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WHAT SAYEST THOU OF THYSELF? SOME REMARKS ON THE ENTANGLEMENT OF LIFE AND NARRATION AND ITS ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PHILOSOPHICAL CANON

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I. Life and Narration

When we are asked who we are, we often answer in stories. Let us take a look at an example, namely at the answer given to that very question by John the Baptist as told to us by the John the Evangelist¹. The Evangelist has the Baptist answer the question posed by the Jewish priests and Levites “Who art thou?” – “Σὺ τίς εἶ;” as follows:

I am not the Christ [Ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ὁ χριστός] (John 1:20).

The learned men do not understand this cryptic reply. They continue to interrogate John the Baptist:

What then? Art thou Elias? (John 1:21)

John the Baptist responds:

I am not [Οὐκ εἰμὶ] (John 1:21).

And a third question follows:

Art thou that prophet? (John 1:21)

John responds and, for the third time, only provides a negative confession: “No [Οὐ]” (John 1:21). The inquisitors become impatient:

Who art thou? [...] What sayest thou of thyself? (John 1:22)

“What sayest thou of thyself?” – “τί λέγεις περὶ σεαυτοῦ;” That is a wonderful explication of the initial question “Who art thou?”. Who John the Baptist *is*, εἶναι, *is* what he has to *say*, λέγειν, about himself. One could argue that at times the same can hold true for us: Who we are is what we have to say about ourselves and, of course, what others have to say about us. We *are* our stories. We can express who we are by telling –

even, as John does, in a highly condensed way – our story. In fact, it seems we have to express ourselves in stories, it seems to be a specific and rather necessary way of being alive as a human being, in other words, using Odo Marquard's phrase, "*narrare necesse est*" – "to narrate is necessary" (Marquard 2003, 56, 60, 64, 71).

Let us turn back to the Evangelists' narration. After his negative confession to Christ John the Baptist eventually determines himself positively:

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias (John 1:23).²

The inquisition is still not over. Now the Pharisees proceed to question why John baptizes, if he is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. John replies:

I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;

He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose (John 1:26-27).

This is what John the Baptist wanted and had – *narrare necesse est* (to narrate is *necessary*) – to say about himself – "τί λέγεις περὶ σεαυτοῦ" (John 1:22): Initially it is vital to him to make his story distinguishable from the story of the one who is of the foremost importance. He is not the prophet; he is not Elias and – most notably – he is not Jesus. "Οὐκ εἰμι" – "I am not" is stated by John the Evangelist in strict opposition to the many times he records Jesus saying: "ἐγὼ εἰμι ..." – "I am ..." ³.

Eventually John the Baptist declares who he is positively: He is the one who announces Jesus. Even this positive confession is a conscious redirection from himself and towards Jesus, the one who is coming after – "ὁπίσω" – him. John is the "voice of one crying" – "φωνὴ βοῶντος", he is announcing the one "whom ye know not;" – "μέσος ὑμῶν στήκει ὃν ὑμεῖς οὐκ οἶδατε". This story is who John the Baptist is. The story of John the herald of Jesus Christ is John. This story, John is convinced, is precisely what any person who wishes to know who he is must learn about him. John encounters himself through his story and he tells this story to those who wish to know him. Thus those – be it the Jewish priests, Levites, Pharisees or the reader of the story in the present day – need this story to understand him as the human being he understood himself as to be. "To comprehend anything human", Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset observed, "be it personal or collective, one must tell its history" (Gasset 1941, 214) – "Para comprender algo humano, personal o colectivo, es preciso contar una historia" (Gasset 1970, 49). And that means nothing else but: one must make accessible our *stories*.

Human beings attempting to comprehend other human beings need to learn about the other's life stories. Here we see that life and narration are, as Edmund Husserl's earliest disciples, Wilhelm Schapp described, *entangled* (Schapp 1953).

Not only are our histories vital for comprehending the other and that our lives and the stories we tell inextricable, even the stories tell do not necessarily have to be factual. Returning to our example, it does not even matter if we consider John the Baptist to be a factual or fictitious person, the real herald of Christ or not. As Paul Ricœur states, "fiction is quasi-historical, just as much as history is quasi-fictive" (Ricœur 1990, 190). German novelist Siegfried Lenz notes we have to learn that even those experiences 'made' by fictitious personal still hold relevance for us. Our being or vitality is very much alive in the fictitious experience. Lenz explains:

"Experiences made by the invented person do not only concern them; they are transferable experiences. Novel characters would never challenge our interest in this way if we did not feel that our matter was being negotiated; we stop and say: that is how it will be. [...] At such moments it becomes clear that we need the invented person if we want to give expression to the general or to find the hidden law that underlies human existence."
(Lenz 1981, 437-438)⁴

From this we expand the essential nature of stories from being necessary for understanding others and a fundamental part of our lives to incorporate stories of both fact and fiction that bring vitality to our experiences and our understanding of ourselves and others. We could say, *narration is being alive*. It seems we would not be able to eradicate our aliveness out of narration, even if we wanted to. When the human being narrates it inevitably add its humanity or vitality into the narration. When the human being narrates it implicitly speaks – λέγειν – of the human being – ἄνθρωπος – in general. Conversely, narrating – λέγειν – implies to tell about the human – ἄνθρωπος. Anthropology implies narration as narration implies anthropology. Our aliveness remains alive when it is spoken, written, or sung, in any the narrative form. Indeed, we encounter narration as a form extracorporeal human vitality.

Not only are we able to convey this vitality, we are in need of this vitality. It allows us to understand our story, it allows us to be understood and furthermore to understand other human beings. Interconnected human life itself comes to reality in stories just as stories come to reality in human life. Schapp even insisted, that access to the human being is "only possible through stories, only possible through his [her/their] stories" (Schapp 1953, 100)⁵.

Being alive is narrative. The *telling of stories* at all, is possible, because we *are alive in a narrative sense*. It can be said that stories enable our existence, and our existence enables stories. Maybe we can even say that *the telling of stories enables the living of stories*, and *the living of stories enables the telling of stories*. Life is always life's story and life's story is always something living, something living in which we see our vitality reflected back to us. Returning to John the Baptist we see he is who he is, and he can tell his story because he is his story and he is his story because he can tell it. *Life is narration and narration is alive.*

This makes the story of John the Baptist being asked who he is a story that can affect us all, whether we understand him to be a herald of Christ or something entirely different. Certainly, we hear the story of the herald of Christ, but we find a human being narratively self-determining himself. This self-determination can speak to any human being. And here the significance of our telling the stories of ourselves takes on crucial importance: The question of "Who am I?" is connected at the very foundations of our existence with the question of "What ought I do?". These questions converge so dramatically at the foundations of existence that they seem to form only one single question: work on the question "Who am I?" seems to be the same work as that concerning the question "What should I do?". Martin Luther understood the Baptist in precisely this sense in a sermon on the Gospel according to John. He has John the Baptist say:

I know neither how to help nor how to advise you [scil. the inquiring scholars], nor indeed myself; but I know of one who can help me and you alike. [...] [F]ollow [Christ], I and will do so as well (Luther 2002, 31).⁶

Follow Christ – that is what is to be done here. While we may know the story of John only in its outline, we know not only his actions, his being, but also his "Why?", his practical answer to the question "What ought I do?". We know John's ought-to-be: to be a follower – or a precursor – of Christ. This connection between being and ought, between what I am and what I ought to be is present in John's story *in concreto*, but it is present *in abstracto*, as the fight for self-determination, for anyone who comes across this narration.

When we hear the story of John, we also hear – without this having to be expressly spoken of – his normative narrative. A story, as we would like to put it, thus concerns the genesis of action and the reasons for it, or, put into philosophical terminology, is and ought and the connection between the two at the foundations of existence. Our biographical narrative is not an objective narration. In the biographical narrative, in the understanding of the world and oneself according to this biographical narrative, our normative understanding of the world is also reflected.

The biographical narrative tells not only of our being, but also of who we are, and this self-determination necessarily includes the ought to which we subject this being.

Let us summarize our findings: We *are* our stories. Being alive implies being entangled in stories, implies tell one's story – or at least desiring to have a story – and to deal with stories of other human beings. A hermeneutic of human life needs cannot be complete without taking into account that being alive happens qua narration. An epistemology of human understanding that disregards stories, as far as we can tell, will necessarily be an ignorant reductive epistemology. We have to take stories seriously as a part of the expressivity of human life. Ricœur remarked that “the novel occupied a still vacant place in the realm of human sciences” (Ricœur 1990, 191) – “le roman occupait ici une place encore vacante dans l'empire des sciences humaines” (Ricœur 1985, 278). We agree with Ricœur. However, we would like to broaden his understanding and insist that this holds true not only for the novel, but for stories in the broadest sense as we can find it in Schapp when he observed that even the “corporeal appearance” of a human being is actually “an appearance of his [her/their] stories” (Schapp 1953, 100)⁷. With stories, the narratives of life, we possess a reservoir of testimonies of human self-understanding that has thus far, despite the works of Schapp, Ricœur and others – been widely underestimated. We must finally and fully accept narrations as, in the words of Austrian thinker Robert Musil, “contributions to the intellectual dealing with the world” (Musil 1978, 942)⁸.

II. Consequences

We have to tried to show the mutual implication of life and narration. Our hypothesis may seem *prima facie* deceptively simple, but there are some surprisingly powerful ethical consequences to it.

If it is true that stories – in the broadest sense – and human life are inextricably entangled then the disregard of some stories as irrelevant, beyond the canon, or primitive equals the disregard of those people who listen to and tell these stories. The western humanities have hegemonically determined for centuries what stories are of relevance. Those stories were mostly written by white, heterosexual men and those stories were mostly written down – even though some foundational figures of the western culture, most notably Socrates and Jesus, never wrote a single line of their own teachings. The African culture, for example, was and continues to be for its many people who continue to hand down their stories orally deemed ‘primitive’, pre-Western, of less relevance, inferior. However, if we take the entanglement of life and narrative seriously, we might have to give up the idea of a narrow canon.

Of course, can establish different parameters of, for example, the impact of different stories. The story of Jesus Christ has certainly had a great impact, but that does hardly make the stories of the Yoruba or Akan any less relevant. It is a still prevailing predominantly western misunderstanding that impact – often advanced by subsequent domination and subordination – is *the* parameter of relevance. We have to give up the idea of canonical stories as story of superior relevance, of a canon that one has to read to become a human being, of a canon that determines that only those who think within these given stories are truly thinking and thus entitled to speak their thoughts. We have to give up the idea of a *general canon*, because a general canon is necessarily an anti-inclusive and superiorist tool of domination that is compiled by those in power. However, power is not a philosophical argument. There is, if we agree to the interconnectedness of life and narration, no philosophical argument for a canon. Any argument for a general canon is an argument against the relevance of *all* human beings.

When we accept life and stories and stories and life as what they are by their blending, we have to understand that ignoring, disregarding, suppressing stories means to ignore, disregard and suppress human life. Africa was during the colonial era not allowed to have a story, was not allowed to continue her story. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel famously claimed that Africa is “no historical part of the world; it shows no movement or development” (Hegel 1986, 129)⁹, and anything one might of relevance there is actually part of Europe’s or Asia’s history. Africa, in Hegel’s opinion, which was highly impactful for the development of what is to be considered part of the philosophical canon and what not, has no story to tell and – and the colonial reality shows the transition of this philosophical assessment into tangible reality – thus there are no living beings to considered as fully human. This practice has to be discontinued. Philosophy has to desuperiorized, i.e. philosophy has to understand and dismantle the – implicit or explicit – assumptions of superiority in all its iterations. All must be able to determine who they are so that they can determine how they should act. Thus everyone is included in the ethical conversations of our times and we can collaboratively broaden our epistemological understanding and desuperiorize the philosophical canon by making it inclusive so that philosophy as a discipline can be a vital part of our coming history.

Endnotes

¹ We will use the King James Version to cite the English text of the New Testament and the Aland & Aland 26th edition for the Greek text.

² See Esaias 40:3.

³ See for example John 6:20, 7:9, 10:11 and many more, furthermore see Thyen 2005, 112.

⁴ This is my translation. The German text reads: "Erfahrungen, die die erfundene Person macht, betreffen nicht nur sie; es sind übertragbare Erfahrungen. Niemals würden Romanfiguren unser Interesse derart herausfordern, wenn wir nicht spürten, daß an ihnen auch unsere Sache verhandelt wird; wir stutzen und sagen: so ist es, so wird es sein. [...] In solchen Augenblicken wird deutlich, daß wir auf die erfundene Person angewiesen sind, wenn wir dem Allgemeinen Ausdruck verschaffen oder die verborgene Gesetzmäßigkeit auffinden wollen, die dem menschlichen Dasein zugrundeliegt".

⁵ This is my translation. The full German passage reads: "Wir meinen auch, daß der Zugang zu dem Mann, zu dem Menschen, nur über Geschichten, nur über seine Geschichten erfolgt".

⁶ This is my translation. The German text reads: „Ich weiß euch [scil. den Gelehrten] nicht zu helfen noch zu raten, auch mir selbst nicht; sondern ich weiß und kenne einen, der mir und euch helfen kann. [...] [H]ängen euch an [Christus], ich wills auch tun".

⁷ This is my translation. The German text reads: "das leibliche Auftauchen des Menschen [ist] nur ein Auftauchen seiner Geschichten ist".

⁸ This is my translation. The German text reads: "Beiträge zur geistigen Bewältigung der Welt". Musil refers here only to the novel.

⁹ This is my translation. The full German passage reads: "[Afrika] ist kein geschichtlicher Weltteil, er hat keine Bewegung und Entwicklung aufzuweisen, und was etwa in ihm, das heißt in seinem Norden geschehen ist, gehört der asiatischen und europäischen Welt zu".