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Reaching for Meaning

Human Agency and the Narrative Imagination

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I am exploring meaning and meaning constructions as forms of human agency. Drawing on notions of meaning, agency, and subjectivity by Jerome Bruner and Klaus Holzkamp, my discussion emphasizes the human potentials to act, choose, and imagine as integral to the human condition. Against the backdrop of this discussion, I am particularly interested in the meaning-making resources of language, especially, of two forms of language use. One is agentive discourse—the discourse of agency—because it brings to the fore the constructive dimension of language. The other is narrative, because it is the most complex and comprehensive construction site of human imagination. I suggest that narrative imagination plays a central role in probing and extending real and fictive scenarios of agency.

KEY WORDS: agency, Critical Psychology, meaning-making, subjectivity

In the epigraph to his book *Hamlet's Castle*, Gordon Mills (1976) describes an event in the year 1924, when the two physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg went on a walking tour to Kronberg Castle in Bohr's homeland of Denmark. When they reached the castle, admiring the architecture—as Heisenberg reported—Bohr began to muse about the strange relation between the physicality of the building and the meaning given to it by the power of narrative imagination. "The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle," Bohr said.

> None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a different language. The courtyard becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness of the human soul, we hear Hamlet's "To be or not to be." Yet all we really know about Hamlet is that his name appears in a thirteenth-century chronicle. No one can prove that he really lived here. But everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depth he was made to reveal, and so he too had to be found a place on earth, here in Kronberg. (Mills, 1976)

Jerome Bruner (1986) has taken this scene as the starting point of an essay entitled "Possible Castles." In this essay he sets out to explore some of the ways in which we create meanings, how we come to experience meanings as real, and how meanings are built into the corpus of a culture as science, literature, history, and philosophy. Obviously, our intellectual and artistic constructions can and, indeed, do simultaneously coexist in diverse worlds, real and imagined. Reflecting on this coexistence, Bruner makes the case that for understanding and appreciating the human condition it is far more important to investigate the ways human beings construct their real and possible worlds—and their material and fictitious castles—than it is to establish the ontological status of the products of these construction processes. Establishing their ontological status would involve applying categories that aim to distinguish exactly between what is "real" and what is "fantasy," what is "objective" and what is "subjective," what is "true" or "right" and what is "wrong" or "faulty." This is what much of the epistemological discourse of traditional psychology has been about. In contrast, Bruner's essay makes a plea for richer concepts—that is at least how I read it—concepts that are differentiated, open, and sensitive enough to live up to the complex and delicate fabric of our meaning constructions.

In this view, the idea that humans are able to create and understand meaning in a variety of cultural contexts is of crucial importance. In fact, it might be at the center of what Bruner refers to as the human condition. What surprised Bohr and Heisenberg at Kronberg Castle was the creative potential of meaning-making as it manifests itself in both the physical and the narrative imagination, equally appreciated by both physicists. As an aside, it may be worthwhile to note that neither of them—not during their walk nor at any other point in their academic career—considered even for a second using the explanatory armature of science to make sense of the imaginative make-up of the human mind. It is as if they wanted to avoid the danger of reducing the interpretive and imaginative potentials of the mind to just one of its options, the option of causal explanation. Perhaps they also felt that there was no need to reify the enterprise of "understanding human understanding" (i.e., of interpretation and imagination) into a generalizing "para-science," as Clifford Geertz (1983) put the matter, when he was describing his belief that the way we create meanings is a different kind of enterprise altogether and, as he added, that there are enough general principles in the world already.

We live our lives in a variety of cultural meaning contexts. We read books about the physicists Bohr and Heisenberg taking a walk to Kronberg Castle; following them, we imagine Hamlet as he might have been imagined by Shakespeare, and by Bohr, and how this scene was used by the critic Gordon Mills, and commented on by Jerome Bruner; and then we hurry across the castle's windy courtyard not to miss the train that will bring us back to Copenhagen, where we will meet friends for dinner and talk about how it is for them to live and work in that city. Usually we do not have any difficulty acting in such multiple scenarios. Shifting between them with great ease and agility, we are often not even aware of this multiplicity. However, things turn out to be thornier when

we try to understand what's going on here; when we want to investigate the ways human beings construct their lives in real and possible worlds. And this is even more the case when we want to make psychological and philosophical sense of this extended space of possibilities we live in. Traditional meaning theories in psychology and philosophy have not allotted much attention to the question of how we manage to live simultaneously in multiple contexts of cultural meanings, mainly—as I suspect—because these traditions have not been particularly concerned with the cultural nature of meaning constructions at all.

However, this is not the entire story. There also have been some outsider views, in fact, traditions offering concepts and approaches that aim to capture meaning as a social, historical, and cultural phenomenon. Such "alternative psychologies" of meaning, to borrow Kurt Danziger's (1997) term, can be traced back over centuries.[1] I already mentioned Jerome Bruner, an influential voice in contemporary cultural psychology for whom meaning and human meaning-making play a central role. In what follows I would like to offer some thoughts on the interplay of multiple meaning constructions, constructions that I want to understand as forms of human agency. Among these, I shall argue, narrative imagination is pivotal in probing and extending real and fictive scenarios of agency.

These thoughts reflect diverse perspectives on the problem at stake, that is to say, they bring into play approaches to meaning and agency from different theoretical viewpoints. Yet they all take up Bruner's point that for understanding the human condition it is far more important to investigate the ways human beings construct their real and possible worlds than it is to classify and evaluate their ontological status; and, we may add, it also is more important than to judge these worlds in terms of their being true or false, that is, by truth values taken from *one* of the many worlds we inhabit.

In my discussion of this point, I also draw on the work of Klaus Holzkamp, who suggested another alternative cultural and historical conception of meaning. At times, I shall engage Holzkamp's and Bruner's views in a kind of dialogical interchange. For I believe that Holzkamp's conception of meaning is similar to many ideas of Bruner and other contemporary cultural psychologists, such as Michael Cole, James Wertsch, and Katherine Nelson, to name a few. This is remarkable because there never was any direct contact between Holzkamp and his North American colleagues who, like him, took up and further developed essential ideas from Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Luria.

It is easier to follow a dialogue than to understand why there was none, just as it is easier to understand why there is something rather than nothing. Why are the theories of meaning, agency, and subjectivity developed by Holzkamp and his colleagues, published in a number of books and papers mostly in German between the 1970s and his death in 1995, almost completely absent in present debates?[2] Neither the different political and cultural zeitgeist and the particular historical circumstances under which they emerged, nor the fact that they were influenced by the cultural-historical school of psychology in the wake of Vygotsky and Marxist theories of society, can fully account for this neglect. Nor can their dense and complicated language, seen by many as a serious deterrent

both in English and in German. None of these factors are really convincing, because behind the aloof surface and the long-ago spirit of 1960s and 1970s' *pensée engagé* there is originality and intellectual sophistication, not to mention a theoretical and, in particular, epistemological awareness that is rare in psychology.

Holzkamp's Project

Holzkamp was already an established academic psychologist, both as experimenter and theorist, appointed at the Free University Berlin as Germany's youngest full professor in his discipline, when he began to feel that there was something fundamentally wrong with the way psychology worked.[3] He became more and more convinced that the scope of dominant "psychology of variables" was substantially limited by a self-imposed methodological apparatus of experimentation, hypotheses-testing, and statistical models that were meant to give psychology the status of an objective and nomological science. For Holzkamp this kind of psychology ultimately was investigating not real human beings in their biological and sociocultural existence, but an artificially created homunculus, a *homo psychologicus*. Strongly influenced by the protest movements and anti-establishment culture of the late 1960s and 1970s, Holzkamp's increasingly radical analysis of mainstream psychology led him to what he saw as a turn from mere ideological critique to the project of a completely new psychology, a psychology that not only resulted from this critique, but was built on novel conceptual foundations.

The name of the new psychology was *Kritische Psychologie*. Critical Psychology was meant to be *Subjektwissenschaft,* the study of the subject "from the standpoint of the subject," rather than from the standpoint of the academic apparatus of psychology. For Holzkamp, the individual subject's perspective was the irreducible focus—he even spoke of the a priori—of all psychological research. And since categories are the tools, the basic instruments of every intellectual enterprise, the gist of the new project was the founding of a new set of categories of psychological analysis. This was the agenda of Holzkamp's *Grundlegung der Psychologie* (Foundations of Psychology), published in 1983. Grounded in an extensive investigation of the historical and evolution-based emergence of the very subject of psychology—the human individual living in the midst of a societal, cultural, and political world—the categories suggested in this book were meant to systematically reflect the phylogenetic, sociogenetic, and ontogenetic "logic" of psychic development. Accordingly, this development was traced all the way up from its elemental biological forms to its complex exemplification in human consciousness and its sociocultural forms, including symbolic systems such as language, art, and ideology.[4]

Philosophically, Holzkamp compared his project of elaborating new basic categories of psychological investigation to Kant's critical philosophy. In contrast to

Kant's transcendental categories, however, Holzkamp wanted his categories to be based on empirical inquiries into the natural, social, and individual history of human subjectivity. Because human beings are agentive subjects of both their historical existence and individual life histories in ways that other species appear not to be, it is their particular subjectivity, and not any transcendental subject, that must constitute the central epistemic point of view in the endeavor of psychology.

Both in its Kantian spirit and in its all-encompassing developmental design, the project of Critical Psychology is also reminiscent of the overarching theoretical architecture of Piaget's Genetic Epistemology. In his system of the developing rational mind, Piaget aimed at interweaving structures of development at an ontogenetic level and development at large, drawing on philosophical and naturalist models of evolution. But this comparison holds only if one leaves out the fact that Piaget defined the principles of his development exclusively in biological terms (or, more precisely, in his personal version of evolutionary theory), whereas Holzkamp's theoretical trajectory was grounded in a view of the human subject as ultimately societal and historical, that is, as a cultural subject.

For many, these are still challenging ideas, thoughts that go against the grain—today, more than a quarter of a century after the publication of Holzkamp's *Grundlegung der Psychologie*, perhaps more so than ever. They invite us to rethink the problem of meaning and, especially, of multiple contexts of meaning from a historical and evolutionary point of view. In suggesting a perspective on meaning that highlights humans' abilities of action, choice, and imagination as integral to the human condition, these ideas strongly emphasize the concepts of agency and subjectivity. In what follows I want to further explore these concepts, issues that have kept me thinking since I wrote my thesis, supervised by Holzkamp, on the problem of meaning in psychology. "Of course, Vygotsky opened a new window on the mind," Holzkamp said in one of our discussions. "But if we really look out of this window, what do we see? We see that we have not yet come to terms with the meaning problem at all," he added in his breathless style, as always in a hurry, as if the problem was impatiently waiting for him that very afternoon in his den at home.

I don't know if today we *have* come to terms with the meaning problem. I don't even know if we ever will and, indeed, if we can come to terms with it at all, because this question is inextricably intermingled with another question of meaning, or shall we say *quest* for meaning: the meaning, or significance, that we give to our lives, to our being in the world. This question arises again and again in the life of each individual in a particular, in fact, unique, way, and it hence requires a patient and ongoing examination of the multifarious forms and practices in which individuals make sense of their lives. One might think of the river in which you never step twice. But I believe that Holzkamp's idea of meaning as a possibility of action (which I will explain in more detail in a moment) has provided us with a new perspective on these forms and practices, a perspective in which the human subject of meaning-making, with all its imaginative potential, is given center stage.

The Meaning of Meaning and Agency

To avoid any misunderstanding I should emphasize that meaning has been an important topic in philosophy, linguistics, and psychology for a long time. The conceptions of meaning, however, underlying 20th-century grand theories explicitly renounce conceiving of meaning and meaning construction as cultural or historical phenomena.[5] Now, with the conversation of Bohr and Heisenberg at Kronberg Castle in mind, we might wonder: how can we study meaning and exclude culture and history? There are a number of options. Consider philosophical concepts of meaning in the wake of Frege's analytic semantics or of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*; Saussureian and Chomskyian linguistics; and behaviorist, cognitive, psycholinguistic, and neuroscientific psychology and philosophy. Even with all their diversity, these concepts overlap in a single but decisive respect: in one way or another they locate meaning in the head—be it the mental sphere of associations, representations, ideas, concepts, and structures; the place of a genetically driven language organ; a hidden black box; a system of computational information processing; or certain brain regions or neuronal networks. To make a long story short, meaning is where culture and history are *not*.

Those who prefer a slightly more extended version regarding psychology, especially of how the "cognitive revolution" replaced the concept of meaning by the concept of information, will find Bruner's (1990) account in his *Acts of Meaning* most helpful. Cognitive science began with the rise of the computational model of the mind. This model not only translated meaning into information, it also turned the mind into a computational machine. On this account, Bruner (1990) writes, the mind was deprived of all its subjective and intentional qualities, up to a point where the concepts of subjectivity and agency eventually became meaningless. Moreover, cognitive science's focus on either mental representation or biological mechanisms, as already noted by Howard Gardner (1985), evaporated not only the idea of subjectivity but the entire idea of a human subject as a subject of action and interaction that lives in a historical world of culture. Cognitive scientists—and this seems to be true as well for most of their heirs, neurocognitive scientists—in principle have no quarrel with the idea that behavior and thought is directed towards goals. If direction is governed by a self-organizing computational system or a system of self-organizing neuronal circuits, this goes perfectly well with most current scientific models of brain and mind.[6] But both old (computational) and new (neurobiological) cognitive science are oddly chary of the concepts of agency and subjectivity. The question of intentional agency has never been psychology's question (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003). Why is that? It might have to do with the very nature of human agency and subjectivity, which reaches beyond the conceptual scope of cognitive science, old or new. Let me explain.

We can understand the term "agency," drawing on the writings of both Bruner and Holzkamp, as referring to the agentive dimension of human subjectivity. Holzkamp called this dimension *Handlungsfähigkeit*: humans' specific capacity

of actively influencing and changing their living conditions. Literally, *Handlungs-fähigkeit* means the ability or capacity to act, which is sometimes translated into "action potence," a term that, however, may sound awkward to Anglophone ears.[7] This capacity for action is mediated through the particular social character of human life. Holzkamp speaks of the essentially "societal nature" of human beings, a feature Bruner refers to as humans' "cultural nature." Holzkamp's focus is on the individuals' striving to extend their influence over their living conditions, an effort that necessitates participation in societal action. Here Holzkamp draws on the definition of human nature given by the young Karl Marx, in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1888/1969), that the "human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual ... but the ensemble of the social relations" (p. 14).

If we examine Bruner's concept of agency more closely we notice that it similarly emphasizes the subjective dimension of action—viewed in the light of philosophical pragmatism. In Bruner's view, this implies that the conduct of action is under the sway of intentional states, such as beliefs, desires, emotions, and moral commitments, states which in turn are interwoven with culture, society, and history. Yet perhaps more important is that both Holzkamp and Bruner, as theorists of human nature, conceive of meaning and agency in relational terms. For both, subjectivity is participatory. For Bruner, meaning and meaning-making are processes that bind human beings to culture; for Holzkamp, they relate individuals, on a biological, social, and psychic level, to their external world and to themselves. To be sure, either view could use Clifford Geertz's classic statement as an epigraph, namely, that there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.

Of course the Vygotskian idea that the human infant is from the very beginning of its life a social being looms large in both these arguments. It is only because infants, in a Vygotskian perspective, are embedded in manifold interactive practices and forms of symbolic communication that they grow so smoothly into a culture's fabric of meaning.[8] Yet in order to understand the idea of agency in Bruner's and Holzkamp's conceptions of meaning, we need to consider, beside the Vygotskian legacy, still another "alternative psychology" of meaning: the tradition of Gestalt psychology and research in ecological perception. As this tradition seems to have been similarly "forgotten," let me revisit a few essentials of the idea of meaning elaborated along these lines.

Koffka's Mailbox

Central Gestalt and ecological psychologists were perception theorists, quite like Bruner and Holzkamp, who both worked for many years in the domain of perception. For classical perception theorists the problem of meaning is that of the subjective "realization" or "actualization" of objectively given qualitative and figurative structures. According to Gestalt psychologists such as Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka, organisms do not merely respond to their

environments; they are involved in lively interactions with the environment. If the rat in a box is the image associated with behaviorism, then the chimp with two sticks in his hands trying actively to manipulate his environment is the symbol of the Gestalt approach, as Robinson (1976/1995) noted.

Meaning, in the view of the Gestalt psychology of perception, is constituted in the interplay between action, experience, and environment. Yet "environment" here is not just the physical surrounding proximate to the organism but the outcome of interactions between the organism's perceptual fields and the physical world. In the process of perception a certain form (*Gestalt*) or figurative organizational quality (*Gestalt-Qualität*) is being imposed upon the physical world. But how and where does this "imposition" take place? The answer given by J.J. Gibson's (1979) ecological theory of perception is that it takes place neither in the senses nor in the mind exclusively. We do not perceive, through sense-data or sensory information, "neutral" physical objects to which we then cognitively "add" meanings or whose meanings we cognitively "decode." Rather, what we perceive is already a meaningful and ecologically valid structure, otherwise we would not be able to perceive it at all. Because this structure is functionally related to the perceiving subject, the subject perceives not merely stimuli, information, or physical forms as such but rather their material meanings as they exist within this functional relationship.

Each thing, wrote Kurt Koffka in his *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935), tells us immediately what it is. One of Koffka's examples was the mailbox. Every mailbox "invites" a letter. In this way the mailbox directly manifests or embodies its meaning. Koffka did not believe that such a meaning could be understood as an array of mnemonic images, unconscious reactions, or cognitive representations. For him, it is the mailbox itself that shows its value "on the face of it." Of course, there is an important qualification to be noted here. For Koffka it was not the physical mailbox that invites me to deposit my letter but the phenomenal mailbox, the mailbox in its functional relationship to me as the letter writer who wants to send a message to a friend. The objects of our world thus have a "demand character," as Koffka put it.

It was in the context of the discussion of this non-mentalist, relational, and interactional approach to meaning that Kurt Lewin coined the term *Aufforderungs-charakter*, which was translated as "invitation character" or "valence." On Gibson's (1979) reading, this became the concept of "affordance." But despite his several differences with the phenomenological psychologists, Gibson maintained the same anti-mentalist (and anti-behaviorist) stance. It's not our perception or our mind that constructs or represents "affordances"; rather, we only perceive the objects of our environment in all kinds of everyday interactions because their affordances result from their function within the overall ecological field of action and perception in which we live. We are always already embedded in a world of objects, places, landscapes, and actions. Our perception is a part of this world. Thus meaning, for Gibson, was connected to what he called an "ecological physics" based on the practical everyday interactions of human beings with

and within their environment. In other words, it was not stimulus–response associations, cognitive information processing, neurocognitive networking, or any other form of mental representation but forms of everyday practices that, in this view, underlie processes of meaning-making and meaning-understanding.

The question is: what do these forms of practice and interaction consist of? In their answer to this question, Holzkamp and Bruner similarly distinguish themselves from Gestaltists, phenomenologists, and ecological psychologists. Bruner, in his *Acts of Meaning* (1990), discusses "the problem of the Self" as a problem of cultural meaning construction. He suggests focusing "upon the meanings in terms of which Self is defined both by the individual and by the culture in which he or she participates." Thus he wants to "attend to the practices in which 'the meanings of Self' are achieved and put to use." He goes on to argue that this focus on a wide spectrum of societal practices will lead us to an understanding of the self as "distributed in action, in projects, in practice" (pp. 116–117).

Shifting the perspective again, I will now take a closer look at Holzkamp's approach to the same issue, highlighting some of the basic concepts he proposes for going about the problem of cultural meaning construction.

Meanings as Possibilities for Action

In repudiating traditional psychological models, Holzkamp aims to overcome what he calls the limitations of a merely "organistic level of specificity" in the analysis of human meanings.[9] Accordingly, when it is about human beings, the analysis has to grasp forms of practice and interaction that are specific to human existence, in contrast to those of other species. These specific human forms of practice, as already mentioned, are the forms of societal life, which involve language and other symbol systems, all of them linked together to constitute an "all-encompassing and pervasive societal synthesis." Differently put, whenever we talk about a human individual, we talk about an individual within this societal synthesis.

This is not to deny that these forms have a biological and evolutionary "prehistory" still operative on the human and societal levels of specificity. The concept of meaning assumes here an important intermediate role since it is both biological and societal. In Holzkamp's phylogenetic and sociogenetic reconstruction, meaning first enters the scene as the "psychic aspect" of the "organism–environment relationship." A bit further up on the evolutionary and socio-historical level of the "human–world relationship," meaning then becomes the central unit of psychological analysis, and the basic category of psychology. To study the differentiations of meaning and meaning-making is to understand the manifold ways in which human individuals are socially embedded and functionally integrated in the whole of a societal community. Over the course of its evolutionary history, the psychological character of meaning changes. While on the pre-human level meaning is a "determinant of activity"

that lies in a species-specific environment, on a human-specific societal level meaning turns into the *possibility* for activity or "action possibility." This formulation is reminiscent of Koffka's demand character, Lewin's invitation character, and Gibson's affordance; but Holzkamp (1983) goes one step further:

> Because (on a specific human, societal level) the mode of existence and subsistence does not depend any more on the immediate recognition and realization of a meaning [as a "determinant of activity"], individuals are not determined in their actions by any given constellation of meaning; rather, within the context of the needs of their own existence, they always have the "alternative" not to act or to act differently. In this sense, they are "free" to realize "their" meanings, meanings here being mere *Handlungsmöglichkeiten*, "possibilities for actions", not determinants of actions. (p. 236)

The concept of human meaning as a "possibility for action" is pivotal to Holzkamp's entire concept of the psyche and, indeed, of psychology. It reflects three basic features of meanings. First, meanings are relational; they are the psychological aspect of our relationship to the world. Second, they are societal and historical; they do not exist outside of culture and its symbolic systems; rather, meaning constructions are the very essence of human culture. Accordingly, what the individual confronts at the societal level is neither the natural world in itself nor even the natural world mediated by the actions of others (as in the formula "nature vs. society"), but a cultural structure of meanings that has, as it were, absorbed and transformed its original natural substrate. Third, meanings are not deterministic triggers of action; they are not physical, chemical, or biological stimuli or constraints, but indicate or signal a range of options, of possibilities for action. At least in principle, we can detach ourselves from meanings; we can step back and consider them, think about them, evaluate them, take a conscious and reflexive stance towards them.

As a consequence, the relationship of human individuals to their societal world is never direct and immediate. What meanings constitute is, in Holzkamp's (1983) terms, a "possibility relationship" (p. 236) between us and the world we live in. Living in a world of cultural meanings implies that we have no choice but to choose: we must interpret meanings, weigh them, and make a decision about how to go about them, be it about everyday issues like what to eat and to wear or more momentous decisions like which spouse and friends to live with and which life to live at all, which brings us back to the question about what meaning do we choose to give to our lives. Ultimately it is this possibility relationship that affords the enormous range of variations in individual development and provides for the essentially human option of distinctively individual forms of life.

These forms of life may even be deviant. People, at least in principle, are able to break with a given societal system—as Klaus Holzkamp did himself—questioning political authority, power-relations, and dominant ideology. We also can speak here in a philosophical-anthropological sense of the freedom human individuals have in choosing their personal ways of being, an idea explored in several

thought traditions of modernity from Marxism and classical liberalism to existentialism, psychoanalysis, pragmatism, and post-structuralism. For Jean-Paul Sartre, to remind us of just one modern theorist of freedom, the human project is always based on "radical choice"—philosophically, ethically, and politically. Thrown into a world of possibilities, we can never escape from the responsibility of freedom or, as Sartre put it, the burden of freedom, which he saw in the very center of the human condition. Holzkamp's notion of the possibility relationship is not far from this. For Holzkamp there is, however, yet another side to the idea of freedom and, and this is, as Tolman (1994) summarizes,

> … that the latitude of freedom in any society (as we all know) can be restricted, suppressed, and deformed. Where this occurs, however, the possibility relationship is not extinguished. The possibility relationship is an *essential* characteristic of the human species and can be objectively annihilated only with the species itself. (p. 106)

Viewed in this manner, there is no such thing as a situation in which human beings do not have alternatives of action and thought; which is not to say that there are no situations in which human beings can be reduced to an inhuman and even sub-human level of existence.

At least from a hermeneutic point of view there is no doubt that we constantly interpret the world we live in, including ourselves and others. We ponder alternatives, negotiate meanings, and form opinions that we then re-evaluate and revise when it seems appropriate. Human beings, Charles Taylor (1985b) has argued, are self-interpreting and self-evaluating animals. In particular, Taylor views the capacity to interpret and evaluate our own evaluations and desires ("second-order desires or evaluation of desires") as a crucial feature of human agency. Whatever people do, and in whatever social circumstances they do it, they can never free themselves from what Holzkamp (1983) calls their "gnostic" or "epistemic" relationship to the world: their interpretive and reflexive stance towards the world and themselves. The possibility relationship thus opens up a kind of "epistemic distance" (*Erkenntnisdistanz*) between individuals and their world and themselves (p. 236). Tolman (1994) remarks that this term "is meant to emphasize the way in which meaning creates a distance between us and the objects of our world, a distance that allows us to 'stand back' and reflect on relations and consequences, make plans, and set goals before acting" (p. 150).

This leads to another concept closely connected to the notions of possibility relationship and epistemic distance that is important for the question of meaning. In the same way in which for human beings the world of things is never just given, there are never actions that just happen, or just follow from other actions, or result from certain causes or conditions. Actions are being done because people, subjects of action, do or conduct them. And they do so for reasons that may be good or bad, comprehensible or incomprehensible, but always are "first-person" reasons. Thus, the main concern of the psychology Holzkamp envisioned is to understand people's "reasons for actions," a concept that he distinguished from causal

concepts.[10] Concepts such as causes or conditions of behavior (and their implicit assumption of an "immediate" psychic causality) are in one way or another fundamental in traditional psychological approaches, and they have gained even more importance with the neuroscientific turn of the discipline.

As noted above, Holzkamp's concept of reasons or grounds for action overlaps to a certain extent with what Bruner called intentionality, that is, the sphere of subjectivity defined by one's intentions, beliefs, hopes, emotions, and moral commitments. It is the universe of their intentions (i.e., their subjective reasons) and the way these intentions (or reasons) are shared—what Tomasello and Carpenter (2007) have called "shared intentionality"—that distinguishes human beings from non-human species, as well as from computational machines and neurobiological networks. But more important here, I believe, is the strong sense of human agency underlying both Bruner's and Holzkamp's views. Bruner's emphasis on intentionality as the central feature of human subjectivity finds its equivalent in Holzkamp's idea that the species-specific characteristic of humans is manifested in their ability to consciously act in a societal context, that is, in their *Handlungsfähigkeit*. On this view, individuals strive in one way or another to influence their conditions of life, a striving for individual self-determination, understood in the broadest sense, that necessarily implies active participation in the societal process.

Whatever the most appropriate English translation of *Handlungsfähigkeit* may be, the semantic field in which it is situated may suffice to make its focus clear: subjectivity, agency, decision-making, controlling one's own life conditions, participation, self-determination, action possibilities, reasons for action. This conceptual field seems well equipped to capture both the agentive dimension of human meaning-making and the creative potential of our meaning construal, a potential that makes us feel at home in either real or imagined worlds.

It is this creative potential to which I will now turn, drawing the attention to language as the hub of our symbolic meaning systems. In particular, I am interested in two forms of language use: one is *agentive discourse*—the discourse of agency—because it brings to the fore the constructive dimension of language; and the other is *narrative discourse*, because it is the most complex and comprehensive construction site of human imagination, or, as I also could say in view of the reflections of Niels Bohr, because narrative imagination is the most ingenious architect of our castles, real and possible.

Agentive Discourse or: What Makes Me an Agent?

Subjectivity, intentions, agency, participation, decision-making, action possibilities, reasons for action, and *Handlungsfähigkeit* are all terms that belong to what Rom Harré (1995) has described as "agentive discourse." For Harré the study of human agency cannot be separated from the study of the language of agency, that is, "the discursive practices in which our agentive powers are manifested or, to put it more candidly, in which we present ourselves as agents" (p. 122). Agentive

discourse refers to the whole of these discursive practices. In Harré's view there are two important ways of presenting ourselves as agents and our actions in an agentive framework. One is "the taking and assigning, accepting and repudiating of responsibility for actions" and the other is "the demonstration that what happened was an action satisfying some appropriate rule, convention or norm, or was not an action but the effect of some causal process" (p. 123). Whenever we are in one of these two situations, we assign agentive power to people, and we do this for the most part by either positioning ourselves or others in an agentive fashion or interpreting an event or "non-event" (e.g., the absence of an expected event) in agentive terms.

All languages provide a rich and differentiated vocabulary for such acts of positioning which allow people to constitute themselves as agents with respect to the conventions and narrative models of agency made available by their culture (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Mackenzie & Atkins, 2008). In Standard Average European languages, for example, we frequently make use of distinctions between basic, independent, original, and true agents and derivative, dependent, or vicarious agents, as well as between all kinds of intentional and unintentional, conscious and unconscious (or subconscious) actions. There are special languages of, for example, law, religion, and psychoanalysis which have developed repertoires of terms to classify and assess the moral status of actions and the state of mind of agents. It is these sorts of discursive practice which define, shape, and, indeed, constitute agency that a discourse theorist like Harré has in mind when he speaks of the psychology of human agency. In this psychology the discourse of agency not only reflects, labels, and describes an action, but also creates it—both morally and ontologically. For Harré, being an agent and discursively presenting oneself as an agent are one and the same.

A premise of the discursive framework is that agency is not just out there in the world, that it is not a biological, historical, or psychological "given," but that there always is someone who assigns it to agents and actions. This includes the putatively neutral and objective observer, the scientist, police detective, and judge. All of them when referring to agency are embedding an interpretation of what one has done, is doing, or is about to do in a narrative that displays someone as agent with respect to the action in question. At one end of the gamut of cultural agency positions we find a narrative that turns reasons into causes, minds into brains, and intentional human actions into physical or (neuro)physiological processes. At the other end, this gamut also includes the assigning of passivity or lack of agency. Harré (1995) points out that such concepts as agency and action always occur in our languages as polarized pairs, together with their indispensable opposites.

> We can only grasp the meaning of what it is to be agentive by contrast with what it excludes, that is, what it is to be passive. So in studying the ways in which we present ourselves as agents by discursively embedding our actions in the agentive framework, we must not fail to attend to the ways we have of presenting ourselves as patients, and to life projects and situations that call for one or the other strategy. (p. 122)

One could argue that many life projects call not only for one or the other strategy but for one *and* the other strategy, and often they do so simultaneously. It therefore seems to be more appropriate to assume a continuum between agency and non-agency or less agency (be it understood in terms of passivity, powerlessness, indifference, abeyance, or restraint). Mostly we are able to tell more than one story in order to explain, justify, or plan what we or others do or don't do. Interestingly, in doing so we typically are not aware of the "agentive status" of what we do. There is, as Harré puts it, no "Machiavellian knowingness" behind our discursive practices. We usually smoothly modulate from one discursive mode of agency to another according to what is required by the situation, the level of moral justification, and the narrative genre—in other words, what is called for by the meaning context in which we position ourselves. "Only when confronted by police, spouses, psychiatrists, or jurors," Harré (1995) writes, "do we reflect upon our modes of presentation— and sometimes not even then" (p. 123).

Agentive discourse, we might conclude, is a vehicle by which we navigate the extended space of our "possibility relationship" to the world and ourselves. It is one of the creative devices of human culture, even if these devices are provided in distinct ways by different cultures, by which we continuously adapt to the multiple meaning contexts in which we live and think—keep in mind that none of these cultural contexts are really stable. But agentive discourse is only one way in which language is operative in what I have described elsewhere as the symbolic space of cultural meanings (Brockmeier, 2000, 2001). In this symbolic space the potentialities of language unfold in and through a number of differentiated symbol systems and media, including texts, pictures, films, architecture, and the arts.

To be sure, language already provides on an elementary level many devices, strategies, and techniques for creating "epistemic distance" from the immediacy of the material world and our perception of it. It creates, as it were, "symbolic distance." Just consider how infants' use of one-word sentences marks a way to step out of the temporal flux of sensations and perceptions and hold on to them, consider and reflect on them, putting them in new contexts of meanings. The moment, as the ancient philosopher put it, may never dwell. But it can be remembered and, in this way, reconsidered, re-evaluated and, in fact, even re-experienced. Viewed in this manner, children's early practices of meaning construction are first attempts to stop the temporal flow of perception, turning "temporality" into a linguistic, symbolic, and cultural construal. The distancing function of language, and this is especially true of narrative (Bruner, 2002), exponentially expands the reach of human meanings and thus of possibilities for action.

Back to Hamlet's Castle

Narrative, the force that brings Hamlet to the castle of Kronberg and Niels Bohr to his musings about meaning construction, is another form of language use (or discourse) crucial to our creative and imaginative potentialities. The

argument that I have put forward in this essay—and, in the process, sketching a way from Holzkamp to my own work today—is simple: I propose understanding narrative imagination as a form and practice of human agency. Telling stories is an advanced mode of communicating and negotiating meanings, but it is also an advanced mode of creating novel meanings. The constructions of narrative not only use established cultural patterns and models but also tackle experiences, ideas, and feelings that break with them and go beyond the common ground. Even extreme experiences that seem to evade language often give shape to stories, as uncommon as these may be, that in their own way share the extreme nature of the experiences (Brockmeier, 2008). At times, narratives are even capable of extending the symbolic space which a culture unfolds at a certain point in history, breaking through the limits of the materially given and transcending the horizon of physical causality: it seems that it was this constructive potential of narrative imagination that made the two physicists brood over what Bohr called the "different language" in which the castle's walls and ramparts spoke to them.

To refine this argument, I shall reformulate it from the vantage points of the three main alternative psychologies of meaning and agency I have discussed. Couching it in terms of Harré's notion of agency we can say that narrative is a form of agentive discourse that allows for the most flexible positioning of agents and actions in a story, as well as of the narrators of that story. What makes narrative such a flexible form and vehicle of imagination is its capacity to tap into multiple frameworks of meaning that draw on both real and fictive scenarios of agency. Narrative imagination seamlessly mingles the factual with the fictitious, the real with the possible; in fact, it fuses the real and possible with the impossible. Who can tell the line between them, if we look at them with the eyes of Franz Kafka's K. figuring out the nature of the nightmarish trial to which he is put for an alleged crime that is never revealed to him? (Walter Benjamin, for one, claimed that these are the eyes of the modern individual.)

From the point of view of Holzkamp's concept of agency or *Handlungsfähigkeit*, narrative can be seen as a symbolic form and practice in which we act out our epistemic relationship to the world and ourselves. Narrative imagination, on this account, explores the reach of the symbolic space of a culture by actualizing its meanings as reasons for a particular kind of action, namely, imaginative actions. Imaginative actions can be down-to-earth and realistic, deeply embedded into the business of everyday life; keep in mind that most of our practical actions are enmeshed with acts of imagination. But imaginative actions can also be tentative and playful, fantastic and fanciful. They can be try-outs, thought experiments, airy scenarios of dreamt-about life projects and blueprints of possible lives, ways to fly a kite and to give life to the dead. For narrative construal not only makes sense of new experience but creates itself a new experience, a pathway to the construction of new meanings (Brockmeier, 2005a). In other words, we can—informed by Holzkamp—understand narrative imagination as a form and practice, both in literary and everyday discourse and thought, that enables the subject to probe his or her "action possibilities."

It allows us to play through our actions and lives, unfolding scenarios of a complexity that otherwise would not exist, in fact, were not even thinkable.

Finally, let me lay out my argument about narrative imagination as a form of human agency on the grounds of Bruner's notion of agency. The specific forms of agency and intentionality that Bruner identifies in narrative and, especially, in what he calls the narrative mode of thought are perhaps best described in terms of the "subjunctivizing strategies" so often used in fiction and poetry. For Bruner, narrative is our most powerful device to subjunctivize the world. It opens up to the hypothetical, the possible, and the actual. It invites us to live in more than one reality, in more than one context of meaning, in more than one order of time. And no doubt, we always accept this invitation. "To be in the subjunctive mode," writes Bruner (1986), "is, then, to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties" (p. 26). Subjunctivizing strategies are well-known practices of the self. Part and parcel of autobiographical self-construction, they offer what Bruner calls "a spectrum of actualizations" of meaning akin to the multiple "performances" of meaning initiated by literary texts (p. 25).

Bruner draws on Wolfgang Iser's (1978) reception-theoretical studies on how we understand the meanings of narrative texts, that is, by reconstructing, recreating, and reinventing them, fusing them with our own experiences and emotions. In further developing his ideas on the project of a literary anthropology, Iser (1991/1993) has maintained that the language of narrative and poetry incarnates a kind of plasticity that is that of the human condition itself, a plasticity that is both mirrored and shaped in all our symbolic meaning constructions. The point of narrative fiction in this context is that it articulates the human capability to permanently undermine cultural norms and restrictions. It demonstrates that the mind interprets meanings as possibilities of action that reach beyond its own limits. In this respect, the mind operates as if it is reading and interpreting a text that expands as it is interpreted because every new interpretation also enriches and opens up all other interpretations (Brockmeier, 2005b).

Reaching beyond one's own limits—I have explained this essential movement of narrative imagination by casting it in notions of meaning and agency from Holzkamp, Bruner, and Harré. Now I wonder whether this might have suggested the idea of a special epistemological capacity or, to say it in a different language, a peculiar hermeneutic faculty. It is true that at stake is a way of understanding and envisioning, an exploratory and explanatory mode of mind. But narrative imagination, to reiterate this point, comes as a fundamentally social enterprise. Reaching beyond one's limits implies reaching out to difference. Narrative imagination, to use the words of literary theorist Denis Donoghue (1998), can be taken

> … to be the capacity to imagine being different; to enter notionally and experimentally upon experiences we have not had, ways of life other than our own. Imagination in that respect is the means of sympathy. I can sympathize with someone else only to the extent I can imagine being that person. (p. 16)

There is an extended theoretical literature on this "social faculty." Philosophers like Gadamer, Derrida, Habermas, and Levinas have examined in much detail

the ways the Other is present in our acts of imagination. "But," Donoghue goes on to write,

> … we don't need to theorize the Other to acknowledge what an act of imagination entails. We know it in the rush of sympathy and sorrow and anger we feel at the sight of someone's pain. "O to have seen what I have seen, see what I see," Ophelia says. Imagination is seeing this difference. (p. 16)

There is a strange dialectic about this "seeing" the difference. Can you see difference at all? Ultimately you cannot. For seeing, as a sensual act—and as a metaphor or metonymy of a sensual act—turns difference from an abstract notion into a subject of sense certainty; it moves the putatively unknown and alien into the realm of the perceivable and imaginable; it transforms the universal into the particular, the generic into the individual. Basically, this is what narrative does. "Narrative 'strives'," as Bruner (1986) says, "to put its timeless miracles into the particularities of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place" (p. 13). Taking up an idea originating with Marcel Proust, Martha Nussbaum (1990) argues that there are certain truths about human life that "can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms of the narrative artist" (pp. 4–5), because they only exist in a specific, indeed, unique, manner. Living a human life means inhabiting a particular place and time, with particular relations to other particularly situated individuals. There is no such thing as humankind, as Brecht remarked; there only is my neighbor Paul who limps and is a widower with an ugly dog.

But then, once we face unique individuals and their plights and predicaments, why is it that we have sympathy with others in their misfortune? Why do we respond to Paul with compassion? Why are we horrified with K., feel undecided with Hamlet, suffer with Ophelia, and enjoy the happiness of a *bon vivant* when he remembers drinking tea on a Sunday afternoon, even longer ago, in Cambrais? Why do we share their feelings? The answer is simply because their feelings are our own or, at least, could be our own.

Understanding a particular individual, in fiction or real life, depends on one's ability to imagine the intentional world of someone else; I already mentioned the term "shared intentionality" to describe this capacity. In the philosophy of mind this capacity has been called "recreative imagination." The emphasis here is on the imaginative capacity for putting oneself in another person's place by imagining intentional or mental states (beliefs, desires, visions) of that person and so, in a sense, "recreating" another mind (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002). But besides this capacity to imagine what it means to be someone else, there still is something else to the understanding of the Other, and this is rooted in one's own particular experience and emotional existence. Nussbaum (1997) has pointed out that compassion has, since Aristotle, been closely associated in the Western tradition of moral philosophy with narrative imagination. Compassion is both an emotional state and a moral stance. It is grounded in the ability to imagine what it is like to be in another person's place, that is, it is based on empathy. But it requires, Nussbaum writes, one more thing, namely:

> … a sense of one's own vulnerability to misfortune. To respond with compassion, I must be willing to entertain the thought that this suffering person might be me. And this I will be unlikely to do if I am convinced that I am above the ordinary lot and no ill can befall me. (p. 91)

To be sure, narrative imagination and emotions, as Keith Oatley (2002) has shown, are intermingled in several respects. The one I would like to highlight here guides us, indeed, compels us, to not only imagine what am I (or my "self") but what is the Other; and what's more, it compels us to familiarize the strange, to move into the uncharted terrain. It is the fabric of this personal experience, of this kind of subjectivity, that becomes the focus of narrative imagination.

I believe this to be one of the main reasons we can view the imaginative resources of narrative as uniquely adapted to the exploration of our own and others' subjective states, including what Bruner called intentionality and Holzkamp subjective reasons of action. The narrative construal of meaning enables us to live simultaneously in distinct worlds, extending in this way the scope of human agency. Reaching for meaning, as I have proposed in this paper, might be the ultimate form of human agency. Nothing seems to be more suited to demonstrate that this potential is integral to the human condition than the narrative imagination.

Notes

1. For a historical view of such alternatives in psychology see Michael Cole (1996) and Gustav Jahoda (1992), and in philosophy see Charles Taylor (1985a) and Steven Toulmin (1990).
2. For a collection of "Critical Psychology" papers in English see Charles Tolman and Wolfgang Maiers (1991). In another work, Tolman (1994) has tried to give an introductory account of German Critical Psychology to an English audience. In 1992, *Theory & Psychology* published Holzkamp's paper "On Doing Psychology Critically" (Holzkamp, 1992).
3. Among Holzkamp's "pre-critical-psychological" works are the much discussed books *Theorie und Experiment in der Psychology* (Theory and Experiment in Psychology) (1964/2005) and *Wissenschaft als Handlung* (Science as Action) (1968/2006), in which he offered a constructionist critique of the logical-empiricist methods and knowledge claims of scientific psychology.
4. A first version of this "biological-historical" inquiry into the emergence of meaning as the basic form of the psychological was carried out by Aleksei N. Leont'ev (1959/1981), Vygotsky's student and colleague (see Brockmeier, 1988). Holzkamp conceived of his own work as drawing on and further developing Leont'ev's approach. He dedicated his 1983 *Grundlegung der Psychology* to Leont'ev.
5. This is, of course, not the case with historical and cultural-historical theories of meaning, like, for example, that of Koselleck (1979/1985) and those by and in the tradition of Foucault (1966/1973), including the works of Hacking (2002). For an alternative tradition in the philosophy of language in the wake of Heidegger and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, see Wellmer (2004).
6. See, for example, the discussions in journals such as *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *Cognition*, and the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.

7. Tolman (1994), although aware of this, used this term throughout his account of Critical Psychology. Another aspect of Holzkamp's idea of *Handlungsfähigkeit* is similarly difficult to translate: the aspect of "control" over one's own living conditions; in Tolman's words, "meaningful participation in the decision-making processes that decide our fates" (p. 150). One can, however, argue that what is at stake in Holzkamp's thought are not so much issues of "control" and "decision-making" (which is the language of exactly the tradition of psychological theorizing Holzkamp wanted to break with), but rather the idea of *Sorge*, care. *Sorge* is a concept pivotal to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger; in particular, to his investigation of human existence. Heidegger's ideas were much discussed in the philosophically interested post-war academic world in which Holzkamp spent his formative years. There is another interesting philosophical point of contact of Holzkamp's central concept of *Handlungsfähigkeit*. It implies the idea of anticipatory self-care, the striving of individuals to extend their influence on (or "control" of) their living conditions—the *Erweiterung* (extension) of *Handlungsfähigkeit*—which comes surprisingly close to the notion of *souci de soi*, self-care (or care of self), as elaborated at about the same time by Michel Foucault.

8. For present versions of the Vygotskian approach to human development see Katherine Nelson (1996, 2007) and Michael Tomasello (1999; Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007).

9. The most systematic and comprehensive account of Holzkamp's conception of meaning is to be found in his 1983 *Grundlegung der Psychologie*. I am drawing here especially on chapter 6.

10. Tolman (1994) translates the German *Handlungsgründe* as grounds for action, instead of reasons of (or for) actions, because he sees "reasons" as too closely associated with "rationality," whereas Holzkamp argued that reason or rationality indicates but one possible framework to understand what underlies a person's actions. "Grounds for action," Tolman (1994) writes,

> provide the immediate explanation for action, and they are part of our subjective states. This rootedness of grounds in the subjective situation [of an individual] is related to the epistemic distance. … It is in this "space" between us and objects that grounds for action develop as distinct from mere stimuli. (p. 110)

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