

# THE LIMITS OF NARRATIVE THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Prolegomena

I assume in this essay the truth of the following claims. First, that religious communities typically either explicitly claim or implicitly assume the truth of some descriptive statements about the nature of the world and of human persons. Second, similarly, that such communities typically do the same in regard to the truth of some broadly axiological statements, statements as to what is of value. And third, that such communities typically regard doing these things as both proper and essential to their function as religious communities. I shall call a community's descriptive and axiological claims its doctrines.<sup>2</sup> These are often, though not always and not necessarily, preserved and displayed in authoritatively binding collections of natural language sentences that I shall call creeds. Though both 'doctrine' and 'creed' are terms used by Christians for their artifacts, and therefore have a specific cultural and conceptual history, they can usefully be used to pick out artifacts used by non-Christian religious communities; in fact, religious communities necessarily have doctrines (though the degree and manner of their articulation varies), and very many of them have creeds. I shall not argue these claims; instead, they will inform and be ingredient to the argument I do make.

Each of these assumptions is a broadly descriptive claim about what religious communities typically do. Stated in a more general way, I am assuming that religious communities cannot perform their typical functions without making some set of descriptive claims about how the world is, and about how human persons ought to behave in it. While I am aware that these assumptions, innocuous though they might seem, can be and have been challenged on a wide variety of grounds, I shall not here attempt to meet any of these challenges (which does not mean that I think them without merit or significance). I shall simply treat these three assumptions and their corollaries as axiomatic for a discussion of the questions that concern me here.

Let me unpack these axioms a little more. Some of the claims made by religious communities about the nature of human persons and of the world they inhabit are typically -- and, in the end, necessarily -- claims not indexed to a time. That is, they are true (if they are) always and everywhere. So, for example, when an intellectual representative of some Buddhist community claims that all existents are impermanent or that everything has a cause, and moreover represents such claims as possessing religious significance for the community, it is clear that these are universal claims: their subject is all things at all times, and so their truth, if they are true, is not indexed to a time or to a place. (It might also be argued, as it has been by some Buddhists, that if these claims are true they are so necessarily, and that they are therefore properly metaphysical claims. But I shall not argue this here, though I do think it true that no religious community can in the end

avoid making properly metaphysical claims.)

Of course, religious communities also typically make many descriptive claims with doctrinal force that are indexed to a time. Christians, for instance, make such claims about a historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth, as well as about various other paradigmatic figures and events in their tradition. Since the object of such claims is a (theoretically) datable event or set of events, they are necessarily indexed to a time; and so sentences representing such temporally-indexed states of affairs may often have doctrinal force for religious communities.

A community's axiological doctrines, those by means of which it attributes value to something or to some course of action, will also often be of a universal kind, a kind that recommends some course or courses of action as desirable for all human persons at all times, or that predicates what William Christian would call an "unrestricted primacy-ranking predicate" of something.<sup>3</sup> Of this kind is the Buddhist claim that Nirvana is the proper end of all human persons or the Christian claim that the service of God is the proper end of all human persons. Ethical principles, of which religious communities typically have many among their doctrines, are also of this broadly universalistic kind: love your neighbor as yourself is an example. These broadly universalistic axiological claims are true, if they are, atemporally: this is so because they are not indexed to a time.

Finally, I understand theology to be the tradition- and community-specific enterprise of exhibiting, elucidating, systematizing, and (where necessary) defending or justifying the descriptive and axiological claims ingredient to and presupposed by some community's religious practice.<sup>4</sup> This definition is meant to include theological practice as part of a community's religious practice; which entails the conclusion that theological practice, unlike most other kinds of religious practice, is interestingly recursive: part of its subject-matter is itself, and it therefore includes, necessarily, those procedural claims that the community takes to govern its own proper performance.

Given these preliminary ground-clearing definitions -- and I am profoundly aware of how controverted and controversial they are -- my central concern in this essay will be with the question of what the deployment of narrative discourse by religious communities can contribute to the furtherance of the theological enterprise, bearing in mind that prosecuting this enterprise is an unavoidable and proper part of the function of such communities. Treating this question will involve asking whether the use of narrative discourse by religious communities can give their members knowledge whose kind or content is available in no other way. That is, does narrative discourse have epistemic or cognitive significance not possessed by other kinds of discourse, and, if it does, how might this significance best be stated? To put this in yet another way: are there conceptual contents, axiological or descriptive, presentable only through the medium of narrative, and if so what are they? I take this to be the same as asking whether it is true that translations or paraphrases of narrative discourse into other kinds of discourse may or must lose some of the narrative's conceptual contents. It is obvious (though far from uninteresting) that such translations or paraphrases inevitably lose much in the way of affective and aesthetic effect; and I also take it to be self-evident that there will often be a de facto loss of conceptual contents; but it is not self-evident (though it may nonetheless turn out to be true) that there is necessarily a loss of this latter kind.

These are issues of considerable theoretical interest in their own

right. Answering them fully would require an attempt at resolution of numerous controverted questions, including: how to define narrative discourse, and whether it is possible to offer a characterization of it with sufficient specificity to make it useful (or: is there such a thing as narrativity?); what other kinds of discourse there are to which the label 'narrative discourse' might serve as a contrastive term; and various difficult topics in the epistemology and hermeneutics of narrative. I shall say or imply something about all these questions, but my main interest here is not in any of them but rather in the much more specific issue of what contribution narrative discourse can make to the theological enterprise.

## **2 Narrative: A Definition**

I understand a narrative to be a diachronically ordered representation of a series of events or states of affairs, a representation that makes it possible for an appropriately skilled consumer to perceive the series (and its representation) as meaningful.<sup>5</sup> There are many kinds of diachronic ordering; a minimal one is the simple chronological list, represented best in what historians call annals.<sup>6</sup> Annals list events and give them temporal location, either relatively, so that we know how the events are temporally related to one another in the series, or absolutely, according to when they occurred in some calendrical system (or, more often, both). Examples of annals understood in this sense are: a schoolchild's diary ('had breakfast, went to school, came home, had tea, did homework, went to bed'); a chart of a hospital patient's body temperature with hourly entries represented in graphic form; and, using Hayden White's example, the Annals of St. Gall, in which the entry for the year 709 CE reads "Hard winter. Duke Gottfried died," and that for 710 reads "Hard year and deficient in crops."<sup>7</sup>

More complex diachronic orderings include not just chronological sequence, but also teleological orderings, flashbacks and flashforwards, temporal nesting or embedding of various kinds, and the like. Examples of these more complex orderings are found, obviously, in novels -- consider, for example, the bildungsroman in its various incarnations from Goethe to Henry James -- and in various kinds of historical writing, perhaps most especially in those works of history like Spengler's Decline of the West or Gibbon's Decline and Fall whose overt goal is precisely to present series of historical events in such a way that, to the appropriately skilled consumer, order, purpose or telos are evident in them.

It will be necessary, in order for some work to be considered a narrative that, as a whole it represents a series of events indexed to a time, and that, for each of its component parts (down to the level of sentences), those parts are either implicitly or explicitly also so indexed. In the case of sentences, this means that each sentence in a narrative must either be an explicit and direct representation of a temporally-indexed state of affairs in a sentence whose ideal type is: At time t ... ; or it must be a direct representation of a state of affairs without a temporal index, but one that is given such an index by courtesy, as it were, in virtue of its relations to the temporal structure of the narrative as a whole. (Of course, the temporal indexing may be possible only relative to the chronological schema of the narrative as a whole, and not to any broader chronological scheme.) This requirement will usually be met by the use of tense; but it need not be.

It seems reasonable to suggest that any series of events or states of affairs can be represented narratively in an infinitely large number of ways. The act of producing a narrative is precisely the act of selecting and

describing events in accord with some criterion or criteria of significance; the significance thus represented is not an essential property of the events. This means that narratives, fictional, fabulist, or historical, neither theoretically can nor actually do show us wie es eigentlich gewesen ist. Rather, they show us one way among infinitely many of attributing significance to how it really was (or is).<sup>8</sup> Fictional and nonfictional narratives do not differ from one another in this regard. That is, the principle that events are ordered according to criteria of significance and not according to their intrinsic properties is operative equally in both kinds of narrative.<sup>9</sup> This is true even if, as Paul Ricoeur would probably want to argue, all events involving human persons necessarily have (what he calls) the attributes of temporality and historicity, and that these attributes can only be represented narratively. For then, although there will be some properties intrinsic to all states of affairs out of which a narrative can be made, these properties will act only as necessary conditions for the possibility of the narrativization of the states of affairs to which they belong; it will not be in virtue of them that some particular narrative will be constructed.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, to say that any sequence of events or states of affairs can be narrativized in an infinite number of ways is not to say that it can be narrativized in just any way. Constraints are placed by the nature of the events or states of affairs: a sequence of events that can be narrativized both as a subtle and challenging presentation of ideas and as an arrogant and puerile act of self-aggrandizement is unlikely also to be capable of narrativization as an especially thrilling final over in a test match, or as a dramatic forest fire.

There are many kinds of discourse whose content is not diachronically ordered, and which are therefore formally distinct from narrative discourse. Some of these kinds of discourse have a logical rather than a temporal structure: that is, they are concerned to represent to their consumers the logical relations among states of affairs or claims about states of affairs, and so are ordered according to these logical relations. Aside from narrative discourse it is these kinds of discourse that have the greatest significance for theology as understood in this essay. Such relations include (at least) causality, entailment, consonance, abstraction, generalization, and the like. I take it that many philosophical works are of this kind -- Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Kant's Critiques, and Vasubandhu's Abhidharmako abh ya are good examples.<sup>11</sup> I shall call this kind of discourse 'systematic' and shall take its objects to be those states of affairs, together with the relations among them, that are not described in sentences indexed to a time.

An example of a state of affairs in principle not statable in a sentence indexed to a time (At time t ...) is the principle of material implication (though, of course, instantiations and examples of it are so statable). Similarly, if God is strictly atemporal, then both this fact and everything there is to know about God's properties can be stated only in sentences not indexed to a time. (This might be taken as a strategic disadvantage inherent in the view that God is atemporal.) I take it, also, that many, perhaps most, of the sentences comprising this essay are of this kind. For example, if it is true that Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding is an artifact best characterized by the property consisting of systematic discourse, then this fact cannot be directly stated in a sentence indexed to a time (though, again, instantiations of it can), and so the sentence used in this essay to express this fact is, correspondingly, not

indexed to a time, either relatively or absolutely.

All states of affairs describable in temporally-indexed sentences can be embedded in sentences with no such index, and so deployed systematically; and all states of affairs describable in sentences not indexed to a time can be embedded in sentences so indexed, and so deployed narratively. So, for example, the temporally-indexed claim Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected under Pontius Pilate (taking the reference to Pilate as our temporal index) may be of use and interest for narrative purposes (as it arguably is for the Gospels). But it may also be of use for purely systematic purposes, where, appropriately embedded in a discourse that removes its temporal index, or makes such indexing of secondary interest it may be used, as it arguably was by Anselm in Cur Deus Homo, either as an axiom in or as the conclusion of an argument whose interests are exclusively systematic. A possible embedding of this statement that would, as it were, prepare it for systematic use, is the fact that Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected under Pontius Pilate . . .. In the first, temporally-indexed, sentence, the state of affairs (of Jesus Christ having been crucified and so forth) is represented directly; this is possible because the state of affairs obtained (if it did) at a time. In the second sentence it is represented indirectly, by being mentioned or embedded in the context of a different state of affairs, one that neither requires nor can have temporal indexing.

Similar moves can be made with non-temporally-indexed sentences deployed for systematic purposes. Consider the sentence 'snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white; this is a paradigmatic example of such a sentence. The state of affairs -- or, better, the set of semantic facts -- to which it refers can easily be prepared for narrative use by a similar kind of embedding to that used to prepare narrative sentences for systematic use. Consider the (implausible) sentence Anna contemplated 'snow is white is true if and only if snow is white' as she threw herself under the train. Here, as with the fact that Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected under Pontius Pilate, direct representation of one state of affairs has been transformed into indirect representation by embedding it in the context of another, though in the case of Anna's contemplation of the 'snow is white' sentence, the transformation is from a lack of temporal indexing to the possession of such, rather than the other way around. In these ways all narrative sentences may be systematized and all systematic sentences may be narrativized.

In addition to narrative and systematic discourse there is also, for example, discourse structured neither by temporal nor logical relations, but rather by atemporal relations among states of affairs or existents. Such discourse is typically descriptive of the spatial relations, physical properties, and aesthetic attributes of physical objects -- Thomas Hardy's description of the Wessex moors at the beginning of The Return of the Native is a good example; or it is descriptive of the states of mind of narrative actors -- Charlotte Bronte's description of Jane Eyre's emotional response when her schoolfriend Helen Burns dies of consumption is a good example.<sup>12</sup> Such discourse is typically employed for narrative purposes when found in the context of a narrative. That is, it is given an implicit temporal index by its location in a broader context, and it is usual to find occasional explicit traces of emplotment within even the most narrowly descriptive passages. Whether exclusively descriptive prose is possible is a nice question, but I shall not be able to pursue it here.<sup>13</sup>

Works that are, as a whole, properly considered narratives will typically contain non-narrative passages. This is obvious in the case of the kinds of descriptive passage just mentioned, but it is also the case that

narratives may contain lengthy passages structured according to logical relations. There may, therefore, be cases in which it is difficult to decide whether a particular work should, as a whole, be classified as a narrative. We might, for instance, wonder this about some of the Platonic dialogues, or about some Buddhist S<sub>tr</sub>as, since these often have a narrative frame and occasional narrative interjections, but are nonetheless largely non-narrative in form.

It should also be clear that narratives, if taken as defined here, need not use words. They may use three-dimensional images, as in the case of the carved stone panels at Borobudur in Central Java: these panels represent scenes from Buddha's lives arranged chronologically; or they may use two-dimensional images, as in the case of wordless visual sequences in cinema (think of Chaplin's or Laurel & Hardy's sight gags); or they may use sound, as in the case of program music (I think of Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet). I suppose they might also use smells or tactile stimuli, though I find it difficult to see how these sensory stimuli alone could be used to represent a complex narrative.<sup>14</sup> But I shall be concerned in what follows only with narratives whose instruments are words, whether written or spoken.

The characterization of narrative given here is minimalist. I have said nothing as to whether and to what extent narratives need to be marked by closure in order to achieve their goal, as Hayden White puts it, of presenting "the moral under the aspect of the aesthetic."<sup>15</sup> Nor have I said anything about how we should understand such complex ideas as plot,<sup>16</sup> the presence in a narrative of a narrator,<sup>17</sup> the distinctions made by narratologists among such categories as theme (fabula) discourse (sjuzet), and genre (forma),<sup>18</sup> or the interesting question of whether a formalist/structuralist approach to narrative is more or less productive than, say, a Foucauldian analysis, according to which narratives should be understood primarily as acts of power in a particular cultural context.<sup>19</sup> But I think, in spite of these large lacunae and the many cases in which it will be difficult to decide whether a particular work should as a whole be thought of as a narrative, that the rough formal characterization of narrative given here will suffice to demarcate narrative discourse from other kinds. It now needs to be asked explicitly what kind of properly cognitive significance such discourse has, and so also what significance it has for the theological enterprise.

### **3 The Cognitive Significance of Narrative**

I begin by affirming, as both obvious and important, that narratives are capable of representing things that can be effectively represented in no other way. The formal properties that characterize complex and subtle narratives -- the devices of plot, the complex interactions between story-time and discourse-time, the dramatic and aesthetically pleasing depiction of a series of events as bearing meaning -- all these (and more) make possible the representation of states of affairs otherwise effectively not capable of representation. I shall, for the sake of convenience, mention three kinds of phenomena that narratives are able to represent better than any other kind of discourse. This list may not be exhaustive, but it appears to cover most of the relevant ground.

Firstly, narratives are especially good at representing the flavor of what Jerome Bruner calls "lived time"<sup>20</sup> and what Paul Ricoeur calls "temporality" or "historicality."<sup>21</sup> More abstractly, it seems proper to say that narratives are especially good at -- because precisely developed and

deployed for -- the detailed representation of specific instances of the phenomenal properties of many kinds of human experience, including affect, conation and the like.<sup>22</sup>

All this begins to make narrative sound like phenomenological analysis, and while it is true that good phenomenology edges toward narrative,<sup>23</sup> it is better to preserve the distinction by saying that narrative tends to be more concerned with specific cases of the phenomenal properties of such experience than does even the richest phenomenology. (But it is no accident that phenomenologists often draw so heavily upon fictive narratives for their work.) It seems likely, then, that the best way to understand what it seems like to a deceitful and disturbed female adulterer to be one is to read Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina, just as the best way to understand what it seems like to a weak and destructive man with too many daughters to be one is to read Pride and Prejudice. Phenomenological studies of lust, depression, and the abdication of responsibility can tell us a good deal about these phenomena, but not, with rich and specific detail, what it seems like to a particular lustful, depressed, or weak individual to be one; such studies move, quite properly, at a higher level of abstraction and generality.

Secondly, narratives, whether fictive, historiographic, or ethnographic, are also especially good at, again because designed for, communicating a detailed sense of the fabric of physical and social life in particular places and times. In the realm of ethnography, consider Clifford Geertz's description of the Balinese cockfight (in large part a narrative description);<sup>24</sup> in that of historiography, consider Peter Gay's history of sex and love in the Victorian period;<sup>25</sup> and among fictive narratives, consider the description of the financial, practical, and emotional details of the life of a hack writer who has ambitions to transcend his condition in George Gissing's New Grub Street (1891). There is clearly significant overlap between this first and second function. Ethnography, historiography, and fiction that narratively represent the fabric of physical and social life will almost always do so in part by representing the phenomenal properties of human experience.

Thirdly, narratives are especially effective at getting their consumers to perceive meaning in historical events. The selection of certain key events and their presentation under certain descriptions is capable of convincing consumers, for example, that the English-speaking peoples have had and will continue to have a role to play in world history whose significance is of a different order than that open to any other ethnic or linguistic group;<sup>26</sup> that Sri Lanka is a country the meaning of whose history is indissolubly linked with Buddhism;<sup>27</sup> or that the whole of human history is given meaning by and finds its proper culmination in the establishment of democratic societies.<sup>28</sup>

This third function of narrative is best understood, I think, as the production in its consumers of a certain kind of seeing-as rather than a systematically-statable knowing-that (although, of course, all seeing-as implies some systematically-statable knowing-that). So, for instance, appropriately skilled consumption of the narratives of the Bible will produce in the consumer the skill of seeing history as the arena of God's action to a degree and in a way that no other kind of discourse (and perhaps no other instance of narrative discourse) is capable of doing. I shall return to this.

If these examples of the three kinds of things narratives can represent better than any other kind of discourse are supportable, we already have a partial answer to our question as to the cognitive significance of narrative. Narratives, it appears, can give us detailed acquaintance with the phenomenal

properties of lived human experience; with the fabric of human social life in particular settings; and with history as possessing meaning. And no other kind of discourse can do this to the same degree and in the same way.

Can stronger claims than this be made for the cognitive significance-of narrative? Some philosophers and literary theorists appear to want to claim more than I have claimed in the immediately preceding paragraphs. They want to claim not just that narrative discourse is a splendidly effective instrument for representing certain kinds of conceptual contents (including the kinds mentioned), and for bringing about certain kinds of cognitive transformation in its consumers, but also (perhaps) that the narrative form in itself has special additional cognitive significance that cannot be stated systematically.

Louis Mink, for example, says that "the complex form of the narrative itself" makes a claim to truth that cannot be stated non-narratively, but must instead be shown by displaying or retelling a narrative.<sup>29</sup> This is, at least in part, a claim as to the limits of translatability, a claim that no attempt at a non-narrative paraphrase of a narrative can communicate all the claims to truth made by that narrative. Martha Nussbaum has made similar claims, sometimes quite lyrically. For example, she says:

A paraphrase ..., even when reasonably accurate, does not ever succeed in displacing the original prose; for it is, not being a high work of literary art, devoid of a richness of feeling and a rightness of tone and rhythm that characterize the original, whose cadences shape themselves inexorably on the heart ... the only way to paraphrase this passage [Nussbaum refers to a passage from Henry James's The Golden Bowl] without loss of value would be to write another work of art.<sup>30</sup>

In order to assess these and similar claims some distinctions may be useful. First, there is the distinction between efficacy and possibility; and second, there is the distinction between effect and content.

Suppose we take the efficacy of a particular kind of discourse to be what it is particularly good at doing, what its peculiar genius is. And suppose we take the possibilities of a particular discourse to denote those things that can be done with it. It will surely always be true that the possibilities of a discourse-type are more extensive than its efficacy: what can be done with it is more than what should be done with it. This is especially obvious in the case of discourse that doesn't use words. Suppose, for example, one wants to assemble a child's toy that comes in many pieces. Consider what diagrams can do in the way of explaining how to assemble the toy. Typically, discursive prose, narrative or otherwise, will be able to achieve the same ends only with great clumsiness and great difficulty. The genius of visual representations is useful in such contexts; that of discursive prose is not. If the goal is to produce in the consumer of the discourse a certain kind of behaviorally evidenced knowing-how -- i.e., the consumer is able to put the toy together successfully -- then visual aids are good for achieving this aim and discursive prose is not. But discursive prose has possibilities in this area also: it can do something, even if its efficacy doesn't lie here.

Analogously--and presumably Mink and Nussbaum mean at least this much--the genius of narrative discourse lies precisely in its ability to give its consumers detailed acquaintance with the phenomenal properties of lived human experience, and so forth. But it is not clear that this is something in principle beyond the capacity of non-narrative discourse. I have already

suggested that the kind of rich systematic discourse we call phenomenological analysis may go a good way toward producing such acquaintance. It may be natural and proper to become impatient at certain points with the limitations of systematic or descriptive discourse, and as a result to turn to narrative. But this is a practical rather than a theoretical necessity, just as when giving directions to someone it may be practically necessary to draw a map rather than to write a letter. This is very different from claiming that it is in principle impossible to give spatial directions in discursive prose. In just the same way, the claim that no paraphrase of a richly-textured narrative artifact into systematic prose can replace the narrative is, by itself, no argument that the undoubted efficacy of narrative discourse for certain things requires one to conclude that narrative discourse necessarily has cognitive significance that systematic discourse does not.

Suppose we look, then, at the second distinction, that between effect and content. This is a distinction between what a particular discourse does to its consumers (what it evokes in them, how it transforms them ethically, cognitively, behaviorally, and the like) on the one hand, and what it claims, the conceptual contents it represents, on the other. It is abundantly clear that narrative discourse, both fictive and historiographic, can produce effects that are, both theoretically and practically, beyond the reach of systematic discourse. This capacity on the part of narrative discourse is partly caused by its efficacy at representing the kinds of conceptual contents discussed above, but is, I think, theoretically separable from it. The point here is that what narrative discourse calls to the attention of its consumers is, strictly, without limit.<sup>31</sup> This is in part because of the literary devices that are its stock-in-trade, devices such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and the like, are constitutively suggestive and evocative, and open-endedly so. But it is also because the kind of effect produced by the appropriately skilled consumption of narrative is a cognitive transformation that consists in a kind of seeing-as. The consumer of the Bible's narratives learns to see history as the arena of God's action; the consumer of the narratives that constitute Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* learns to see human action as determined largely by greed, lust, and ambition; and the consumer of Anita Brookner's careful narrative representations of despair begins to see human action as, in large part, determined by fear, lassitude, and lack of vision. Seeing things in terms such as these is a skill that can, as Nussbaum and others claim, only be fully learned narratively, as well as being a skill whose exercise and application itself has narrative form.

Donald Davidson, in the course of an analysis of what metaphors mean, says this:

It's not only that we can't provide an exhaustive catalogue of what has been attended to when we are led to see something in a new light; the difficulty is more fundamental. What we notice or see is not, in general, propositional in character ... Seeing as is not seeing that ... [and] since in most cases what ... metaphor prompts or inspires is not entirely, or even at all, recognition of some truth or fact, the attempt to give literal expression to the content of the metaphor is simply misguided.<sup>32</sup>

Substituting 'narrative' for 'metaphor' here, I would wish to say the same. If, through properly skilled consumption of the biblical narrative, I come to see history as the arena of God's action, this is certainly not the same as my coming to know that history is the arena of God's action -- though it may

entail and require that I have such knowledge. Instead, it is the open-ended transformation of my capacity to see historical events as a certain kind of thing, to experience them under the rubric of a certain narrative description. This transformation can be labelled propositionally, and its conceptual contents can be elucidated systematically; but what I experience in virtue of it is not accessible in detail to systematic discourse. This is because such experience has an infinitely large set of phenomenal properties whose flavor is both produced by consumption of narratives, and is capable of further display and development only narratively.

With these distinctions and conclusions in mind I return to Mink's and Nussbaum's suggestions that narrative form itself makes a claim to truth that cannot be stated or represented nonnarratively. I would restate this to say that the unique effect of narrative discourse is to produce cognitive transformations in its consumers whose content is neither exhaustively statable in systematic discourse, nor effectively capable of display in any discourse other than narrative. But I would deny that any claim about the nature of things is made by narratives, considered either as wholes or in their parts, whose content cannot also be represented in systematic discourse. If this is right then it is indeed true that no non-narrative paraphrase of a narrative can replace it. But this is true not because narratives make claims to truth of a special kind, but because their peculiar genius is to produce transformative effects of a properly cognitive and affective kind: consumed skilfully, narratives shape the phenomenal properties of lived experience; they create and foster perceptions of value in the temporal succession of events; they provide, at the most general level, a set of perceptual and cognitive skills, the exercise and application of which in a specific life itself has narrative structure.

Similar claims should be made -- and, increasingly, are being made -- by philosophers concerned with the analysis of moral knowledge and moral action.<sup>33</sup> Moral knowledge -knowledge, that is, both of what right action is and of how to perform such action -- is, it may be said, available principally through detailed acquaintance with specific instances of morally significant decision-making; and such detailed acquaintance is, in turn, possible only through the skilled consumption or construction of narrative. Put in terms of virtue theory, such claims will be interpreted to mean that the development of virtue is either contingent upon or symbiotically linked with the use of narrative discourse. But one need not be a virtue theorist in order to hold strong views about the importance of narrative in the development of a moral life.<sup>34</sup> If it is right that there is an irreducible particularity about what makes a morally right action right,<sup>35</sup> a particularity to which the general moral principles statable in systematic discourse are not only an insufficient guide, but also a guide that may be actively misleading, then it is easy to see how narrative can be taken to be indispensable to the development of moral perceptions that are adequately precise and responsive to the demands of specific situations. For it is precisely and only narratives that are capable of providing "an account of the careful, detailed fashioning of a moral action,"<sup>36</sup> and therefore precisely and only narratives that can develop the moral imagination in such a way as to produce appropriately specific moral skills.

It is important to distinguish this view of the cognitive importance of narrative discourse from one implicit in another common way in which philosophers (including ethicists) use narrative: as illustrative-example. In this use, since the point is to depict a situation in such a way as to "elicit shared beliefs about particular situations so as to resolve disputed

beliefs about general claims,"<sup>37</sup> ambiguity is not a virtue. The point is heuristic power, effectiveness in posing or solving some set of problems; and for this goal to be realized ambiguity must be reduced as much as possible (though complexity may be extended as much as seems beneficial). When narratives are used illustratively or heuristically in such ways, they tend not to be works of literary art; this is just because such works of art value and represent the potent and irreducible ambiguity of lived experience in a manner that is itself ambiguous. The reverse is true, for instance, of Hilary Putnam's stories about brains-in-a-vat<sup>38</sup> and of Derek Parfit's imaginative use of stories about matter transmitters and brain transplants.<sup>39</sup> This use of narrative as a device to disambiguate rather than to explore the cognitive implications of ambiguity is paralleled by the cavalier way in which many anglophone philosophers treat the history of philosophy. Very often such philosophers have no interest in giving a nuanced and historically informed reading of texts in the history of philosophy. For them, the names 'Aristotle' or 'Aquinas' designate only particular positions, the less ambiguous and the more precisely stated the better, and so the adjectives 'Aristotelean' or 'Thomistic' become not markers for serious historiographic (and so more-or-less narrativized) reconstructions and restatements, but rather calques for positions capable of exhaustive statement in systematic discourse.

But even in the sphere of ethics, where perhaps the most attention has been paid to the philosophical significance of narrative and the strongest claims made for it, it does not seem that narrative discourse can do everything the moral philosopher might want to do. Certainly, it can as Nussbaum claims give access to the processes through which moral imagination is developed and moral decisions made; it can also act, as Daniel Brudney (following Stanley Cavell) suggests, as a means for projecting some of the concepts of moral philosophy, a means for showing "a new context for applying a concept, one that reveals new dimensions and resonances."<sup>40</sup> But suppose the moral philosopher wants to state principles, to elucidate a meta-ethic, or to give an argument to show that a particular action in a particular context is right or wrong? Since the objects of such claims and such arguments are non-temporally-indexed states of affairs, making them is among the paradigmatic functions of systematic discourse; the deployment of narrative discourse to perform them is likely to be about as successful as the use of discursive prose in place of musical scores to get an orchestra to play the slow movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony. The efficacy of discursive prose for such a purpose is just about zero; and so also, I suggest, is the efficacy of narrative discourse for the elucidation of some specific meta-ethic or the construction and contestation of arguments whose conclusion is that some ethical principle has universal validity. And it appears that those who extol the virtues of narrative for engaging in moral philosophy recognize nonetheless that systematic discourse has its proper functions in this sphere also, even if there is considerable disagreement as to the nature and scope of those proper functions. I shall return to this last question in a moment, when I come to discuss what it is that narrative discourse can and cannot do for theology.

Narrative discourse, then, to summarize my conclusions to this point, can represent things that systematic discourse can represent only with great difficulty (if at all). And some of these representative capacities may have considerable cognitive import for properly skilled consumers of narrative. Further, narrative discourse is capable of producing effects upon its consumers analogous to the effects produced by metaphorical discourse,

effects that are altogether beyond the scope of complete restatement in systematic discourse. But the peculiar efficacy of narrative discourse in these spheres does not suggest that it is capable of simply replacing systematic discourse. What, then, of the significance of narrative discourse for theology?

#### **4 Narrative Discourse and Theology**

That the deployment of narrative discourse is indispensable to at least Christian theology (and possibly, though I shall not argue this here, to all forms of theology) should be clear from all that has been said so far about narrative. If one of theology's functions is to exhibit the community's descriptive and axiological claims, and by so doing to transform the perceptual, affective, and cognitive habits of its members, it is clear that the genius of narrative discourse makes it indispensable: how else could the appropriate kinds of skill be fostered and developed? The indispensability of narrative here is of the same logical kind as the indispensability of narrative for the formation of moral knowledge and moral action, discussed above. And exponents of narrative theology have emphasized this kind of indispensability almost ad nauseam.<sup>41</sup>

But to claim that the deployment of narrative discourse will suffice for the prosecution of the theological enterprise is a much stronger and very different claim. It is not clear that anyone makes it.<sup>42</sup> Even the most vociferous advocates of narrative discourse as an instrument for carrying out the tasks of Christian theology acknowledge that other kinds of discourse have their place and purpose in performing those tasks. The real question, then, is how to understand the nature of the relations between narrative discourse and systematic discourse within the theological enterprise. If each is necessary, which is basic or foundational and how does the one relate to the other? And on this question narrative theologians speak with a much more unified voice: so far as theology is concerned, they say, narrative discourse is prior to and independent of systematic discourse; and that the functions of systematic discourse within theology are thus based upon and an epiphenomenon of the functions of narrative discourse. Here is a programmatic and abstract example of such a claim, taken from Michael Goldberg's exegetical essay on two verses from the first chapter of Exodus:

The central claim of 'narrative theology' is the contention that virtually all our basic convictions about the nature and meaning of our lives find their ground and intelligibility in some sort of overarching, paradigmatic story.<sup>43</sup>

The claim here seems to be that properly skilled consumption of certain narratives is a necessary condition both for having certain kinds of axiological beliefs, and for being able to specify what they are. Stanley Hauerwas says exactly this in his defense of casuistry as a narrative art: narratives, he says, give the meanings of terms in moral discourse, and so also the possibility of their use; the appropriately skilled consumption of narratives is therefore among the conditions for the possibility of engagement in systematic moral discourse. And narrative discourse therefore has both practical and logical priority over any attempt to "justify the rightness or wrongness of certain actions abstracted from their narrative context" -- and, by extension, priority also over all attempts at systematic justification of properly metaphysical claims independently of the narrative context in which they are represented to and consumed by the community of the

faithful.<sup>44</sup>

Some version of these claims to priority may well be defensible. I have already suggested that properly skilled consumption of narrative discourse has cognitive effects attainable in no other way; and I also think it true that exposure to narratives, and the gradual process of learning to use them skilfully, has, in almost everyone's life, temporal priority over learning to manipulate systematic discourse. All religious persons, or almost all, know the stories before they learn the theology (if they ever do the latter). But it also seems clear that theology has certain needs -- most especially those for systematization, precision, universalization, and justification -- that cannot easily be met, if they can be met at all, by the deployment of narrative discourse. Let's try and see why.

First, and most generally, the fact that religious communities typically -- and Christians most certainly -- have found it necessary to develop and deploy doctrines and creeds expressed in systematic discourse and not in narrative discourse strongly suggests that such communities have felt called to engage in intellectual activities whose ends cannot be realized solely by the use of narratives. Most basically, such communities have felt they could not avoid making non-temporally-indexed claims of universal axiological and descriptive import.<sup>45</sup> It is just the making of such claims that constitutes doctrinal practice. Consider the claims God is three persons in one substance; all human persons are made in the image of God; the literal sense of scripture must always have priority for the believing community over the allegorical sense. These are, in my sense, claims made in systematic discourse. They are claims made and argued for by Christian theologians, who have frequently seen them as theological claims. And they are claims to the statement and elucidation of which narrative discourse is paradigmatically unsuited -- though they can, of course, be instantiated and deployed narratively.

But religious communities have not felt called upon only to make such abstract, generalized, non-temporally-indexed claims. They have also attempted to justify them in the face of opposition, to argue for them against competitors, and to do so by deploying the abstract and denaturalized schemata of systematic discourse rather than the unsubstitutable specificities of narrative discourse.<sup>46</sup> The name for this activity has traditionally been 'apologetics', and it is an activity that those narrative theologians who deny either the need for or the possibility of justification in any terms other than those given by the community's narratives must eschew. Apologetics, for a "pure" narrative theologian like Hauerwas or (perhaps) Hans Frei,<sup>47</sup> means "a mere act of recital meant for the sustenance and benefit of the believing community";<sup>48</sup> it cannot mean an intellectual engagement with persons for whom the narratives of the Christian community are both unknown and insignificant.

Further, it seems that narrative discourse is unsuited not only to the systematic and apologetical needs of religious communities, but also to many of their catechetical needs. While insufficient work has yet been done on the genres or kinds of discourse in and through which catechesis is done -- I suspect that there is rich material here for cross-cultural comparative work -- it is clear that catechesis is done only partly through the medium of narrative. At least as often, and for very good reasons, it is done through the medium of systematic discourse, for only such discourse can provide the requisite level of precision and systematization. A good catechism does both more and less than retell the sacred narratives, just as a creed does: insofar as it uses what is made available by skilled consumption of

narrative, it does so under a redescription that makes it available for systematic use.

In general: the characteristics of narrative as defined in this essay make it an instrument for the presentation to its consumers of a unique singularity -- that of this unsubstitutable person or this unsubstitutable set of ambiguous moral decisions, or this unsubstitutable catena of events. It is precisely not designed to answer questions at the level of generality and abstraction applicable to properly anthropological or metaphysical questions. And, I would argue, treatment of such questions is unavoidable for because in part constitutive of theology.

The argument to this point has been simple: narrativists typically either deny that the needs of religious communities traditionally met by their deployment of systematic discourse are actually needs at all; or they reconstrue those needs, and so also the meaning of the use of systematic discourse in meeting them, in such a way that such discourse is seen as epiphenomenal to narrative discourse. This latter move is most easily made when considering the abstraction, generalization, and systematization of scholastic theological system-building, or when considering the use of such abstractions in catechesis. Here, without denying that religious communities typically do feel the need to use such discourse to engage in such enterprises, the claim can still be made that such discourse issues only in rules for the governance of the inner life of the community, and not in any properly metaphysical claims as to the nature of reality or of human persons. This, I take it, is the point of George Lindbeck's attempt to state a theory of doctrine in which all systematic doctrinal discourse has an exclusively regulative function for the community that produces it, and is thus incapable of making claims to truth that extend beyond the boundaries of the community.<sup>49</sup> The merits of such theories have been extensively discussed during the past decade, and I have no space here to engage this discussion fully; all I can do is to point out that even if such a theory turns out to be defensible as a theory about the systematic and catechetical practices of Christian communities, it cannot do justice to their apologetical practices since these require the possibility that systematic discourse might engage and make claims upon those who do not share the narratively-constituted practices that gave rise to it in the first place. So, even if the regulative theories of doctrine which are the necessary resort of the narrativist who does not want simply to reject the whole enterprise of systematic theology as a mistake, turn out to be defensible (though I do not think they are), their use must entail the conclusion that the entire apologetical enterprise rests upon a mistake.

The inability of narrativists to provide an account of the significance of systematic discourse which will do justice to the ways in which religious communities have understood -- and still largely continue to understand -- their use of it is by itself a powerful reason to reject their view of systematic discourse as epiphenomenal to narrative discourse. But there is another, and I think decisive, argument that can be brought to bear. This is an argument to the conclusion that a pure narrativist program is self-referentially incoherent. To see how this argument goes it is important to understand one of the basic motivations of the narrativist program. Narrativists tend to think, on the basis of a relatively uncritical appropriation of the Kantian critique of metaphysics, and of the postmodernist rejection of foundationalism in all its forms (metaphysical and epistemological), that what religious communities have typically wanted to do with systematic discourse cannot be done, and that it ought therefore either

to be jettisoned or radically reconstrued.<sup>50</sup> What religious communities should want to do instead, they think, is to retell their stories with ever more passion and seriousness, and recapitulate the narrative structure of those stories in their own lives as witnesses to it; and to do these things without using categories extraneous to the narrative to frame, explain, or justify them.

The self-referential incoherence in this kind of antifoundationalist narrativism is surely, given this explanation, easy to see. If the narrativist claim is that narrative discourse is all the theologian needs to do theology, or that everything important to theology must be done without introducing categories extraneous to a master narrative, and that procedural claims governing the practice of theology are themselves part of theology (recall my claim that the theological enterprise is recursive in this way), then it is hard to see how the claims being made by narrativists either are or could be stated (much less argued for) solely in narrative discourse. These claims are true (if they are) atemporally: they provide a theory of value and a set of procedural claims intended to govern the community's theological practice (which is part of its religious practice) always and everywhere; or they make claims as to the capacities of narrative discourse which are true (if they are) for all narratives everywhere. And yet, in tension with their own agenda they do not make their claims narratively: they make them systematically. And when challenged they produce not narratives but arguments, arguments stated in systematic discourse. And they do this for the very good reason that narrative presentation of such claims could only instantiate them, not argue for them. If, then, apologetical needs must be met even for pure narrativists, how much more is this the case for religious communities?

The arguments I've offered are suggestive rather than demonstrative. They do indicate, I think, some strategic disadvantages inherent in some versions of the strong narrativist program, most striking among which are the inability to account for what religious communities actually do with the discourse they employ, and the inability to state and argue for the program itself without producing a damaging variety of self-referential incoherence. My own view is that narrative discourse is extremely important for theology: it has cognitive powers and transformative capacities not available to religious communities in any other way. But it cannot be the case that narrative discourse can fulfill all theological needs. This could only happen if theologians made the procedural decision to dispense with their goal of making non-temporally-indexed universalizable descriptive and axiological claims and to engage instead solely in the production and manipulation of narrative discourse. And, as I have suggested, this procedural decision cannot be argued for or even presented without incoherence. So the conclusion is that theology done by deploying narrative discourse narratively has both strengths and limits, just as moral philosophy done in the same way has both strengths and limits. A properly developed and flexible theology will recognize and use both narrative and systematic discourse, according to the particular needs of the community engaging in it; and such a community's use of systematic discourse need not be limited to, nor even strongly constrained by, the stories it tells itself. Only so can the truly universal and properly metaphysical ambitions of Christian (and every other variety of) theology be served and realized.

## NOTES

1 This essay was written in the spring of 1992; no changes of substance have been made to it since then, in spite of the time that has elapsed. I no longer fully endorse all the points made in it, though I am still sympathetic to the general direction of its argument.

2 In putting matters in this way I am indebted to William A Christian, Sr.'s works, especially Oppositions of Religious Doctrines (London: Macmillan, 1972), and Doctrines of Religious Communities (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1987).

3 See Christian, Oppositions, 60-86.

4 Compare the definition given by Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in Garrett Green, ed., Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 58-78, at 60-61. In spite of the distinctive difference in focus of interest between Tanner's definition and mine, I take them to be congruent.

5 I draw here upon the definitions and descriptive analyses of narrative found in Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 233; Oswald Ducrot & Tzvetan Todorov, Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language, transl. Catherine Porter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 297; W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., On Narrative (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 80, 111, 205; Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), x-xi; Jerome Bruner, Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3-43; Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview," Interpretation 37 (1983), 340-352, at 341-343.

6 White, Content, 5.

7 White, Content, 6.

8 See Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in R. Canary and H. Kozicki, ed., The Writing of History (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 129-149, at 143.

9 In "The Narrative Function," Semeia 13 (1978), 177-202, at 186, 195, Ricoeur argues that historical and fictional narrative are similar in terms of both sense and reference. The similarity in sense, he says, is given by the structural factor of the fact of emplotment; the similarity in reference is given by the fact that both are ineluctably fictive and mimetic (i.e., narrativized), and that both therefore have historicity-temporality as their ultimate referent. Compare Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, 3 vols., transl. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988), vol.2, 156. See also Edward T. Oakes, "Apologetics and the Pathos of Narrative Theology," Journal of Religion 72 (1992), 37-58, at 44-45.

10 "I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity, and narrativity to be the language structure that

has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal" (Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in Mitchell, On Narrative, 165-186, at 165).

11 See Mitchell, On Narrative, 118, and Bruner, Actual Minds, 12-14. Bruner calls this kind of discourse "paradigmatic." Mink (in "Narrative Form") calls it "theory". There are important differences between these two ways of distinguishing narrative discourse from other kinds and that stated in this essay, but the purpose of making the distinction is the same.

12 Another good example is the analysis of Maupassant's "Une partie de campagne" in terms of these distinctions in Mitchell, On Narrative, 119-120.

13 It should be obvious that the categorization of kinds of discourse given here is not meant to be exhaustive. It is intended to suffice only for the task of exploring what significance narrative has for theology.

14 For some interesting thoughts on the cognitive significance of olfactory stimuli see Dan Sperber, Rethinking Symbolism, transl. Alice Morton, Studies in Social Anthropology, vol.11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 115-123.

15 See White, Content, 25, and see also Frank Kermode, The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), for a classic discussion of this issue. Steven Collins, "Nirv\_a, Time, and Narrative," History of Religions 31 (1992), 215-246, especially at 234-245, has recently made interesting use of this set of questions in discussing Buddhist material.

16 On which see Ricoeur, "Narrative Function," 183-185; idem, "Narrative Time," 174; Louis O. Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," in Ralph Cohen, ed., New Directions in Literary History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 107-124, at 117; idem, "Narrative Form"; Ducrot and Todorov, Encyclopedic Dictionary, 298-300; Vladimir Propp, The Morphology of the Folktale, 2d. ed. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968).

17 On which see White, Content, 13; Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4.

18 On which see Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," Social Research 54 (1987), 11-32, at 17-18 (drawing from Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Propp).

19 On this, see the debate between Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Seymour Chatman in Mitchell, On Narrative, 117-136, 209-232, 258-265.

20 Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 12.

21 Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 165. White, Content, 170-181, provides a useful discussion of Ricoeur's work on narrative.

22 See, for some specifically theological applications of this in terms of the tensed modalities of human experience, Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 39 (1971), 291-311.

23 This point might be made, for instance, about the best of Merleau-Ponty, or about some of Edward Casey's recent work, especially Remembering: A Phenomenological Study (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987).

24 Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in idem, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-453.

25 Peter Gay, The Education of the Senses (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); idem, The Tender Passion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

26 I think here of Winston Churchill's History of the English-Speaking Peoples, first published 1956-58.

27 I have in mind here the uses made of the Mah vasa and the D pavasa by contemporary Sinhalese Buddhist intellectuals.

28 I have in mind here Tocqueville's works, especially De la démocratie, first published 1835-40.

29 Mink, "Narrative Form," 144-145.

30 Martha Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in Anthony J. Cascardi, ed., Literature and the Question of Philosophy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 167-191, at 177. Nussbaum has made similar claims in her "Flawed Crystals: James's The Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy," New Literary History 15 (1983), 25-50; "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," Logos 8 (1987), 55-83; and "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," Ethics 98 (1988), 225-254. See also Daniel Brudney, "Knowledge and Silence: The Golden Bowl and Moral Philosophy," Critical Inquiry 16 (1990), 397-437. Philip Quinn says: "A life is a process with a narrative structure. The extent to which an ethical theory made in the image of the theories of science can generate a blueprint or model of a life is problematic. Theoretical descriptions of a life plan are usually very schematic and lacking in concrete detail; they seldom cast much light on what it would be like to lead a life as planned." ("Tragic Dilemmas, Suffering Love, and Christian Life," Journal of Religious Ethics 17 [1989], 151-183, at 151.) Compare Arthur Danto's discussion in "Philosophy As/And/Of Literature," in Cascardi, Literature, 3-23. Hans Frei makes a very similar point when he refers, glancingly, to the "heresy of paraphrase": see "'Narrative' in Christian and Modern Reading," in Bruce D. Marshall, ed., Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 149-163, at 155.

31 In this I take narrative discourse to be, semantically, just like metaphor. I draw here upon Donald Davidson's work on metaphor, especially "What Metaphors Mean," in idem, Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 245-264. Ricoeur also emphasizes the strong connection between what can be said theoretically about narrative discourse and what can be said about metaphor. See Time and Narrative, vol.1, preface. See also George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83, who says that literary objects demand and produce infinite

response even though the description of their formal components is finite.

32 Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," 263.

33 See Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); idem, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Brudney, "Knowledge and Silence"; Quinn, "Tragic Dilemmas," 151-152.

34 Nussbaum, for instance, is not such a theorist, and yet she wants to claim that the use of the moral imagination, requisite for moral action, depends upon the development of "moral attention and insight," and that this is available only by looking closely at "the specificity and ... the emotional and imaginative richness of ... [the] individual moral effort," "Finely Aware," 170.

35 This claim was made by Aristotle, who says that to respond "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is appropriate and best, and this characterizes virtue," Nicomachean Ethics, 1106b21-23.

36 Brudney, "Knowledge and Silence," 425.

37 Brudney, "Knowledge and Silence," 417.

38 Hilary Putnam, Reason, Truth and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-21.

39 Such stories are scattered throughout Parfit's Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

40 Brudney, "Knowledge and Silence," 429, drawing on Stanley Cavell's work in the philosophy of language, especially as represented in The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

41 Useful surveys of work in narrative theology and collections of representative essays include: Fackre, "Narrative Theology"; Green, Scriptural Authority; Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 55 (1987), 687-717; Stanley Hauerwas & L. Gregory Jones, ed., Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989).

42 Though Robert McAfee Brown gets close: "Our faith did not, after all, initially come to us as 'theology,' and particularly not as 'systematic theology.' It came as story ... Out of such stories the systems begin to grow, with results we know only too well: stories about a garden become cosmological arguments; stories about Jesus become treatises on the two natures; stories about salvation become substitutionary doctrines of atonement; stories about the church become by-laws of male-dominated hierarchies. Who could care less?" ("Starting Over: New Beginning Points for Theology," The Christian Century 97 [1980], 545-549, at 548). I take this to be rhetorical overkill rather than reasoned argument.

43 Michael Goldberg, "Exodus 1:13-14," Interpretation 37 (1983), 389-391, at

389.

44 Stanley Hauerwas, "Casuistry as a Narrative Art," Interpretation 37 (1983), 377-388, at 378-379.

45 David Kelsey puts this clearly when he says that "theological anthropology is a set of questions about human personhood that are fully as general as the questions about human being addressed by the human and physical sciences" ("Biblical Narrative and Theological Anthropology," in Green, Scriptural Authority, 121-143, at 134). But he goes on to argue (implausibly in my view) that theological anthropology in this general sense is "materially derivative from almost all other theological topics" (139), that it is secondary to and derivative from theological elucidation of what narrative tells us (140-141), and that it is "rooted in and ordered to practical theology" (136). Though none of these positions is at all likely to be correct (and can be shown historically not to be how the general run of Christian theologians have understood the enterprise of theological anthropology), Kelsey does at least clearly recognize and acknowledge that theological anthropology -- and, by extension, other dimensions of the theological enterprise -- requires generalized abstractions in order to do its work.

46 See my "Denaturalizing Discourse: bhindh\_rnikas, Propositionalists, and the Comparative Philosophy of Religion," in Frank E. Reynolds & David Tracy, ed., Myth and Philosophy (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 57-91.

47 I rely here upon Comstock, "Two Types". See also his "Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," Journal of Religion 66 (1986), 117-140, where it is argued that Ricoeur preserves the possibility of allowing the biblical narrative to make claims to truth of universal import, whereas Frei denies such a possibility. But it is not quite so clear to me that Frei does deny it. His comments in "'Narrative' in Christian and Modern Reading" seem to leave the question open. But I am in basic agreement with Comstock's rejection of what he calls "pure narrativism", at least when questions of justification arise.

48 Oakes, "Apologetics," 58. See also William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," Journal of Religion 66 (1986), 282-301; William C. Placher, Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); and my own An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991). Much of this discussion has been sparked by George Lindbeck's attempts to provide a place for ad hoc apologetics within the framework of a cultural-linguistic theology that is broadly sympathetic to some version of narrative theology. See Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 128-134.

49 See the discussions of Lindbeck's work in The Thomist 49 (1985), and in Modern Theology 4/1 (1988).

50 Comstock ("Two Types") and Oakes ("Apologetics") both outline the historical story behind these assumptions on the part of (at least) pure narrativists. J. A. DiNoia, "Philosophical Theology in the Perspective of

Religious Diversity," Theological Studies 49 (1988), 401-416, makes a powerful argument that the rejection of foundationalism need not issue in a retreat from the deployment of systematic discourse, nor from the universalistic aspirations inherent in such deployment.