Mimesis and Myth: Evolutionary Roots of Psychological Self-Understanding

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In contemporary social life, we are often asked to elaborate on the kind of person we believe ourselves to be. A prospective employer asks: "Why do you think you are the right person for the job?" On a first meeting with a potential romantic partner— or a new friend we meet online, or a therapist, or even the first haircut with a new stylist—the familiar request comes our way: "So, tell me about yourself." Our different interlocutors want to know something about our *identity*. As such, they are all posing some variation on the fundamental identity question: *Who are you?* There are many different ways to answer the question. We might, for example, describe the neighborhood where we live, our family background, our occupational status, the last vacation we took, the books we like, and our opinions regarding certain Hollywood celebrities. These kinds of demographic and normative responses will probably work well with the hair stylist, but they may prove insufficient for the job interview, the first date, and the therapy session. In these and many other contexts (strongly influenced by cultural expectations), the identity question seems to call for a *psychological* answer. The interlocutor is asking that we share something of our psychological selves. How might we respond?

Two options present themselves. We may (1) *describe features* and/or (2) *tell stories*. In the descriptive mode, we may talk about the specific kind of person we are by invoking our characteristic traits, skills, proclivities, roles, and other consistent features of our psychological makeup, as we recognize them in ourselves: "I am a very sociable person"; "I am a hard worker"; "I have very strong analytic skills"; "I am a devoted mother"; "I always vote"; "people can count on me"; "I tend to be

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93

fun-loving". By contrast, in the narrative mode, we convey important aspects of our psychological selfhood by relating concrete events and scenarios: "Yesterday, when I was walking across campus…"; "Ever since I was a kid…"; "An important thing that happened to me was…"; "I have never been the same since…."

In describing abstract features of the self, we draw upon *semantic* memory, or the storehouse of general information we have about the self. In telling self-related stories, by contrast, we draw upon *episodic* memory, or specific scenes from our lives as we remember them, told in story form (Tulving, 1985). The two templates for self-understanding—trait-based (semantic) and story-based (episodic)—turn out to be remarkably distinct (McAdams, 2013a). On time scales of weeks or longer, we tend to define general characteristics about ourselves, even for basic emotional judgements such as "I am a happy person," based on semantic knowledge about the self (Robinson & Clore, 2002). Moreover, as documented in cognitive science experiments, these general characteristics are functionally independent of and often bear little resemblance to the particular stories we tell about our lives (Addis & Tippett, 2008; Klein & Loftus, 1993).

The most dramatic illustrations of the separation between the two different forms of self-understanding come from case studies of patients suffering from retrograde amnesia (e.g., Klein & Lax, 2010; Klein, Loftus, & Kihlstrom, 1996). For example, a 79-year-old man named D. B., who became profoundly amnesic after cardiac arrest, produced reliable and consistent trait ratings for himself, ratings highly correlated with those made by his daughter, even though he was "unable to recollect a single thing he had ever done or experienced from any period in his life" (Klein & Lax, 2010, p. 927). In principle, then, a person may know that he or she is a highly "extraverted" (or "conscientious," or "humble") human being (semantic, trait-based knowledge) without having access to the memory of any single autobiographical event (episodic, story-based knowledge) that might be used as evidence to support the (truthful) claim. Our self-attributed traits are one thing; our self-defining life narratives may be quite another.

Where do these two modes of self-knowledge originate? Developmental and personality psychologists have paid significant research attention to how trait judgements and narrative identity emerge and develop over the human life course (e.g., Harter, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Robins, Tracy, & Trzesniewski, 2008). Yet a key piece of this puzzle remains relatively unexplored: *How did trait judgements and narrative identity emerge and develop during the evolutionary course of the human species*? Self-attributed traits and stories are complex, self-reflective, socially, and culturally bound aspects of human experience with no obvious analogues in other species. How can we explain their appearance in the human species? When did they appear in the human evolutionary past? And why?

In this essay, we consider the possible evolutionary origins of psychological self-conceptions, basing our informed speculations on research in personality and developmental psychology, sociology, cognitive science, and linguistics. We begin by linking self-attributed traits to the evolutionary challenge of formulating a viable *social reputation* in groups (Boehm, 1999; Mesoudi & Jensen, 2012). We suggest that this salient challenge was first differentially negotiated in the pre-linguistic,

mimetic culture developed by *Homo erectus*, nearly 2 million years ago (Donald, 1991). The subsequent emergence of language made for greater articulation and precision in the attribution of traits to the self. Importantly, language was also the evolutionary midwife for the emergence and proliferation of storytelling among *Homo sapiens*, and the creation of myth (Donald, 1991; Dor, 2015). Language thus paved the way for the attribution of personal myths, or self-defining life stories, to the self.

In a nutshell, pre-linguistic humans first saw themselves as others saw them, in their performances as social actors. Their selves thus came into existence *from the outside in*. With the transition from mimetic to mythic culture (Donald, 1991), human subjectivity was radically augmented and transformed. Individuals now came to see themselves as carrying stories in their minds, stories about the personal past that might be connected to the anticipated future, stories that could be told, again and again, in words, to both the self as audience and to others. A new narrative dimension was added to the self, developing within a mythic context *from the inside out*. Eventually, human beings began to see themselves as the protagonists of their own ongoing life stories, formulating *narrative identities* (McAdams & McLean, 2013) in their storytelling minds to provide life with some semblance of temporal continuity and long-term purpose.

1   Social Reputation and the Attribution of Traits

When Shakespeare wrote that all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely actors upon it, he was expressing a profound social–psychological truth. In the twentieth century, sociologists like Erving Goffman (1959) and psychologists like Robert Hogan (1982) formulated *dramaturgical* theories of society and the self, describing how human beings play roles, enact scripts, and manage impressions in everyday social interaction. As *social actors*, human beings aim to attain *acceptance* in the group and to achieve some form of *status* in order to obtain the resources needed to survive and flourish (Hogan, 1982; McAdams, 2016). Social actors strive to *get along* (acceptance) and to *get ahead* (status) in the groups wherein their performances are enacted, seen, and evaluated.

As if it were occurring on the theatrical stage, human behavior plays out in the presence of other actors, who observe one another's performances. From one scene to the next, actors develop reputations within their groups. As they improvise on their social roles, they display distinctive styles of emotional and behavioral expression, styles that are assiduously noted and remembered by their fellow actors. Over time, actors come to understand how others see them; they learn what their social reputations are (Bem, 1972; Mead, 1934). By observing themselves and by observing how other actors relate to them, self-conscious human actors begin to formulate semantic understandings of themselves, like these: "I must be an *aggressive* person because other people seem to be afraid of me." "Watching others, I think I am more

emotionally calm than they are." "I must be *smart* because other people come to me for advice."

Initial trait attributions come into the self, as it were, from the outside, as a result of being observed by others. Long before they consciously know that they are social actors whose every performance is being observed, human infants are the objects of rapturous scrutiny and relentless surveillance on the part of caregivers, relatives, friends, and others who watch and comment upon them. By the time self-consciousness begins to dawn (in the third and fourth years of life), human children have already (and unwittingly) garnered social reputations. They eventually come to learn what those reputations are, even as those reputations continue to develop, by taking a third-person perspective on the self—by treating themselves as objects. In the reflexive terminology immortalized by William James (1892/1963), the "I" (the self as subject) begins to formulate an understanding of the "Me" (the self as object) by monitoring how others see "Me." The developing social actor, as I, begins to attribute simple psychological traits to the Me. As the child matures and perspective-taking skills increase, those trait attributions become more complex and differentiated (Harter, 2006). Early on, I may see myself as "nice" or "mean" or "always happy," but eventually I fashion more detailed and informative self-attributions, describing myself (to myself and certain others) as "warm and caring," "depressive," "conscientious," "humble," "socially dominant," "the perennial life of the party," "fearful in the presence of strangers," or "nervously excited when my father is with me."

The number of semantic psychological descriptors that a social actor might attribute to the self would seem, on first blush, to be nearly infinite. In a first effort to narrow these down, Allport and Odbert (1936) identified over 18,000 words in an English unabridged dictionary that refer to psychological traits, states, and evaluations. Working with their list and others, personality psychologists eventually developed hundreds of rating scales and questionnaires designed to assess individual differences in broad self-attributions, administering these scales and tabulating the results in countless studies, conducted in many different societies and with different language traditions, over 70 years. The statistical results of this work have consistently suggested that broad trait attributions may be loosely grouped into five superordinate categories, often called The Big Five (Goldberg, 1993; McCrae & Costa Jr., 2008). In the most commonly used terminology, the five big categories encompass extraversion (e.g., gregariousness, social dominance, positive emotionality), neuroticism (anxiety, depressiveness, negative emotionality), conscientiousness (dutifulness, discipline, industriousness), agreeableness (warmth, altruism, humility), and openness to experience (curiosity, imaginativeness, open-mindedness).

The five categories have repeatedly arisen in statistical studies of *self-report* questionnaires, as well as in ratings of others. At the most basic level, they measure the content of semantic attributions that social actors typically make about the self and others (McAdams, 2013a). Importantly, self-assessments on the Big Five are consistently and significantly correlated with peer ratings (Funder, 1995; Vazire & Mehl, 2008). In other words, if one particular social actor tends to see herself as a

highly extraverted (or highly agreeable, or not especially conscientious) person, others who know her are likely to agree, though discrepancies typically also arise.

It would appear that human beings have evolved to take careful note of the differences captured in the Big Five (Buss, 1996; McAdams, 2016). In order to get along and get ahead in groups, it is essential that social actors keenly evaluate just how "conscientious" a potential ally might be, or how "agreeable" and "emotionally stable" (that is, non-neurotic) a potential romantic mate might be. There are countless behavioral differences that human beings manifest as social actors, but some are much more important for adaptation than are others. Social reputations capture the most important differences, which themselves become incorporated into different social actors' conceptions of themselves. Social actors jockey for reputational position in the groups wherein their performances take place, aiming to improve their overall standing in the group (Mesoudi & Jensen, 2012). As such, the attribution of traits to the self and to others has existential consequences for positioning within the group, with ultimate ramifications for a social actor's survival and reproductive success.

2   Mimesis

The decades-long program of research that led ultimately to the Big Five taxonomy for trait descriptors began with a survey of lexicons (Allport & Odbert, 1936). The assumption was that traits are *in the language*.

But is language in the traits? To be clear, the actual behavioral differences conveyed by the traits are out there already, even if nobody takes note of them. These differences between community members are the end results of environmental inputs and genetic variation, which exist regardless of any attempts to describe them. The question is this: *Is language necessary for encoding those differences into selves?* Does the I need language to know that the Me has traits? And is language necessary for disseminating information about the trait-based social reputations of different actors in the community?

These questions have some bearing on understanding human evolution. Many scholars believe that language emerged relatively recently, perhaps even within the last 100,000 years (e.g., Pinker & Bloom, 1990). Others argue that its origins go back further, but even they suggest that language use followed the advent of relatively complex group life among our evolutionary ancestors (Dor, 2017; Everett, 2017). Either way, there must have been a time when our group-living forerunners managed to adapt to the challenges of group life without the benefits conferred by language. In a pre-linguistic group context, how were social reputations achieved and transmitted? How did social actors understand themselves?

The interdisciplinary literature on pre-linguistic human societies suggests that these ancient groups achieved a remarkable level of social, technological, and communicative sophistication without the benefits of language (Dor, 2017; Wilson, 2012). From approximately 2 million years ago to about half a million years ago,

Homo erectus evolved in the direction of larger brains and greater social intelligence, which promoted greater size and complexity of human groups, which led to even larger brains and so on, in a kind of evolutionary virtuous cycle (Dunbar & Sutcliffe, 2012). Throughout the process, human survival came to rely less and less on individual actions and more on the intricate cooperation of human groups.

Among the most important innovations introduced by *Homo erectus* were collaborative hunting, cooking, and community child-rearing. Each likely contributed to the evolutionary growth of human brains and human groups.

In order to hunt big game, individuals needed to work together to design and forge effective weapons, to develop elaborate plans to achieve their goals, and to distribute the different tasks to different social actors who were capable of working together to achieve them (Sterelny, 2012). Protocols needed to be developed for distributing and storing the meat, making for greater division of labor and more differentiation in group roles. *Homo erectus* learned how to tame fire in order to cook the meat, a development that Wrangham (2009) views to be a game-changer in human evolution. Cooked meat is more tender and easier to digest than raw meat. Cooking thus afforded the shrinking of the human digestive system over evolutionary time while providing energy for the greater growth of the brain. Cooking also changed social life by introducing fireside campsites, where group members came together to cook and to eat. The ancient prototype of the human home may have been the campsite to which hunters and foragers returned every evening and where children were nurtured and raised (Wilson, 2012). Parenting practices became more collaborative through *alloparenting*, in which group members shared resources and responsibilities to protect children, feed them, and socialize them within the group culture (Hrdy, 2009). These social practices required significant skills in perspective taking and empathy, demanding more brainpower and introducing greater practical and emotional interdependencies within the group.

It has been proposed that our pre-linguistic ancestors achieved all of this, and much more, by relying largely upon the communication mode of *mimesis* (Donald, 1991; Dor, 2015, 2017). Mimesis aims to convey meanings through mimicry, imitation, facial expressions, eye movements, manual signs and gestures, postural attitudes, and non-linguistic vocalizations, such as screams, sighs, screeches, and hoots. Mimetic acts imitate and represent human experience without language. They are akin to playing the game of charades. Mimesis is the basis of ritual, dance, artistic expression, and religious and spiritual experiences. Mimesis is fundamental to human emotional experience, as in the nonverbal bond of attachment that forms between human infants and their caregivers and between lovers of all ages, as well as the endlessly varied feelings of both positive and negative emotions—raw and refined—that human beings display in the presence of others.

Mimetic communication enables social actors to share immediate experience with each other. In a nonverbal manner, an actor can readily depict what he or she is feeling, thinking, or wanting. The actor can also teach through mimesis. Indeed, many forms of instruction today rely on mimesis rather than on language per se. From hitting a baseball to typing a manuscript to playing a musical instrument, people often learn skills through modeling what other people do, rather than hearing

or reading what they say. Not only skills, but also group norms are often learned through imitation and modeling (Bandura, 1977). Many skills and norms are passed from one generation to the next largely through the practice of mimesis.

By enabling pedagogy and the accumulation of knowledge over time and generations, mimesis creates cumulative human culture (Henrich, 2016; Tomasello, 1999). Indeed, Donald (1991) has argued that the first human culture was a mimesis culture: "The mimetic system is thus a seminal hominid cognitive innovation, a mode of cognition that remains dissociable from language even in modern humans, and is the logical basis of the first truly human culture" (p. 193). Both Donald (1991) and Dor (2017) identify *Homo erectus* as the progenitors of that first culture. They argue that *Homo erectus* exhibited the first system of communication to afford "the capacity of experiential mutual identification" (Dor, 2017, p. 114) or the group's ability to identify and elaborate upon a shared experience, a shared reality.

Within a mimesis culture, social actors' socio-emotional performances are observed and remembered without the assistance of language (and without the recording technologies, such as writing, that ultimately followed the emergence of language). Even without words to provide the precision and clarity that modern lexicons give us, the behaviors and the emotions associated with traits were expressed in the environment of *Homo erectus*, observable in social actors' repeated and memorable performances, as we might encounter them today in a ballet, a sporting event, or a religious rite. Unlike today, members of a mimesis culture did not enjoy the luxury of talking about the performance they had just observed once the curtain came down. They were less able than modern humans to transport the experience over time. They could not, for example, say: "Remember what a jerk that guy was yesterday!" They could not *gossip*. And gossip is the lingua franca of trait transmission in a linguistic culture, allowing social reputations to be rapidly disseminated throughout a group (Dunbar, 2004; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012).

Nonetheless, they could still remember. They could continue to update their episodic memory files, which contained a storehouse of remembered mimetic scenes, and they could continue to derive semantic conclusions about different social actors based on those files, including semantic conclusions about themselves. They could arrive at linguistically unmediated conclusions regarding the kind of person a given social actor is, based on repeated observations of socio-emotional performance. Moreover, mimesis would allow them to transmit these trait-based conclusions, in a limited way, to others in their immediate vicinity and experiential context.

Go back a million years and imagine that you want to convey trait information about Social Actor A (who is a jerk—or, we might say, he scores low on the trait of agreeableness) to a fellow Social Actor B (who happens to be a friend). If you are in the presence of both the social actors, you might attract B's attention and then gesture (subtly) in the direction of A, signaling to B that you are about to convey a meaning regarding A. Then you contort your face in such a way as to express a combination of fear and revulsion, to signal the essence of A's social reputation, as you have observed it, based on your experience in the group. B understands you, nodding approval, or else B does not understand, or perhaps B disagrees, and B

gives you a quizzical look. The "conversation" might continue, as in a game of charades. In Dor's (2017) characterization, you and B would be able to share and compare your individual experiences (of A) in order to achieve "experiential mutual identification" regarding A. Like social actors who dish out the gossip today, you would likely be highly motivated to achieve mutual identification, comparing and contrasting your respective impressions mimetically, seeking common reputational ground.

It seems clear that a great deal of emotional and social experience can indeed be conveyed without language. Moreover, we know that social actors living in complex groups need to be able to predict what other actors will do, based on social reputations, in order to get along and get ahead in the group. Therefore, it seems eminently logical to assume that some degree of trait information could be readily garnered, revised, and transmitted in mimetic culture based on social observation. With increasing social complexity, members of *Homo erectus* may have felt more and more pressure to understand each other, and to understand how others understand them. Using the mimetic interactive tools at hand, *Homo erectus* would have developed a host of ingenious strategies for attributing relatively simple behavioral and emotional traits, updating their attributions, and transmitting trait information from one social actor to the next. Of course, language would have made it all easier and more efficient, as language ultimately did. But language would not have been necessary for apprehending and remembering the dispositional traits of other social actors. Mimesis would have been sufficient. Similarly, mimesis would be sufficient for attributing simple, non-linguistic traits to the self as well as others. Without words, early *Homo erectus* would still be able to formulate a semantic, trait-based understanding of the self, based on self-observation and information exchange in a mimetic context.

3   Language, Story, and Myth

Because spoken language leaves no physical evidence behind, scientists have not been able to trace its evolutionary origins with any degree of certitude. Instead, they have had to draw deductions from material artifacts, imagining what qualities of mind and social interaction were necessary to produce the artifacts. Conservatively speaking, then, evidence suggests that language emerged no later than about 70,000 years ago (Wilson, 2012). Many scholars suggest, however, that it emerged much earlier. They note that the anatomy of *Homo sapiens* appears to be conducive for the production of speech and that growing complexity of human groups ultimately required the development of a more versatile communication system, forcing evolution's hand (Everett, 2017). Dor (2015) suggests that language "began to emerge before *Homo sapiens* came onstage, in communities of *Homo erectus* and *Homo heidelbergensis*. But they did not take it very far" (p. 204). According to Dor, *Homo erectus* may have ultimately supplemented mimesis with primitive language, but they never lost their affinity for and dependence upon the former. It was left to

Homo sapiens, "biologically adapted to language" and with "bodies more adapted to speech" (Dor, 2015, p. 204), to exploit the full potential of language over the past 200,000 years.

Dor (2015, 2017) conceives of language as a communication technology invented by humans for the instruction of imagination. Whereas mimesis depends upon mutual identification of experience in real time, language enables speakers to find common experiential ground at any time, constrained only by the limits of what can be imagined. The elements of language convey mutually agreed upon meanings that need not be linked to immediate experience.

In the realm of social reputation, language enables actors to catalogue their observations of others with syntactic forms that are precise, malleable, and infinitely transportable. Rather than gesture in A's direction in order to alert B that I am about to share an impression of A, I can now simply use a word that B and I agree refers to A. I can call A "A" or "John." B and I can now gossip about John when John is not present in our immediate experience. B and I can now recollect him and set him up in a mental space for further elaboration. Moreover, we can employ words to describe our impressions of him, like "jerk," or "disagreeable," or "tends to brag about himself and never cares about the feelings of other people." We can discuss his social reputation at length, elaborating our mutual understanding of John, correcting and updating it over time as we gather new observations and share them with each other, and with yet others in the group. Feeling especially emboldened one day, we can even report back to John with our assessment. We can use that assessment to our advantage in our never-ending efforts to get along and get ahead in the group.

Monitoring our own respective positions in the group, moreover, B and I can use language to update and elaborate upon our own understandings of *ourselves*. We can now attribute traits to the self through words. Language affords so much more elaboration, precision, and flexibility than mimesis that this process will ultimately result in a complexified and differentiated understanding of the self and others. New traits will emerge, in the community and in the minds of social actors themselves, more articulated and subtler forms of self-understanding than could ever be expressed through gesture and mime. In other words, language enables social actors to achieve more complex social reputations, and these reputations can be disseminated within groups more widely, quickly, and efficiently through linguistic gossip. Accordingly, language makes for more complex and sophisticated trait-based self-conceptions, and these become subject to the multiple influences and determinants that arise within a culture wherein people talk about people.

Importantly, language also serves to enrich social and psychological understanding by enabling *storytelling*. Both Dor (2017) and Donald (1991) suggest that telling stories about people, and about the world more generally, may be language's most important function. Donald (1991) asserts that constructing narratives is the original and "natural product of language itself" (p. 257). He writes: "Language, in a preliterate society lacking the apparatus of the modern information-state, is basically for telling stories" (p. 257).

Stories track human *intentionality* across a landscape of time, space, and consciousness (Bruner, 1990). At their core, stories are fundamentally about what happens when a human agent, equipped with wishes and plans, sets out to achieve a goal. For humans, goal-directed action is guided and motivated by the wants, desires, beliefs, and values that reside in the minds of human agents. Understanding goal-directed behavior in this way is indeed the basic insight of *theory of mind*—an insight about motivation that human children apprehend by the time they are 4 or 5 years of age (Apperly, 2012). But these internal motivating states, unlike behavior and emotional display, cannot be directly observed. As such, it is very difficult to convey the dynamics of motivation solely through mimesis. Language provides the first technology for characterizing that goal-directed process as it plays out in human minds and groups. By opening a window into intentionality, the language of stories provides a technology to interrogate the goal-directed human mind.

With the introduction of stories, social reputations and self-understanding move beyond the traits of the social actor to encompass the internalized desires, goals, fears, plans, values, and beliefs inside the minds of *motivated agents* (McAdams, 2013a, 2016). The ability to understand other humans (as well as the self) as intentional agents who act upon internal motivational agendas is an invaluable asset for social life, both within a group and with respect to intergroup competition. Wilson (2012) writes: "A group with members who could read intentions and cooperate among themselves, while predicting the actions of competing groups, would have an enormous advantage over others less gifted" (p. 224). The ability to read intentions and thereby understand motivational agendas in others is a feature of social intelligence that is tied up with a general inclination toward narrative sense-making (Boyd, 2009). Stories function to simulate social experience (Mar & Oatley, 2008), helping human beings to solve social problems (Sugiyama, 2005). Human beings construct scenarios in their minds about what motivated agents might do, or might have done, moving forward and backward in time. After playing the story out in an imagined space, the narrator can decide how to respond to a difficult social problem based on the results of the simulation.

The broad significance of storytelling in human evolution becomes even more apparent in considering the function of story *for the group*. Shared stories model values that are prized by group members, such as courage, resilience, and compassion, serving as important agents of socialization for children in the group. They build group identification and allegiance (Kesebir, 2012). Shared cultural narratives may help to orchestrate large-scale cooperation among group members and to motivate social cohesion (Dautenhahn, 2002), effects that are especially apparent when stories take on the imprimatur of sacred *myth*. Foregrounding the power of language to create integrative stories for human groups, Donald (1991) argues that the introduction of language marked the transition in human evolution from mimetic to *mythic* culture. Reflecting perspectives to be found also in Campbell (1949), Bruner (1990), Harari (2015), and throughout the cultural anthropology literature, Donald (1991) underscores the *integrative* power of myth—its function to synthesize disparate observations, facts, and snippets of human experience within a broader framework that confers broad meanings that are shared within the group:

> The myth is the prototypical, fundamental, integrative mind tool. It tries to integrate a variety of events in a temporal and causal framework.
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> It is inherently a modeling device, whose primary level of representation is thematic. The pre-eminence of myth in early human society is testimony that humans were using language for a totally new kind of integrative thought. Therefore, the possibility must be entertained that the primary human adaptation was not language qua language but rather integrative, initially mythical, thought. Modern humans developed language in response to pressure to improve their conceptual apparatus, not vice versa (Donald, 1991, p. 215).

In all societies, humans have created myths to make sense of the imagined historical past and the anticipated future, to answer questions about the origins of life and the ultimate reasons for human existence. Employing the power of language to instruct imagination, humans have endeavored to understand themselves—collectively and individually—by crafting stories and telling them to each other. The narrative understandings they have formulated are more integrative than those that rely solely on the identification of salient features, dimensions, and traits. They resemble personal myths—integrative self-narratives that aim to convey broad and abiding conceptions regarding who a person is and what his or her life may mean.

4   Narrating the Self

In the beginning, a social actor behaves and emotes in the presence of others, who observe and take note. The social actor formulates a trait-based self-understanding, which develops initially from the outside in.

Stories help us turn the process around. By capturing and conveying human intentionality, stories show how human beings are not *just* social actors—they are motivated agents, too. Little Red Riding Hood may be a nice girl, or perhaps she is mean and vindictive. She may be extraverted, or not. What gets her story going is not so much her traits but rather her intentionality: Little Red Riding Hood *wants* to get to Grandma's house. That is her goal. The story's plot begins as she sets out on her goal-directed journey. Along the way, she meets a character whose motivational agenda directly opposes hers. He is the Big Bad Wolf, and what he wants is dinner. We understand the protagonist and the antagonist in this simple story through their own subjective perspectives. We know what they want. We know their goals and their values. We get inside their heads. As such, we come to know them from the inside out.

And so, too, do we come to understand ourselves, as motivated agents. Each of us has privileged access to our own minds, filled as they are with wishes, fears, plans, schemes, and other features of our own motivational agendas. Outside observers do not have direct access to these motivational agendas. They cannot know what we know. They must instead try to infer what is in our minds, imagining us as characters in an ongoing narrative of one kind or another. And we must do the same vis-à-vis them if we are to apprehend them as motivated agents. In sharp contrast to the developmental scenario for the social actor, this second form of self-understanding

begins with first-person knowledge of what I want as a motivated agent. It begins from the inside, and then develops outward. Like a character in a story, I harbor a wish in my heart (or mind), and I pursue it. (Or else I don't pursue it, but I still want it.) I am motivated to pursue it. I have a plan. Episodes in my life can play out in the way a story plays out, as if I were Little Red Riding Hood.

We begin to understand ourselves as goal-directed, motivated agents in the early elementary school years (McAdams, 2013a). In so doing, we begin to locate daily events within a temporal stream of experience that evokes a sense of plot and character (Schechtman, 1996). Vaguely at first, we sense that our lives themselves seem to unfold in the way that a story does, with a beginning located in the remembered or confabulated past and an ending projected far off in a distant imagined future. In adolescence and young adulthood, we begin to string together discrete personal events into extended sequences that elaborate on thematic lines running through our lives over time. We begin to draw dynamic conclusions about our lives, about how we have changed and grown over time, as illustrated in these sequences (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In so doing, we begin to assume some degree of ownership of that ongoing story. Not only are we pursuing our goals as characters in a story, but that ongoing story is *our story*. Not only are we actors who perform roles and agents who strive for goals, but we are also authors of the story wherein our acting and our striving take place.

By adulthood, we typically apprehend ourselves as *autobiographical authors* whose psycho-literary projects come to comprise our respective narrative identities. Our internalized and evolving stories of the self reconstruct the past and imagine the future in such a way as to provide our lives with some degree of coherence, purpose, and moral grounding (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Functioning as personal myths, narrative identities integrate disparate features of ourselves to explain how we have come to be the persons we believe we are becoming. In the same way, then, that groups employ language to construct societal myths which organize group members' understanding of the world (Donald, 1991), so too do autobiographical authors employ language and a storytelling sensibility to construct narrative identity for the self.

Autobiographical authors construct self-defining life stories within a cultural context that prescribes what kinds of stories are indeed worth constructing (McLean & Syed, 2015). Master narratives of culture are stories that prevail within a given society regarding how to live a good life. They prescribe guidelines for narrative identity by translating societal values and norms into idealized life plots, themes, images, and characters (Hammack, 2008). In the United States, for example, narratives of *personal redemption* wield significant cultural power (McAdams, 2013b). Stories of overcoming adversity and rising from rags to riches are enshrined in myths of the American Dream. They are captured in historical accounts of the American pilgrims who sought redemption in their City on a Hill, in the emancipation of African American slaves, in nineteenth-century Horatio Alger stories charting upward social mobility for young immigrant men, and in the Sunday sermons and graduation speeches that exhort Americans to transform sin into salvation, or to transcend the limitations imposed upon them in order to discover their own unique

gifts, so that they can use those gifts to make the world a better place. Within a given culture, a circumscribed collection of master cultural myths compete with each other to win the storytelling hearts of individual narrators, whose personal experiences sometimes line up nicely with what cultural myths prescribe, and sometimes do not.

By providing a voice for the expression of first-person intentionality, then, the emergence of language provided *Homo sapiens* with the indispensable technology (Dor, 2015) for understanding the self first as a motivated agent and later as an autobiographical author. With language, human beings began to assign words to their internal wishes and desires. They eventually converted their understanding of goal-directed sequences into stories that could be shared with others through language's unparalleled power to foster mutual identification. They began to construct the self from the inside out.

But at what point did humans begin to use language to formulate broad stories *of their lives in full*? When did telling stories about discrete goal-directed events of the day bleed into conceiving of one's ongoing life as an integrative, self-authored narrative? In writing the *Confessions*, St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.) is often credited with producing the first truly self-reflective autobiography. But the urge to do so surely predated him. Homer and the Old Testament authors told third-person stories about the lives of gods and men. In some of those stories, the protagonists were themselves motivated agents, as in *The Odyssey*. In others (*The Iliad*, the book of Genesis), supernatural forces and voices sometimes dictated the actions of human protagonists. Still, even the tale of hapless Adam and Eve featured the kind of motivated agency that coherent stories require—on God's part, mostly, but also in Eve's acting upon her own desire to bite into the forbidden fruit.

We assume that long before stories were transcribed into the written word, authors invented stories about motivated agents, and shared those stories with the group. It seems reasonable to assume that they possessed the ability and the desire to tell stories about themselves, too, stories that connected one life event to the next in an ongoing sequence that could potentially convey something substantial and important about "my life." It would seem likely that authors would relate those personal stories to the myths that the group formulated to make sense of the known world more generally (Donald, 1991). Those personal stories would surely have been simpler and less introspective than what St. Augustine accomplished, or what might be told in a job interview or therapy session today. But they would be stories of the self nonetheless, proto-narrative identities, as it were, the fledgling products of an emerging autobiographical author.

5 Conclusion

In their evolutionary study of nineteenth-century British novels, Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger (2016) argue that the dynamics of *cooperation* and *dominance* contour these stories more strongly than do any other thematic concerns. Within the

agonistic plot structure, characters strive to get along (cooperation) and get ahead (dominance). The social reputations of protagonists and antagonists largely consist of the traits that readers ascribe to them in so far as those traits promote or impede the characters' efforts to get along and get ahead. In this essay, we contend that pre-linguistic humans, like *Homo erectus*, first ascribed simple versions of these reputational traits to each other, and to themselves, through mimesis. Language per se would not have been necessary for the articulation of trait-based self-understanding, developed from the outside in through the internalization of social reputation.

Language would appear to be a prerequisite, however, for narrative understandings of the self, through which identity develops from the inside out. As the primal technology for storytelling, language provided *Homo sapiens* with a means whereby motivated agents could articulate their goals through stories, while imagining how the minds of others might do the same. The culmination of self-storytelling is the development of narrative identity (McAdams, 2019). As autobiographical authors, human beings derive meaning and purpose in their lives through reconstructing the personal past and imagining the future to create an ongoing, self-defining story. Whereas my traits capture the basic dimensions of my social reputation, my story explains how I have become the unique person I am and where I believe my life may be going.

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