Narrative Time:
The Inherently Perspectival
Structure of the Human World

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This essay originated as a contribution to a symposium at Brandeis University chaired by Professor Egon Bittner on the topic "Whether scientific inquiry is, can be, or should be undertaken from positions of ethical and political neutrality." I chose to restrict my remarks to a consideration of the study of society, leaving to others the task of discussing the study of nature. I can say at the outset that my answer to all three of Professor Bittner's questions was *no.* The investigation of the human world cannot be, hence is not and ought not to be, undertaken from a position of ethical and political neutrality.[1] Such originality as I was able to bring to this much-discussed issue consisted in resting my case on ontological rather than moral considerations.

It may help to explain the origins of my argument if I report that when Professor Bittner's invitation arrived, I was reading Wilhelm Dilthey's observations on the construction of the historical world, in preparation for a graduate seminar on the philosophy of history. As will become obvious almost immediately, my reflections constitute an effort to extend into the realm of the human studies my understanding of Immanuel Kant's analysis of the transcendental ego's construction of objective time-consciousness as the foundation of the laws of phenomenal nature.

Let me begin, somewhat implausibly, by contrasting Kant's account of the status and structure of the natural world, as he gives it to us in the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason,* with the ontology of the worlds created, or constituted, by fictional narratives. Although I do not myself endorse the dramatically paradoxical doctrine promulgated by Kant in the Critical Philosophy, I do believe that it provides the essential clue to an understanding of the ontology of the human world, and thereby to an answer to Professor

Bittner's question. Here, as elsewhere, the extravagant metaphysical and episte-mological doctrines put forth by Kant and his successors as analyses of the natural world turn out to be quite accurate guides to the structure of the social or human world.

I take as my text the extraordinary passage near the end of the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Summarizing the argument which has been set forth, albeit erratically and somewhat inconsistently, over the previous fifteen pages, Kant writes:

> Thus the order and regularity in the appearances, which we entitle *nature,* we ourselves introduce. We could never find them in appearances, had we not ourselves, or the nature of our mind, originally set them there.[2]

And a page later:

> Thus the understanding is something more than a power of formulating rules through comparison of appearances [as David Hume had asserted]; it is itself the lawgiver of nature.[3]

In the Second Analogy of Experience, in the Analytic of Principles, Kant explains, with great precision and clarity, that the knowing mind constructs the objective world order essentially by establishing a necessary temporal succes-sion of events that is in principle distinguishable from the subjective order in which the mind apprehends the diversity of its sense contents. To be an event, Kant argues, to be empirically real, *just is* to have objective time location. What is more, since, as Kant argues in agreement with Hume, causation is essentially necessary succession, it follows that to have objective time location precisely *is* to stand in necessary causal relation to everything that has preceded and will follow.

This doctrine is well known to students of the philosophy of Kant, but it is not an easy doctrine to understand, and since it will play a central role in my argument, let me devote a few words to explaining it. Consider the distinction between remembering an event and imagining it. The difference clearly does not lie in the *content* of the thoughts. So far as visual, auditory, or other images are concerned, there need be no difference at all between a scene recollected and the same scene imagined. What distinguishes memory from imagination is that memory involves the assertion of a proposition, and hence necessarily raises the issue of the truth or falsehood of what is being asserted. If I purport to *remember* that I dined last night at Maxim's in Paris, then I am implicitly asserting the proposition *that I dined last night at Maxim's,* a proposition which, alas, is false. But if I *imagine* having dined last night at Maxim's, since there is no assertion, there is no truth value. All experience, not merely memory, Kant tells us, is a structure of judgments, not a construction of sense contents.

If I ask, now, what is the most general and fundamental mark of objective experience, of the empirically real, Kant replies that it is not any particular sense *content*—not some special shade of blue that invariably signals the real, as it were—but rather a certain cognitive or judgmental feature in its *form,* namely

necessary temporal succession. To say that something really happened, that it is part of the objective world order, is, at base, to say that it happened just *then,* that it came *after* this, that, and the other event which preceded it, and *before* these other events which followed it. Location in objective time succession is, Kant argues in the Second Analogy, *the* mark of the empirically real.

Fantasies can always be altered if I find them unsatisfactory. Daydreaming about a romantic affair, I imagine that I see a lovely woman on the street, speak to her, and strike up a romance. Then, dissatisfied with my imagining, I rewrite it, this time visualizing her as speaking first to me. Since nothing is being *asserted* in the daydream, no constraints limit the sequence in which I can conjure my images. But if I wish to *remember,* for example, what I did this morning, then I must represent my getting dressed as coming *earlier* than my having breakfast, for that is, in fact, the order in which those events occurred. (It is not at all necessary that I call up the image of my dressing before the image of my having breakfast in order to be true to the facts. I can perfectly well recall these events in reverse order, so long as, in doing so, I represent them *as* in reverse order. To repeat, experience is a structure of judgments, not a construction of sense contents.)

So to say of an event that it is *real,* that it really happened, is no more and no less than to assign it to an objective time location. But there is a problem here, as Kant notes in a passage added to the *Critique* in the second edition. "Since time. . .cannot itself be perceived, the determination of the existence of objects in time can take place only through their relation in time in general, and therefore only through concepts that connect them *a priori*."[4]

The problem is one which frequently confronts historians, especially those dealing with scanty data concerning ancient peoples. We are accustomed to saying that Julius Caesar was slain on the Ides of March in 44 B.C., as though it were possible to look at the time line stretching form infinity to infinity, and simply see that hanging up at the 44 B.C. mark, by a sort of cosmological clothespin, is the murder of Caesar. But in fact, as Kant notes, we cannot perceive time itself. Hence, to date a past event, we must trace a continuous regression of events from our present moment back to the event in question. There must, as it were, be an apostolic temporal succession connecting present time with that past event. Let there be merely one genuine break, and if we have no indirect evidence allowing us to ascertain how long the gap that cannot be filled, then we cannot date that past event. What is more, at the most basic epistemological level, we cannot then be sure of the reality of the event we are attempting to date.

How, for example, do we determine whether the stories of King Arthur are fact or fiction? Not by content, needless to say, for after the fabulous elements have been eliminated, there is nothing internal to the story to tell us whether in real time there were men and women corresponding to the Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, and Gawain of the old tales. We approach the question by attempting to set the persons and events of the story in some necessitated sequence with other persons and events whose provenance *can* be traced unbroken to the present. Thus it was that Schliemann sought to bring ancient Ilium into

historical time, by setting it in the context of present-day physical remains that independent scientific knowledge permitted us to connect up with an already known historical sequence.

And now, perhaps, the reader may spy, distantly, the first glimmer of a connection between these remarks and the title of my essay, for the objective temporal sequence of which I have been speaking is, of course, a narrative. But there are other matters to be discussed before we can confront fully the significance of that fact.

Consider first a question which Kant neglects: the mind-constructed temporal sequence is, according to Kant, *objective* because necessitated. But is it *intersubjective*? Does each of us, Protagoras-like, live in a private time, or is there one time which is the single objective time for the experienced world? This question is in fact so deep that its full answer undermines the very foundations of Kant's ethical theory.[5] It suffices for our purposes to observe that Kant avoids the issue by assuming that the purely formal structure of the knowing mind is everywhere and always the same. Since the forms of sensible intuition — space and time — are the same for all minds, or for all human minds, at any rate, and since the pure forms of conception, or categories, which lie *a priori* in the mind, are likewise identical for all cognitive agents, it follows that there cannot be two or many objective times, but only one.

Put somewhat more formally, there is always a transformation that will allow us to translate the objective date of an event in any one system of time reckoning into the equivalent date in any other system. All peoples choose striking or memorable events as the zero-points of their calendars: the birth or death of a god, the creation of the world, the ascension to the throne of a ruler — it makes no difference. The defining mark of the real is intertranslatability from calendar to calendar. Thus, we might say that despite its brilliantly vivid verisimilitude, the Middle-Earth of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* is shown to be imaginary by the impossibility of establishing any temporal translation from *its* elaborate chronology, carried all the way back to the events of the first age of Middle-Earth, to the one chronology of the real world.

To summarize, then, the mark of the empirically real is objective time location, which is identical with inclusion within a sequence of causally connected events. And even if, as Kant claims, the structure of objective time is mind-created, nevertheless the formal identity of all knowing minds guarantees that objective time (and also objective space, though Kant does not say so) will have the characteristic intersubjective feature sometimes referred to as isotropy. To say of time that it is isotropic is simply to say that every moment of time or time-location is formally indistinguishable from every other. In isotropic time, there are no privileged times, no moments uniquely full of history, no hours in which eternity breathes. Hence, it is only their time relations, not their absolute time location, that is significant about a sequence of events.

It was the secular physics of the seventeenth century, and its antecedents in the teachings of the ancient agnostic atomists, that introduced the notion of isotropic time. Religious time is radically anisotropic. According to Christian

eschatology, the flow of historical time is divided by a number of ontologically distinguished moments which segregate events in such a way that where one is located with regard to those moments determines entirely the existential status of one's being. I have in mind such moments as the Creation, the Fall, the Old Testament, or compact, made by God with Abraham, the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Jesus, when the Word is made flesh, fulfilling and super-ceding the Law, and the Last Trump, or end of time. Note — for this will become central to the development of my thesis — that the anisotropy of Christian time is intimately related to the narrative structure of the Christian story. Note also that here, as in the case of Kant's epistemology, intersubjectivity is preserved, for the story is God's story, and there is only one God, who is Lord and Creator of the universe.

Now let me turn to the apparently unrelated subject of fictional narrative, with particular attention to the ontological structure of the fictional worlds conjured, or, more precisely, created by those narratives. Think for a moment about the world brought to life in Edith Wharton's widely read novel, *Ethan Frome*.[6] The novel has a frame structure — it is a story within a story. The narrator undertakes to tell us about Ethan. His account of the events which constitute the story of the novel begins as he is stepping across the threshold of the Frome house. The entire inner story of the novel is told as he pauses, half in and half out of the door. When the tragic denouement has been revealed, he completes his step across the threshold, and the novel ends.

It is customary to assume that the 'location' of the novel is the western Berkshires in Massachusetts, roughly in the area between Springfield and Williamstown, and that the time is the early part of this century. But, of course, that is merely a manner of speaking, for this is a fictional narrative, and the events recounted stand in no causal or other relations to real places or events in the actual Berkshires of the early twentieth century. What is more (and this, if you will permit me a bit of crude finger-pointing, is the philosophically central idea of this entire discussion), the world of the novel, *Ethan Frome,* is ontologically, inherently perspectival. It is not simply *shown to us* from the narrator's point of view, so that, for example, the harshness of the winter or the timeless horror of the three souls trapped in that house are set center stage in the narrative. That world *exists* from the point of view of the narrator.

What do I mean when I say that the world *exists* from a point of view? I mean that the normal ontological relationship between representation and thing represented is reversed in a fictional world. In the real world, the object of our cognitive representations is ontologically prior to our representation of it. Truth is then conformity of representation to object, and perspective in representation is the consequence of the specificity of the spatio-temporal location from which the knowing mind apprehends what exists in isotropic space and time. Kant, as we have seen, inverts the ontological priority of representation and object of representations, but he restores the intersubjectivity and isotropy that are the two signal marks of the ontological priority of the object by his claim that the forms of intuition and conception are universal.

In a fictional world, however, the representations *bring the world into existence*. They are genuinely constitutive of that world. The narrator's account of Starkfield and those of its inhabitants whom he chooses to mention creates the world of *Ethan Frome*. Hence, the spatial, temporal, cultural, and linguistic perspectives of the narrator are constitutive of the structure of that fictional world. What the narrator tells us, and with what words, makes the world essentially what it is.

We are all familiar with these facts about fictional worlds, although we may not often bring them reflectively to mind. We understand that it is a confusion to wonder, for example, why Phineas Fogg never met Sherlock Holmes, or whether Raskolnikov would have struck up a friendship with Ivan Karamazov, had they met. It is equally confused, save as an independent literary and creative exercise, to ask how Pip looked to Miss Havisham, or what Nigger Jim's childhood was like. Such questions presuppose that the fictional world is ontologically prior to the narrative account of it, which account can then be called into question as incomplete, biased, (reprehensibly) perspectival. But although that supposition may be true for the real world (we shall consider that question presently), it is precisely *not* true for fictional worlds.

One more point about fictional worlds before I attempt to bring all this to bear on an analysis of the ontology of the human world. A fictional world is constituted by the words of the narrative. By intention in the fictions of a skillful novelist, and frequently unselfawares in such fictions as fairy tales, certain words, *as words*, take on a valence or power or significance in such a fashion that their appearance in the narrative objectively imbues certain places, times, events, objects, persons, or characteristics in that fictional world with special meaning. Dickens, for example, plays endlessly with the names of his characters as a way not of *revealing* but of *constituting* their nature. The Veneerings, Miss Murdstone, Ebenezer Scrooge, Lawyer Tulkinghorn, Herbert Pocket, and so forth.

Now, if a historian labels the economic, social, and technological changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an 'industrial revolution,' she is making a claim about their nature, asserting, we may suppose, that in the scope and depth of their effects they produced as great a change in Europe as the overthrow of the British or French monarchies. But when Dickens names a group of greedy poor relations the Pockets, he is thereby creating their distinctive trait by the act of naming.

The same thing is true, more subtly, with regard to the form of the narration. Where the author chooses to begin it, where he or she ends it, what is included and what omitted—all these are acts of creation and constitution, not acts of discovery or description. The fact that the world of *Tom Sawyer* has almost no significant positive adult male figures is an objective fact of that fictional world, *not*, as it would be if the book were a bit of social history, a fact about what aspects of that world the author has chosen to reveal to us.

Let me turn now to the nature of the human world, which, I shall suggest, has about it certain characteristics which ally it more closely with fictional worlds than with the spatio-temporally isotropic natural world.[7]

Let me begin with several passages by Dilthey from a draft for a critique of historical reason, published as part of his *Collected Works.* These words come from a subsection entitled simply "Awareness, reality: time."

[T]he parts of filled time are not only qualitatively different from each other but, quite apart from their content, have a different character according to whether we look from the present back to the past or forward to the future. Looking back we have a series of memory pictures graded according to their value for our consciousness and feelings. . . . When we look back at the past we are passive; it cannot be changed. . . . In our attitude to the future we are active and free. Here the category of reality which emerges from the present is joined by that of possibility. We feel that we have infinite possibilities. Thus the experience of time in all its dimensions determines the content of our lives. This is why the doctrine that time is merely ideal is meaningless in the human studies. We recollect past events because of time and temporality; we turn, demanding, active and free, towards the future. We despair of the inevitable, strive, work and plan for the future, mature and develop in the course of time.[8]

Although Dilthey's language is regrettably loose and imprecise, I think we can discern here a major philosophical break with the Kantian tradition, a break with extremely significant implications. The crux of the matter is the claim that moments in time "have a different character according to whether we look from the present back to the past or forward to the future." In short, human time, unlike the time of natural events, is anisotropic and perspectival. In the natural world, all moments in time have the same valence. It is only our arbitrary chronology that imposes a divided time line on the flow of events. What is more, the physical interactions of classical physics are all in principle reversible. But in the realm of human action, past and future are ontologically different. What is past can be recalled, savored, regretted, but not taken up as the object of intention, purpose, or action. What is future, by contrast, *can* be the object of a rational will. The distinction is not merely conventional, an artifact of the system of time measurement I am employing. It may be that I can, in imagination, situate myself in 44 B.C., but I do not thereby acquire the possibility of frustrating the attempt on Caesar's life.

Dilthey also calls attention to a second distinctive characteristic of human time, namely that it is organized by our affective and evaluative orientation toward the content of moments of time. The student of the natural world adopts an attitude of disinterested theoretical apprehension toward the events of the objective spatio-temporal order. She may be pleased or displeased by them — astronomers, we may suppose, have their favorites among the stars — but that affect plays no substantive role in the judgments she forms. Our experience of the human world, however, Dilthey clearly suggests, is in part constituted by our affective orientation.

This conclusion follows directly from his observation that it is as intentional, purposive, rational agents that we apprehend the human world. Since

purpose presupposes ends, toward which we adopt an evaluative attitude, it is clear that the very structure of the human world – its asymmetry, its perspectival existence from the standpoint of the active mind – is affectively organized. In short, what is condemned by natural science as primitive animism and a pathetic fallacy is legitimate and necessary in the study of the human world.

As an illustration of this point from one of the classical texts of modern social theory, consider Karl Mannheim's well-known analysis of the affective constitution of human time in the section of *Ideology and Utopia* titled "The Utopian Mentality." Mannheim, with considerable flair, undertakes to distinguish the chiliastic, liberal-humanitarian, conservative, and socialist-communist political ideologies by their orientation to time itself. A few passages will indicate the direction of Mannheim's thought:

> The Chiliastic mentality has. . .no sense for the process of becoming; it was sensitive only to the abrupt moment, the present pregnant with meaning. . . . The Chiliastic absolute experience of the 'now', which precludes any possibility of experiencing development does. . .serve the sole function of providing us with a qualitative differentiation of time. There are, according to this view, times that are pregnant with meaning and times that are devoid of meaning.
>
> The time sense of [the conservative] mode of experience and thought is completely opposed to that of liberalism. Whereas for liberalism the future was everything and the past nothing, the conservative mode of experiencing time found the best corroboration of its sense of determinateness in discovering the significance of the past, in the discovery of time as the creator of value. Duration did not exist at all for the chiliastic mentality, and existed for liberalism only in so far as henceforth it gives birth to progress. But for conservatism everything that exists has a positive and nominal value merely because it has come into existence slowly and gradually.[9]

As for the socialist-communist mentality, Mannheim observes that "time is experienced here as a series of strategic points. . . . It is not alone through the virtual presentness of every past event that every present experience embodies a third dimension which points back to the past, but it is also because the future is being prepared in it. It is not only the past but the future as well which has virtual existence in the present."[10]

Which of these conceptions of historical time, we might wonder, is the *correct* conception? What is historical time *really* like? The familiar liberal-humanitarian bias of modern social science leads us to suppose that historical time is *really* isotropic, smoothly flowing like the time of the natural sciences. The chiliastic, conservative, and socialist-communist conceptions might then be understood as ideological or utopian distortions of the truth in the service of class or party interests. But this view, as Mannheim makes clear, is profoundly mistaken.

Let us recall Kant's observation that time itself cannot be perceived. This is as true for historical as for natural time. Historical time is the order of historical events. If historical events are *constituted* as anisotropic – if the history of a

society has, in its very nature, distinguished moments, an asymmetrical structure, an orientation evaluatively determined—then the time of those events will *be* anisotropic, asymmetrical, affectively defined. It will not simply be that the members of that society *experience* their time in that way—much as schizophrenics subjectively *hear* voices. The time of the society's history will actually have that structure.

How can this be? The answer lies in the social character of human history. Max Weber introduced the notion of a 'social action' to capture the distinctive character and structure of the social, as opposed to either the natural or the individual. In *Economy and Society*, he explains that by a social action he means an intentional action which is oriented to the beliefs, expectations, intentions, and actions of others. As Weber says, "Not every type of contact of human beings has a social character. . . . For example, a mere collision of two cyclists may be compared to a natural event. On the other hand, their attempt to avoid hitting each other, or whatever insults, blows, or friendly discussion might follow the collision, would constitute 'social action.'"[11] In the full sense, social actions are acts of reciprocal orientations, in which the action *per se* is constituted by the shared expectations, evaluations—or, more generally, shared social meanings—by means of which the mutual orientation takes place. It goes without saying that social actions need in no sense be instances of harmony, cooperation, or rational agreement.

New let me introduce a bit of technical scholastic jargon—the Latin term *qua*. A hippopotamus is a mammal. But when I drop a hippopotamus from a helicopter, it does not fall *qua* mammal. That is to say, it does not fall in virtue of being a mammal. Its being a mammal is no part of the explanation for its falling. Rather, it falls in virtue of being, or insofar as it is, or *qua* heavier-than-air physical object. Were it a plaster cast hippopotamus, or a reptile masquerading as a hippopotamus, it would still fall. On the other hand, it *is qua* mammal that a hippopotamus bears its young live.

Consider a wedding ceremony, with minister, bride and groom, family and friends, all gathered for, and participating in, a social action essentially constituted by the reciprocal orientations that Weber calls 'social actions'. The flowers decorating the altar cannot be said, strictly speaking, to be present at the wedding *per se*, at the wedding *qua* wedding, for the flowers do not share a reciprocal orientation with the members of the wedding party. I wish to argue that it is also strictly correct to say that an uncomprehending anthropologist from a distant land or a visitor from another planet cannot be said to be present at the wedding *qua* wedding. To be sure, the wedding has a spatial location in physical space and also a temporal location in physical time. It would therefore be possible to construe the wedding purely as a natural event, noting, for example, the gravitational interactions between the bride's bouquet and the dust in the aisle or measuring the slight rise in temperature in the locality during the time of the event. But just as the hippopotamus does not obey the laws of motion of falling bodies *qua* hippopotamus, so these physical aspects of the wedding are not characteristics of it *qua* wedding.

The wedding as wedding exists in and through the shared meanings of the participants, and also of all the other members of the society through whose reciprocal orientation, directly or indirectly, weddings as social institutions and events have their being.

Social actions are grounded in normative mutual orientations which arise out of the purposiveness and affectivity of human life. A wedding has a normative structure which allows us, as participant observers, to judge that it has been conducted well or badly, successfully or unsuccessfully. What is more, a wedding is an objectively happy event, full of forward-looking promise and hope. Hence, an unhappy wedding – and, of course, there are such – is experienced objectively, not merely statistically, as an anomaly. That is to say, an unhappy wedding exhibits the same inner contradiction that we find in a man who sighs forlornly and announces that he is happy.

As many social theorists have observed, we naturally – I would maintain, inevitably – experience social roles, categories, and institutions as objective, existing independently of our choices or wishes in exactly the same way that trees, mountains, chemical reactions, or insects exist independently of our cognition and volition. Dilthey calls this phenomenon, rather quaintly, 'objectifications of spirit'.[12] Ask a little girl what she wants to be when she grows up, and she will invariably respond with the label of a social role (doctor, bus driver, president, saint) which she, and we, conceive to be the name of an objectively existing category.

Five facts about this universal phenomenon of objectification are relevant to my discussion here.

First, the objectification of social roles and categories *mis*represents the reality, which is that they are human products – for the most part originally intentional and deliberate products, but subsequently experienced as given, rather than as constructed.

Second, the process of construction and objectification is social or collective rather than individual. No one – not even the world-historical individual, if there ever was such a one – creates a social role himself or herself, and no one can, alone, carry through the process of objectification.[13]

Third, because social categories are collective *human* products, because they are the objectifications of purposive agents, they are intrinsically normative. Built into any social role or category are norms, purposes, intentions, and evaluations. Those who occupy the roles can embrace the evaluative structure of the role, resist it, play off against it, vary it, but they cannot avoid engaging with it in some way, because that structure is part of what the role *is*. In this way, social roles are entirely different from physical objects. A rock or stick has no purpose. It can be used for a variety of purposes, but it has no intrinsic purpose. Even an artifact which has been crafted for a human purpose does not bear that purpose within it. When I use a scalpel to open mail or a book to prop open a door, there is no objective contradiction between the *proper* purpose of the artifact and the *deviant* use to which I have put it. But when a doctor uses his skill to torture patients rather than to cure them, he violates the intrinsic normative

structure of the role he is filling. To be a doctor in our society *is* to aim at relieving pain rather than at causing it. That is the element of truth in Plato's account or *technés* in the *Gorgias*.

Fourth, because the 'objectifications of spirit' are collective, they are inevitably historical. The objectification occurs as the structures of interaction are reproduced, day by day, and passed on from one generation to the next. The history of a social role or category is part of what it is—not simply of what has made it what it is. The way in which this carrying-along of collective memory takes place is by the process of personality development and enculturation through which infants become members of a society. To develop a coherently formed ego requires the internalization of a structure of social roles and categories which define who and what he is—and which, through the shaping of instinctual energies, determines even the *style* in which one desires, wills, reasons, or despairs.[14]

Finally, because who one is is a consequence, in large measure, of what normatively organized social roles one has internalized, because there is no coherently formed natural man or natural woman beneath a scrim of civilization who could stand back and achieve an objective cognitive or evaluative perspective on one's society, it follows that the perspectival, evaluative orientation to society and history in which each of us is embedded simply *is* social reality. Once one becomes reflectively aware of the nature of social reality, one can choose to alter one's social role, one's identifications, indeed even one's society. But every change is a change *within* a social context, not a step *out of* a social context. There have been many attempts in the history of philosophical analysis of the human world to find a way of achieving that evaluatively neutral, ahistorical extrication from the constraints of social reality. Among the most recent is John Rawls's "original position under the veil of ignorance," which is self-consciously a bracketing of precisely those perspectival aspects of our self-understanding. What Rawls neglects to notice is that by dint of this bracketing, he has accomplished also an abstraction from precisely the *social* in human experiencing, with the result that he has merely produced one more instance of what Marx, in a lovely turn of phrase, called "Robinsonades."

Let me now try to pull together the various strands of this discussion in some coherent form. What I wish to maintain is that the history of a society is a collective narrative, constituted by the members of the society as they construct their historical time through their projects, recollections, myths, and memories, and through 'objectifications of the spirit' in social, economic, and political institutions. The shared social meanings *are* the society, and the temporal organization of those meanings *is* their history.

Thus, to ask whether scientific inquiry—in the realm of the social—is, can be, or should be undertaken from positions of ethical and political neutrality is to ask whether there is a transcultural, transsocial privileged narrative standpoint from which one could retell the story of a society *objectively*. Alternatively, it is to ask whether there are translation rules enabling us to transform one historical account into another, from a different narrative

perspective, without loss or distortion of information. My answer to this question is obviously, no. Every narration is, to use the term that the French so like, 'guilty'.

If objective social science is intrinsically impossible, what then are we to make of the normative debates that rage in the human sciences? Are they simply confusions? Dialectical efforts to advance what Charles Stevenson called 'persuasive definitions'? Crosscultural failures of communication?

I think it might be useful, at least up to a point, to construe such debates as struggles over control of the narrative voice in the story of a society. As Kant reminds us, it is the transcendental unity of apperception, the 'I think' that attaches to every proposition, that is the ground of the unity of the experienced world — a proposition incredible with regard to the natural world, but very close to the truth with regard to the human world. Very often, social and political struggles take the form of fights over which groups shall play a role in the telling of a society's story.

For example, the disputes between feminist and establishment historians in recent American historiography can be viewed not as disagreements over what actually happened in the past but rather as struggles over who shall tell the story of, and thereby constitute the nature of, the collective past of the American people. The same struggle has been waged for some time now by Black historians, just as, at an earlier time, it was waged by regionalists who struggled against the historiographic hegemony of the New England Puritan voice. The nodal moments in the time line of American history are reconstituted by the intrusion of new voices into the story-telling that is a collective culture.

Is there an 'original position', an 'ideal communicative situation', in which the historical truth can be voiced and rational principles of action enunciated? Is there a *correct* account, a suitable voice, one standpoint, perhaps encapsulating all the others, from which the story of the United States, or of any nation, can be told objectively? The answer is clearly no. For whose voice would that be? And where would he or she or they be standing?

There is a powerful tradition, going back at least to Plato, which seeks an objective, impartial standpoint from which to make political judgments or launch political actions. The attempts to derive a theory of the just state from cognition of eternal forms, to deduce it from an analysis of rational agency as such, to extract it from a model of a bargaining game among rational agents, or even to base it on a claim about the objective movement of history are all doomed to fail, for they all rest on the false supposition that there is a transhistorical, transcultural perspective from which we can grasp the nature of human nature, history, and society as they *really* are. Over and over, in some form or other, philosophers appeal to the image of the ideal observer, the impartial judge — in Lucretius' evocative image, the observer high on a hill, above the plain on which the battle is being fought.[15] But if the arguments of this discussion are sound, none of these attempts can possibly succeed.

What, then, are the implications for political action? If the stance of the judge, the impartial observer, is impossible to achieve, from what position

should we launch into the struggle? Clearly, the answer is that we can only adopt, and hence must adopt, the stance of the *partisan*. A true story from my experiences at Columbia University during the student uprising of 1968 will help to explain. I was, at that time, deeply committed to the proposition that there are objective, universal principles of morality and society, a claim which I was struggling to explicate and justify both in my political writings, such as *In Defense of Anarchism*, and in my commentary on Kant's ethical theory, *The Autonomy of Reason*. One of my students was a serious, intense member of the Communist Party who divided such time as he could take from his studies between proselytizing on campus and organizing in a local factory. He challenged me to defend my belief in objective moral principles, and lacking good arguments, I tried to turn the question against him. If you don't believe that there are truths to be discovered in morals, I asked him, then on what do you base your own deep commitments in politics? He answered, somewhat like a parent explaining elementary matters to a child, that it all comes down to which side you are on. You have to make a choice, and after that, you will know who your friends and allies are, and whose interests you are prepared to fight for.

At the time, his reply struck me as hopelessly simple-minded — a refusal to face hard questions of justification and first principles. After almost two decades of reflection, I have concluded that in this, as in so much, my students have a great deal to teach me.

Political action grows out of felt needs, and out of identification with groups of men and women whose goals, needs, and demands one takes as one's own. By the time I begin to think about politics (or ethics, for that matter), I am already a historically and socially situated person whose self has been formed by identifications, internalizations, sympathies, and antipathies with other individuals and groups. Political deliberation consists partly in attempting to decide how (and whether) to advance the interests or projects of those with whom one identifies, and partly in reflective consideration of the soundness, the wisdom, the suitability of those identifications.

Depending on whom one is talking to, political debate is either a discussion with one's comrades about what is to be done, or an effort to find common ground with those whose overlapping commitments and identifications provide some possibility for persuasion, or else a form of non-physical combat in which the aim is to wound and defeat, not make common cause with or persuade, one's antagonist.

To this position, which can truly be described as banal in its manifest obviousness, it is frequently objected that if there is no firmer foundation for politics than shared identifications and sympathies, then there is nothing we can say to the committed Nazi or the historically and socially embedded Afrikaaner. If by this the objector means that we can find no arguments that will persuade the Nazi to give up Nazism and the Afrikaaner to give up Apartheid, that is certainly true, but scarcely relevant. Has anyone ever been so foolish as to imagine that she could legitimately act against Nazism only after she had found an argument that would persuade a Nazi (or even a 'rational' Nazi)?

But perhaps the objection means, How can I justify *to myself* acting against Apartheid if my opposition to it is 'merely' an expression of my identification

with Black, Colored, and Indian South Africans (or, if I myself am Black, Colored, or Indian, an expression of my own interest in the defeat of Apartheid). If 'justification' consists in locating an objective, impartial standpoint from which any person, merely *qua* rational agent, would judge the opposing of Apartheid to be the right action, then justification is impossible since no such standpoint exists. If 'justification' means persuading my compatriots that this is the proper action, then justification will involve the usual sorts of strategic, tactical, factual, and purposive considerations which are the substance of real political discussion and with which anyone who has been at all active politically is familiar.

Nothing more can be obtained, nothing more is needed, and nothing more ought, therefore, to be sought.

NOTES

1. If 'one ought' implies 'one can', then 'one cannot' implies 'it is not the case that one ought', but that is not quite the same as 'one ought not', for this latter form of words carries with it the implication that one ought not even try. It is certainly possible to argue that one ought to try to investigate the human world from a position of ethical and political neutrality, even if one is doomed to fail, but I shall not undertake a refutation of *that* claim in this essay.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* translated by N. Kemp Smith (New York, 1961), A 125.

3. Ibid., A 126.

4. Ibid., B 219.

5. For a demonstration of this claim, see R. P. Wolff, "Remarks on the Relation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to Kant's Ethical Theory," in *New Essays on Kant,* edited by Bernard den Ouden and Marcia Moen (New York, 1987), 139–54.

6. Cf. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words* (New York, 1977), 159–84.

7. I have read a shorter version of this essay to a number of audiences, and almost invariably someone will observe, during the discussion afterward, that the study of the physical world does not in fact possess the objectivity which I attribute to it, and which I am contrasting with the perspectival character of the study of the human world. I must confess that I am, when it comes to the study of nature, an unreconstructed realist, but since that conviction is not part of my argument, the reader should feel free to substitute a different conception of our relationship to the physical world, particularly if that makes it easier to accept my thesis.

8. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings,* edited, translated, and introduced by H. P. Rickman (Cambridge, 1976), 209–10.

9. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia,* translated by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York, 1936), 225–26, 235.

10. Ibid., 244, 246.

11. Max Weber, *Economy and Society,* translated by Ephraim Fischoff et al. (Berkeley, 1979), 23. I have read this brief passage a hundred times, and I still cannot tell whether Weber is deliberately satirizing the German mentality or intends the example seriously.

12. Dilthey, *Selected Writings,* 191–95, the section entitled "The Objectifications of Life [*Geist*]."

13. See, for example, the compressed but elegant development of this idea in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y., 1966).

14. The deepest and most graceful exposition of this theme of which I am aware can be found in Michael Oakeshott's essay "Rational Conduct," in *Rationalism in Politics* (New York, 1962).

15. Cf. *De rerum natura,* Book II, opening lines.