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Nurturing and Noxious Narratives: Prolonged Adolescence as a Storytelling Failure

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IT IS COMMON FOR those of us wise and full of years to regard the childhood and adolescence we lived through as differently paced than that of children and adolescents today. We tend to be convinced that our childhood innocence was prolonged far beyond that of present day kids' but that we negotiated adolescence somewhat more quickly than they do (though not necessarily with less anguish).

It seems reasonable to explain shortened childhood on technological grounds, such as the media that leave kids almost nothing to be naïve about. But what to make of prolonged adolescence is less clear. In this paper I am going to propose what I take to be a *formal* account of prolonged adolescence—one that represents adolescence in terms of a passage into a mode of active awareness (distinct in certain formal characteristics) that we equate with maturity. By active awareness I mean simply our awareness of *what we are doing when we do it*.

To disclose the formal characteristic of maturity in terms of active awareness, it helps to trace some of the steps we pass through on our way to maturity. In that context, I believe, we'll be better able to see the peculiar challenge adolescents face in projecting a way to understand their action maturely.

Maturity as a person is maturity as an individual, so the active awareness of a mature person would seem to require an awareness of acting as a single character of action, of being the same person in all that one does. The immature, in contrast, have not "gotten it together" in the same global way. They may have deep pockets of commitment, but in their projections they aren't always accountable to one another.

To see *how* a mature person coordinates his action as a whole, we will follow the best clue we have to the active awareness of persons as they mature, namely, the storytelling they respond to. As we will see, the maturing agent

goes through distinct stages in the way he is characterizing what he is doing, and those stages are analogous to the forms of action resolved in the stories he responds to. A child tells only episodes unresolved by any life-comprehending storyline. A mature person tells his story as a projection of action accountable to the whole of his intentional life. It is that accountability that warrants the active awareness contextualized by that personal story to channel the active awareness of an individual.

Adolescence, then, is the passage from one kind of storytelling to another: from the telling of multiple stories with no accountability to one another to telling a personal story of individual agency—one that purports to coordinate somebody's life as a whole better than any other story imaginable. The overall coordination we find in a mature person has something like a story format for the purely formal reason that both mature persons and stories represent the *resolution* of a set of actions in the imagination. They both purport to draw a body of intentional behavior into the best overall coordination they can by projecting a course of action through time.

By definition, we become agents when we become actively aware as well as experientially aware. That is when action emerges out of mere behavior. We first accredit action in a baby's movements when we see intention in that behavior, and what manifests intention is the coordination of movement. Only if sequential moves appear to bear on a multi-moved accomplishment do we take the baby to be acting. ("Look, she's crawling to Grandma!")

Having an intention, then, requires one to be aware of his movement according to some meaning it has for him. It entails that in some way one knows what one is doing. Without assuming such an intentional object, we couldn't say that she *meant* to "crawl to Grandma."

A baby's first intentions are singular, his agency single-minded; if he is doing anything, he is doing just that one thing—a serial actor, not a multi-tasker. There is evidence of this in the form a baby's dissatisfaction takes: complete, immediate, and mercurial. If one and only one intention occupies the whole of somebody's active awareness, its dissatisfaction amounts to the complete annihilation of his agency. Babies "break down" and "dissolve" into tears whenever they are disappointed because their momentary dissatisfaction completely consumes them as agents.

This means that as a new agent a baby's first challenge is to master sustaining movement to satisfy ever more movement-comprehending intentions (building a wall, not just stacking two blocks; drawing a picture, not just scribbling). Consider why a baby responds to this challenge. Why doesn't it simply stay at a level of action where it never sustains more movement than

it takes to crawl to Grandma? Enhanced motor control or cognitive skills make extended agency a possibility, but a baby's impetus for using those skills seems to be best accounted for by the form of any agent's actualization. His being is to be *actual* (i.e., to be entertained and reflected upon as a character of action). As a purely formal matter, any action we characterize represents some particular range of movement. Thus accomplishments that sustain an intention over a greater range of movement are by definition greater accomplishments. Given that more movement is being determined in character by the character of his active awareness, the baby is aware of being more actualized as a character of action. In effect, babies have an ontological prompt to develop in the scope of their movement as a character of action.

One way a baby responds to this challenge is by listening for stories that respond to the same challenge—to sustain movement in the service of a single intention. He finds compelling stories about the little engine that could or going to a birthday party or helping Grandma bake cookies. Stories like these are the first that appeal to a baby because they are uniquely qualified to represent to his imagination possibilities for his own more sustained intentional satisfaction.

The imaginative prowess progressively achieved sets up conditions for another stage of active awareness. The more movement the imagination learns to project in sequence toward greater satisfaction the more the arcs of the baby's active projects lengthen until, inevitably, imaginatively projected satisfactions require modifications to fit new circumstances that arise during those extended sequences. The greater the duration of undertakings the more course corrections events will dictate. And we see just this sort of challenge being confronted in the stories children typically respond to next. A child's story of going on a picnic becomes more interesting when the picnic gets complicated by a thunderstorm and must be moved indoors, though it is fun anyway.

A second inevitable result of extending one's movement in a single character is that one runs into contentions. Contentions are occasions when two or more intentions compete in someone's active awareness to determine the *same* moment of movement. The experience of contending intentions battling to determine the same moment of action introduces struggle into a baby's active awareness. From the time he begins to take on the challenge of negotiating the conflicting intentions he is actively aware of (to resolve them as well as he can so as to diminish his dissatisfaction), it seems reasonable to call him a child. A child's active awareness, unlike a baby's, negotiates two or more simultaneous intentions contending for mastery over his presently projected movement. The first such agony is likely to be experienced in

an interactive contention between a child's intention and Dad's or Mom's. Little Heather grabs candy from the checkout display; Mom puts it back. Zack wants to stay up; Dad sends him to bed. The challenge this poses for the child's imagination is to negotiate such contentions so as to salvage whatever satisfaction he can. Inevitably he is negotiating from weakness, his own present intention being vastly less powerful (i.e., able to determine the character of far less movement) than that of his contender. We can see this differential reflected in the escape-from-domination stories so appealing to young children: Cinderella is dominated by her step sisters, Hansel and Gretel by the witch, Jack by the giant. In each case a weak protagonist's intention—going to the Royal Ball, escaping the wicked witch, climbing back down the beanstalk—contends with a vastly more powerful agent's intention. That's why it must be through ingenuity and magic that the weak party resolves the contention in his own favor.

There is another reason these stories take place in a world innocent of realistic cause-effect relations. A child's world is *actual* before it is *real*; children characterize actions before they can account for causal outcomes. They live in—and are actively aware in—a purely actual world where cause-effect laws don't limit what can happen and everything happens intentionally. Fairy godmothers cast magic spells, animals talk, and beanstalks grow into the sky. Another reason for enchanted worlds is that they allow the child to project actions in higher definition than realism can allow. In realistic stories the character of action is constantly being constrained by events, and the resistance of nature to agency convolutes the depiction of its intended course. To the unpracticed imagination, the lack of event resistance allows the character of the action to emerge more intelligibly. When nature is represented as accommodating agency perfectly, the character of action gets projected in an uncluttered, pure and graceful way. Unencumbered by natural constraints, evil acts become downright demonic and good acts magical.

As a young child grows older, he is expected to negotiate the regularity of events as well as the intentions of other agents. In fact, learning to act realistically is often taken to be synonymous with "growing up." The ontological prompt is here too: one is more likely to enjoy more intentional satisfaction if he projects his actions realistically. So children soon come to listen for stories that respect the natural, factual, eventful world of cause and effect—the *real* world—and they usually find this realistic context for cultivating their active awareness in biographies, adventure stories, sports stories, news stories, and other stories that contextualize protagonists in a world where impersonal forces as well as personal ones aid and frustrate human purposes.

We saw earlier that agents, by definition, actualize themselves progressively by determining an ever greater range of movement by the way they mean their action. But when a child intends ever-widening spheres of coordinated movement, there comes to be an inevitable challenge of a different order. At some point—and here is where adolescence begins to beckon—an older child's imagination will have to flirt with the possibility of *individuality* as a character of action. Again, there is an ontological prompt: because active coordination always leads to a more satisfying life (i.e., one where more intentions get carried through to accomplishment), an attempt to coordinate one's whole intentional life becomes the obvious solution to the challenge of optimizing intentional satisfaction in the way one actualizes his agency.

It is the dawning of that recognition that marks the beginning of adolescence, a passage into maturity that will end when the youth is able to warrant his intentional coordination as the most satisfying he can imagine.

What sort of story is likely to feed the adolescent's imagination for such a leap into individuality as a character of action? Preadolescents of my era responded to "The Lone Ranger" stories. It never occurred to us to wonder whether he had a love life, a religious life, or a retirement plan. In contrast, what adolescents need is a protagonist whose actions are apparently coordinated with the whole of their intentional life. Only such stories as these can suggest to the adolescent's imagination a way to project his own action as the action of an individual.

I suggested early on that there is an account of prolonged adolescence awaiting us at the bottom of this heap of formal observations. If we survey the narrative environments of children and of adolescents, I think it is abundantly clear that the sorts of narratives children need at their various stages of development are richly provided for, but that the sorts of narratives adolescents need are largely crowded out from their hearing.

TV commercials, movies, TV dramas, and video games are the dominant modes of storytelling in an adolescent's environment. To see the constraint they pose to the adolescent's imagination, we have to leave aside all of our well-founded concerns about the bad products they sell, the shallowness of the life they portray, the paucity of reasoning skills they foster, and the mindless violence they glory in. Our interest here, you will recall, is only in the forms of active awareness they nourish.

I suspect TV commercials, by sheer number, supply most of the stories most adolescents hear. As we are all aware, most effective ads suggest a story line even as they leave most of the work of filling it out to the viewers' imagination. Specifically, they suggest a narrative wherein a product is consumed,

and they invite the viewer to follow in an analogous course of consumption. In their most successful format, they represent an imaginative projection of action along a path of consumption *in which a protagonist achieves the plausible integration of the very intentions he, the viewer, has found most troublesome to satisfy*. In effect they pretend to be suggestive of a personal story. By representing the resolution of contentions likely to be most frustrating to an adolescent *in the act of consuming*, they invite him to integrate his dissatisfied intention into a resolve to consume the product. This integration of a viewer's character of resolve in an act of consuming counts as ultimate success in advertising because if the viewer's imagination succeeds in integrating his life around the act of consuming the product, in effect he comes to be named as an individual character of action by that product. With the product resolved into his character, it is as if his personal character bore its logo. Product loyalty often has that force.

"What is wrong with that?" an advertiser might ask.

Consider: when an adolescent is lured into believing that consumption of any sort can resolve his most frustrated intentions and provide a reasonably stable singularity of character, he is (I trust you will agree) lured by a false promise. Narratives of consumption rarely if ever sustain an agent as an individual in good faith. That means that the disappointment occasioned by the ad's pseudo resolution works to thwart his emergence as an individual character of intentional satisfaction. By forestalling his successful projection of a course of action to which all his actions are accountable, it puts off his moment of maturity.

One might hope that movies and TV dramas would be freer to provide narrative nourishment for an adolescent's bid for individuality, but we find systemic constraints operating here, too—not formal constraints but economic and technological ones. First, there's the very fact that the stories on TV must be told for commercial reasons. On commercial TV, storytelling's crucial function is to deliver eyes to the next block of TV commercials. More than that, it is to provide the appropriate environment for the viewer's receptivity to those ads. It is widely acknowledged in the entertainment industry that "serious drama," the sort that delves into the full range of the protagonist's intentional life, is not an appropriate environment for commercial receptivity. For one thing, it is too engaging; it won't let go of the imagination so as to give it over to the pseudo resolutions achieved in the block of ads. When a TV network runs a movie like "Schindler's List" commercial-free, it is not just out of respect for the topic. It is because ads would not work as well and therefore could not be sold.

The popularity of movies, and particularly their pervasiveness in the narrative world of so many adolescents in our culture, may seem to challenge my analysis here. If genuine stories of emergent individuality are militated against by commercial interests, how is it that movies aimed at adolescents are so compelling for them? Like TV commercials, let me suggest, they offer the form but not the substance of personal integration. The protagonists in popular “coming of age” movies do resolve their lives, but they tend to resolve them only interactively, particularly in romances. Overcoming contentions with another person functions as an emblem for overcoming contentions within oneself, but this ploy, too, only teases the adolescent imagination. The achievement of a personal relationship with another does not often create personal stability in the partners, so a steady diet of stories about finding resolution in another actually thwarts an adolescent’s achievement of comprehensive intentional coordination. When relational success is sought as the vehicle for an adolescent’s resolve, he falls in love with being in love rather than with another person.

Other limitations on maturity-nurturing narratives seem to be imposed by the new technologies of their telling. Electronic storytelling fosters the ascendancy of spectacle and fantasy at the expense of realism. Popular video games and Internet simulation sites use their technological edge to constitute alternative, “virtual” realities—places where we are invited to disengage the modes of realistic resolution that we developed in childhood. Moreover, in a fantasy determination of one’s character, the protagonist’s character dominates only a narrow field of intentions, narrower even than that of the Lone Ranger, so it is hard to make the case that these experiences can be helpfully suggestive in the struggle to bid for comprehensive coordination.

I began by correlating an agent’s active awareness with the stories he finds most compelling, and I’ve wound up lamenting the dearth of the sort of stories an adolescent can profit from developmentally in what I take to be his usual narrative environment. I’ve suggested that the modes of storytelling most readily available to him are counterfeits that mimic the form of personal stories but mostly provide false leads to an imagination trying to project individuality. Someone whose personal development is malnourished and even poisoned by his narrative environment might wisely postpone his bid for mature singularity. Given how disappointing all his attempts have been, the childish worlds of pure action are likely to seem inviting places of retreat to muster courage for some later try.

Much has been written about the death of personhood as a status of agency. Philosophers of personal identity have mostly concluded that there

isn't any, artificial intelligence enthusiasts and neurobiologists want to replace the "folk psychology" of "person" with impersonal referents, and poststructuralists claim to have de-legitimated "personal presence." But against all this pessimism about the possibility of personality, I am holding out for a single character of action still being possible to prompt. It just takes the right kind of storytelling.