collective projects, undertaken directly alongside others. Secondly, even ‘solo’ projects usually depend indirectly upon others for success. Thirdly, our sense of what projects are worthwhile and available to us is socially and historically conditioned. From this it follows that the virtue of hope is closely related to the virtue of trust: opportunities for meaningful and successful action will only appear to us if we can trust that others will act in co-ordination with us or at least reliably and supportively. Here, though, there is room for a range of profiles of virtue. While no one is entirely self-sufficient and independent of society, some people cultivate these characteristics, and may be able to cultivate a form of hope, and of virtue more generally, which is less dependent on trust. On the other hand, there are ends that can only be achieved through collective projects, and those who cultivate the virtues needed to contribute to such projects must have a form of hope that is more closely related to trust.

Furthermore, as suggested earlier in relation to Aristotle, one of the most important dimensions of hope is the hope that one’s whole life will have the form of a coherent, meaningful narrative; and I will argue this is only conceivable if we suppose a person’s whole life narrative – and with it, their personal identity – as a social construction.

Up to this point I have focused on arguing that hope is significant, indeed an important virtue, because human life has a narrational dimension which demands hope for its fulfilment. But how and why should this scale-up to a person’s whole life? Even if life is permeated with narrative, it doesn’t follow that *a life* is a narrative.

The first reason one might suppose this to be case is that the narratives which confer meaning upon actions are themselves embedded within larger narratives, which are embedded in a still broader context, and so on. From this, one might naturally conclude that each of a person’s

actions ultimately needs to be understood in the context of an overarching whole-life narrative.

However, such a conclusion (at this stage) would be over-hasty. To assume that the ultimate ‘frame’ should be a whole-life narrative could be too narrow or too broad. Why should the widening circles of meaning-conferring narrative stop at the boundaries of an individual’s life? On the contrary, there is every reason to think that the individual’s life gets its meaning partly from the wider historical narrative in which it is embedded. I accept and will indeed emphasise this point, but argue that this doesn’t detract from the significance of the whole-life narrative. But before addressing this, I need to address a greater threat to the significance of life narratives – the suggestion that ‘lives’ can easily be fragmented into distinct episodes or threads which are only loosely connected.

Can life not be conceived as a series of largely self-contained episodes? Insofar as each episode in life needs some wider, meaning-conferring context, this surely needn’t be the person’s whole life; it could be (for instance) a transpersonal project of some kind. For example, suppose a person changes jobs. Their working life afterwards may bear very little relation to their working life before; nonetheless, what they were doing before may have been meaningful in relation to a larger project, and the same may be true of their current activity – they may contribute successively to two distinct collective endeavours. They may, to give a more specific example, go from playing in an orchestra to running a small farm. The orchestra has its story: a story of rehearsals, performances, disagreements and resolutions, the development of the repertoire, and so on. The farm has its story: a story of crops planted and harvested, of livestock bred, of commercial growth or decline. The individual plays a role in these two meaningful narratives in turn, but they are not necessarily meaningfully connected.

Alternatively, one might think of life as being composed of multiple projects which run concurrently but which are still largely independent of one another: a person may be a parent, a professional musician, and a model railway modeller, and all these threads may be meaningful in their own right even if they do not weave together in any meaningful way. They may intersect in trivial ways – for instance, the person may buy nappies, guitar strings and modelling glue during the same shopping trip – without this having real significance.

I am prepared to concede that life *can* be conceived in either of these ways: as a series of independent episodes or set of independent threads. And furthermore, by combining elements of both these accounts you can arrive at a highly plausible conception of life as consisting as a collection of threads, some of which are significantly connected, whereas others are not, and all of which are temporary. The upshot being that while there may be no identifiable point in a person's life where you can unequivocally say their life started anew, there may be two points in a person's life which are not connected by any very significant threads at all, meaning that the individual at the first and at the second belong to different narratives, if they belong to a narrative at all. Given the plausibility of this account, how is the significance of the whole life narrative defensible?

In brief, my response to this question is that while it is in a sense open to us to see life either in fragments or as a whole, we have powerful reasons to embrace the whole life narrative view. To fully explain these reasons requires a fairly complex account of the relationship between the narrativising of life and personal identity, but the key point is that adopting the whole life narrative view is necessary – or at least conducive – to participating in social practices that are vital for a good human life (given we are, by nature, social animals). Simply put, a person's identity is (in a sense) socially constructed alongside their life narrative, through a process that can be approximately characterised as a 'negotiation' between them

and others. While disavowal of social identity and of any whole life narrative is possible, this comes at a social cost.

Before fully elaborating this position, it may be helpful to step back and properly consider the relationship between personal identity and life narrative. The idea of a whole life narrative seems to imply a conception of diachronic personal identity. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore in depth the philosophical debate concerning personal identity, is it necessary to ask what the relationship is between these two conceptions. It might be argued that it is a person's whole life narrative that *constitutes* diachronic personal identity – i.e., that it is narrative structure alone that makes a person the same person throughout their life. On the other hand, it might be argued that diachronic personal identity, established in some other way, is the precondition for narrative unity.

The position I defend differs from both of these. I suggest that we should pay close attention to the bases of diachronic personal identity that precede narrative unity; these could arguably be enough to give a minimal account of diachronic identity, but provide an impetus to the construction of narrative unity, which is necessary for full human personhood. Since, as I have argued, all intelligible human action implies some basic degree of narrative, it is doubtful that any account of personal identity could avoid narrative completely; however, a typical person's life involves a diverse array of different actions, and more broadly, events and experiences. If these are all to be incorporated in a single narrative, a narrative that stretches not only over minutes or hours, but over days, months, years and decades, this is not something we can take for granted: it is rather a great accomplishment of synthesis. So whereas small-scale, short-term narrative unity is a basic condition of interpreting human behaviour, and as such is phenomenologically 'built-in' to our everyday experience of the

world, large-scale, long-term narrative unity is a higher-order construction, dependent on linkages which are not intrinsically narrational.

To explain simply what I mean, suppose you are listening with rapt attention to a piece of music when a police car passes outside, siren blaring. Is there any meaningful or direct causal connection between the experience of the music and the siren? We might be tempted to say there is merely a bare sequence. On second thought, it is not clear we ever experience a bare sequence; in this case, you would surely immediately experience the sound of the siren *as an interruption*. The siren's narrative meaning (or some of it) is pre-given. Nonetheless this is only possible because of the temporal ordering of music and siren, more precisely, their temporal ordering in *your* experience. That is to say, even while we may never experience events free of narrative meaning, this narrative meaning presupposes non-narrative unity of experience.

Davenport terms this fundamental unity of experience unity-0, and identifies it with Kant's concept of the synthetic unity of apperception. For Davenport there are two higher levels of unity: unity-1, or planning agency, the ability to conceive oneself as individual who can pursue goals over time; and unity-2, which is the achievement of those who display personal integrity and are able to give their life narrative a special, and admirable, level of coherence. Davenport suggests that a person must have unity-1 to be regarded as 'morally sane', and suggests that we can consider anyone with unity-1 as having a single whole life narrative, which he terms a narrative. While I do not disagree with this, I propose to examine more closely how unity-1 is constituted; and will argue, against Davenport, that whole life

narratives, however well integrated (or not), are always socially constructed (although this does not imply they are unreal).⁷

To recap, we have identified two ways in which life events are linked, providing a basis for diachronic personal identity and, potentially, a foundation for the construction of an extended life narrative. Firstly, even if we imagine living as undergoing a collection of passive experiences, these are experienced as forming a temporal sequence belonging to one subject. Secondly, taking account of the fact that to live is not merely to passively experience but to act, it is clear that one's doings are meaningfully related to past and future doings, events and states of affairs; in other words, that action has a temporally-extended narrative structure which implies the diachronic continuity of the agent.

These linkages are insufficient for diachronic identity extending over a whole life. This, indeed, is why we feel the need for larger-scale narrative unity. But if larger-scale narrative unity is *dependent* on these linkages, how can it go beyond them? There must be an additional factor that can contribute to creating this unity. I suggest that what is required is a process by which a person's identity and life narrative are socially constructed, through interaction between the individual and others. This process centres on the body, as the simultaneously public and private site of a person's actions and 'point of view'.

Identity is not determined purely from 'inside' (that is to say from the perspective of the individual); nor purely from 'outside' (that is to say, the perspective of others and/or physical facts about the body). Rather it is constructed through the interplay and negotiation between the two, as the individual seeks recognition as a *person* – that is to say, a unique consciousness with a unique perspective *and also* a member of the community answerable to

⁷ John J. Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge, 2012), p.45f

other members, who should be able to *give an account of themselves and their actions*. The individual has the ‘right’, in a sense, to tell their own story, but must tell it a way that is recognisable and acceptable to others. Of course, this narrative never exists in completed, completely harmonised form; but the notion of such a narrative is a regulative ideal.

Since I have now mentioned the body as the lynchpin in this process, it might be objected that I am overlooking a much more straightforward solution to the problem of diachronic personal identity: simple bodily continuity. Rather than troubling ourselves with the complex, contested business of constructing a life *narrative*, why not simply say that a ‘person’s’ history is the *chronicle* of events involving their body? In response I would argue, firstly, that understanding a person’s bodily life, insofar as it includes *actions*, draws us into the territory of meaningful narrative (as already shown); secondly, there are cases – e.g. some extreme cases of amnesia – where we would intuitively say that personal identity ‘restarts’. The principle that bodily continuity corresponds to a single life narrative is a basic presumption that must *generally* hold good for our social practices around selfhood to function, but it can be overridden.

We can imagine two types of case that might be regarded as exposing vulnerabilities in this account. Firstly, what if someone disavows identity with a past self in order to evade moral responsibility? That is to say, they refuse to accept that actions enacted through ‘their’ body during a particular were enacted by *them*; they edit out part of their own life narrative. Secondly, what if we were to encounter a culture with completely different social practices around diachronic identity and moral responsibility?

My response to the first kind of case is as follows. We cannot ultimately compel someone to accept a life narrative, even a basic component such as the scope of that narrative. We may,

however, doubt their sincerity, or the depth of their sincerity. If we have reason to doubt their sincerity, we can continue to hold them responsible and they may come to acknowledge their responsibility in time (obviously if it is small matter we can ‘let it go’). If they are deeply sincere, the community seem to have no choice but to recognise this as one of the rare cases where bodily continuity and diachronic selfhood diverge. However, the community ultimately decides whether the narrative the individual *is* prepared to accept is sufficient basis for them to participate in social practices that require commitment and trust. If not, they have excluded themselves from these practices and their associated goods. It may be epistemically impossible to distinguish between the individual who cynically attempts to evade moral responsibility and the individual who cannot attain or sustain sufficient self-integration to be morally responsible; but this point is largely moot because whether we regard it as regrettable or ‘deserved’, the individual in question cannot access social goods that most of us desire, and it *may* be necessary for the community to protect themselves from the individual in some respects if their disavowal of the basis of moral responsibility in selfhood is accompanied by a disregard for the welfare of others. At the same time, the community ought to recognise that such an individual may themselves be vulnerable and in need of care and compassion. The fact that they cannot fully participate in the social practice of personhood or in the moral community, does not mean they are not worthy of moral consideration.

With regard to the second kind of hypothetical case, I cannot assess here whether anthropological work has identified such cultures. All I can say here is that if such a culture did exist, there would be profound questions to address regarding its interaction with other cultures. Common ground would have to be found regarding what makes a person a person. Of course it would be problematic for one culture to impose its conception of personhood, identity and moral responsibility on another. Arguably, the safest strategy is simply to give up on finding the ‘universal core’ of such conceptions. But this strategy comes at a great cost,

because without at least the idea of a universal core there is no basis for the interaction between people from different cultures as equal members of an overarching moral community.

In relation to the concerns raised in the foregoing, it is important to note that narrative unity allows for considerable ‘distancing’ between one’s (present or ‘final’) self and particular actions or episodes in one’s life. This is one of the strengths of a narrative account of the self. The relative ‘weight’ of particular actions or threads or episodes – i.e. their significance – depends on their relation to the whole life narrative. For example, someone can be said to have ‘put a criminal past behind them’ – it forms a significant part of the life narrative, without principally defining them. This provides lots of scope for ‘negotiation’ between individuals and the community with respect to a person’s identity and how they are to be held responsible for their actions. This could also accommodate a range of different cultural practices regarding identity and moral responsibility.

The account I have outlined here is in many respects similar to that defended by Davenport under the label ‘narrative realism’. I concur with Davenport regarding the importance of whole life narratives – which he terms ‘narravives’ – and, along with Carr and Davenport defend the claim that life is inherently narrativel. However, I differ from Davenport in my acceptance that whole life narratives are ultimately constructions, albeit social constructions with intersubjective reality. Davenport states his position as follows:

the narrative realist holds [...] that there is exactly one basic narravive for each practical identity at the constitutive level (unity-1), though higher levels of this identity (and unity-2 if achieved) alter within the narravive as it is lived. [...] there is a one-to-one relation between basic narravives and personal identities; “identities” distinguished within a single basic narrative are aspects of one

personal identify, and identities without a single basic narrative are sub- or transpersonal⁸

Davenport conceives the different narratives we might tell about a person's life as better or worse approximations to a single basic narrative, the real true story of a person's life, which (unlike constructed narratives) omits nothing. This seemingly commits him to the view that a person's narrative is a metaphysical actuality in its own right. To clearly avoid this, I prefer to regard the 'true story' of person's life as a regulative ideal governing the social practice of constructing a person's identity. This process is never finished, even after the person's death; hence their whole life narrative is never a completed actuality, and could not become so even if we possessed perfect knowledge of everything that happened during their life.

Davenport's notion of narrative is intended to counter the argument that if identity is narrational it cannot be truthful, since narratives always omit information. The problem with Davenport's strategy is when we try to imagine a fully inclusive narrative it is hard to imagine what would give it narrative unity and structure. I propose that a better response begins by stressing that narratives gain their unity and structure from what they foreground or emphasise; this foregrounding of elements comes from us – it is not a metaphysical given – but its plausibility depends on the total information available. Therefore, narratives can still be highly truthful despite large omissions, *if* 'filling the gaps' would not significantly undermine the choice of elements foregrounded. That said, for reasons that will become clearer in the next section, our best hope for constructing truthful narratives may be to construct meta-narratives, which co-ordinate and hierarchise multiple irreducible narratives.

⁸ John J. Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality*, p.71

Hope and History

A recurring theme throughout this enquiry has been the importance of regarding one's life as a meaningful whole – and, as far as possible, making one's life whole. This is what it means to seek narrative unity and personal integrity. It has also become clear that this requires us to situate ourselves in larger wholes: our community, in negotiation with which we construct our identities and life-narratives; and history, which makes available meaningful projects.

The broadly Platonic approach situates us in relation to something which possesses wholeness in virtue of its being eternal and transcendent – at least in the sense of transcending the particular – and which promises to make our lives whole (or more so) in the imitation of it, or in striving towards it. Typically, those who take this approach suggest that, even as individuals, we can attain a greater wholeness beyond our mortal lives. Meanwhile, the Aristotelian naturalist approach focuses on the wholeness we can achieve during, and especially in the completion of, our mortal lives. Here the ultimate framework in which our lives can take on meaning is our membership of the human species, but our particular community – in its historically-conditioned form – implicitly provides a matrix for our meaning-finding. I propose moving beyond both the Platonic and Aristotelian naturalist approaches to explicitly recognise the historical character of our temporality. That means not only recognising that the conceptions of the good which help to structure our lives are particular to our temporal location, but also conceiving the history of our community – and indeed of humanity at large – in narrative terms, analogously to the way we think we think about our lives.

As we have seen, even relatively short-term, relatively mundane action requires hope: the reaching towards a future which will 'complete' and thereby make intelligible its past,

including the action we are presently engaged in. The Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to making life meaningful require more ambitious forms of hope: reaching towards a transcendent wholeness or towards the meaningful completion of one's entire life. But I am now proposing that we need another form of hope, invested in the narrative of human history. When seeking to make oneself intelligible to oneself and to others, as a person with agency and identity, it is no easier to draw a sharp boundary around one's 'life and times' than it is to draw such a boundary around a particular project or episode within one's life. The call for narrative unity implies it is impossible to live a good life without interpreting one's life – or at least without one's life being *interpretable*. And once interpretation has begun, one cannot constrict the hermeneutic circle.

But here it is imperative that we proceed with caution. I have emphasised that narrative unity is *constructed*, and in view of this it is vital to acknowledge and reckon with the tensions within and limitations of this unity. The unity of a life narrative cannot be seen as an easy, natural unity, and it hardly needs pointing out that imposing unity on the whole of human history is all the more problematic. Consequently, our conception of narrative unity has to somehow accommodate these tensions and limitations, especially if it is to be applied to history. Even if the narrativisation of lives, and their narrativisation within a historical context, is accepted as unavoidable, it does not necessarily follow that history itself need be narrativised at all. I will defend the narrativisation of history, but only after analysing and rejecting two prevalent modes of historical narrativity. These I term the 'traditionalist mode' and the 'progressivist mode'; but it should be noted that I use 'traditionalist' and 'progressivist' in broad senses, encompassing positions that would not normally be labelled thus. The shortcomings of these two approaches will point us in the direction of a better alternative.

The Traditionalist and Progressivist Modes of Historical Narrativity

What I term the ‘traditionalist mode’ covers any approach to narrativising history that tends to emphasise and valourise events and figures of the past, and projects and practices that originated in the past, in preference to contemporary events and figures and to projects and practices which participants regard as ‘new’. Such an approach tends to produce narratives of continuity or of decline. When there is hope implicit in such narratives, or associated with them, this hope is focused on the preservation of traditions (in the face of perceived threats), or their revival. Contrarily, what I term ‘the progressivist approach’ emphasises and valourises the present, and/or (more commonly) an anticipated future. Hope focuses on advancing upon or towards the new. A simple way of putting the point is that, for the traditionalist, it is the past that *gives meaning* to the future, whereas for the progressivist, it is the present, or more usually the future, that gives meaning to the past. This formulation oversimplifies because no one moment within the whole can, strictly speaking, confer meaning on the whole; it is more correct to say that the whole confers meaning on each moment. Nonetheless, in a narrative certain moments ‘stand out’, structuring the whole and making it meaningful. For the traditionalist, these stand out moments are predominantly past; we *look back* in order to remind ourselves who we are and what matters to us. For the progressivist, the stand out moments are predominantly still to come; we *look forward* to the future, and by doing so give ourselves a sense of purpose.

The will towards narrative unity can have a distorting effect if the limitations of this unity are disregarded. It may, for instance, stymie our sense of possibility.

A traditionalist narrativisation of history creates the impression that our options for meaningful action are limited to imitating the past. Now it is certainly the case that

meaningful human action takes place against a historical background, and that the range of intelligible actions available to us would be narrow indeed if it were not for the social and cultural space pre-established by the actions of our forebears. However, this space leaves room for considerable novelty and innovation, and indeed some measure of innovation is no less essential for meaningful action, since pure repetition is corrosive of meaning. Mimetic following of convention inevitably takes on an automatic character, and while behaviour of this type is necessary to sustain a form of life, if it predominates we risk losing agency altogether. It would be incorrect to suppose that traditionalists are most prone to this; as in fact they are often antagonistic towards *present* norms and conventions, and exhibit agency by choosing alternative models to guide them. However, insofar as these normative models are drawn from the past, the implicit telos of traditionalist narratives and action is a condition in which genuine agency is strictly circumscribed, if not impossible.

Contrasted with the traditionalist mode, the progressivist seems to affirm and celebrate the openness of the future, thereby providing much greater scope for genuine action. However, this is undermined by a temptation towards fatalism inherent in progressivism. The asymmetry of past and future is the key to the phenomenology of temporality, but progressivism reifies this asymmetry, treating it less as a feature of experience (irrespective of one's era) than as an essential feature of the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves. Progressivism locates us somewhere in the middle of history, but forgets that this sense of being in the middle derives from our *perspective*, instead imagining itself to have an overview of history which can be used to find our temporal location. Now it might be argued that we need precisely this kind of overview of history in order to act, collectively, on a historical level. I have, after all, defended the position (put forward by Carr) that agency generally has a protentive-retrospective structure: we envisage the future goal and this structures our present action. But there are serious problems with simply scaling this up to the

collective, historical level. The principal problem is *not* just that envisaging (for instance) an ideal society is more difficult than envisaging, say, the meal you're in the process of cooking; nor that the former has to be collectively envisioned and therefore culturally mediated (whereas the meal I can simply envisage in my own mind). The fact that this is dauntingly difficult does not mean it is impossible, still less that it is unnecessary. The key problem is that while *all* our actions and projects are vulnerable to unexpected disruption and failure, most of these actions and projects can fail (at least individually) without our lives losing meaning altogether, whereas a progressivist narrativisation of history makes the historical meaning of our lives entirely dependent on the attainment of whatever final telos is stipulated by the narrative. Some people may be prepared to accept this; to affirm, for instance, that all striving for a just society will turn out to be meaningless if a (more or less) just society is never achieved. Such people, if they continue their striving, would certainly display the virtue of hope; but on *their* account of what hope is grounded in, it is doubtful that their hope would be virtuous *unless* a just society *was* eventually achieved. For all their hope would have been futile; and can something futile be virtuous? In any case, the terrifying prospect of futility more often drives progressivism into explicit or implicit fatalism. The achievement of the final goal is regarded as ultimately inevitable, although this undermines meaningful action. Typically, the achievement of the final goal is not only seen as necessarily happening *at some point* in history, but as necessarily happening at a particular point – usually sometime that is *soon*. This inflicts an extra indignity on past generations: while they may be thought to have contributed to the ultimate realisation of history's telos, it is implied that it was never possible for them to have taken the decisive step – that privilege being reserved for us, or perhaps our children or some subsequent generation.

It might be objected that if we adopt a progressivist narrativisation of history, making a small further contribution to the progress that has already been made should be enough to give our

lives meaning. The present era, imperfect as it may be, is the culmination of millennia of human progress, and as such can be regarded as the telos of history. However, the assumption that human history up to this point has been a story of smooth, objective progress is deeply problematic. While there have clearly been many great human achievements that are worthy of celebration, and that we can be thankful we benefit from, it is not difficult to identify significant harms and cultural losses brought about by many (if not all) of the major technological innovations and reconfigurations of social life that have occurred in human history. To take a simple example, it is often pointed out, on average, routine violence seems to have greatly decreased over the course of human history. But it can hardly be denied that over the last two centuries humans have devised devastatingly effective methods of mass slaughter that never previously existed, and what's more, that there have been those prepared to use them. Another simple example is the legacy of the industrial revolution. Needless to say, we owe many of our comforts and conveniences to the technologies and social changes of that era; but the harm caused by industrialisation to the natural world, including to the ecosystems on which we depend, is hardly less obvious. How is it possible to weigh up the pros and cons of a process such as industrialisation? If such an assessment is even conceivable, it would surely require not only exhaustive empirical research but the resolution of fierce debates over the interpretation of data and the criteria of assessment. I would in fact argue that questions such as 'Was industrialisation good or bad?' are ultimately facetious. The benefits and harms are both immense but impossible to quantify and incommensurable. I suggest that it is only plausible to regard human history as a story of progress if you assume that all these developments, with their profoundly ambivalent legacies thus far, will lead – at some point in the future – to a society in which their negative side has been decisively overcome. A society, say, in which there is democracy without demagoguery, and in which people enjoy the benefits of technology without experiencing alienation or causing the

degradation of the natural world. I do not judge this to be vain hope, although it would be unrealistic to imagine the negative side of ‘progress’ can be entirely overcome. However, it is clear that a progressivist narrative which invests all of our yearning to meaning in this hope does leave us exposed to the risk of futility.

So, to summarise the problems we have so far identified with the traditionalist and progressivist modes of narrativisation: they constrict the openness of the future, undermining meaningful action, and also alter our relationship to the past. They try to *fix* the meaning of history, which is misguided because not only are the present and future open, they exist in a dynamic relationship to the past, the significance of which can change. We ought to conceive both ourselves and past generations as free agents, which means taking seriously the unrealised possibilities implicit in the telling of the past. This applies both in our life narratives and on the historical level. Who we could have been matters to who we are. What could have been matters to what is.

Unrealised possibilities give actuality its character. Most obviously, my actual actions are only *choices* in relation to what I might have done instead. Note that this is the case even from a determinist perspective: even if my choice is determined by my desires, which are themselves wholly determined, the concept of choice depends on the idea of a possible world in which ‘I’ desired something else and acted accordingly. (I personally think that ethical reflection in general depends on a presupposition of something closer to libertarian agent-causation than compatibilism; nonetheless, if a compatibilist framework is at all viable it can and must accommodate the point that choice is conceptually dependent on alternative possibilities.) Even in circumstances where I do not feel I have a choice to do *x*, it may be relevant who I am that I am someone who might – *under other circumstances* – have done *x*.

It might be objected that if my identity is not determined by what I have *actually* done and what has *actually* happened to me I have no determinate identity at all. It is certainly true that to dissociate my identity from my actuality is a form of inauthenticity. However, there is not only a black and white distinction between what I actually did and everything that I *might* have done. Rather, some unrealised possibilities in my past loom larger than others when I take stock of my life; some because it seems that they came close to being realised, but others because, however improbable, it seems they would have answered to some deep yearning in me. There are abundant opportunities for the vices of self-deception and bitterness here, but reflection on what might have been is so crucial to our self-conception it should not be excluded altogether. The same applies to reflection on history. Although many historians would scoff at elaborate speculations about what might have happened if so-and-so had died in childhood, or if such-and-such a battle had been won by the other side, the very business of explaining and evaluating the significance of so-and-so, or of such-and-such battle, depends implicitly on envisaging alternative pathways.

Furthermore, we can reinterpret history, even as a basis for action – e.g. reviving a past possibility – or through action – which changes meaning. Furthermore, the past is never our possession – our understanding is always limited: new knowledge may emerge, new perspectives

Besides fatalism, the other temptation of narrative is the idealisation of history. This is linked to the previous point, because the impossibility of a complete account of the past, complicated by the diversity of different viewpoints creates the opportunity for a biased interpretation. It is not possible to have an entirely unbiased account, but the danger is one that excludes the perspectives of marginalised and oppressed people. This, again, is most obviously an issue for traditionalist narrativisation. Progressivist narrativisation often –

although by no means always – champions the oppressed who gradually work their way towards a just society. However, the fatalist tendency in progressivism contains a more insidious form of justifying the injustice – it is seen as necessary. The oppressed may be ‘empowered’ but only insofar as the narrative allows at a given point, and only to do what has been destined to happen then. Everything the oppressed have endured through history is consolingly glossed as a necessary sacrifice.

I suggest that an alternative mode of narrativisation can be developed, taking inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. What Benjamin calls ‘now-time’ has the potential, at moments of meaningful action, to link us both to the past and to a hoped-for future, living a narrative which is neither fatalistic nor dependent on an idealised past or future.⁹ Narrativising our lives in this way entails a genuine solidarity with the oppressed throughout history; in fact, it orients us towards the overcoming of all oppression, but without treating this as inevitable, or consigning our lives to futility if it is never achieved. Benjamin’s approach to history has striking similarities with that of Kierkegaard. This may be partly due to direct influence, but can largely be explained by their common roots in the tradition of messianic thought. Benjamin’s work is all the more pertinent to my argument since he emphasises the politically liberatory dimension of this tradition. (While it would be a grave mistake to essentialise either religion, one may cautiously suggest that this dimension is typically more at the foreground in Jewish messianic thought than in Christian messianic thought, not least because of the latter’s preoccupation with the doctrine of the Incarnation.)

⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’* by Michael Löwy, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2016) p.86f

Benjamin's Messianic Thought as an Alternative to Heidegger and Lukács

Before elaborating on the advantages of the messianic mode of narrativising history, I will consider the work of Martin Heidegger and Georg Lukács. These thinkers share insights with Kierkegaard and Benjamin and consequently avoid the worst tendencies of traditionalism and progressivism, but nonetheless manifest, instructively, these inadequate modes of historical narrativity.

Like Kierkegaard before him, and in all likelihood deeply influenced by him, Heidegger stresses that the past *was* a field of possibility, just as the present and future are now. Of course the past *no longer* has the openness of the present, but this manifest truth is liable to mislead us into conceiving it as *always* fixed, not merely determined but *predetermined*. This distorts and renders inauthentic our relation to history. Hence, Heidegger writes that “historiology will disclose the quiet force of the possible with greater penetration the more simply and more concretely having-been-in-the-world is understood in terms of its possibility”.¹⁰ I take this as a recommendation that historians should emphasise the choices and alternative paths historical agents could have taken, and a repudiation of history that treats events as necessary, whether through material determinism or a grand teleological scheme such as Hegel's.

Heidegger, then, has the right understanding of how to authentically relate to the past, which I have argued is crucial to hope. But, although he is therefore aware of the dangers of strong traditionalism – a sense of being bound to the past, morally obligated if not metaphysically determined, to continue traditions out of respect – his position still leans too far in a

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) p.446

traditionalist direction. Explaining this should allow me to highlight what I take to be the key ingredient missing from Heidegger's account but which is present in Benjamin's.

Carr comments that towards the beginning of *Being and Time*, Heidegger seems to have an individualist conception of authenticity, but later in the work shifts to emphasising the 'handing-down' of possibilities from one generation to the next. He writes: "the authentic self, which had seemed all erratic originality in rejecting humdrum conformity, now emerges as a stern and proud traditionalist paying homage by obedience to the authority of the past".¹¹ While Carr's interpretation correctly identifies a tendency in Heidegger's thought, it is somewhat one-sided. To ensure my critique of Heidegger as too traditionalist is justified and even-handed, I will now examine a key passage in which Heidegger sets out his conception of authenticity as repetition. Heidegger writes:

Arising, as it does, from a resolute projection of oneself, repetition does not let itself be persuaded of something by what is 'past', just in order that this, as something which was formerly actual, may recur. Rather, the repetition makes a *reciprocatve rejoinder* to the possibility of that existence which has-been-there. But when such a rejoinder is made to this possibility in a resolution, it is made *in a moment of vision*; and as such it is the same time a disavowal of that which in the "today", is working itself out as the 'past'. Repetition does not abandon itself to that which is past, nor does it aim at progress. In the moment of vision authentic existence is indifferent to both these alternatives.¹²

The clear statement that repetition 'does not let itself be persuaded' to simply reproduce the past and 'does not abandon itself to the past' suggest that the 'reciprocatve rejoinder' is something other than simply paying homage to past. But what, then, is it? Heidegger's translators, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, suggest that

The idea seems to be that in resolute repetition one is having, as it were, a conversation with the past, in which the past proposes certain possibilities for adoption, but in which one makes a rejoinder to this proposal by 'reciprocating'

¹¹ David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p.94

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.437-8

with the proposal of other possibilities as a sort of rebuke to the past, which one now disavows.¹³

Now, I grant that the passage is ambiguous enough that this is a viable interpretation; however, I would suggest that this goes too far in the opposite direction compared to Carr's interpretation. Authentic 'repetition' of the past is neither a submissive paying homage, nor a disavowal. I propose that the most plausible interpretation is that Heidegger is advocating the revival of past traditions, albeit in a necessarily new form, as a rebuke to the present. It is not the past as such that is disavowed but the norms of today, which are of course one 'working out' of the past. Heidegger, dissatisfied with the present, is essentially recommending going forward by going back and recovering alternative possibilities from past tradition. This interpretation helps to explain and resolve the tension in Heidegger's work helpfully identified by Carr. For Heidegger, authenticity requires a willingness to break from the habitual, ingrained behaviours of 'the They'; but Heidegger can only envisage doing this by taking inspiration from the past. It seems he has in mind either imitating the example set by heroic, 'stand out' figures from the past, or going back to a more authentic way of life that he fantasises everyone enjoyed before the corrupting effects of modernity took hold. Heidegger is quite right that on occasion it is vital to break out of shallow conformity to the mores of the present, but his attitude all too easily slides into a snobbish disdain for the ways of the contemporary 'common man', whom he regards as the unthinking product of the age. What Heidegger lacks is any conception of inclusive solidarity. Consequently, what he fails to realise is that opposition to 'the age' can be conducted on behalf of, and indeed can spring from, 'the masses'. Two thinkers who do both grasp this possibility are Lukács and Benjamin. However, I will argue that only Benjamin has a truly authentic conception of historical hope, because Lukács is not entirely free of the shortcomings of the progressivist mode of narrativisation.

¹³ *Being and Time*, p.438n

The progressivist view of history is an extremely broad category but the basic idea is that it sees all of history as moving towards some future moment of realisation. Notable tendencies of this view are determinism and smoothness. The idea that history had to unfold towards its present and ultimate future point, and the idea of cumulative progress, in which each era building logically on the previous. Throughout this essay I have defended a teleological conception of ourselves, and defined hope in these terms, but progressivism tends to suggest there is a single telos located in the future, in relation to which the whole of history can be regarded as retrospectively necessary and ‘justified’.

The progressivist may look back at past figures and say they were ahead of their time; and see us as having the opportunity to fulfil what they could not bring to fruition. But this has a tendency towards complacency: the progressivist sees the present or the (near) future as having a privileged position. This is disrespectful, even dehumanising to those in the past. Of course, in a way we do have the privileged position of hindsight – but we also have the disadvantage of knowing that the project previously ended in failure. We have to retrieve those possibilities. It is virtuous to be able to perceive the opportunities for retrieving these possibilities in the present, but complacent, even delusional, to tell yourself that now, or soon, is a special moment, when the world will finally be ready. Of course, there are objective circumstances that affect whether something will work at a particular time, but we must not forget the role of human freedom in this, and to see history as building linearly to greater opportunity is unwise.

I want to focus my attention on a figure who represents the progressivist way of thinking, but in a more defensible form, Lukács.

Lukács, and the Hegelian-Marxist tradition to which he belongs, does not really exhibit ‘smoothness’, because of the emphasis on *dialectical development*. However, this tradition does have a tendency to subsume this dialectical process into a greater teleology. Lukács explicitly rejects the determinism of many Marxists, referring to his “deep abhorrence of ... mechanistic fatalism”¹⁴ but he still has the fatalistic tendency to identify a special moment of history when truly conscious action will be possible.

It is not necessarily wrong to see full freedom as something emergent rather than pre-given, but the idea that this only arrives at the ‘end of history’ (or just before, as the condition for the end of history) encourages complacency and is patronising to past generations.

The essential problem that we still find in Lukács is the idea of an upcoming privileged moment when a decisive shift to a just society – i.e. a vindication of hope – will be possible. Therefore, for all his rejection of determinism, Lukács deprives past generations of genuine choice. Of course with hindsight we can see obstacles that were invisible to people at the time, but the same could be said of the future in respect to us. In seeking to learn from the past, we cannot suppose that people in the past were absolutely stuck in ignorance.

Lukács writes that “The proletariat has been entrusted by history with the task of *transforming society consciously*”.¹⁵ Here Lukács affirms the proletariat as the subjects and free agents of history but the phrase ‘entrusted by history’ betrays Lukács’ surviving fatalism. Marxism may be right that the creation of the proletariat created new opportunities for the formation of solidarity and action on the basis of solidarity, but we have to suppose the

¹⁴ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Pontypridd: Merlin Press, 1971), p.xxv

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.71

possibility of solidarity to be always present. Otherwise we cannot achieve solidarity with other generations ourselves, and become alienated from history.

In contrast to Lukács, Benjamin stresses the “refined and spiritual things [...] present in class struggle”, which are “alive in this struggle as confidence, humour, cunning and fortitude, and which have effects that reach back far in the past” and “constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers”¹⁶. The power of hope is to unite us in solidarity with past generations so that we find meaning and wholeness in a tradition of struggle, irrespective of whether the struggle ever concludes in victory. Authentic historical hope does require us to become invested in a teleological historical narrative, but this narrative must not be too neat or too comforting. The story it calls upon us to tell ourselves must acknowledge the constant presence of its shadow-story: a story of oppression, of hopes dashed, of human potential choked and crushed. Which is the ‘true story’? That depends on us, in every moment.

Conclusion

I will conclude by summarising and clarifying the key points of the last section. To be truthful, a narrativisation of history (like a whole life narrative) must, in principle, include all events, including all perspectives on those events. Needless to say, it is impossible to actually *produce* such a narrative (in the manner of a narrative artefact). And neither is it an imperfectly-known given that exists independently of narrativisation (like Davenport’s narrative). Hence we must regard it as a regulative ideal. It is possible to pursue this ideal authentically because the construction of narrative unity does not imply an *omission* of known or unknown ‘facts’, even though it does involve selection. That is to say, when

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Michael Lowy, *Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*, p.37

constructing a narrative with honest intentions we select what to *emphasise* not what to include. A narrative *artefact* relating to reality – e.g. a work of history – must, to a large extent, emphasise by excluding much information from explicit mention, but it is implicitly recognised that such an artefact does not tell the ‘whole story’. The narrative can still be truthful, albeit not in an absolute sense; but its claim to truthfulness is always vulnerable. Both new information about what has already happened and new happenings (which can affect the significance of what has happened before) may call into question the emphases of the narrative. Traditionalist and progressivist narrativisations of history illegitimately attempt to fix the meaning of history. However, narratives of decline (or revival) and narratives of progress are not entirely false; they are partial truths. The ‘whole story’ – our regulative ideal for historical narrativisation – is a meta-narrative that incorporates these different narratives. Nonetheless, what we are aiming for here is still a story, not just cacophony of different stories arrayed alongside and against one another.

The ‘messianic’ mode of narrativisation exemplified by Benjamin encourages us to find and make wholeness in a narrative based on solidarity with the oppressed of history. Any degree of success in this respect requires hope. The final telos of this hope is a permanent non-oppressive society. Were this ever to be achieved (which we would never know, even if it were possible), then the narrative of human dignity and integrity in the struggle against oppression would become the dominant narrative in the historical meta-narrative, without this erasing the tragic counter-narrative of the oppressors’ domination. If oppression is never overcome, there is still meaning and ‘partial wholeness’ to be found in telling and enacting the counter-narrative of resistance. Either way – presuming a commitment to inclusive solidarity – this kind of historical hope is a vitally important virtue.

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