**The Foundations of Narrative**

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1 Introduction

I knew Peter Goldie for many years, originally when he was still a financier and philosophy was one of his enthusiasms, rather than the vocation it later became. In time we became close friends. We would talk about many things, both inside and outside philosophy. We shared a lot of attitudes, and diverged on others, in about the right proportions for conversation to be great fun.

In philosophy, our discussions would have a characteristic shape. Some feature of human life would be at issue—personality, remorse, sport, moral value, sadness, fiction—the list was long. We would try to identify the essence of the thing. But where Peter would look upwards, as I thought of it, I wanted to dig down. I was curious about evolutionary origins, individual variations, cerebral mechanisms, the nuts and bolts of how things worked. By contrast, Peter was interested in the role of our chosen topic in human affairs. He wanted to know why it mattered, what difference it made to our lives. When we drew on intellectual resources from outside philosophy, as we often did, I would look to cognitive science and biology, while Peter would turn to literature and history.

Neither of us ever thought of our divergent perspectives as in competition. We could see that there was room for both approaches, and indeed that the two complemented each other. There is little point to knowing how things work without understanding why they matter, or indeed vice versa. I would like to think that we learned from each other. I certainly know that I learned a lot from Peter.

In this paper I want to add my perspective to some of the things Peter says about narrative in his last book, The Mess Inside. Peter was fascinated not only by the narrative structure of fiction, but also by the way that narrative understanding shapes our lives. In the book he highlights the range of possibilities offered by narrative, such as shifts in perspective, dramatic irony, and free indirect style, and also the characteristic structure that narration lends to events. For Peter these aspects of narrative were not just artefacts of literary convention, but materials that all of us use to make sense of our lives.

I think that Peter was quite right about all this. What I would like to add is a more general account of the cognitive structures and abilities that underlie the aspects of narrative that Peter appeals to. Central to this account will be what I shall call the construction of histories, by which I mean nothing more that the characteristic human practice of mapping the spatiotemporal locations of past events—that is, of forming representations that locate past events not only geographically, but also in time, by their temporal relations to each other.

In discussing our ability to appreciate shifting narrative perspectives, Peter said “usually we take all this for granted, as it comes to us so easily” (The Mess Inside 30). I think the same about our ability to construct histories. This is so basic a human ability that we do not stop to think about it. It seems as unremarkable as breathing. But in fact it is a complex and sophisticated phenomenon. Other animals do not do it, and humans only manage it at a relatively advanced age. In fact it is a complex cultural achievement, and deserves to be recognized as such.

Once we appreciate the construction of histories for what it is, we will see that many of the aspects of narrative that Peter was interested in are upshots of this more basic ability. The central features of narrative fall directly out of the basic human ability to construct histories.

To repeat, I do not intend my emphasis on the construction of histories to invalidate any of the points that Peter made about narrative and its importance for human life. On the contrary, my view is that we will be all the better placed to understand these points and appreciate their importance, once we see how they are corollaries of certain more basic features of our thinking.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. In the next section I shall consider the construction of histories and compare it with some more basic cognitive abilities present in non-human animals and infants. The following three sections will then assess some standard ideas about human memory against this background. In section 6 I shall show how many features of narrative emerge straight from the construction of histories. A final section will then consider some additional aspects of narrative that call for further explanation.

2 The Construction of Histories

As I said, the human ability to construct histories is so familiar that it escapes attention. There is plenty of philosophical and other discussion of literary narrative, of narrative theories of personal identity, and so on. But behind these more refined issues lies a far more basic human ability to string together the events of our lives into an historical sequence, into an awareness of what happened at successive times in the past. This ability comes so easily to us that we do not stop to think about it. As a result we can fail to appreciate the ways in which it contributes to more sophisticated abilities.

It might seem that there is little to say here. Isn’t it obvious how we construct our histories? As we go through life we undergo a sequence of sensory experiences. Subsequently we can replay those experiences in imaginative memory. So as we move through life we build up a record of what has happened, in the form of a temporally ordered library of sensory memories. The metaphor of a video recording seems apt. We have a stored video of our waking hours, and we can search this to recall incidents from our past when we need to.

But this familiar line of thought obscures any number of complexities. The ability to replay experiences imaginatively is one thing. Ordering them into a timeline is another. There is plenty of reason to think that many animals are capable of the former. But only humans can do anything like the latter, and even for them it does not come entirely naturally.

To get these issues into focus, it will be helpful to turn away from temporal ordering for a moment, and first consider the analogous abilities of animals and humans to represent the location of things in space.

There is good evidence that many animals have some kind of memory for places. For simple animals, such spatial information will be represented in egocentric ‘viewpoint’ form (Wang and Spelke 2002). That is, the memory will be of how things were arranged in relation to the viewer’s body, as lying to the left or to the right, or closer or further away. This is the format in which sensory experience presents things, and the format which immediately guides action.

However, on its own such egocentric viewpoint information is of limited utility. In principle, an animal could ‘update’ its information in egocentric format as it changes position and orientation, using ‘dead reckoning’ of its past movements to infer how things will egocentrically appear from its new perspective, so to speak. But such a system would be both inflexible and laborious. Apart from any other difficulties, every new step would literally require a new coding for each feature of any represented scene.

Given these points, it is not surprising that there is ample evidence that many animals also represent the arrangement of objects in space ‘allocentrically’, that is, in a format that abstracts away from the perspective of an observer, and presents objects as related to each other in such observer-independent ways as to north or south of, or east or west of (Burgess 2006). This kind of representation is much more economical, as the only updating required as an animal moves around is to keep track of its position and orientation in the allocentric map, or to reidentify its stance anew using landmarks. Using such an allocentric map, plus information about its present position and orientation, the animal can then construct an egocentric representation of items in its environment when this is needed for action.

Now, how about locating events in time? In truth, time is a fourth dimension alongside the three spatial dimensions, and events can be located allocentrically at points in this four-dimensional spatiotemporal framework, just as objects can be located allocentrically at points in the three-dimensional spatial framework. And this indeed is how we mature modern humans think about the world and our roles in it. We arrange all past events of interest to us in a great big spatiotemporal map, an impersonal representation of where those events stand in relation to each other, not just in space but also in time. This is what I mean by the ‘construction of histories’—the ability to map history in an objective allocentric format.

Still, as I said, this ability is not to be taken for granted. It is illuminating in this connection to consider whether any non-animals represent events allocentrically in time, as well as in space.

There is evidence that animals have what have been called ‘episode-like’ memories for past events (Eacott and Easton 2010). This terminology of ‘episode-like’ is meant to contrast with ‘episodic’ memory, one supposed aspect of human memory. I shall have some things to say about human ‘episodic memory’ in the next two sections. For now we need only note that episode-like memory refers to the ability of animals to recall some previous incident as occurring in the past and guide their behaviour accordingly. For example, western scrub jays can remember the period elapsed since they cached items of food, rats can recall how long ago they explored some maze, and pigeons can remember what action they last performed in certain experimental protocols.

Now, while these abilities might plausibly be taken to show that animals are capable of replaying past experiences in sensory imagination, this is clearly a long way short of placing those experiences allocentrically at points in some historical dimension. Even if the recalled experiences are tagged as having occurred at some distance in the past, this is only to represent then in egocentric relation to the present moment, and therefore to represent them in a way that needs constant updating as time passes and the event in question recedes from the present. There is no evidence that animals represent temporal events in any more objective way, as related to each other, and not just to the present, by allocentric relations like n days before or m years after.

Indeed, if one thinks about it, it is not clear what use animals might have for such representations. There is no doubt that allocentric representation of the past is far more economical that the egocentric alternative if one needs to record the temporal positions of events in relation to each other. But what use would animals have for such information? It is not as if they can move between events in time. Animals have plenty of use for allocentric spatial maps, since these enable them to figure out how to find their way to desired locations from any given starting point. But since there is no question of animals finding their way to desired times, they have no obvious need for allocentric temporal maps.

For those familiar with McTaggart’s distinction between the temporal ‘A series’ and ‘B series’ (Markosian 2014 section 5), we can put the point like this. Some non-human animals seem to be capable of locating previously experienced events in A-series terms, as having occurred at a certain time before the present. But they have no obvious need for B-series representations, which represent events as occurring so much earlier or later than other events located in time. In line with this, there is no evidence that any non-human animals do employ B-series representations.

These points about non-human animals are confirmed by the development of corresponding abilities in human children. While human children arguably display episode-like memories and related abilities within the first two years of life, the ability to represent past events allocentrically as occurring at specific points in time comes much later.

There is good evidence that human infants under two can recall episodes from their recent past. From an early age they can perform ‘delayed imitation’ tasks, in which they repeat behaviour that they observed on some earlier occasion. In addition, there is evidence that young infants have some elements of a concept of self, being able to recognize themselves in mirrors in a way that most animals cannot. (Howe et al 2003.) Together these lines of evidence suggest that, even before two, children are capable of recalling past events, and perhaps of thinking of these as things that happened to them, so to speak.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, as we have seen, the occurrence of such episode-like memories does not require anything like an ability to construct histories, in the sense of representing events as occurring at observer-independent times. And indeed there is no evidence that children form any such historical representations until much later ages. Even after they can talk, young children need to be prompted and encouraged before they are able independently to specify the temporal location of previously experienced events. Full competence in these respects only arrives at the ages of 5-6 years. (Nelson 1993.)

Some cognitive scientists maintain that all the materials for ‘autobiographical memory’ are available at a much earlier age, and that the role of parental linguistic instruction is merely to show the infants how to express the objective historical information that they already have. (Howe et al 2003.) But this underestimates the extent to which the construction of histories requires a theoretical framework which there is no reason to suppose that infants will develop without cultural input. The infants need to be shown that they can think of time as another dimension, akin to the three spatial dimensions, and that they can locate events in this dimension, as they can locate objects in space. The comparative evidence suggests none of this is present in any other animals, and indeed that other animals have no need of it. It looks as if the construction of histories is a distinctive human achievement, and one that calls for a significant element of cultural input in childhood.[[2]](#footnote-2)

3 Memory and History

Cognitive scientists standardly divide human memory into procedural memory, episodic memory and semantic memory.

Procedural memory involves practical knowledge. Thus I might remember how to hit a backhand slice, or how to tie my shoelaces. This kind of memory is not relevant to our current concerns, and will not be discussed further.

Episodic memory and semantic memory together constitute ‘declarative’ memory, that is, memory with factual content. Episodic memory is then distinguished as the kind of experiential memory that allows us to rehearse past events in sensory terms, as when I remember first meeting someone, or remember scoring a goal. Semantic memory, by contrast, is the kind of memory of facts that does not involve experiential rehearsal, as when I remember that Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, or that the stock market collapsed in 2008.

Let me deal with one issue immediately. There is a sense in which ‘remembering’ is simply the other side of the coin of ‘knowing’. For any item of information that you knew at some given time, we can raise the question of whether you remember it at some later time. Do you remember the atomic weight of carbon? Do you remember your mother’s maiden name? The issue here is whether an item of information, once it has got into your head, so to speak, manages to remain there in a retrievable form. Memory in this sense is neutral both as to the source of knowledge (which could be observation, inference, or testimony) and the content (which may concern abstract and timeless matters, as well as historical ones).

Perhaps there are important things to say about memory in this general sense of retention of any kind of knowledge. But here I want to focus on a more specific topic, namely memory in the sense of the acquisition and retention of information about what happened on specific occasions in the past—that is, on the construction of histories in the sense outlined in the last section. It is this kind of memory that will help us to understand the structure of narrative.

Now that we have distinguished episodic from semantic memory, it might seem natural to ascribe the former a more central role in the construction of histories. After all, episodic memory might be thought of as offering us a direct window onto the past, a kind of observation at a temporal distance, akin to observation of things that are spatially removed from us. This conception of episodic memory goes naturally with the ‘video recording’ model of memory. We observe the past by accessing the relevant section of the stored recording.

However, I want to resist any such privileging of episodic memory. One issue here is whether some sort of special epistemological authority attaches to information that can be accessed via sensory recall. I rather doubt this, and shall comment on this issue further in the next section. But even if some such authority were granted, the point remains that episodic memory is just one among a number of different resources that we use to construct histories.

We should remember that, whatever the epistemological status of sensory recall, the ability so to recall some past episode does not by itself suffice to locate that episode in the historical record. This is because of the point, emphasized in the last section, that infants and animals can arguably recall past experiences while lacking the intellectual wherewithal to place them in a historical sequence. A two-year old toddler may be able to recall swimming, say, and indeed be aware of this as something that it itself experienced not so long ago, yet quite lack the intellectual apparatus to think of it as something that occurred a week after it first went to nursery school.

In the article where he first coined the term ‘episodic memory’, Endel Tulving specified that ‘episodic memory receives and stores information about temporally dated episodes and events, and temporal-spatial relations among those events’ (1972 385). This makes it clear that, for Tulving at least, mere replay is not yet episodic memory. We only have something worth calling episodic memory if we can integrate the information we get from sensory recall into a richer framework of events strung out along the temporal dimension.

Once we appreciate that sensory recall needs such augmentation before it can contribute to the construction of histories, we can also recognize that it is just one among a range of resources which provide us with information about past events and allow us to place them in a temporal framework.

Other means to the same end are inference and testimony. I might infer that you arrived home before me because the lights are on, or that it rained last night because there are puddles on the path. An even more fertile source of information about the past is testimony. You tell me that Jane met John last week. I learn from the newspaper that Arsenal played at home yesterday.

We piece together our histories from disparate sources, using all kinds of information to weave to the materials of the past into a coherent sequence. For example, I might sensorily recall some party where you wore a red dress, and you might then testify that you bought that dress in New York, and from this I might draw inferences about when the party could have happened. We are constantly working in this way to arrange the materials of our lives into a temporal order.

4 Autobiographical Memory

Peter Goldie agreed about the diversity of sources that contribute to the constructions of our histories:

‘My contention is that diverse kinds of remembering of one’s past characteristically get pulled together in autobiographical narrative remembering—semantic memories, all sorts of experiential memories, traces of thought and imagination, fragments of “flashbulb” memory, almost dreamlike sequences that flit through one’s mind from time to time, perhaps many of them hardly reaching a level of conscious awareness, and much else besides’ (The Mess Inside 44).

There is one aspect of this quotation, however, that does not fit particularly well with the picture I have been developing. Peter, along with many others, thought of each individual’s construction of a history as a matter of autobiographical remembering. I agree with Peter that the construction of histories draws on many kinds of disparate sources. But I see no good reason to think of the resulting histories as ‘autobiographical’.

One point here relates to the ‘auto’. Why think of the construction of histories as an individual enterprise? The work required to keep track of past incidents and order them in time will typically be distributed through larger social units—families, tribes, villages, nations. As a rule, single individuals will lack the information needed to construct anything more than a fragmentary map of the past. But by pooling resources they will be able to fill in many of the gaps. We will do well to think of histories as in the first instance the possessions of social groups, rather than of individuals.

But this is not the main point I want to make about ‘autobiographical’ memory. Even if histories are possessed by groups in the first instance, it remains the case that individuals will each work with some more particular version of those histories, tailored to their needs and interests; and to that extent we can think of these as ‘auto’ histories, owned by particular individuals, as it were. But even if each individual has an ‘auto’ story in this sense, why think of these stories as ‘biographies’?

The idea, presumably, is that all individuals will each have a story in which they are the central character, starting with their early life and running until they are no longer capable of forming memories. But this is a bad way of looking at things. The histories we each possess extend beyond the incidents of our own lives, and feature many other characters, including families, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and prominent figures we have never met. We will naturally aim to keep track of interactions between all these individuals, including episodes where we were not ourselves present, or even incidents that happened before we were born. Of course, in the natural course of events we are likely to be particularly interested in one particular character, namely our own selves. But this needn’t make the story a biography, any more that an account of code-breaking at Bletchley Park need be a biography of Alan Turing.

No doubt some individuals’ histories are more biographical than others. People differ in the extent to which they are self-centred (the term makes the point perfectly). Some people are interested only in events in which they are directly involved, to the exclusion of pretty much everything else. But others are more self-effacing, worrying about their families and communities as much as themselves, and thinking of themselves as primarily elements of larger units. It is possible that there are cultural differences in these respects. Modern industrial societies may foster a focus on the self, where more traditional societies encourage individuals to think of their own histories against a backdrop of clan or tribe.

I presume that the widespread tendency to think of individual memory as autobiographical is fostered by the ‘video recording model’ of memory. If you think of memories as primarily an accumulating library of the way you experienced incidents in the past, then you will naturally conclude that your stock of memories is autobiographical through and through. It will be like a film shot from a camera located between your eyes, and so will contain nothing but incidents in your own life represented from your own point of view.

But this is a bad reason for thinking of memory as essentially autobiographical. Even if we put semantic memories to one side for a moment, and focus on the sensory replay of past events in episodic memories, we should recognize that the structure of episodic memory often works actively to represent the experiencing subject as just one among an objective cast of other agents.

It is a striking fact that episodic memories often portray events from an observer rather than a field perspective (Nigro and Neisser 1983). An episodic memory uses the ‘observer’ perspective when it portrays the experiencing subject from the outside, as if the subject were being observed. For example, I might remember attending a dinner party by visualising the scene as it would have been filmed by a camera some distance from the table, with me appearing as one of the people sitting around the table. A ‘field’ memory, by contrast, will portray a scene as it appeared from the subject’s position, shot from between the eyes, as it were, and so omitting the subject as such.

Why do we often remember events from the outside observer perspective, representing ourselves as part of the scene, as opposed to representing the scene as we observed it? At first sight, this can seem surprising. Why do we recreate past events, not as we actually experienced them, but as they would have been experienced by a third party observing the scene from the outside?

However, from the theoretical point of view I have been developing in this paper, observer versions of episodic memories are just what we should expect. As we have seen, episodic memory, properly so-called, is not just a replay of earlier experiences. Animals and infants can replay experiences, but have no real awareness of history. To form proper historical memories, we have to take the raw materials of sensory recall, and use them to form a representation of something that occurred at a certain location in the objective spatiotemporal order and involving various interacting individuals. A representation of this kind will inevitably portray things from an observer’s perspective, showing the remembering subject as one among the various different agents involved in the episode. From my theoretical point of view, it is field memories that are anomalous, rather than observer memories. They look like raw material for the historical record, rather than the finished article.

In line with this, it is noteworthy that observer memories become more prevalent as events recede into the past (Nigro and Neisser 1983). Recent events tend to be recalled in field format, whereas temporally more distant events tend to be represented in observer format. We can take this to show that the placing of events in the historical record requires significant cognitive work, and that by no means all experiences are subject to this treatment. Those events which do make their way into the historical record, and so can be recalled from a distance, will tend to be those that have been rearranged into observer format.

5 Sensory Reconstruction

Is there not an element of falsification in observer memories, in presenting past events from a perspective different from the one originally occupied by the rememberer? I see no reason to say this. As we have seen, the job of memory, properly understood, is to place descriptions of events appropriately in the historical record, not to replay some analogue of a video recording. There is nothing to stop observer memories doing this. A third person representation from the observer perspective can be a perfectly accurate record of what happened. Indeed, the observer perspective would seem essential for a full recording of those incidents in which the rememberer played a significant interactive role.

It is interesting to compare observer memories with the common use of sensory imagery to

embellish ‘semantic’ records of past events at which the rememberers were not themselves present. For instance, when I think of Don Bradman’s last test innings, I visualise Eric Hollies tossing up a good-length googly and Bradman playing outside it. But of course I wasn’t there. I have simply imagined the scene, on the basis of the many graphic descriptions I have read. But in this case too I see no reason to disparage my way of remembering how Bradman was dismissed as inaccurate. There is no reason to doubt that my imagery is faithful to the actual event, and as such an entirely appropriate way to represent it.

Of course, there would be an element of misrepresentation if I took my visual imagery of Bradman’s dismissal somehow to indicate that I was present at the occasion. But the mere fact that I represent this event visually does not in itself lay claim to my having been there. After all, this is not a peculiar case. It is quite normal for people to use sensory images to think about events that they know perfectly well they have only learned about via testimony or inference.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Of course there is a real difference between episodic memories of events resulting from our actual presence and sensory portrayals of events we know about only indirectly. The casual routes by which we arrive at these two kinds of sensory depictions are different. In the former cases, our sensory imagery will be a causal upshot of our original sensory experiences of the event in question, whereas in the latter it will be constructed on the basis of various kinds of non-sensory information.

Moreover, everyday language makes a clear linguistic distinction between these cases. I can say that I remember Mike Gatting being bowled by Shane Warne’s ‘ball of the century’, since I was actually watching at the time[[4]](#footnote-4), but not that I remember Bradman being bowled by Hollies. Even if my visual imagery in the two cases is quite analogous, the right way to describe my Bradman knowledge is to say that I remember that Bradman was bowled by Hollies.

While this terminology certainly marks a real difference, it seems to me that everyday thought is in danger of overestimating its significance. I have been arguing that the important thing about memory is the way it contributes to the construction of histories. With respect to this purpose, genuine episodic memories and sensory representations of indirectly known events can function quite analogously. They can both represent past events perfectly accurately using the resources afforded by sensory imagery.

Perhaps the reason that everyday thought marks the difference so sharply is that genuine episodic memories are more reliable than sensory representations of indirectly known events. We need to mark the difference, so the thought might go, because we can trust our sensory information about events we have actually observed, by contrast with our unreliable sensory reconstructions of events we know about only via testimony or inference.

But, if this is the rationale for marking the distinction, it is arguably quite misguided. There is now a wealth of evidence that sensory representations of previously observed events are highly unreliable. Eyewitnesses will often feel fully confident about their observational reports, but independent tests show that they are often wrong. Of the first 100 prisoners exonerated in the USA because of DNA evidence, 75% were wrongly convicted on the basis of mistaken eyewitness testimony (Wells and Olson 2003). Even in cases where the significance of the event is exceptional, sensory memories are frequently misleading (Neisser and Harsch 1992).

Cases like these suggest that many aspects of sensory representations of previously observed events are not caused by the earlier experiences themselves, but are rather themselves embellishments based on assumption and inference. Given this, we might wonder whether the everyday distinction between genuine episodic memories and later sensory reconstructions is as clear-cut as it initially seems. Even in the case of events we have actually observed, cognitive work is required to place sensory images in the historical record, and as a consequence there is plenty of room for error to intrude. Of course, we can still distinguish in principle between those sensory images that derive casually from earlier experiences of the relevant event and those that do not. But this distinction proves to be of little practical use in determining which memory reports are accurate and which fallacious.

It seems likely that everyday thought privileges episodic memory because it is attached to the notion of ‘autobiographical’ memory and the associated ‘video recording’ model. It thinks of episodic sensory memory as a kind of direct replay of what was observed in the past, and so feels highly confident of its deliverances. By contrast, sensory imagery deriving from other sources is regarded as tendentious, speculative and unreliable.

We will do well to distance ourselves from everyday ideas about autobiographical memory. In truth all memory is a complex achievement, yielding sophisticated representations of events strung out in time. The idea that certain sensory memories offer a direct window to the past is a myth that should be jettisoned.

6 The Structure of Narrative

I now want to relate some of the points I have made about memory and the construction of histories to Peter Goldie’s discussion of narrative in The Mess Inside. In that book, Peter started with the structure of narrative, and used it to illuminate various features of human life. My suggestion is that the structure of narrative can itself be explained in terms of the construction of histories.

The first chapter of The Mess Inside specifies what narratives are: roughly, linguistic or mental representations that rehearse a sequence of events from a perspective that imposes a meaningful structure on them. The subsequent chapters then explore the many ways that narratives in this sense matter to human life. They enable us to comprehend our pasts and our futures, they help us to deal with distress and to come to terms with our failings, and they assist in shaping our sense of ourselves—though at the same time there is always the possibility that real life will prove too unruly to be corralled into coherent narratives.

The Mess Inside is a marvellous book, and the remarks which now follow are not intended to diminish its achievement. On the contrary, I want to deepen Peter’s analysis by placing the features of narrative he appeals to in a wider context. For the most part, Peter simply took narrative structure for granted, as something that influences human lives in various ways. I want to show that it is not an accident that narrative has the structure it does. It is a consequence of the human tendency to construct histories.

Let me start with an aspect of fictional narratives that Peter did not focus on, but which I have always found striking. This is the possibility of non-linear narratives, where the order in which events are presented differs from their chronological order. Human beings are remarkably facile at understanding such constructions. A story can start in the middle or the end as well as at the beginning, and then jump back and forwards in time, without the audience losing track of things. The device goes back to the beginning of literature—the Iliad starts in media res—but is so familiar as to go largely unremarked. (Unless, that is, the work deliberately draws attention to this peculiarity of story-telling, as with Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, which promises to start with Tristam’s birth but then digresses into other matters until volume 3; or Harold Pinter’s Betrayal, which presents the events of the story in strict reverse order; or Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction, in which we are relieved when Vincent Vega evades trouble in the final scene, even though we saw him being killed half-way through the film.)

Once we do attend to it, this remarkable facility can seem surprising. How are ordinary people able to keep track of fictional events so easily, even when they are recounted in such perverse ways? My answer, as you would expect, appeals to the construction of histories. The ability we bring to fictions is one we acquired when we learned how to form historical memories. As we have seen, such memory-formation isn’t just the accumulation of experiences in the order in which they occurred. It also involves learning about events not directly experienced, via inference and testimony, and placing them in a historical timeline. In such cases the order of learning can differ from the order of occurrence. First you tell me what you did yesterday, then you tell me what you did last week. I slot both items of information into my record of the past without effort. It turns out that our impressive ability to grasp non-linear narratives is simply an application of a capacity we use all the time in everyday life.

Now let us turn to an aspect of narrative that does concern Peter, namely, the interplay of different perspectives. It is this that gives rise to dramatic irony and lends itself so naturally to ‘free indirect style’. The central case (though there are more complex ones) is when there is a dislocation between the perspective of a character in the story being related, on the one hand, and that of the narrator and audience, on the other. The narrator and audience know something that the character does not.

Dramatic irony results when the audience’s extra knowledge adds significance to the words and actions of the character; as with ordinary irony, the literal import of the character’s activities can stand in pointed contrast to the audience’s interpretation of them. Free indirect style is the literary expression of this dislocation of perspectives; events are being described from the narrator’s putatively omniscient vantage point, but on occasion are expressed in terms that reflect the character’s more limited perspective

For Peter, this kind of interplay of perspectives is central to the way that narrative shapes our lives. When we reflect on our pasts, anticipate our futures, evaluate our achievements, or assess our characters, we do so from the perspective of our present selves, but at the same time are aware of the divergent perspectives of our temporally removed pasts and futures. The knowledge that things can appear differently to us at different times, as our emotions, beliefs, values and change, plays a crucial role in the way narrative helps us understand ourselves.

As these last comments will have made clear, Peter took narrative structures to be present, not just in narrated stories, but also in our ordinary thinking about our past and future selves. However, this generated a number of problems for him. His paradigm of a narrative was an explicit fiction, where there are obvious distinctions between narrator, audience, and characters, and consequent room for interplay between their different perspectives. But what creates this space when a single subject is simply recalling his or her own history? There seems no obvious narrator here, nor audience.

Moreover, if we focus on sensory episodic memories, there seems no perspective in play other than that of the original experience. If memory is like narrative, it should provide the materials for the comparison of different perspectives. But at first pass it is natural to think of sensory memories as simply portraying things from a single perspective, the stance of one’s past perceiving self.

Peter offers good answers to these questions. On the contrast between narrator and audience, he points out that memory self-narratives are often rehearsed in preparation for relating them to other people, and adds that, even when such explicit narration is not envisaged, subjects can themselves serve as both narrator and audience, first shaping their tales, and then stepping back and evaluating them for authenticity (ibid 41-2). As for episodic memories, he points out that they come in observer as well as field form, and so are quite capable of representing past selves from the outside, as it were. Given this, episodic memories can fit naturally into the mould of explicit narratives. They allow us a perspective external to that of our earlier selves, and so lend themselves naturally to dramatic irony and the interior equivalent of free indirect style (ibid 48-53).

While these are indeed good answers, my view is that Peter’s questions have things somewhat back back to front. They arise because he starts with the structure of narrative, in the sense of a story that one person might tell another, and then has to work hard to explain why self-memory has analogous aspects. But if our focus is on the richness of divergent perspectives and the resources this offers for understanding human lives, there is no need to start with narrative story-telling in the first place. I have argued that all memory, properly so-called, is constructed history. Once we appreciate this, we are already in a position to explain how it embodies a diversity of perspectives, without assimilating it to narrative stories. This interplay of perspectives falls straight out of the fact that memory is the construction of history.

Rather than understanding memory on the model of narrative story-telling, I would urge that we look at things the other way round, and use the nature of memory to cast light on the structure of narrative stories. If anything, I would say that that our facility with the shifting perspectives of narrative fictions derives from the way memory works, rather than vice versa. We have no difficulty with the interplay of perspectives for the same reason as we take easily to non-linear narratives: the demands of both are already familiar to us from history construction.

Bear in mind that memories are not video-like records mechanically inscribed from the perspectives of earlier experiences. Rather, they are reconstructions of what happened when, based on testimony and inference as well as observation, laid out from an observer-independent point of view. As such, they automatically embody a variety of perspectives. There will be the perspective of the present self who ‘owns’ the history, who possesses the record of past events. Then there is the perspective of that same present self who reflects on and assesses that history. And then there will be the perspectives of all the different characters in that history, which will of course include the subject’s earlier selves.[[5]](#footnote-5) Here we already have all the structure of perspectives that interested Peter in narrative fictions: the narrator, the audience, the character in the story. We don’t have to bring in narratives as such to find this structure. It is built into memory itself.

We can make a similar point about the structure of sensory memories. Peter pointed out that ‘observer’ memories adopt a perspective from outside the past experiencing subject, and so make room for the imposition of later knowledge and emotions, as in dramatic irony and free indirect style. This seems quite right. But Peter simply took it as given, as if it were a happy accident that sensory memory so matches the structure of explicit narratives. What we can add is that this is no accident, but another consequence of the fact that memory is always constructed history. As we saw earlier, our histories often require us to represent ourselves objectively as participant in events, and not just as implicit observers. This itself demands that sensory memories be displayed in observer format. We need to locate the experiencing subject in an allocentric spatiotemporal network of interlinked agents and events. Once more, the narrative structure of memory can be explained as falling straight out of memory’s role as constructed history.

7 The Sense of an Ending

I have been arguing that some of the characteristic features of narrative are best understood in the light of the construction of histories. Non-linear order and multiple perspectives are not peculiar to explicit narratives. They are more general phenomena, present in any constructed histories, and their prevalence in narrative is arguably a consequence of this.

As I have said, this affinity between narrative and constructed history was not something that Peter addressed in The Mess Inside. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that he was also interested in features of narrative that they do not seem to share with constructed histories, or at least not at first sight.

In his first introductory chapter, Peter contrasted narratives with ‘chronicles’, bald specifications of sequences of events, as in an appointment diary, or list of sporting results. As Peter pointed out, such bald chronicles will normally lack the meaningfulness we expect in a narrative, the element that gives the story emotional and evaluative import. Not any relation of a sequence of incidents constitutes a narrative. The story also needs to have a trajectory that lends significance to the events it relates.

At first sight, this certainly seems to drive a wedge between narratives and constructed histories. For what are constructed histories except bare chronicles of events strung out in time? As such, there seems no essential requirement that they carry any evaluative or emotional meaning.

Now, it may be that this requirement of a meaningful trajectory is peculiar to narratives and has no parallel in the more general human practice of constructing histories. That is, perhaps the narrative stories we tell ourselves and others are marked by a certain conventional structure—think of the way that a pantomime, say, must observe certain conventions—which is by no means displayed by all the histories we construct. In line with this, maybe there is some further aspect of human mentality, or of certain cultural traditions, that demands this structure in narratives, over and above the requirements of history construction.

If this were so, this would not invalidate the points I have made so far. True, it would mean that narrative was a more specific phenomenon than history construction, marked by a set of extra features that distinguished it from a mere rehearsal of historical events. But even so it could still, as I have argued, share some of its features with history construction, and indeed do so because history construction has made these features so familiar to us.

However, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the requirements of narrative significance might also be explainable in terms of history construction. That is, perhaps the meaningfulness of narrative is not some kind of conventional add-on to the human propensity to construct histories, but is itself grounded in that propensity, alongside such features as non-linear order and the multiplicity of perspectives. On this suggestion, history construction will itself call for meaningful stories and not just bald chronicles—a series of events will only earn its place in human history if it hangs together in a significant way.

When I explained earlier that the allocentric representation of events in time was a distinctively human practice, I backed up the point by observing that animals would have no use for any such representations. Where the allocentric representation of space serves the obvious purpose of helping animals navigate their geographical environments, there is no such pay-off to the allocentric representation of time. Since animals can’t travel through time, in the way they can travel through space, there is no point to their constructing historical maps.

But what I didn’t stop to consider at that stage was what purpose the construction of histories might serve in humans. After all, we can’t travel in time any more that animals can. True, psychologists and other theorists sometimes talk of ‘mental time travel’, by way of reference to the human ability to recall past scenarios and imagine future ones. But of course this is a metaphor. We don’t really travel in time. So what is the reason why humans invest so much mental effort in allocentrically locating historical events in the fourth spatial dimension, in addition to locating places in the three spatial dimensions?

I take it that the answer is something to do with the human tendency to make plans. Humans are distinguished from other animals by the extent to which they can take time out from their common activities, deliberate about their best sequence of actions, and then set themselves to carry out some complex intention over an extended period of time. By and large, other animals are limited to living in the here and now, at any moment performing those behaviours that are best suited to satisfy their currently active desires. While this system serves most animals well enough, the extra possibilities of long-term planning allow humans to transcend their current urges and act in their long-term interests, and, as importantly, to co-ordinate their actions over time and with the actions of other agents. (Bratman 1987, Holton 2009, Butlin and Papineau forthcoming.)

I would say that this is the basic reason that humans go in for such meticulous construction of histories. It is a resource that helps them to formulate plans. Planning calls for detailed information about anything that is relevant to the possibilities for future action. Which environments and objects lend themselves to which purposes? Which people react in which ways in which kind of circumstances? Who knows what about whom? Where can we find food, spades, spears, or whatever? An allocentric map of what happened when and where seems ideally suited to answer these and other questions. By specifying the objective order of past incidents, and who was involved, and how things were left afterwards, we can compile a comprehensive compendium of information that can help us in our planning.

If something like this is the reason why humans first developed the ability to construct allocentric representations of past events, then it offers an explanation of why these representations should call for more than bald chronicles. Perhaps a few humans do have needs for chronicles as such—book keepers, tax collectors, astronomers, meteorologists. But for most of us the point of representing the past is to learn practical lessons for the future. We are interested, not in the past per se, but in items of practical importance, in incidents that carry a moral for future enterprises. We want to know about whose projects succeeded and whose failed, about shifts in power and the creation of alliances, about new resources for action—and in general about anything that is relevant to the possibilities of future deeds.

Of course our contemporary sense of narrative meaningfulness may have dimensions that transcend the practical needs that first led our ancestors to construct histories. As with all cultural traditions, out appreciation of narrative will change and develop under various influences, not least self-conscious innovations introduced by authors of literary fictions. It would be overly reductive to equate the kind of narrative significance we nowadays expect from stories with those elements that originally accounted for the human practice of constructing histories. Still, this does not invalidate my underlying point. The construction of histories was never a matter of simply detailing the order of events for its own sake. The point was always to highlight incidents and sequences that taught us lessons that mattered to our lives. It is intrinsic to the human construction of histories that it should feature events that have such significance, and not just random sequences of past happenings.

8 Conclusion

I never had the opportunity to explore these issues properly with Peter. He told me a bit about The Mess Inside when he was writing it, and in response I offered a few half-baked thoughts along the lines of this paper. He was interested enough, but I didn’t at that stage have anything detailed enough to be worth discussing at length. I would like to think that he would have found my ideas about history and narrative congenial to his project. As I have emphasized throughout, I fully subscribe to the many significant ways in which Peter has added to our understanding of narrative. I hope I have deepened that understanding by placing his ideas in a broader context.

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1. It is not to be taken for granted, however, that children who cannot yet construct histories will have a real sense of themselves as beings that extend through time. Cf Povinelli et al 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The neurological basis for spatial and temporal representation is not fully understood. John O’Keefe and others have demonstrated the existence of ‘place cells’ in the hippocampus of rats, cells which fire when specific locations are re-encountered, and which presumably play a role in encoding information about those places (O’Keefe and Dostrovsky 1971). Similar hippocampal cells are involved in episode-like memory (Burgess et al 2002). It seems that allocentric mapping of space and time depends somehow on interactions between these hippocampal cells and more cortical areas (Byrne and Becker 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some theorists hold that genuine episodic memories carry an ‘autonoetic’ phenomenonological signature, to the effect ‘I was there’, which distinguishes them from sensory reconstructions of events learned about indirectly (Tulving 1984 Perner and Ruffman 1995). I am sceptical about any such intrinsic phenomenological signatures (as opposed to the subject’s historical record categorizing the sensory imagery externally, so to speak, as derived from the subject’s presence at the relevant occasion). In support of this scepticism, it is noteworthy how easy it is to be wrongly convinced that you were present at some sensorily represented event. Oliver Sacks offers a striking example of this. In his memoir Uncle Tungsten he describes in vivid first-hand detail how an incendiary bomb fell behind his childhood house in the blitz: ‘. . . burned with a terrible, white-hot heat . . . water seemed useless . . . vicious hissing and sputtering . . . throwing blobs and jets of molten metal in all directions’. But, when Sacks’ older brother read the memoir, he told Sacks that he had been at boarding school at the time, and had only learned about the incident by letter. Sacks was initially staggered by this news. ‘How could he dispute a memory I would not hesitate to swear on in a court of law and had never doubted as real?’ (Sacks 2005.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Well, I wasn’t actually there at the match, but watching on television. Everyday thought seems happy to count this as observation, and so to count me as remembering Gatting being bowled, and not just that he was. It is an interesting question how mediated one’s experience can be before ceasing to count as observation in this sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. And sometimes the perspectives can be multiplied vertically as well as horizontally, as it were, with the perspective of such characters including the perspectives of yet further characters. The possibility of such iterations within our ordinary histories is of course the source of our facility with literary ‘frame’ narratives containing stories within stories. (This device can be carried to baroque extremes, as in Jan Potochki’s The Saragossa Manuscript, or subverted by breaking frames, as in Flann O’Brien’s At Swim Two Birds.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)