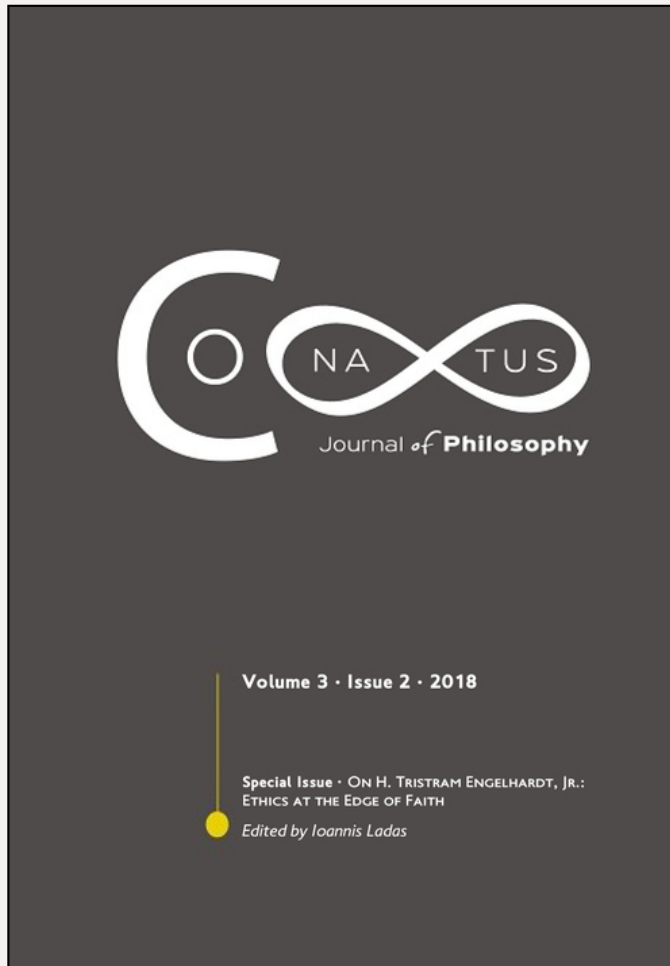


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# In the Honour of Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.: On the Sources of the Narrative Self

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## Abstract

*Modern philosophy is based on the presupposition of the certainty of the ego's experience. Both Descartes and Kant assume this certitude as the basis for certain knowledge. Here the argument is developed that this ego has its sources not only in Scholastic philosophy, but also in the narrative of the emotional self as developed by both the troubadours and the medieval mystics. This narrative self has three moments: salvation, self-irony, and nostalgia. While salvation is rooted in the Christian tradition, self-irony and nostalgia are first addressed in twelfth-century troubadour poetry in Occitania. Their integration into a narrative self was developed in late medieval mysticism, and reached its fullest articulation in St. Teresa of Avila, whom Descartes read.*

**Key-words:** *subjectivity, narrative, self, secularization, salvation, irony, nostalgia*

Most of us believe we have a story. I am not just living the instantaneous present, but I am constantly adjusting between my memories, my anticipations, and my being here right now. Perhaps I share my present with others, perhaps not. But it is certain that my memories and my anticipations are mine alone. (It is clear that my subjectivity has a wider expanse than the mere existence at a now-point attributed to it by Descartes and Kant.) Taken together, these three, memory, nowness, and anticipation, are the basis for my sense of myself as an individual being. I can weave these three together into a story and tell my story because it is my own story, and I want to tell it to others. The question of why I would want to tell my story to others is a question to which we should return. Yet to tell my story, I place what I think I remember and what I expect to happen into a narrative. In turn, that narrative is my narrative.

It recently became clear to me that not all people think in this way. My personal trainer was killed in a traffic accident, and so I went to the funeral of this wonderful

woman. Rivka was a formerly Ultraorthodox woman who had left her five children and her secluded life in order to fulfill herself as a free spirit. And now her five very religious children were called to bury her. It turned out that they did not disapprove of her; indeed they loved her very much. Yet when it came time to deliver the funeral orations, they were unable to tell us anything about how she had been or indeed about themselves or how they had experienced their mother. That is because they had no narrative subjectivity, no ability to tell stories about themselves and their mother. All they could do was tell exemplary anecdotes about rabbis. These stories were supposed to illumine something about their mother, but that something was left unspoken. The individual and concrete Rivka disappeared into the general story of the religious Jewish community.

Narrative subjective individuality is a cultural construct. Some cultures let you tell your own story, and others never even let you think you have a story. What is the advantage, if any, of having a narrative subjectivity, of becoming the narrator of one's own story? To answer this question, we need to investigate what attitudes you can adopt vis-à-vis yourself when you tell your own story. We also need to ask which social and cultural conditions encourage people to have stories, and which conditions prevent people from ever putting themselves together into a story. Our claim will be that the entire edifice of modernity, and surprisingly a precondition for the investigation of nature through science, is rooted in the astonishing phenomenon of apparent autobiographical distance from oneself. In turn, this self-distancing has a specific historical origin, one which is not to be found in narrative autobiography, but rather in love poetry, perhaps because the declaration of love for another both affirms the sense of self and yet renders tenuous the sense of self. For establishing a modern sensibility, self-distancing and self-narrative need to be integrated. Indeed, self-distancing narrative can replace metaphysical analysis as a way of penetrating reality and as a way of justifying our research about nature.

Narrative is much older than subjectivity. Epic poetry, and tales of wars and heroes often reach back before societies became partially literate. Despite this primitive origin of epic, Biblical narrative, as Erich Auerbach pointed out, was sometimes psychologically acute, describing in a few words an unseen internal self.<sup>1</sup> Yet that unseen internal self was not a self who is looking at itself, who is telling its own emotional story. It was already a breakthrough that a narrator could relate outer displays of feeling to internal and invisible states of mind. Before there was what we would call a self, there was an omniscient narrator, someone who tells a story from outside. The special quality of the Biblical narrator, as Auerbach pointed out, is that this external narrator can also discern and communicate internal states of mind. Yet the idea that an external narrator can discern an internal state of mind does not yet mean that

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard K. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); original edition Bern: A. Francke, 1946, 11-13.

someone can tell us about his own state of mind. In an analogous manner, in early modern English courts, the defendant was forbidden from testifying in his own favor. Even if there is a subject, that subject cannot be trusted to provide an objective account of events. Thus if there is a story to be told, the subject does not own it.

Subjectivity has a different origin, one that does not emerge from narrative. Subjectivity, as we understand it, is at least as old as St. Paul. St. Paul makes a real cognitive breakthrough, but he does not do so because people have stories to tell about themselves. Nor does he make this breakthrough because he is interested in cognition. Paul does recognize the importance of the emotions for salvation. Paul rather redesigned the Jewish religion in this way because he wanted to shift the sacred history of salvation away from the sacred community to the individual, an individual who henceforward can be saved for eternity. God's relation is no longer with the individual as a member of a community, but rather directly with individuals, who can then be redeemed with the realization that God loves them individually, and who are therefore individuals more in terms of their relations with Him than with their community. Correspondingly, the community is desacralized, and henceforward exists only as a community of individuals.

Modern subjectivity is rooted in Paul's transcendental anarchism, but it has developed a complex multi-layered subjectivity, which I shall now briefly describe. The first moment of subjectivity elevates the subject because it is salvation: the individual is always already saved. He may sin, but God's love is so infinite that no betrayal by a sinner will lead God to forsake him. This a priori opportunity for salvation holds true even for quite evil people such as Adolf Hitler. If we map this absolute and inescapable subjectivity onto modern cognitive subjectivity, what we obtain is the idea that the cognitive subject is a priori necessary for synthesizing our knowledge about the world. Where is this subject? Do you personally know any Cartesian ego or Kantian synthetic unity of apperception? Of course you don't. The link between this subject of knowledge and the older subject of salvation is that, while the older religious subject could sin, this modern a priori subject cannot err; only an empirical subject can make mistakes. Yet this subject does bear the mark of the Christian inheritance: he is both individual and universal, both one subject and one universal subject. In the process of secularization, his universality has come to outweigh his individuality, but that individuality is nonetheless there, for the subject for both Descartes and Kant is referred to in the singular and never in the plural.

However, there is a tension here. What prevents an inerrant Cartesio-Kantian subject from being a God? Kant sees this problem and he explicitly denies the human subject the power of seeing things as they are from all aspects, because the human subject, unlike God, operates in space and time. This theory of the limitation of the subject's perceptual scope was found wanting by the German Idealists, and much later a profounder reason was adduced for why a human subject cannot be a God. The insight was that the reason that we are not Gods has as much to do with God's nature as with ours, it has as much to do with what we attribute to God as to what

we attribute to the human subject. For example, Jacob Taubes argued that God has created humans in order to escape from his own potential nothingness, which implies that in their process of seeking to imitate God, humans also need to confront their own potential nothingness.<sup>2</sup> What stops the human subject from being a God is not the limits of the human subject's perceptual power, but rather the human subject's finitude. This was the response that Martin Heidegger devised to refute Hegel's supposed claim of the subject's immortality. Heidegger's solution however suffered from one defect, which was that it is not clear how we are to confront this apparent fact of our own mortality. Heidegger suggested resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), i.e. a grim and courageous determination in the face of our own almost certain death and the consequent actual nothingness of the world of our experience. Yet this issue of human nothingness existed long before Heidegger, and it had two proposed solutions, both of which however had nothing to do with the issue of cognitive immortality. The one was the denial that the subject is finite, which is the meaning of Christian salvation. The secular answer to this sense of human nothingness was different. Human beings have learned to confront their own uncertain nothingness by employing irony, which is to say that humans both deride their own power and also celebrate their impotence. God cannot be self-ironical. Since humans' future in this world is as nothing, they therefore can wax ironical about their own situation. Irony expresses a distance from the present, but it is basically unstable, since it provides no solution to the situation it ridicules.

One solution for this instability is, once again, salvation, which links humans to their future after their death. In other words, the instability of our present human situation is compensated for through the attribution of stability to another world, which in turn permits us to deny the facticity of this world. In contrast to salvation, irony links humans to their future on this earth. Yet this link to experience in this world is always annihilating itself, so that no continuous tradition of irony can emerge.

Continuity first emerges with the possibility of a link to the past. It is this link to the past that provides humans with narrative coherence; narrative coherence emerges as a result of linking the present to the past. What is the emotional affect of this link between the present and the past? Perhaps this kind of linkage can be characterized as nostalgia. The subjective moment then develops in the interplay between irony and nostalgia.

The subject has one strange requirement on which Kant and Heidegger are actually in agreement. This is the idea that the individual is autonomous. There is nothing in the idea of salvation as such which would require autonomy, but there is something in the idea of individual salvation which almost immediately raises the question of individual autonomy. But what would the idea of autonomy mean for a cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Taubes, *Abendländische Eschatologie* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947); reissued Berlin: Mathes & Seitz, 2007. Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmako (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 17.

subject, one who aims to discover the laws of nature that completely determine our existence, to use Kant's terminology? The autonomous Kantian subject is in the process of discovering a world that is completely determined. In contrast, Kant located the idea of autonomy in the moral individual, but this relocation is problematic. Clearly, the scientist as well is not just a passive vessel of science. The edifice of the discovery of nature requires an autonomous cognitive subjectivity that is in the process of discovering that nature.

Tentatively, I do believe that the idea of the autonomy of the individual as being rooted in his potential salvation first appears in St. Paul. The reason that salvation is so interesting because salvation is not general. In contrast, when individuals are encouraged to use their reason, the assumption is that if all individuals could think perfectly, then they would all think the same. The pursuit of reason is the pursuit of identity as meaning the sameness between individuals. However, salvation rooted in God's love does not mean that God loves all human beings identically, because love means recognizing the difference between individuals.

That idea may be an anachronism, but it could be argued that cultural history since Paul has actually been about the articulation of individual difference. That claim is a large one, since it took at least a millenium after Paul for this process to take off. One step in the articulation of individual difference was taken in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, where for the first time someone proposed that his own spiritual autobiography was significant enough to be written and made public. However, as Paula Fredriksen has made clear, St. Augustine was not really that interested in his own story.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, he rather sought to use his story as a kind of parable or example, a story which would show the reader how the reader could be saved. Improving upon Paul, Augustine provided a narrative of salvation.

Salvation is the first moment in creating individuality, i.e. the idea that the self is immortal. The second idea is irony, i.e. the idea that the self is unstable.

Arguably, the first person to even hint at the possibility of self-irony was the first known troubadour, William IX, the Duke of Aquitaine, who may be known to some of my readers as the grandfather of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Augustine wrote that when he tried to grasp time, he could not seize it. Analogously, Guilhem wants to grasp himself, but it turns out that this subjectivity of his is too unstable. As Simon Gaunt points out in *Troubadours and Irony*, Guilhem, "engaged in a dialectic with himself", "oscillates between two opposite poles, *sen* and *foudatz*, wisdom and folly."<sup>4</sup> What we elicit from this is that self-irony presupposes the instability of the self, or of the subjective perspective. We will argue that self-detachment takes place not only on the basis of generalization to a general human condition, but more pointedly on the confrontation with one's own inconstancy or instability.

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Fredriksen, "The *Confessions* as Autobiography", in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 87-98.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Gaunt, *Troubadours and Irony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34.

The third moment is nostalgia. We often think of nostalgia as the recollection of a better past, i.e. of a golden age. Here however I mean the nostalgia for a previous phase of life, self-nostalgia. This emotion is clearly present in Rousseau, but it can be found much earlier, for example in St. Teresa of Avila's spiritual autobiography. Nostalgia requires perspective, even though that perspective may not be accurate or even factual. Irony also required perspective, but the point about irony is that that perspective could not be stable, because irony is self-annihilating. For perspective to function in the context of individuality, that perspective needs to be stable and continuous. The reason that irony cannot be stable and continuous is not only that irony annihilates itself but especially that the present itself is shifting, unlike the past, which has a continuous non-existence, at least in terms of subjective existence. When I look at the past, I feel that I am looking at something that is no longer there, even though at the same time it is at rest, so it can be observed. What is changing is my position in space-time

Inside each of these three aspects there is a duality. The duality of the future is the alternative between death and salvation. The duality of the present is contained in the possibility of either affirming or negating the present. The duality of the past is the duality between the past as it is and my contemplation of that past, what the historian knows as the difference between the lived past and her book about that past. Whereas there is always a tension between affirmation and negation in the future and in the present, while that tension does exist in the past, it has a fundamentally different character. Claiming either that only my perspective on the past exists, or conversely that the past really exists, but my perspective on it does not, rapidly leads to the impossibility of having something such as a past. Nonetheless, the way I approach the past will affect my choices about the present and the future. Clearly, salvation and negating the present go together, and they are also tied to my subjective contemplation of the past. That means conversely that in a different way death, affirmation of the present, and the real past also go together. In this last case, the nihilism is about the future, whereas salvation assumes a nihilism about the present. What is striking is that vis-à-vis the future and the present, I can affirm one side of a duality and negate the other aspect, whereas vis-à-vis the past this combination of affirmation and negation does not work.

William IX had an additional breakthrough. Namely he linked his sense of self-irony to his adoration of the beloved woman. He invented a new kind of love poetry, and he chose to do so in a new language, forsaking the Latin which most of the clergy used when writing poetry, and choosing instead to write his poetry in Occitan, or Provençal, as it used to be known. There have been many theories of why he did so, and also of whether other poets who are unknown to us were also writing such poems at that time. Since most of the other poems have been lost, we will probably not be able to gauge precisely his originality. There are, however, plausible explanations of why he made this move, one which established his self-ironic sense of subjectivity in relation to the beloved woman.

Here is one explanation, which I found in Reto Bezzola's *Les Origines de la Societe Courtoise*.<sup>5</sup> Namely, William IX had a clerical counterpart and contemporary, Robert d'Arbrissel. Robert d'Arbrissel set up mixed convents, in itself not a novelty, at the head of which, however, he put a woman, which was a complete innovation: women in this convent would rule not only other women, but would rule men as well. This convent, Fontevraud, where Henry II of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Richard the Lion-Hearted were buried, swiftly became a magnet for upper-class French women, who often chose this secluded life in order to escape their subordination to their husbands, who were also their feudal lords. The disappearance of so many ladies of the high nobility into a network of convents created a social problem for early Medieval society. Here then was William IX's stroke of genius: in place of the religious cult of the Virgin Mary, he substituted the secular cult of the divinized lady as the object of love. Moreover, this love was transgressive. If noblewomen could abandon their homes for the life of religion, then for William IX these noblewomen could be the objects of adoration for their lovers, whether or not these noblewomen were married. William IX had thus secularized the cult of the Virgin. At the same time, these women were *domina* (a loaded term in the Middle Ages), i.e. they would rule their lovers, and they had no duty to return the love of their admirers. In other words, he proposed a secular divinity for women. We know this solution did work, because it had one unintended consequence: for the first time since Antiquity, women took to writing their own love poems, which we still have.

What the troubadours did was to create an emotional rationality, or an emotional self, one that could be schooled in the emotions, and one which was in tension with the rational and cognitive self of the philosophers. Naturally, this path was a two-way path: religion influenced secular culture, and secular culture influenced religion. One of the best-known examples of this influence of secular culture on religion is the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, who indeed started out life as a troubadour, and imported the secular sense of love into religious poetry. In turn, this reimportation of secular love into religious poetry had the effect of eroticizing sacred love. A long tradition of religious figures from the thirteenth century through to the sixteenth century wrestled with this erotic dimension of religious experience. Many attempted to synthesize sacred and secular love, most notably Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.

I wish to make a further claim: our sense of self is not just cognitive. Where on earth does Descartes' sense of the certainty of his own experience come from? My point is that Descartes is certain of his own experience before he ever begins to analyze it in the *Discours de la Methode*. His doubt is really a literary figure of speech in order to enable him to convince his readers that the basis of his and our experience is certain. One possibility is that Descartes is transposing onto the self the certainty that religious thinkers attributed to a world based on God's constitution. That may

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<sup>5</sup> Reto Bezzola, *Les origines et la formation de la litterature courtoise en occident* (Paris: Honore Champion, 1960), part II, volume 1, 242-313.



explain the certainty, but it does not explain the sense of self. How could one set up the self as parallel to God? One would think that the traits that characterize the self also show the complete disparity between God and the individual self, since most of the traits that characterize the self are limitations. Limitations are also used to characterize God, but these limitations are what Kant called infinite judgements, e.g. God is limited as being immortal.

A robust sense of self did exist in Descartes' culture, but it existed in the emotional realm. Indeed, it was a richer sense of self than the self which Descartes needed for his theory of knowledge. This sense of self was modified in different ways: it had a sense of time, it had different emotional attitudes, and it had different senses of fulfillment or perfection. For example, William IX does not look for fulfillment through a relationship, i.e. the perfection he seeks is the perfection of unfulfilled love. In the same way, Dante only saw Beatrice once. What is time, how should we feel, what is completeness, were questions that were posed in the emotional tradition, and sometimes imported into the cognitive tradition. But by its nature, the cognitive tradition was reductive, always seeking an economy of explanation in preference to rendering justice to the complexity of experience. Descartes needed very little for defining the world in terms of the cogito, but he did need to know to look inside the self for basing the experience of the world, and this idea was current in the emotional tradition, which as Christia Mercer has shown, came to him through his reading of St. Teresa of Avila.<sup>6</sup>

As Jürgen Renn has argued, paradigm shifts are not as sudden as Thomas Kuhn claimed.<sup>7</sup> Paradigm shifts are rather a process. There is in each paradigm shift a transitional stage during which matters can go in many directions. This transitional stage may be quite long. For example, the agricultural revolution seems to have occurred twice, as there occurred a backsliding from agriculture to hunting. Each stage in the history of the agricultural revolution lasted for more than a thousand years. Perhaps that kind of figure is a consequence of our own inability to determine things more closely.

In an analogous fashion, the elaboration of the modern self took several centuries. In my view, it finds completion in Mme. De Lafayette's famous seventeenth-century novel, *La Princesse de Cleves*. The reason is that the self that is portrayed in this novel is a self defined entirely in terms of mental events. Nothing happens. These mental events are the consequence of circumstances and emotions. They are depicted in a perspectival manner. This manner can already be found in the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, but the mental life in question there is the love for Christ, not the love for the heterosexual other, as in *La Princesse de Cleves*. My claim is that this elaborated mental self is the consequence of a long process of becoming that started

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<sup>6</sup> Christia Mercer, "Descartes' Debt to Teresa of Avila, or Why We Should Work on Women in the History of Philosophy", *Philosophical Studies* 174, no. 10 (2017): 2539-2555.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Renn, *The Evolution of Knowledge*, forthcoming.

in the late eleventh century and came to its fruition in the late seventeenth century. Our entire experience of the external world has been reformulated in terms of this internal experience. Whether or not we actually sleep with someone, what is important is what we feel about it.

In turn, the Cartesian ego is the reduced version of this emotional self, because it is the emotional self which first provides the sense of doubt about the external world, which in turn is the basis for recourse to the certitude of the cognitive ego. However, even this certitude is first one which the tradition located in the emotional self: according to the Nominalists. God was accessible only through the path of love and not through the path of intellect. Sometimes the paradigm shift is signaled by a reduction of the possibilities which were previously available as the choice of one path can lead to the exclusion of other possible paths.

Human history is marked by the exclusion of certain paths. In one sense, things become simpler all the time. Yet, on the contrary, each path that is chosen turns out to be a rich path with many branches. Moreover, choosing a path does not mean that the excluded paths do not continue to have an influence on our culture. For example, secularization could mean the exclusion of religion, yet religion continues to play a role in a secularized culture. Thus a reduced ego as the basis for cognition does not mean that the emotional path to external reality has been blocked. This emotional path keeps reappearing in Rousseau, in Schleiermacher, and in Kierkegaard. Moreover, my argument has been that the path that is excluded from the account of the world according to the cognitive ego actually turns out to be the basis for the development of that cognitive ego.

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