

## **A POSTMODERN BASIS FOR NARRATIVE REALISM IN PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING**

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What are philosophical counselors to do when their clients present them with flesh-and-blood "meaning of life" problems? What should they do with those "who am I and why aren't I happy?" problems? Should they reject a problem if it is couched in terms of difficulties in the client's personal relations at home? What if the problem reflects a career or mid-life crisis? How should they counsel clients in the throes of a religious crisis? What should they focus on when clients want to utilize philosophical inquiry to move beyond, digest, understand, or reconstruct the meaning of failed relationships or depressive cycles in their life? Problems like these might seem to fit more appropriately within the province of therapeutic training, calling for calculated interventions by psychological or family counseling practitioners. I suspect therapists and philosophers would initially be reluctant to place these problems within the province of philosophical counseling.

It might seem more appropriate for philosophers to counsel clients who raise ethics problems. But why are ethics problems more relevant to a philosopher's expertise than, say, problems reflecting a crisis in personal growth or self-awakening? How can we be sure these two problems aren't somehow related? What if the person sitting in our office is having difficulty working through a postmodern crisis as she faces the challenge of constructing a new personal identity in the face of a series of transformative life experiences? How could a predicament like this not affect our relationship to an ethics problem? What is a philosophical counselor to do in a case like this? Is there a proper method, a systematic approach based on a generalized understanding of problems of this type? Is there a truth to discover here? Or perhaps a value or set of values to be prized over all others? That is, should we expect philosophical counselors to know which philosophies take precedence in a case like this? Is there a special philosophical frame of reference from which to determine this? What will legitimize the counselor's decision to privilege one perspective over others in determining which methods are more appropriate for defining and addressing our visitor's problem? What if we can see that several competing perspectives are influencing her frame of mind? What if some of these perspectives appear to be experienced in her face-to-face dealings with others, experienced perhaps as expectations reflecting from the faces of significant people in her life? Is this legitimate counseling territory for philosophers? At first glance, we might be inclined to err on the side of caution and refer our visitor to a non-philosophical therapist.

Now suppose our visitor is a practicing psychotherapist. She wants our philosophical counsel regarding the theoretical basis of her methods. She wants to critique the philosophical views and principles shaping her work in psychotherapy. Perhaps at some level she comes in hope of reconciling with her Maker, for she fears she may have offended His sensitivities with her embrace of the postmodern narrative therapy movement. Recently she has experienced a reluctance to accept the death of God, not because she is troubled by what this would entail, but because she is sensitive to the difficult challenge the postmodern stance poses to her clients. She is

intrigued to see if within the scope of our philosophical dialogue she might find a challenge to these views, an overturning of sorts, and through this, a pathway to a new framework for her therapeutic practice. Why should philosophical counselors have any qualms about taking on this problem? Clearly this is, at least in some measure, a philosophical kind of problem. And yet, how can a philosophical dialogue on this realm of issues not already entail a clear mindset toward the very sorts of life problems philosophers might be inclined to refer to a psychotherapist or family counselor?

Why does it seem more legitimate for philosophers to discuss methodological concerns with therapeutic counselors than to counsel people who are facing complicated issues in their life? Two points come to mind: counselors are more accepting of the relation between philosophical theory and psychological practice; and we easily defer to the expertise of a clinical therapist in situations where personal life-histories and fundamental projects are somehow at risk. As a result, we presume a trained therapist will exercise more discretion than a troubled counselee when it comes to reflecting on or being swayed by philosophical counsel. I want to rethink this mindset in light of a new breed of clinical and family therapists who operate from postmodern philosophical assumptions. We can think of this as the postmodern "narrative therapy" movement in psychological counseling.

A broad range of narrative therapeutic approaches have gained credibility from the work of psychotherapists in the "constructivist" and "social constructionist" movements.<sup>1</sup> The postmodern thinking behind these new therapies challenges the credibility of time-honored methods and assumptions underlying the systematic, replicable, rule-governed practices of the more traditional forms of clinical therapy.<sup>2</sup> I am considering whether we can sustain the key premises of the postmodern therapy movement through philosophical dialogue. If we can, this might provide a basis for applying philosophical counseling practices to the personal problems of people whose life-histories or fundamental projects hang in the balance. I will explore this possibility in the remainder of my paper. In the process, I will respond to Barbara Held's criticism of the "anti-systematic impact" of postmodern philosophies on psychotherapy.

### **The Postmodern Narrative Movement in Psychotherapy**

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Neimeyer (1995, 1997, 1998), Neimeyer/Mahoney (1995), and Held (1995) for summary presentations of the conceptual background on these movements, including elaborations and critical discussions on the dominant methods and practices.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Held quotes Gergen (1993) on the "significant disjunction" between contributions of postmodern narrative therapies and "the past century of therapeutic writing" (cited in Held (1997), p. 15). See Neimeyer/Mahoney (1995), Neimeyer (1995, 1997, 1998) and Held (1995) for references to leading proponents of the "mind-set" characteristic of postmodern narrative therapies. Held is a significant critic of this mind-set (and a defender/critic of the more systematic, replicable, rule-governed practices of traditional clinical therapies). For a similar vein of criticism from a more overt philosophical orientation, see Jopling (1996). The elaborative contributions most relevant to my discussion of the postmodern narrative therapy movement are Anderson & Goolishian (1988, 1992), Epstein & Loos (1989), Gergen & Kaye (1992), Schafer (1992), White & Epston (1990), Edwards & Potter (1992), Freedman & Combs (1996), Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston (1996), Sewell, Baldwin, & Moes (1998), Rosen & Kuehlwein (1996), Taylor & Brown (1989), Kvale (1992), and Polkinghorne (1992)

Postmodern narrative therapies tend to focus on the descriptions and explanations offered up by counselees in the course of their dialogue with therapists. The counselee's problem is construed through analysis of the counselee's narrative construction of events, problems, or assumptions as reflected in (the story of) their life. The reference to the "story" of a life is bracketed here to emphasize the silent privilege of our taken-for-granted attitude toward these narrative constructions. The pivotal thesis is that narrative constructions are commonly taken for granted as accurate reflections of events, problems or assumptions in our life. Narrative therapists see a value in helping their clients spot the mediating impact of "*narrative construal*" in everyday life as the underwriting basis of our personal life-narratives. On this view, narrative constructions are reflections of a person's experience of <<events>>, <<problems>>, and <<assumptions>>; the experiences reflected in these narrative constructions are the *intentional content* of a person's reflections on life (--reflected in the use of <<brackets>>); and this intentional content is distinct from the *actual* content we otherwise presume to be the direct referent of our narrative constructions. The actual content of experience (i.e., what we ordinarily project as the actual event, problem, or assumption) is an *indirect* (and merely implied) referent of these constructions.<sup>3</sup>

The dominant goal of postmodern narrative therapies is to assist in the reconstruction of life-narratives. The principal target of this reconstruction effort is the intentional content of the counselee's experience. Intentional content is reflected in the work of attention and correlates with our organizing frame of attunement. Because intentional content is so integral to a narrative construal of specific episodes or circumstances of life, the actual episodes or circumstances remain always an *indirect* target of therapeutic or reflective analysis. The direct target of reflective analysis is actually the *intentional content*, or the experience of meaning intrinsic to the narrative construal. This intentional content is the key to how people in therapy (and people in general) experience problematic episodes or circumstances in their life. The presumption behind postmodern narrative therapies is that effective reconstructions of the therapeutic subject's narrative identity will draw attention to the narrative dimensions of the subject's problematic reality.<sup>4</sup> As partners in dialogue engaged in "a process of 'sculpting' novel possibilities in language and exploring their implications in behavior," therapist and client endeavor to "jointly conjure new prospects for living and relating." Since these possibilities are individualized to the life of the therapeutic subject, intentional content "cannot be specified in advance or generalized as a treatment goal for other clients" (Neimeyer, 1995, p. 355). This individualizes each episode of therapeutic practice in a manner distinct from the work of philosophical practice. For philosophical practice is not about analyzing personal life-narratives and identifying new possibilities for living. It is about understanding how life-narratives operate in our lives, how they constrain or facilitate new possibilities for living, and how therapeutic subjects (and subjects in general) experience life through the narrative dimensions of identity and the narrative scope of life's problems. So, the opening is there to engage in a philosophical dimension of work.

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<sup>3</sup> Note the phenomenological leanings of this mind-set. For further elaboration of various ways to construe the underlying theory of intentionality, see Husserl (1900-01, 1913, and 1925), Smith and McIntyre (1982), Searle (1983), and Tuedio (1988).

<sup>4</sup> See Neimeyer (1995, 1998) and Held (1995, 1997) for elaborations (one positive, the other critical) of this orientation to psychotherapy.

The principal objective of postmodern narrative counseling is to help clients reconfigure problematic realities into contexts of newfound opportunity. This is accomplished when clients find a way to *reconstrue the problematic meaning* operating in the intentional content of their experience. Since the intention here is to have a direct impact on the problematic experiences themselves, the postmodern narrative approach to counseling should address specific needs of the therapeutic subject. Because narrative realists believe our needs can be revealed through the dialogical construction of life-narratives, they engage the client's life-narrative as a concrete expression of the counseling problem.<sup>5</sup>

If actual episodes and circumstances in our life are not themselves accessible objects of therapeutic analysis or intervention, then analysis and intervention should be directed instead to the intentional content of our experiences. The relevant content for analysis is reflected in the therapeutic subject's narrative construal of episodes and circumstances in their life. Neimeyer (1998) considers this orientation "the distinctive mind-set" of the postmodern narrative therapy movement. At the heart of this mind-set, the subject's "problem" is characterized as a target for narrative reconstruction. This presumes the problem is somehow lodged in the narrative constructions revealed by the client in the course of the therapeutic analysis. This may explain why narrative therapists focus so intently on the narrative construal of meaning. If the therapeutic goal is to facilitate a creative manipulation of the subject's worldview, the point is to transform problematic dimensions of her life, to expand her sense of viable possibilities.<sup>6</sup> But the path is not without obstructions. Narrative therapists must learn to factor in the "reluctance" of subjects "to relinquish the core constructions on which their assumptive worlds are built" (Neimeyer, 1995, p. 354).

### **Some Philosophical Premises Underwriting the Postmodern Narrative Analysis Movement**

Three philosophical premises motivate this emphasis on the reconstruction of life narratives. The most important is the assumption that language mediates our experience of social reality. On this premise, our experience of social reality always already reflects the influence of dominant discourses, and language plays a largely performative role (the representational role being largely overestimated) in the communication of information. This assumption is correlated with a premise concerning the relation between language, reality and human knowledge: human knowledge is a construction of reality, not a representation. The third premise postulates a dependence of self on language: the "textual" basis of self is correlated with the "social construction" of personal identity. Self identity is "a living web of connections" reflecting an "atmosphere" of media images and social expectations. Its

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of the postmodern narrative therapy movement is a central focus of Held's criticisms in *Back to Reality* (1995). See in particular pp. 82-134.

<sup>6</sup> See Parry (1991), White & Epston (1990), and Anderson & Goolishian (1988) for reflections of this conceptual orientation. See Held (1995, 1997) for a critique of the antisystematic implications of this mind-set for psychotherapy. For a straightforward discussion of the relevance of this approach for the philosophical counseling movement, see Lahav (1995), Schefczyk (1995) and Norman (1995).

narrative dimensionality is "deeply penetrated by the language of one's place and time."<sup>7</sup>

If these assumptions are valid, can a therapist and visitor actually communicate about the realities of the visitor's situation? What do their communications refer to, if everything they express in narrative discourse harbors a matrix of performative agendas distorting the representational function of language? On the "self-as-text" model of analysis, where do we locate their identity as dialogical partners?

When we provide a narrative account of episodes of life, narrative therapists assume we communicate only the *story* of our reality, not the reality itself. It must follow from this that a therapist's understanding of this story is itself a story. Surely if a counseling intervention is to mean anything positive in the life of the therapeutic subject, it should transform problematic dimensions of her life. Is this a realistic expectation? The counselor seems to be dealing with someone who is one step removed from her own reality and condemned to operate within a narrative construction that mediates, shapes and projects meaning and significance into everything she experiences as real. Is there any basis here for a therapeutic discipline that can sustain legitimate systematic interventions? Before we get too caught up with this concern, perhaps we can reframe the issue in defense of the premises underwriting the narrative therapy movement.

Consider the following questions: How might we understand the therapist's relation to the therapeutic subject, and how will the therapeutic subject relate to her own history (and to her own future, for that matter!) if everything each of them expresses or responds to in therapeutic conversation is open to dialogical reconstruction? What does the narrative construction refer to, if indeed it is more a reflection of performative discourse than an attempt to represent actual episodes, relations, or circumstances in the person's life?

The problem is not that narrative constructions fail to refer to episodes, relations, or circumstances in a person's life. The problem is to understand **how** narrative constructions refer to actual episodes, relations, and circumstances in a person's life. In her pursuit of this understanding, the postmodern therapist or counselor must relate to both general and individual structures of her client's experiences. By her own admission, these structures of experience are apparent in the narrative construction itself. For instance, the therapist can try to grasp *general* structures of the subject's experience by cultivating an attunement to the social discourses influencing her subject's narrative descriptions and assessments. By directing reflective attention to the narrative influence of dominant social discourses, the therapist can structure an intervention to awaken new perspective in her subject and then sit back and study the subsequent interactions. But how do *individual* structures show through? Here the therapist must shift to a reflexive analysis of the construction of the subject's mind-set at critical junctures in her life (including the present).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Neimeyer (1997b), especially for his summary of the constructivist agenda, and Neimeyer & Stewart (1998), especially the section on "Current Issues in Constructivist Theory." Held (1997) portrays these assumptions as features of an "antirealist" mind-set and critiques the epistemological implications for psychotherapy in Back to Reality (1995).

Postmodern narrative therapy operates in a self-referential circuit of vulnerability. The very medium of communication appears to be driving the entire analysis and holding it captive to ambiguity. If every description, assessment, and concern expressed in dialogue evolves within a dynamic narrative context, there will always be room to question the validity of representational language used in the narrative constructions. But with respect to issues of validity, another level of attention takes precedence over concerns about representational validity in postmodern narrative counseling sessions. In these sessions, focus is directed to what might be called the "performative validity" of the subject's narrative construction. The question no longer concerns the *accuracy* of the client's construction of events. Instead, the therapist's task is to draw out the intentional content conveyed by this construction and to reflect on the correlated experiences of meaning and significance. But we misconstrue this task if we cast it as a representational project. It is misleading to think of the subject's construction of reality as a representation of reality. The narrative construction is more precisely a *performance* of the subject's reality. While a "bird's-eye view" might enhance a therapist's ability to test life narratives for representational validity, her most important work will give voice to the performative validity at work in life narratives. Here perhaps we should address how the subject's narrative construction bears reference to actual episodes, relations, values and circumstances in her life.

The puzzle is not so much about what *happened* in her life, as about what she *makes* of what happened. Here we can use the image of a living construction, one produced by such things as life's obstructions, social and interpersonal influences, and our refined capacity to accept, revise, or reject representations of events in our life. We might consider the gambler portrayed so poignantly in the writings of Dostoevski (1869) and Sartre (1945). No matter how many times he has affirmed his resolve to swear off gambling, he soon learns how futile it is to rely on the intended meaning of prior resolutions against gambling to save him from the pull of the gaming tables. He finds he must always perform the meaning of his resolve *here and now*. Later, when he recounts an episode to his narrative therapist, the gambler will describe his experience in representational terms, but the therapeutic intervention will focus attention on the performative validity of his description. The gambler needs to understand how the descriptions and assessments reflected in his life-narrative achieve credibility for him. He needs to establish a connection between the subject who is overcome by the urge to gamble and the subject-as-narrator who identifies with the resolve to cease gambling. Even if our gambler's vertigo is not diminished by narrative analysis, it can be brought to clearer understanding.<sup>8</sup> The gambler's experience of vertigo is transformed when he recognizes that nothing in his resolve will ever prevent him from throwing himself into another fit of gambling (as one might throw oneself off a ladder in the panic of suddenly feeling too high off the ground). Instead of feeling overcome by the powers of desire, he can begin to face the dynamics of the choice he faces as he stands before the gaming tables and the next step of his life.

### **A Postmodern Basis For Narrative Realism?**

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<sup>8</sup> Sartre offers an interesting analysis of the gambler's vertigo in the context of existential bad faith. Cf. *Being and Nothingness* (1945).

So how *does* the subject's narrative construction refer to actual episodes, relations, and circumstances in his life? If the construction is only a narrative reflection of the subject's *experience* of actualities (and not a reflection of the actualities themselves) what does it mean to say the construction 'refers' to these actualities (as if we could somehow measure the representational validity of truth claims inherent in the narrative construction)? It would appear this theory postulates a gap of inconceivability separating experience from actuality. After all, for the postmodern narrative realist, any experience of actuality always already reflects the mediating influence of social discourses and practices. The focal points of this mediation are primarily description and assessment. Through the medium of description and assessment, we experience actual episodes, relations, and circumstances. This medium is the basis for construing the meaning of actual episodes, relations, and circumstances in our life. The meanings we construe are inseparably related to our life-project (this is one aspect of the performative movement). But our life-project, in turn, is open to influence from the portrayals of life reflected in our narrative constructions. Through a reconstruction of his narrative reading of the experience of vertigo, the gambler can shift his focus away from the sense of losing control over his resolve and focus instead on the question of whether or not to embrace the possibility of throwing himself into a fit of gambling.

While the meaning of his resolve against gambling can be revealed only in the *performance* of the resolve, the performance itself is conditioned by the underlying narrative through which the gambler understands (and experiences) his situation, whether as a moment of choice or as the prospect of impending loss of control. The meaning inherent in the gambler's resolve is a function of the narrative construction through which he understands his situation. But the gambler's narrative also refers us to the field of interaction within which certain elements of his situation crystalize into organizing pressures. If these elements can be identified only through the medium of language, this does not mean these elements are inaccessible to knowledge. It means only that our access to them is *through language*. Our access to knowledge must pass through the language of description and assessment, and this is already to construe meaning within a context of performative validity. This is why it is important to analyze the language of description and assessment as it figures into a client's narrative constructions of reality. The client's experience of the actual episode, relation or circumstance is always already mediated by an understanding caught up in the midst of the experience. The point of narrative analysis is to reveal and reconstruct the problematic meaning intrinsic to this understanding. How you identify the goal of this process will determine the pressures you bring to bear on it.

By adjusting his context of performative validity, the gambler effectively reconfigures the scene of his life. This in turn has an impact on further episodes, relations and circumstances of his life. But the actual impact he experiences over time reflects the *narrative construal* in terms of which he *understands* his experiences. Narrative analysis is designed to stimulate his capacity to reconstrue the sense he makes of the relations and circumstances comprising his lifeworld. Of course, there is plenty of facticity to constrain him, surely enough to motivate concerns about representational validity! But his experience of reality also reflects the influences of his acquired conceptual vicissitudes and his evolving sense of identity. These

conceptions dominate the construal of meaning and underwrite the performative validity in his life.

This is why the visitor needs to address the credibility factor in his narratives. He needs to understand how credibility is sustained by the language of description and assessment. There will always be issues concerning representational validity. But these issues will need to be addressed in relation to the context of performative validity. For this is the context within which we entertain meaning and significance. This is also the context most likely to influence how therapists and their visitors respond to therapeutic interventions. Narrative therapists have identified this as a dominant factor in the therapeutic situation, and are tailoring their methods to the conceptual idiosyncrasies of their clients. The point of this practice is not to reinforce these conceptual idiosyncrasies, but to respect their influence on the process of assigning meaning and value to the input of experience. This brings us to consideration of an important postmodern presumption about the self.

### **Narrative Identity and the Context of Performative Validity**

Postmodern narrative therapists and counselors reject the concept of "substance" as a theoretical basis for understanding the self. In lieu of the more traditional appeal to "substance" (with its connotation of cross-temporal identity), postmodern practitioners anchor their practice in the concept of *narrative identity*. As Paul Ricoeur points out, the focus on narrative identity shifts our attention from the presumptive "*what*" to the phenomenological "*who*" of the "*I am*." In his analysis of "narrative identity" theory, Ricoeur gives special emphasis to "a dialectic of selfhood and sameness" at the heart of the "who."<sup>9</sup>

Ricoeur's insight is to see how the "narrative structure" of the "who's" self-identity "joins together the two processes of emplotment, that of action and that of the character." (Ricoeur, p. 146) On the one hand, there is the "selfhood" of self-constancy, in terms of which I am considered reliable and, by implication, accountable. Here the focus is on preserving a connection between intentions and actions, as when I express my intention to honor a commitment or promise to myself or another. Ricoeur refers to this as the "Here I am!" aspect of the self. Clearly, narrative identity helps to underwrite the link between the "Who am I?" question and the "Here I am!" response. But narrative identity also provides a link to the second pole of temporal identity, which Ricoeur calls "sameness of character."

Ricoeur considers character to be "the set of distinctive marks (or 'lasting dispositions') which permit the ('recognition' or) re-identification of a human individual as being the same" (Ricoeur 1992, pp. 119, 121). With regard to this facet of character, the focus is directed not just to the "habits" or sedimented "character traits" of the individual, but also to a dispositional factor which Ricoeur calls "the set of *acquired identifications*." Identity is configured here as an expression of the "values,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ricoeur (1992), p. 118. Ricoeur's discussion of narrative identity is the principal focus of the fifth and sixth studies in this book (cf. "Personal Identity and Narrative Identity" and "The Self and Narrative Identity").

norms, ideals, models, and heroes in which the person or the community recognizes itself" (p. 121). That is, by identifying with certain values, norms, ideals, models and heroes, our "character" element ("the 'what' of the 'who'") manifests a socializing element of "loyalty," effectively locking us into identifications which have the power to turn us "toward fidelity, hence toward maintaining the self" (p. 121). One can anticipate shades of Foucault in this analysis.

Over time, our character "contracts" into a "history." To preserve a healthy oscillation between "identity" and "sameness" (or between "identity of the self" and "sameness of character"), this historical dimension of character (the "sediment" of character, as it were) needs to be "set back within the movement of narration" (p. 122). Foucault and Nietzsche have both proposed genealogical strategies for tracing out "the complex relations of forces" shaping this on-going process of identity configuration. Following Nietzsche, Foucault directs our attention to a rich mixture of dominating and liberating "relations of power" which, in his estimation, comprise "the conditions for the existence of the entities, values, and events of our experience" (cf. Mahon 1992, pp. 8ff). Genealogy develops initially as an experimental practice whose aim is "to reveal concrete, practical, and historical conditions of existence." This stage prepares us for the "critical second moment" of genealogical critique, in which we learn "to question the value of the entities, values, and events of our experience" -- to shed light on their "precarious origins" (and to reveal *our own* precarious origins) -- and to do so for the "enhancement of life." On this approach to the narrative analysis of identity, the "life-project" of the self is cast in terms of "relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics"<sup>10</sup> and the goal of narrative therapy is to open a window on how these forces shape our life.

While our "sameness of character" is "inscribed" within horizons of general social expectation, the self-constancy of identity is not. Self-constancy reflects a personal resolve that can only be inscribed from within the life of the individual who says "Here I am!". Following Ricoeur, we would seek to understand the personal resolve to stand on firm ground, and to see in this resolve our only basis for "the obligation to safeguard the institution of language and to respond to the trust that the other places in my faithfulness" (Ricoeur 1992, p. 124).

There is an interesting (and essential) tension mediating these two extremes of "permanence in time" -- an "interval of sense" between the socially charged inscriptions of habit we associate with "sameness of character" and the personally charged dynamic comprising our "constancy of self-identity." Our narrative identity is lodged within this "interval of sense." Here we find a space of self-concern where it makes sense to ask questions about "what matters or not" *only in relation to the singular evolving life for whom meaning and significance are at issue* (cf. Ricoeur, p. 137).

At one extreme of the dialectic of sameness and selfhood, we easily confuse "sameness of character" for the "selfhood" of self-constancy. At the other extreme, the self of self-constancy learns to pose the ethical question of its own identity "without

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<sup>10</sup> This is Foucault's terminology from Power/Knowledge (1980, p. 144). Cf. M. Mahon, Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy (SUNY Press: 1992) p. 126. Cp. Foucault's interview discussion of "practices of liberty" and "practices of domination" in "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (eds.) The Last Foucault (MIT: 1987), esp. pp. 10-12 and 16-20.

the aid and support" of the identity intrinsic to permanence of character (Ricoeur, p. 124). In a sense, these extreme forms of identity-configuration reflect the two poles of domination and liberty discussed by Foucault. When there is enough *Spielraum*, the dialectic of character-development is regenerated, revitalizing a whole range of movement that had been effectively "abolished in acquired dispositions" (Ricoeur, p. 166). Of course, this also recharges the existential challenge to close the gap between "narrative identity" (composed in light of the question "Who am I?") and "moral identity" (expressed through the affirmative "Here I am!").

The more pressing our efforts to close this gap, the more tempting it becomes to "incorporate" the "tormenting" question "Who am I?" into the "proud declaration" "Here is where I stand!" But the "existential crisis" of the self cannot be banished from the fringe of awareness. It is always still there, ready to emerge in the gap between "self-effacement" and "self-affirmation." Here we find a crucial dialectical tension within the life of the self, an oscillation between "the question which engulfs the narrative imagination" and "the answer of the subject who has been made responsible by the expectation of the other" (p. 168).

Whenever the question of self-identity erupts anew, we face the challenge of narrative reconstruction. Since the question of narrative identity can be posed only by the "who" to whom the question is posed, the challenge of narrative reconstruction is always already my *own* challenge. In posing the question "Who am I?" I cannot help confronting my identity as an open question, but this question never dissipates the point of reference in terms of which I experience this challenge as my very own.<sup>11</sup> I experience this decentered reality as my own, not only as an absence of substantial unity, but also as a radical multiplicity.

In a study published in 1845, Wilhelm Griesinger<sup>12</sup> proposed a dialogical model for understanding this radical multiplicity of the I. He argued that the I is formed as a "strong kernel" from "a mass of well-ordered ideas that are easily evoked by each other" (§26). He traces the foundation of our desires and drives to relations between our feelings and these "idea-complexes" or "idea-groups" (*Vorstellungsmassen*). The idea-groups are largely hidden from us. Whether conscious or not, each idea-group plays a projective role with respect both to our perceptions of the external world and to ideation activity within the psyche (§18). "Willing" arises when we become conscious of an idea-group (§24). Different idea-groups struggle with one another to represent the I, working against the circumstances that oppose the drives and desires. Griesinger writes:

The I is an abstraction . . . that in the progression of psychical processes constantly takes in new content. But this assimilation . . . takes place very

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Tuedio (1979a and 1979b), where this point is derived from Heidegger's Being and Time (1927) and Sartre's Being and Nothingness (1945).

<sup>12</sup> Postmodern conceptions of the self as a radical multiplicity can be traced back to Wilhelm Griesinger (1867). His innovative study on Mental Pathology and Therapeutics initiates a strand of theoretical developments reflected in the writings of William James, Ludwig Binswanger, and Carl Jung, and exhibits close affinities with Nietzsche's psychology, as well. The study was first published in 1845 (and later reprinted in 1867) as Die Pathologie und Therapie der psychischen Krankheiten. Translations from Griesinger's study are by Graham Parkes. Cf. Composing the Soul (Parkes, 1994), pp. 269-272 and notes 49-53 on p. 444.

gradually, and what has not yet been assimilated at first appears in opposition to the I, as a you within the individual. Eventually . . . several closed, articulated, and strengthened idea-groups are formed; two (and not only two) souls then live in the human breast, and according to whether one or the other of these idea-groups predominates, all of which can represent the I, the I is transformed or is split within itself. (§28)

Griesinger conceived the I as being "very different at different times," depending on which duties "have pressed into the foreground" or which idea-groups happen to be "more highly developed" at a particular point in time:

We are "another and yet the same." My I as a doctor, my I as a scholar, my sensual I, my moral I, and so on -- the complexes of ideas, drives, and vectors of will denoted by these words -- can come into conflict with each other, and one of them can at various times repress the others. (§28)

Negative moods arise when dominant idea-complexes of the I are "checked and thrown back in their flowing toward striving," resulting in a condition of "inhibition, repression and depression." When conditions are conducive to the expansion of the I, the dominant idea-groups promote a feeling of well-being in the I and as new ideas stream in, the I "behaves affirmatively toward the new process in consciousness and seeks to retain it" (§32).

Graham Parkes shows how Nietzsche transformed this associative model by substituting for the "association of ideas" something like "an internal 'sociology of ideas' [or] a politics of the realm of thought."<sup>13</sup> Drawing on Nietzsche's discussion of the "secret struggle with thought-persons," a process reflecting "mostly concealed marriage-brokering of thoughts, state-founding of thoughts, pedagogy of thoughts, and tending of poor and infirm thoughts," Parkes rejects the presumption that the individual's "I" is "ruler of the realm of ideas: [for] while there are some ideas over which it can exercise control, there are others to which it is in thrall" (p. 284). As Nietzsche points out, we have the capacity to be "afraid of our own ideas, concepts, [and] words, but also [to] honour ourselves in them and involuntarily ascribe to them the capacity to instruct, despise, praise and censure us," and in the process come to "traffic with them as with free intelligent persons, with independent powers, as equals with equals" (Nietzsche 1879, AOM §26).

William James appears to extend this view in the *Principles of Psychology* (1890) when he argues that "a man has as many social selves as there are [groups of] individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind." Because we generally show a different side of ourselves to each of these different groups, there results "a division of the man into several selves." In some cases, this produces a "discordant splitting," in others, it produces "a perfectly harmonious division of labor" (1: p. 294). In discussing the "Rivalry and Conflict of the Different Selves," James notes that a broad range of possible characters "may conceivably at the outset of life be . . . *possible* to a man" but "to make any of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed." He then proposes that if we are seeking after our "truest, strongest, deepest self," we should "review the list [of possible characters] carefully," and choose the one on which to stake our "salvation."

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Parkes (1994, p. 284).

James presumed there is normally one person --the "I"-- who plays the various roles in our life, who stands behind our different personæ, and speaks through our various masks (to use one of Nietzsche's favorite metaphors). But the postmodern view throws this open to question. After Nietzsche, it is an open question as to who speaks through our various masks, or whether one speaks at all from "behind" a mask. As Parkes expresses the issue, "Is it really . . . some one, single person, the unitary I, who plays these different parts? Or does a variety of roles not . . . require a plurality of persons as well as personæ to play them?" In contrast to James' metaphorical expression of personal autonomy as a "perfectly harmonious division of labor" orchestrated by a single I, Parkes says it is "more helpful" to imagine the increasingly autonomous I on the model of an acting group,

[one that is] moving toward improvisational theatre, with scripts and prompts constantly coming in from outside and the most accomplished players rotating through the directorship. With the passing of time the actors [and actresses] would practice their art with discipline, get to know each other's style, and broaden the repertoire; and there would finally come a point at which there was no [further] need for a director, and the company could become fully improvisational. At every juncture the actor(s) [or actresses] most suitable to play the part or respond to the prompt would do so, without having to be directed by an independent agent." (Parkes, p. 369; cf. pp. 370-71)

This requires a capacity to be open to the perspectives of many different characters, not just those that are consistent with the idea-complexes of a dominant self (or the "heroic ego" who is so often behind our masks).

For many of us, this capacity is occasionally within our grasp, but for people with troubled lives, experiencing the self-reflexive influence and interplay of different characters or personæ could very easily intensify the problematic mode of their life. Philosophy does not always produce wisdom. It can often produce anxiety. It may well produce more trouble than it can fix. We can hope we are giving the rational side of life something of value to chew on, but we do not control the context in which these philosophical provocations are received or assimilated by the therapeutic subject.

## Problematizing the Subject

The dynamics of this project become more interesting when we factor in the impact of social construction on the on-going constitution of the overlapping currents of the self. The writings and interviews of Michel Foucault reveal some operational aspects of social construction. His central focus is directed to normalizing modes of social subjection. He tracks the rise of these phenomena back to the social transition in Europe from a highly personalized ethic of ancient Greek and Roman thought to social disciplining practices inherent in the "interdictions and normalizing effects" of the Christian and Enlightenment moralities. From this transformation comes the "problematization of the subject," or the issue concerning the constitution of the self as subject (under the force of subjection to moral norms).<sup>14</sup> As Foucault sees it, the more significant changes are to be found not in the new codes that stipulate what is forbidden and what is not, but in a new conception of "the relation to oneself," which now emphasizes "a moral experience centered on the subject." Cutting against this, the role of the intellectual is to "make oneself permanently able to remove oneself from oneself," to "reexamine evidences and postulates, to shake up habits, ways of doing and thinking, to dissipate accepted familiarities, to reexamine rules and institutions,"<sup>15</sup> and, above all, "to lift subjection by displaying its mechanisms" (Racevskis, 1987, p. 31). Here Foucault returns our focus to the "who" of experience:

Who makes decisions for me? Who keeps me from doing one thing and tells me to do something else? Who programs my movements and my schedule? Who forces me to live at this particular place while I work at this other one? How are these decisions that completely articulate my life made?<sup>16</sup>

But how realistic is it to think we could actually uncover the "specific identity" of a person, group or class lurking behind each "who?"

For Foucault, there are no strategists to be identified behind the strategies -- no one occupies the place of the Other. Nevertheless, it is in the name of the Other that identities are formed; by questioning the provenance of the forces that control an individual's life, Foucault calls into question the accepted patterns of individualization. (Racevskis, 1987, p. 31)

If patterns of individualization are organized in relation to "games of truth" and "practices of power" and in accordance with social norms (cf. Foucault, 1987, pp. 9-12), how is the therapeutic subject understood in relation to the different forms of subject emerging within the context of these truth games and power relations? Foucault recognizes that "a political subject who goes and votes or speaks up in a meeting" will not have the same relationship to self as the erotic subject who endeavors to fulfill desires in a sexual relationship. Each relation to self takes on a distinct form. As a result, he would contend, the therapeutic counselor must dispense

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<sup>14</sup> For a concise discussion of these themes, see Foucault's interview with François Ewald entitled "Le souci de la vérité," *Magazine littéraire* 207 (May 1984). Cf. "Truth and Power" (1980), *The Care of the Self* (1984) and *The Use of Pleasure* (1985).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. Passage translated by Karlis Racevskis (1987, p. 30).

<sup>16</sup> "Du Pouvoir," *L'Express* (13 July, 1984, p. 56), Foucault interview with Pierre Boncompagni. Passage translated by Karlis Racevskis (1987, p.31).

with any "a priori theory of the subject" which would conceive the therapeutic subject as a unifying "substance." Therapeutic counselors should learn to operate from the hypothesis of "different forms of the subject," recognizing that each form of subject develops within a specific context of overlapping truth-games and practices of power (cf. Foucault, 1987, p. 10). Such is the approach of the postmodern narrative realism movement in psychotherapeutic counseling, with its guiding emphasis on the study of what Foucault calls "practices of self."

Because games of truth and power always support some degree of liberty for everyone involved, every participant gets drawn into the process of appropriating "practices of self". But these practices are not invented along the way; they are "ready made patterns" found within our culture, patterns that sustain the various "forms of relationship" we establish with ourselves in the course of trying to "direct the behavior" of others in the various contexts of our lives (cf. Foucault, 1987, p. 11).

Foucault is intrigued by the "changeable, reversible and unstable" character of relations between one form of subject and another. Even in their most unbalanced form, all relations of power sustain "the capacity of resistance" (p. 12). Is this not as true for power relations *within* the individual as it is for power relations *between* individuals? To recognize this would open up a domain for reflective analysis in which forms of truth are conceived as *productions*, not as objects of intellectual or scientific pursuit. Foucault sought "to discover how the human subject enter(s) into games of truth, whether they be games of truth which take on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control" (p. 1). He couched this project within the context of the Greek and Roman emphasis on "care for the self," which revolves in part around the goal of striving to learn a certain number of truths and doctrines, fundamental principles and rules of conduct, so we will know how to behave in a spontaneously appropriate manner in each situation in life.

Foucault captures this point in a metaphor drawn from Plutarch: "You must have learned principles so firmly that when your desires, your appetites or your fears awaken like barking dogs, the *logos* will speak with the voice of a master who silences the dogs with a single command." As Foucault points out, "you have there the idea of a *logos* who would operate in some way without your doing anything" (p. 6). Within this context of analysis, "being free" means "not being a slave to one's self and to one's appetites, which supposes that one establishes over one's self a certain relation of domination, of mastery, which [the Greeks] called *arche* -- power, authority" (p. 6).

Even leaving aside the discussion of how these practices were so skillfully appropriated and transformed into social schemas of power by dominant institutions of the Scholastic and Enlightenment traditions, we can see where Foucault's analysis is leading: as a philosophical practice, "caring for the self" demands sensitivity to the operational schemes of domination inherent in truth games and practices of power. This new attunement can help us identify "other rational possibilities," and can facilitate the growth of practices to "teach people what they ignore about their own situation" when they live under the influence of their "conditions of work" and other forms of "exploitation" (p. 15). Seeing as how we will always lack a "complete and peremptory definition of the games of truth which would be allowed, to the exclusion of

all others," there is always the possibility we might discover a new move, change a rule, alter an expectation, or perhaps even discover we can change "the totality" of the game (p. 17).<sup>17</sup>

Philosophical practice can assist in this complicated process of discovery, production and reconstruction. Through philosophical dialogue we can study the narrative structures of a human life. This in turn can increase our attunement to contingent factors underlying the dominant practices and discourses of power that structure the scenes of our life. As we cultivate greater attunement to these factors, Foucault suggests we begin looking for ways to open up fields of play within the various relational games of truth implicating us in our day to day lives.

### **The Philosopher's Challenge**

What are the philosophical goals of narrative realism? Can we discern how the narrative structures of understanding influence a person's life? Does philosophical analysis extend to understanding how personal narratives constrain or facilitate new possibilities in our life? Does philosophical analysis extend to understanding how stratified dimensions of narrative identity mediate our experience of life? Is there a philosophical way to motivate attunement to the narrative scope of the dreams, challenges, ambitions or problems in our life? Is there a philosophical move for people who are reluctant to relinquish the core constructions on which their assumptive worlds are built? Does it depend on whether they agree to pay for your services, adopt you as their professional interlocutor, or merely seek you out for casual philosophical conversation? If one of the goals of psychological analysis is to open up (or tie down) personal life-narratives operating in a client's life, and if the objective of this is to help clients identify new possibilities for living, is there a comparable space for philosophical work?

We can develop a philosophical analysis to show how language "mediates" our experience of social reality. In the process, we can try to show how our experience of reality reflects the influence of dominant discourses. Perhaps we can even deconstruct the performative role of language in the communication of information. Clearly there is a philosophical focus to analyzing human knowledge as a construction, rather than a representation, of reality. There is room for philosophizing about the "textual" basis of self, as well, and for thinking about how this narrative dynamic correlates with the "social construction" of personal identity. Through philosophical analysis we might even find ways to articulate the dependence of self on language, or find ways to articulate the experience of personal identity as a "living web of connections" reflecting a gravitational atmosphere of media images and representations.

All of this would be in concert with the organizing premises of postmodern narrative therapy. But is there not also a philosophical response to narrative

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<sup>17</sup> Compare Lyotard's extended discussion of this point in Just Gaming (1985). A helpful critical analysis of Lyotard's views in this regard can be found in Haber (1994).

descriptions and explanations as encountered or implicated in an actual counseling proceeding? On what basis can we apply philosophical counseling to problems of a personal nature, in contrast to translating these problems into abstract theoretical generalities or case studies? Can we sustain philosophical activity if we remain focused on surveying or sizing up the actual narrative constructions of events, problems or assumptions in a person's life? Can philosophical analysis reveal narrative constructions implicit in how we construe our experience? Can it influence how we talk about the circumstances or situations of our life, or help us reframe our experience of the world, or the way we think about or relate to other people? Can it help us grapple more effectively with the things we can't seem to handle in our life? Can philosophy help us identify the mediating aspects of an actual narrative construction (or reveal the "intentional content" of an actual experience)? Can it trigger an understanding of how these aspects sustain (or challenge) the dominant or contested narratives in another person's life? Does it get any easier if we limit our efforts to accomplishing this in our own life? Is it realistic to think we can reconstruct life-narratives (as an author might reconstruct a story to make it more compelling to the reader)? Or is the process of narrative construction always going to outflank the scope and command of philosophical analysis?

The assumptions of postmodern narrative realism imply we can at least attempt to understand and reconstruct our life-narratives. Clearly, the philosophical work we do will flow from a philosophical orientation, but all philosophical work is constrained in this fashion. Working from a philosophical orientation is not unlike the process of operating under the influence of a dominant or contested life-narrative. For this reason, of course, philosophical counselors must remain attuned to criticisms of the inherent narrative basis of their philosophical methods and assumptions. But I see no reason why this should weaken the philosopher's resolve to push a counseling encounter into new frontiers of personal analysis in an effort to open up the revealing stories of a human life. The key move is to see the actual episodes and circumstances of a life as the indirect targets of a philosopher's analysis. The direct targets of philosophical analysis are reflected in the intentional content of our experiences. To the extent we can learn to identify some of the background to a specific construal of meaning in our personal experience, we open some philosophical perspective on the schemas of attunement and interpretation operating in our life. If we can do this in our own lives, I see no reason why as philosophers we should refrain from applying these skills in the course of philosophical encounters conducted in a counseling setting. But our authority as philosophical practitioners does not extend to the interpretation or critique of another person's narrative attunement in life. We can pose questions and offer speculative readings, but the province of judgment remains forever in the hands of our client.<sup>18</sup>

### **Addendum Dialogue**

The following dialogue develops in three movements: the first movement ("I Have To Go Now") shadows a visitor's reluctance to relinquish "core

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<sup>18</sup> A version of this paper was originally presented as part of an ASPCP symposium on Barbara Held's Back to Reality at the March 1998 meeting of the Pacific Division APA.

constructions" on which her "assumptive world" is built (cf. Neimeyer, 1995, p. 354), and reflects a hint of existential vertigo in her climactic retreat from the pressing encroachment of the dialogue.

The second movement ("Why Did I Break It Off?") establishes a more positive connection to this existential vertigo through the visitor's re-engagement in dialogue. In the time between sessions, she has been digesting facets of the earlier conversation, trying to understand the meaning of the "gap" in her life. Her focus shifts to thoughts about confirmation and identity, and she begins to face the dynamics of the choice she must work through as a consequence of revealing this gap. Over the course of this movement, the visitor adjusts her orientation to a defining event in her life (the sudden displacement of a valued relationship) and we begin to see a subtle empowerment in her evolving narrative identity.

In the third movement ("I Just Want To Feel Whole Again"), the visitor begins to explore her need for confirmation in relation to the value of implicit connections in her life, and to explore the link between these implicit connections and the wholeness she aspires to feel again. But while this movement shows her re-establishing a sense for the possibility of feeling whole again, she still exhibits a tendency to lapse into a nostalgic narrative identity (taking refuge in believing there was a point in the relation when she experienced the feeling of wholeness within herself) as a way to collapse the inescapable gap between confirmation and identity.

The question she is left to ponder encourages her to begin rethinking the sense of wholeness she has ascribed to her lost relationship. The next step is more tenuous: does she begin deconstructing her desire to feel whole? Is she drawn to question the extent to which implicit connections can account for the continuity of a meaningful life? Does she begin to rethink how her mistrust of implicit connections might be linked to her need for confirmation? Can she find a way to reconnect with the implicit dynamic of meaning she feels is missing from her life? Can she dispel the philosopher's temptation to prejudge the desirable outcome of her subsequent movements? Can she begin to see how easily we give in to artificial ways of becoming who we are? Can she learn to live with who she is, while changing in the process? Can she learn to belong and not belong to her surroundings, to her home, to herself in her unfolding life? Can she learn to be on the way, forever on the way? Or will she seek refuge in a point of arrival?

### **"I Have To Go Now"**

V: If I have to think once more about the problem of identity, I think I'll die laughing.

P: Do we have a choice?

V: Why is consistency such a big deal, anyway? It's not like God's looking over my shoulder, or anything. I like the way you talk about waves. Riding the crest 'til it breaks. That's me. One crest at a time.

P: So why are we here?

V: Because I feel like shit. I feel like I'm at the bottom of the wave. I want to know what the point is.

P: Of what?

V: Of waking up. Getting involved. Trying to be someone. What do you think?! There was a point to my life. Now there isn't. How can that just disappear? I look at the world around me, and nothing makes sense. I mean it does, in a way. But it leaks out through a sieve or something. It just fades away. It's not like I erase it. It just disappears.

P: Do you have any pictures?

V: Of when we were together? I can't look at them without crying. I was so free then. Everything made sense, and I had this sense of being filled to the brim, overflowing. When I look at the pictures I collapse inside. I get hollowed out with emptiness.

P: Why do you call it emptiness?

V: I had to erase it.

P: Erase what?

V: The meaning. What it meant to be there. Together. As if we belonged to each other. As if our lives rolled into one. I had to throw myself away and start over. I couldn't be that person anymore. I couldn't be myself. I had to start over.

P: Did you survive starting over?

V: That's the weird part. I did survive, in a way. But I lost all the meaning. Well, not all of it. Just the part that made me feel like I belong. I lost my sense of belonging. Things started to look strange. Lifeless. As much as I try, I can't get the meaning back.

P: What does it mean to try to get the meaning back?

V: Stuff *meant* something. Christ, my *life* meant something. How can a life lose meaning? There was this one book, which meant the world to me. I'd hold it and possibilities would flood into my head. I hold it now and there's . . . nothing. Something that used to mean so much just . . . evaporates. What was I thinking?

P: About your life? Or the book?

V: I can't really separate them. What was I thinking, to get so invested in something I couldn't control? What's the point? We can't hold onto anything. What we have is what comes next. That's it. The rest is just a dream.

P: A dream?

V: A story. A story we tell ourselves to feel connected. To feel in touch. To feel like there's continuity.

P: Do you think continuity is an illusion?

V: Ha! Continuity is what comes next. Except sometimes it doesn't come. Then it's like I have to figure out what comes next, and I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to make something meaningful if it's not already . . . significant. So, yeah, continuity is an illusion. There's such a thing as starting over.

P: Do you feel like you're having to start over?

V: Yes.

P: What does that mean? Are you starting from scratch? Are you rebuilding yourself? Are you holding onto anything? What does it mean to start over?

V: It means waking up and finding the emptiness. It means spending the day doing what comes next, looking for clues to who I am. To who I am becoming. By the end of the day, I'm exhausted. It all just leaks away. And then I'm back at the start. Wondering what the point is. I'm glad I have my job. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have my job. But the whole time I'm there at work, I'm not that person. Things get done. I do them. But it's not me doing the work.

P: What do you mean?

V: I mean, I know how to do the work, and it gets me through the day, but I'm totally disconnected from it. Now this is really weird. I'm there and everything. I'm doing the work. But I feel no connection to it. It's like that all day long. When it's over, I get in my car and the whole day flushes away. I drive home, but I never get there. I walk in the door, I see all my stuff, I hear the silence, and I feel totally lost.

P: So you start over.

V: I start over. Only, it's not so easy. You have to find yourself to start over.

P: Find yourself?

V: Yeah. I mean, it's not like I just start rolling the rock up the mountain. Eventually it comes to that, sure. But first I have to wander around. I have to feel the emptiness, make it mine. It doesn't start out that way. I have to make it mine.

P: Your emptiness?

V: Yeah. At first it's just all empty. Everywhere I go I see his face, missing. How can you see a face missing? But there it is, everywhere I look.

P: What does it mean to see a missing face?

V: Things that meant a world of possibilities point nowhere. Something inside of me dies a little more.

P: And that's what you have to make your own?

V: Yeah. It's like I have to become the loss, the emptiness. At first I thought I was, like, a gap. But the gap wasn't me. How can a person be a *gap*? It took a while for it to sink in that I *was* the gap. I mean, *I am* the gap. I'm the gap in meaning, a life that lost its trajectory. That's how it feels, anyway. Like there's no direction. If the phone rings, I answer it, and maybe then I have some direction. But when I hang up the phone, a piece of me dies, the part that had direction. And I'm watching all of this unfold. That's the weird part. The part of me that knows life isn't supposed to be like this is watching the whole damn thing unfold right before my eyes. But who is that? Who knows my life isn't supposed to be like this? How can I know this?

P: From the emptiness?

V: Yeah, from the emptiness. How can I know *anything* from the emptiness? But there it is, like a sign in bright lights: "this is not supposed to be your life." Ha! Like it was ever supposed to be my life.

P: But it was before, wasn't it?

V: Oh yeah. It was definitely my life! I wouldn't have traded my life for anything.

P: Did it feel like it was supposed to? Like it was your life?

V: Yeah, only, it wasn't quite there yet. I knew that. It was like we were closing in on it, like starships locked into a docking maneuver. Everything pointed to the moment of affirmation. The deferring was the attraction. I was living on

the verge. I was closing in, and being gathered in, all at the same time. Filled out, almost completed, but not yet there. You see? The gap was there even then. I was the gap, but I couldn't see it. I just thought everything was unfolding the way it was meant to be. That I was about to *arrive*.

P: To arrive? What does it mean to arrive?

V: It means to finally become the person you've been striving to be. I was becoming the person I'd been striving to be. I was making choices at all the intersections, steering my way through traffic, collecting together all the meaningful traces of the person I was destined to be, and then suddenly, poof. It's not like I lost faith in something real. A person doesn't walk out of your life. They walk off with it.

P: So you hold on to the emptiness and try to make it your own?

V: I'm still alive, if that's what you mean.

P: As the gap?

V: As the gap. Only, the gap never arrives. We just fall short. Or so it seems. Should I believe in destiny? Maybe this is all just . . . my fate. But if so, then why does it bother me?

P: The emptiness? How does it bother you?

V: It feels all wrong. A life shouldn't feel empty. A life shouldn't lose touch with itself. My life shouldn't be . . . a gap.

P: So there is some sense of meaning left.

V: That's what I'm struggling with. My life feels like it has no meaning. But somehow that *means* something to me.

P: Like what?

V: Like there's a point to feeling empty. Only, everything feels pointless. I'm wrestling with this.

P: What do you think it means?

V: Well, it's a contradiction.

P: Does that bother you?

V: That my life might be a contradiction? Yeah, that bothers me. Wouldn't it bother you?

P: I'm not sure. Does it make sense to say you feel meaning in a life that feels meaningless?

V: All I know is my life feels meaningless, and that somehow means something to me. What it means, I haven't a clue. I have to go now.

### **"Why Did I Break It Off?"**

V: I couldn't live on the verge anymore. I had to have affirmation. I couldn't live with the open question.

P: What question?

V: When are we going to *arrive*? That question.

P: And if you weren't going to arrive? What would that mean?

V: It would mean I wasn't meant to be . . . complete. Or whole. It would mean I was meant to be . . . a *gap*. Me, recovering myself in my emptiness. It's like I was forcing myself into exile. I was so alive, everything was flowing into my heart. The suspense was killing me. When does a person know it's the right moment to draw a little closer? When do we know if it makes sense to reach across the gap, or not? How can I be so sure this is my place to arrive if my

arrival is continually deferred? These questions had to be settled. I couldn't live in the gap between these questions and their answers.

P: So you broke it off?

V: No, he broke it off. But I pressed the point. I forced the issue. I could have done otherwise. Not. If I'd had the patience to wait, I would've been someone else. So, yeah, I broke it off, you might say. Does this mean I chose against myself? Did I choose not to be the one who could wait?

P: Did it feel like you were making a choice?

V: --to interrupt my bliss? No one can choose against their bliss.

P: Or perhaps to tie down some confirmation?

V: I'm not so sure. I wanted confirmation. I needed it. I'm not sure it makes sense to say I chose to force the issue. It felt more like I was forcing the issue, that *forcing the issue* was who I had *become*.

P: What was at stake in the uncertainty?

V: My life. Is that too much to ask?

P: What do you mean?

V: Is it too much to ask that a life be confirmed?

P: Do you think your life would have been confirmed if he'd asked you to marry him? What would that mean?

V: Well . . . yeah. I mean, there would have been closure. No more gap. I never would have seen the gap. You know what I mean? That kind of confirmation. Where you never even see the problem. It's just not there. Because everything is on trajectory. I can't feel that way anymore. I may never feel that way. I didn't even feel that way when it was all so alive. But I *could* feel the sense of possibility.

P: What kind of possibility?

V: The possibility of knowing for sure.

P: Knowing what?

V: Knowing that we were right for each other. And that two people really *could* be right for each other. That it isn't all just love in fairy tales. I was hooked on the possibility that our love was as real for him as it was for me, and I needed to know for sure that it was.

P: Or . . . wasn't.

V: Yeah, but that's not what I had in mind. I wasn't thinking that side of it at all. I just had to know.

P: So that became your new trajectory?

V: Ha! Some trajectory!

P: So you traded one question for another. And what do you make of your new question?

V: I find it more challenging to escape from. I mean, it's not a question I can force the issue on. I'm not even sure I know what to make of it. I mean, as a question, it's pretty vague. It's not really a "who am I?" question. It's not really a meaning of life question, either. I guess it is, in a way. I do wonder what the point is anymore of going on with my life, but I don't feel attracted in any way to ending it. I just don't know what it would mean to go on living my life. So much was taken away when he left. I suppose the question I'm left with is, how do I go on from here? The question doesn't really mean anything

to me. It just doesn't go away. How *can* you go on after so much is stripped away like that? It's not like I'm the same person anymore.

P: Is that so clear to you? What would it mean to be the same?

V: It's all about disruption. Displacement. I was taken out of my possibilities. I think we're the same until we get taken out of our possibilities. Everything I was living for . . . just evaporated. After this, it's hard to think a person could ever be the same. Whatever gets built up will eventually get stripped away. In some way, shape or form, there will be displacement. Identity is a word for being what others expect of us. It doesn't mean we're the same, it means we're predictable, or identifiable. Inside, there's no confirmation. No identity. Just emptiness. I must have sensed this or I wouldn't have pressed the issue. Maybe that's why I broke it off.

### "I Just Want To Feel Whole Again"

V: People look at me like I'm supposed to be married. I want them to know how hard I tried. I really did try, but how can I explain what it means to fall short? I loved and lost. Why doesn't that mean more than whether or not I'm married? I mean, why doesn't that mean more to *me*?

P: Don't you think it does?

V: What do you mean?

P: You defined the breakup in terms of a risk you took, the risk in seeking to know for sure. What does it mean to you to have taken this risk? Not everyone would take such a risk, especially with such a strong investment in the possibility of a positive outcome.

V: I really did need to know for sure where he stood. I had to know.

P: But you said earlier you never thought about the negative outcome. So perhaps you were not really taking a risk at all. Perhaps you took it for granted that your lives would fold into one. But you didn't *really* take it for granted, or you wouldn't have had to press the issue. You wouldn't have needed the confirmation, would you?

V: Part of me took his love for granted, and part of me needed confirmation. It's possible I was at odds with myself in some way. On some level, I was taking a risk. I must have known that. But it didn't feel like a risk because it didn't feel like I was seeking his confirmation of our love. I thought I was expressing the love we shared, making explicit what was already implicit. I didn't stop to think about how precious the implicit can be. I just wanted to feel complete. I didn't feel grounded on the level of our implicit love. I felt an urge to make it explicit.

P: Does love need to be explicit to be real?

V: I think I believed that implicit love is real love, and that real love should be made explicit. I didn't understand the power of the implicit.

P: Or the danger of trying to make it explicit.

V: Right. But how do you confirm implicit love if you don't make it explicit?

P: Maybe the desire for confirmation is misplaced. Why do you think we insist so much on confirmation when it comes to questions of love? Why isn't it enough that it *might* be love? Or that it *feels* like love? Why isn't this enough?

V: Sometimes we just have to know for sure.

- P: Would you have known for sure, if he had said "yes" to you? Do you think this would have been enough to make the implicit love you felt between the two of you explicit?
- V: Isn't this why we say "I love you," or ask someone to marry us? I thought we shared an implicit love, or I wouldn't have drawn him out. I wouldn't have pressed the issue. It's funny. Now I wouldn't want to press the issue at all. I miss the implicit love. I just want to feel whole again. Will I ever find my way back? I'm not sure that it matters. What do you think? Does it matter if we never make it back, if once we knew implicit love?
- P: Can we honestly say we know an implicit love for which we need confirmation?

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