Abstract: The role of narrativity in the constitution of personal identity, a widely discussed topic in recent philosophy, is also an important issue in Robert Musil’s novel “The Man without Qualities.” Apart from a theoretical passage, where the coherence established by life-narratives is explicitly rejected as an illusion, the novel displays various instances of reflection in which characters seek to articulate their identity by narrating parts of their lives. Not all of these self-narratives are presented as flawed; rather, by highlighting the differences between various instances of self-reflection, the novel suggests that a life-narrative has to meet certain standards in order to further self-understanding. The essay seeks to identify these standards by analysing two examples of self-reflection rendered in Musil’s novel. Furthermore, it briefly compares the novel’s dealing with the issue of narrativity and personal identity with recent philosophical approaches, in particular with Charles Taylor’s view that in order to have an identity, human beings have to understand their lives in the form of a narrative that determines their place relative to the good.

1.

“Most people relate to themselves as storytellers.” This sentence could be used as a condensed expression of a view that has become something of a commonplace in various academic disciplines over the last decades: namely, the view that human beings typically see or experience their lives as a narrative, and that they create their identity or their self by constructing stories of their lives; various versions of this idea have been elaborated in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences.¹ The sentence quoted above, however, is not taken from any recent publication in philosophy or psychology, but rather from Robert Musil’s novel, The Man without Qualities (Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,

1930-1932); there, it is embedded in a passage that is highly critical of most people’s tendency to “relate to themselves as storytellers,” suggesting that the stories that these people tell themselves about their lives are usually a means of comforting self-deception.² Yet although this passage seems to condemn all life-narratives as illusory, the novel shows several characters in the process of developing narrative accounts of their lives, and these narratives are not throughout presented as flawed; rather, the novel suggests that some of these life-narratives are more adequate than others. Thus, the question arises of what, according to Musil, distinguishes “good” life-narratives from “bad” ones. It is this question that I shall address in the main parts of this essay.

In what follows I shall first turn to the question of what kind of life-narrative is criticized in the passage of the novel I have just mentioned, and for what reason; then I shall discuss some of the novel’s representations of processes of self-reflection in which the characters create narrative accounts of their lives. As indicated above, some of these instances of self-reflection appear as flawed or only partly successful, while others are presented in a more favourable light; by comparing examples of both kinds of self-reflection, and of the life-narratives developed therein, I shall try to reconstruct the view on narrative, self-interpretation and the self suggested by Musil’s novel. Finally, in the last section of the essay, I shall discuss briefly how this view expressed in The Man without Qualities could be related to recent philosophical theories about narrative and personal identity.

2.

The above-mentioned passage of The Man without Qualities, which critically examines the inclination of most people to “relate to themselves as storytellers,” is to be found in the penultimate chapter of book 1 of Musil’s unfinished novel. The chapter is entitled “Going home” and depicts Ulrich, the novel’s protagonist, as he walks through the streets of Vienna at night, heading home. Most of the time he is sunk in thought, and the greatest part of the chapter is made up of his deliberations, which are partly triggered by memories of recent events, but also influenced by the ambiance of the places he passes. First, Ulrich remembers the moment when, some time ago, he looked at childhood photographs of himself; he felt “not a trace of warmth for that little boy,” but only had “the impression of having narrowly escaped a great horror.”³ Assuming

³ Ibid., p. 707.
that many or most people do not feel alienated from their own past in the same way, he starts to speculate on the mental mechanism that allows these people to ward off such experiences. A line of trees alongside the street provides him with an apt metaphor for this mechanism: “It’s a kind of foreshortening of the mind’s perspective, he thought [...]. Happiness, after all, depends for the most part not on one’s ability to resolve contradictions but on making them disappear, the way the gaps between trees disappear when we look down a long avenue of them.” Some moments later, he hits upon the idea that the most important way that this “foreshortening of perspective” is brought about is by means of placing events in chronological sequence, that is, by means of narrative. The passage where he develops this thought is worth quoting in full:

[I]t struck him that when one is overburdened and dreams of simplifying one’s life, the basic law of this life, the law one longs for, is nothing other than that of narrative order, the simple order that enables one to say: “First this happened and then that happened….” It is the simple sequence of events in which the overwhelmingly manifold nature of things is represented, in a unidimensional order, as a mathematician would say, stringing all that has occurred in space and time on a single thread, which calms us; that celebrated “thread of the story,” which is, it seems, the thread of life itself. Lucky the man who can say “when,” “before,” and “after!” Terrible things may have happened to him, he may have writhed in pain, but as soon as he can tell what happened in chronological order, he feels as contented as if the sun were warming his belly. This is the trick the novel artificially turns to account: whether the wanderer is riding on the highway in pouring rain or crunching through snow and ice at ten below zero, the reader feels a cozy glow, and this would be hard to understand if this eternally dependable narrative device, which even nursemaids can rely on to keep their little charges quiet, this tried-and-true “foreshortening of the mind’s perspective,” were not already part and parcel of life itself. Most people relate to themselves as storytellers. They usually have no use for poems, and although the occasional “because” or “in order that” gets knotted into the thread of life, they generally detest any brooding that goes beyond that; they love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a “course” is somehow their refuge from chaos. It now came to Ulrich that he had lost this elementary, narrative mode of thought to which private life still clings, even though everything in public life has already ceased to be a narrative and no longer follows a thread, but instead spreads out as an infinitely interwoven surface.⁵

In their comments on this passage, critics usually assume that it has a reflexive or meta-fictional dimension, and that it implicitly conveys some-

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., p. 709.
thing of the design of *The Man without Qualities* and of the way that the novel uses or avoids narrative form. This assumption seems plausible, if not inescapable. It is, however, by no means evident what exactly this implicit message amounts to. Some critics concentrate on the image of the “infinitely interwoven surface” and maintain that Musil’s novel itself, with its many characters, its various narrative strands and its numerous essay-like digressions, is constructed as a surface of this kind. This way of reading the passage, however, is less plausible than is often claimed: according to this interpretation, the structural design of the novel is meant to imitate the complexity of public life in modern times, a complexity that defies all attempts to get an overview or to discern specific patterns. However, Musil repeatedly declared that the aims of his novel were of a constructive kind, and that he did not want to just provide a portrait of disorder, but rather to help his readers to cope with the complexity of modern life and to find a way out of its disorder.

But if the clue to the reflexive meaning of the above passage is not given by the idea of an “infinitely interwoven surface,” what else could it be? It should be noted that the narrative order that is the subject matter of this passage is understood to be a simple chronological order, the order of a sequence of events structured by “when,” “before” and “after.” Narrative discourses governed by this kind of order are contrasted to two other modes of discourse: on the one hand, to poetry, and on the other hand, to explanatory discourse structured by “because” and “in order that.” As for the first contrast, it can be inferred from Musil’s theoretical writings that poetry for him had a close affinity with the sort of ecstatic or mystical experience he referred to as the “other condition” or “other state” (*anderer Zustand*); furthermore, his essays, as well as parts of his novel, indicate that he disapproved of what he saw as most people’s tendency to regard the experience of poetry merely as a pause that offers a rest from everyday life without influencing it. For present purposes, the second contrast drawn in the above passage is more important: the contrast with a discourse structured by causal and teleological relations, by instances of “because”

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and “in order that.” The statement about most people’s shying away from too much reflection on their lives is obviously meant as a criticism; it suggests that these people could discover many more relations of “because” and “in order that” in their lives if only they dedicated more effort to self-reflection. Thus, the remark seems to imply that a life-account structured mainly by these causal and teleological connectives is more valuable than a narrative structured almost exclusively by “when,” “before” and “after.”

Assuming that at least part of the reflexive or meta-fictional dimension of the passage is related to this contrast between two modes of discourse, one can read it as alerting the reader to the fact that, in The Man without Qualities, reflection upon reasons, motives and causes is given priority over the presentation of a chronological sequence of actions and events. It would not be difficult to argue that something like this is indeed the case, and that the structure of the novel as a whole is informed, to a large extent, by such an interest in disclosing relationships of “because” and “in order that.” After all, the novel is set in Austria-Hungary in 1913, and one of its clear aims is to anatomize the collective moods, mentalities and ideologies that prevailed there – and, perhaps, throughout Europe – before the First World War and that contributed to the outbreak of war. Moreover, however, it is also reflection in a more literal and concrete sense that plays an important role in the novel. Many of the characters are shown at least once in a moment where they reflect at length upon their lives and upon their present situation. These reflections, most of which are rendered extensively in Musil’s text, often appear as guided by a desire of the character in question to clarify a particular emotion or to discern the motives and reasons that have shaped his or her life; that is, these reflections are often concerned with patterns of “because” and “in order that.”

So, if the life-accounts developed in these reflections reveal causal and teleological relations in the characters’ lives, does this mean that they are not narratives? In his thoughts about life-stories quoted above, Ulrich seems to imply something along these lines since he equates a narrative with a representation

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8 In the English translation this implication may be somewhat less obvious because of the use of the word “brooding,” the connotations of which are somewhat different from those of the word used in the German original, “Besinnung” (see Robert Musil, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, ed. Adolf Frisé, vol. 1, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1987, p. 650: “so verabscheuen sie doch alle Besinnung, die darüber hinausgreift”). While “brooding” suggests a mode of thinking that is characterized by an exaggerated or otherwise problematic degree of intensity or tenacity, the German word “Besinnung” has no connotations of this kind, but rather evokes a mental activity by means of which one becomes aware of some aspects of one’s own experiences or actions which one could (and maybe should) have noticed earlier, but has overlooked so far. Incidentally, an earlier English translation of Musil’s novel uses “cogitation” instead of “brooding” (see Robert Musil, The Man without Qualities, translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, London: Secker & Warburg, 1961, vol. 2, p. 436: The like of it now happens - II).
of a sequence of events in which the events are connected merely by “before” and “after.” This conception of narrative, however, appears rather simplistic, at least from the perspective of more recent theories. In these theories, it is usually considered as a constitutive feature of a narrative discourse that some of the events, actions, and states of affairs represented in it are connected by causal relations of some kind. If one understands the notion of narrative in this sense, the life-accounts of Musil’s characters obviously qualify as narratives. One can assume that Musil, too, would have admitted that narratives can contain relations of “because” and “in order that,” and that, therefore, these life-accounts can be termed narratives, although his protagonist Ulrich in the above passage seems to deny this. But be that as it may, there is another point about these self-reflections of Musil’s characters that is important in the context of the present discussion. The novel displays a whole range of self-reflections carried out by various characters. Some of the life-accounts developed in these reflections are presented as adequate or “successful,” others are not; but where the life-accounts appear as flawed, this is not so because they are made up of a mere temporal sequence of events and lack any relations of “because” and “in order that.” Rather, the novel makes it clear that the reconstruction of these causal and teleological relations in a character’s life has to fulfill certain additional requirements in order for his life-account to be adequate.

In the following section, I shall attempt to provide some evidence for these claims by discussing a few examples of processes of self-reflection presented in Musil’s novel. I shall concentrate on Ulrich, the novel’s protagonist and the character whose reflections are rendered most frequently and extensively, but shall also take a glance at another character, Arnheim, who is constructed as a rival of, and a contrast to, Ulrich. The aim of my discussion is not just to substantiate the general claim that presentations of self-reflection occupy a prominent position in *The Man without Qualities*, but also to show what, according to the novel, constitutes an adequate or successful instance of self-reflection.

3.

In the first chapters of the novel, Ulrich is introduced as a man in his early thirties who has recently abandoned his career as a mathematician and

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decided to “take a year’s leave of absence from his life.”

10 He had never pursued mathematics for its own sake, but always regarded it as “a preparation, a toughening, and a kind of training.”

11 In this way, he wanted to acquire the intellectual equipment that would eventually enable him to tackle the major problems that beset modern culture. However, having worked as a mathematician for several years, Ulrich has begun to feel a growing dissatisfaction; the reasons for this dissatisfaction are not wholly transparent to him, but, at any rate, he begins to feel that his preparations never come to an end, and that he has lost sight of the purposes that these preparations were meant to serve. This vague sense of disappointment and failure becomes acute when Ulrich reads a newspaper article in which a racehorse is praised as a genius.

12 He seems to take this article as evidence that the intellectual capacities that he has sought to acquire are considered by contemporary society to be equivalent to the qualities of a racehorse. Having read this article, Ulrich reminds himself of the fact that he never “meant to spend all [his] life as a mathematician;” importantly, however, at this point he cannot quite say what else it was that he had wanted to do or to be: “But what had he really meant to do? [...] All he could say was that he now felt further removed from what he had really wanted to be than he had in his youth, if indeed he had ever known what it was.”

13 Thus, the chapter that describes Ulrich’s farewell to mathematics and his decision to take “leave from life” clearly suggests that he suffers from a lack of self-knowledge or self-understanding.

14 During the first months of his “leave from life,” Ulrich undergoes a transformation that has two main aspects: first, he slowly and gradually gives up the habit of suppressing his emotional and sentimental tendencies and dispositions. This side of his character has manifested itself above all during a short period of time when, as a young army lieutenant, he was passionately in love with a major’s wife. He eventually travelled alone to an island, far away from her, where he experienced a form of mystical union with the world, a state of being in which “[a]ll of life’s questions and occurrences took on an


12 See Ibid, pp. 41-43.

13 Ibid., p. 44.

14 The impression that Ulrich has an insufficient understanding of his own situation is confirmed in a later chapter by a remark of the narrator: “If Ulrich had been asked to say what he was really like he would have been at a loss, for like so many people he had never tested himself other than by a task and his relation to it. His self-confidence had not been damaged, nor was it coddled and vain; it never needed that overhauling and lubrication that is called probing one’s conscience” (Ibid., p. 157).
incomparable mildness, gentleness, and serenity, while their meaning was utterly transformed.”15 Later, he felt embarrassed by this episode and used to avoid any thoughts of it. But when, some time after his decision to take “leave from life,” a memory of this affair crosses this mind, he does not dismiss it as sentimental nonsense, but dwells upon it at length. In the following weeks, he also allows himself to become engaged in conversations about love, and even talks about his childhood and his own love-affair. In short, as he himself (or the narrator) once puts it, he seems to be “mellowing.”16

The second aspect of the change that Ulrich undergoes is that he starts to think about himself. He recalls episodes from his youth, such as the story of the major’s wife, but also reviews the beliefs, plans and aspirations that he entertained as a young man and that guided his existence over the past years. This process of self-examination is mainly driven by his desire better to understand his present situation, which means above all: better to understand the dissatisfaction that has made him abandon his career as a mathematician.

Ulrich makes a first effort to analyze his situation one afternoon while walking through the streets of Vienna (the long reflections he develops during this stroll are rendered in chapters 34, 39 and 40). In the course of these reflections, he notices that he feels as if all his personal qualities have more to do with one another than with him17 and that they are all “in a curious fashion indifferent to him;”18 he recalls an idea of his youth according to which “the world would be best governed by a senate of the wisest, the most advanced,”19 together with his aspiration to become himself one of these leading thinkers; finally, he asks himself why, in spite of these ambitions, he is unable definitely to choose a specific career and fully to commit himself to it: “Why,” he asks, “was he living in this dim and undecided fashion?”20 His attempt to answer this question is only partly successful. Ulrich’s reflection ends with his being “split” into two persons: “At this moment there were two Ulrichs, walking side by side.”21 One of them is filled with pain, anger and the exasperated ambition to go on pursuing the plans of his youth, while the other rejects these ambitions in a mood of ironic resignation, smiling and thinking:

So this is the stage on which I once hoped to play a part. One day I woke up, no longer snug in mother’s crib, but with the firm conviction that there was some-

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15 Ibid., p. 131.
16 Ibid., p. 618.
18 Ibid., p. 159.
19 Ibid., p. 163.
20 Ibid., p. 162.
21 Ibid., p. 164.
thing I had to accomplish. They gave me cues, but I felt they had nothing to do
with me. Like a kind of feverish stagefright, everything in those days was filled with
my own plans and expectations. Meanwhile the stage has continued revolving
unobtrusively. I am somewhat farther along my way, and I may already be standing
near the exit. Soon I shall be turned out, and the only lines of my great part that I
will have uttered are “The horses are saddled!” The devil take all of you!22

At this point, Ulrich does not understand the relationship between his two
opposed states of mind, and hence is unable to situate both of them within a
coherent self-image. The reader who knows the further development of the
novel can discern the flaw in Ulrich’s self-interpretation: it remains unclear
why a part of him does not support his earlier ambitions with which another
part of him still identifies. One could also say: it remains unclear what
part of
him it is that does not support these ambitions.

The point where Ulrich has definitely overcome this state of unawareness
or denial is reached in a long reflection, rendered in chapter 116, towards the
end of book 1.23 There, Ulrich sums up a large part of his self-examinations
of the past months with the idea that his life so far has taken the shape of two
trees that correspond to two sides of his personality. The one side, which he
calls the side of “violence,” is, he thinks, rooted in an “urge to attack life and
master it” and characterized by a “certain hard, cold aggressiveness,” and this
has dominated the larger parts of his life: the “immature Napoleonic plans” of
his youth, his choice of a career as a mathematician, his “rejection of the exist-
ing order,” especially existing moral norms, and the various ways in which he
has been striving for a new order. All these tendencies, desires and ambitions
appear to Ulrich to be connected with each other, like branches growing
from the same trunk. The origin of the other side, which he names the side
of “love,” seems to lie in “some primal memory of a childlike relationship to
the world, all trustfulness and yielding.” The affair of the major’s wife is now
interpreted by Ulrich as “his only attempt to reach a full development of this
gentle shadow side of his life;” after this episode he began to suppress this side
so that, while he was working as an engineer and then as a mathematician,
it expressed itself only “in his instinctive assumption that the active and busy
side of him was only standing in for the real self, an assumption that cast a
shadow on his active self.”24 The image of the “shadow” is Ulrich’s metaphor
for the feelings of dissatisfaction and the sense of getting lost in endless prepa-
rations that have oppressed him for a long time; this “state of moral arrest,” he
now comes to think, is due to the fact that “[h]is development had evidently

22 Ibid.
23 See Ibid., pp. 645-649.
24 Ibid., pp. 646-647.
split into two tracks, one running on the surface in daylight, the other in the dark below and closed to traffic.”

What Ulrich formulates in this reflection is an account of his life that contains narrative elements and that ascribes a specific shape or order to his life; nevertheless, it is obvious that this reflection does not qualify for the criticism leveled against life-narratives in the chapter “Going home.” The overall structure of this life-account is not based on a chronological ordering of events, but on acts of interpretation: Ulrich seeks to detect some form of order in his life (or, if one wishes: he imposes some form of order upon his life), not by arranging episodes and events in a temporal sequence, but by interpreting his most important beliefs, desires, aspirations and dispositions as the expression of one of two fundamental tendencies. This interpretation, in turn, serves him as the basis for an explanation of the dissatisfaction that has led to his taking “leave from life.” Thus, Ulrich’s thoughts about the two trees shed light on some of the major instances of “because” and “in order that” in his life.

Ulrich’s earlier self-examination, presented in chapters 34, 39 and 40, also aimed not at a chronology of his life, but at an explanation or interpretation of his current state; but whereas the depiction of this earlier reflection hints at some flaw in his self-understanding, the rendering of his thoughts on the “two trees of his life” contains no such hints. On the contrary, these thoughts are indirectly confirmed by the narrator who, in earlier chapters of the novel, has described Ulrich’s character and the causes of his current state of dissatisfaction in a way that is close to his self-interpretation in terms of the two “trees” of violence and love. Accordingly, in the subsequent parts of the novel, Ulrich never rejects or substantially modifies this self-interpretation. In addition to these features of Musil’s text, there is also some contextual evidence suggesting that Ulrich’s self-interpretation developed in chapter 116 occupies a privileged position in the novel. Having spelt out the idea that his life has “split into two tracks,” those of “violence” and “love,” Ulrich goes on to speculate that these two sides of his personality correspond to two fundamental modes of human behavior and experience, and that modern culture is characterized by a dissociation of these two “fundamental spheres of human existence;” and that the struggle between the tendencies of “violence” and “love” in his own life is symptomatic of this general crisis of modern culture. These thoughts about two fundamental spheres of human existence and about the origins of the crisis of modern culture bear a close resemblance to ideas that Musil developed.

25 Ibid., p. 647.
26 See chapter 62 of book 1, in particular the passage surrounding the sentence: “Yet it was probably an underground movement of this kind that gradually slowed him down in his scientific work and kept him from giving it all he had” (Ibid., p. 276).
in some of his essays of the 1920s. There, Musil postulates the existence of two basic conditions of being between which human life alternates: the “normal condition” or “normal state” (Normalzustand) and the “other condition” or “other state” (anderer Zustand). The polarity constituted by these two conditions is very similar to the opposition between “violence” and “love” as described by Ulrich. According to Musil, the other condition, albeit the source of all religions and ethics and “the nourishing and transforming power of the spiritual history of mankind,” has “never been properly brought into relation with the normal condition of being.” Modernity is marked, above all, by the dominance of capitalism and science, both of which are expressions of attitudes rooted in the normal condition, whereas the experiences belonging to the realm of the other condition are neglected, misunderstood or treated with suspicion. But since the experiences and the emotional and spiritual needs that derive from this latter condition cannot be wholly suppressed, they manifest themselves in distorted forms, that is, in waves of irrationalism or of what Musil’s narrator at one point calls “anemic romanticism.”

Thus, there are several reasons to assume that Ulrich’s self-interpretation in chapter 116 was conceived by Musil as an instance of an adequate or valuable kind of self-reflection. This interpretation can be supported and rendered more precise by setting Ulrich’s efforts of self-reflection alongside those of another character in the novel, Arnheim. In several respects, the character of Arnheim is presented as an antithesis to Ulrich, and his extensive reflections and self-reflections, which are rendered in a number of chapters, seem to be designed as a contrast to those of Ulrich. Arnheim is a highly successful Prussian industrialist and, at the same time, a man of letters who has written numerous books in which he proclaims “the merger of soul and economics, or of ideas and power.” While in Vienna, he falls in love with Diotima, the wife of a high government official, who obviously returns his feelings, although neither of them declares this love. This experience has a deeply unsettling effect on Arnheim; it reminds him of his youth, when, without...
actually being in love with a woman, he had continually found himself in the state of blissful dreaminess that is usually associated with first love. Later, when he entered his father’s business and became deeply fascinated with the “great poem of life,” the world of commerce and industry, he did not condemn the “dreamy outlook” of his youth, but tried to “effect a kind of fusion of both kinds of experience.” However, after his encounter with Diotima, he vaguely feels that this purported synthesis of soul and economics might have been a sham, that he has “lost a path he had always followed,” and that “the whole ideology of the great man he lived by was only an emergency substitute for something that was missing.” These feelings of Arnheim and the critical evaluation of his past life implied in them present a clear parallel to the dissatisfaction which prompts Ulrich to take his “leave from life” and to his gradual uncovering of the deeper meaning of this dissatisfaction. In Arnheim’s case, however, these feelings have no consequences. Just as he shies away from any deeper involvement with Diotima, so he never seriously examines and questions the motives that have led him to adopt this kind of life; nor does he repudiate his ideology of the great man and of the alliance between ideas and power, soul and economics. The factors that prevent him from doing so are made explicit by the narrator on several occasions: the main factor is Arnheim’s desire to be seen – and to see himself – as a great man, a desire that turns out to be stronger than his love for Diotima and that is certainly much stronger than his wish for truthful self-understanding and a life without lies.

Ulrich’s thoughts about the “thread of life” in the chapter *Going home* suggest that life-narratives in general are based on illusion, if not self-deception, simply by virtue of the fact that they replace the chaos of real life with an orderly sequence of events. The self-reflections of Arnheim that are rendered in the novel, and the life-narratives developed in the course of these reflections, do, indeed, appear as a case of self-deception; but this is not because they contain a chronological ordering of events of Arnheim’s life. Rather, what makes these reflections an instance of self-deception is that Arnheim seeks to evade or to suppress those insights that undermine his self-image, and that cast doubt on the worth of his chosen way of life. He realizes, if only vaguely, that the life that he leads lacks something important and valuable which he has come to know in his youth, and he also realizes that what makes him nonetheless continue this way of life is a kind of moral weakness and lack of courage; but he rejects these insights almost immediately, and replaces

32 See Ibid., pp. 418–419.
33 Ibid., p. 420.
34 Ibid., p. 416.
them with descriptions of his life and of his motives for choosing this life that are more flattering but less accurate.\textsuperscript{35} Musil’s presentation of Ulrich’s and Arnheim’s self-reflections makes clear that the adequacy and value of a life-narrative depends on its accuracy as well as its honesty: on the accuracy that is manifest in the analysis of the reasons, motives and desires of the subject, and on the degree of honesty that is manifest in the way that the subject passes judgment on his life and on phases of his life, assessing the extent to which it has been a good or satisfying life or a life that corresponds to some ideal standard. The question of whether a subject arrives at such a truthful account of his or her life, so Musil’s novel suggests, importantly includes the question of whether a special sort of experience is given its due place in his or her life-narrative: namely, the mystical experience of “cosmic union and love” that most people come to know in some form during their childhood or youth. To give these experiences their due place means, first, to acknowledge their value and importance; this is what Ulrich refuses to do for a long time, before correcting this mistake in his reflection on the “two trees of his life.” It means, second, to recognize the difference between the authentic mystical experience itself and its false “emergency substitutes,” and to reject the latter; this is what Arnheim fails to do, without ever correcting his mistake.

4.

In the central part of this essay I have tried to extrapolate a view on the nature and value of life-narratives from Musil’s novel, drawing both on explicit statements about life-narratives contained in the novel and on its representations of the mental activity by which life-narratives are produced. How, then, does this view relate to recent philosophical theories about the role of narrative in the constitution of personal identity? I shall limit my brief and tentative discussion of this question to a consideration of one philosopher whose views can be particularly fruitfully compared to those of Musil, namely Charles Taylor. According to Taylor, it is an “inescapable feature of human life” that in order to make sense of ourselves, in order to have an identity, we have to “grasp our lives in a narrative.”\textsuperscript{36} This condition of making sense of ourselves, Taylor argues, is closely bound up with another facet of human life and of the constitution of a self: one of the essential characteristics of human beings con-

\textsuperscript{35} Arnheim’s tendency to suppress or to reformulate unwelcome insights is particularly evident in his reflection rendered in chapter 112.

\textsuperscript{36} Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, p. 47.
sidered as selves is that they are concerned with their “relation to the good,” and that they want to be “rightly placed in relation to the good.” To make sense of their lives, human beings have to determine their position relative to the good, and since human beings are always “changing and becoming,” they can only do so by forming a narrative of their lives. Taylor sums up these ideas as follows:

My underlying thesis is that there is a close connection between the different conditions of identity, or of one’s life making sense, that I have been discussing. One could put it this way: because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a “quest.” But one could perhaps start from another point: because we have to determine our place in relation to the good, therefore we cannot be without an orientation to it, and hence must see our life in story. From whichever direction, I see these conditions as connected facets of the same reality, inescapable structural requirements of human agency.

There are parallels to some of Taylor’s ideas about human life and the self in the views put forward in The Man without Qualities. In Musil’s novel, likewise, it appears to be an essential feature of human life that human beings seek to make sense of themselves by situating themselves in relation to something they consider as “the good,” as something “incomparably higher.” To be sure, in Musil’s novel this matter is often dealt with in a satirical mode, that is, in the form of critical examinations of current conceptions of “the good” that are revealed to be naïve or informed by egoistic interests; but this criticism directed against wrong ideals and ideologies only underlines the fact that, for Musil, placing oneself in relation to some conception of the good in order to make sense of oneself is indeed a fundamental element of human life. Furthermore, as this essay has tried to show, the novel also suggests that the attainment of true self-understanding involves reference to experiences of “cosmic union and love,” as well as an acknowledgment of the value of these experiences; for Musil, these exceptional moments where the subject finds himself in the “other condition” seem to represent the most important embodiment of “the good.” Incidentally, it could be argued that these ideas about the “other condition” and its ethical significance also have some affinities with the

37 Ibid., p. 44.
38 Ibid., p. 47.
40 See, for instance, the observations upon the role of “systems of happiness and balance” in everyday life that Musil’s narrator presents in chapter 109.
philosophy of Taylor: Musil’s conception can be interpreted as one version of what Taylor has called the “ethics of authenticity.”

Taylor has not only given an historical account of this ethical ideal, but has also tried to distinguish its full and original versions and from its more recent, “trivialized and self-indulgent forms,” and to defend the value and legitimacy of the former.

However, there is also an obvious difference between Taylor’s and Musil’s views, and this difference concerns precisely the role of narrative: for Taylor, the importance of an “orientation to the good” implies the importance of a story of one’s life, whereas in Musil, the valorization of a form of self-reflection in which the subject situates itself in relation to an experience of “the good” is not accompanied by a valorization of narrative; rather, in one passage of the novel life-narratives are explicitly condemned as a distortion of reality.

True, this difference can be resolved to some extent by pointing out that the criticism in Musil’s novel is directed only against a special, rather simplistic form of life-narrative, and that the novel implicitly acknowledges the worth of more complex types of life-stories by presenting the “self-narratives” of Ulrich and other characters in a favorable light. Furthermore, one could add that Musil’s and Taylor’s notions of narrative are related to, and shaped by, the specific contexts of their writings, and that therefore the difference between their attitudes does not constitute a significant or interesting disagreement: the critical stance on narrative that is expressed in Musil’s passage on the illusory nature of life-stories, on the one hand, is a well-known feature of literary modernism, and the target of polemical judgments such as this can generally be identified with traditional narrative forms, such as

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41 See Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity. Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press, 1991. Of course, the claim that Musil’s ethical views can be placed within the tradition of the “ethics of authenticity” would need to be argued in detail. This cannot be done here. See, however, the comparison between Musil and Taylor developed in: Jacques Bouweresse, “Musil, Taylor et le malaise de la modernité,” in Id., La Voix de l’âme et les chemins de l’esprit. Dix études sur Robert Musil, Paris: Seuil, 2001, pp. 285-321. Bouweresse convincingly draws several parallels between Taylor’s analysis of the “malaises of modernity” and the diagnosis given by Musil earlier in the 20th century. In doing so, he also points to some similarities between Musil’s and Taylor’s ethical views, similarities that regard, among other things, their attitudes towards what Taylor has called the tradition of “expressivism.”

42 Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity, p. 15.

43 For a similar observation regarding Musil’s view of narrative, see Sabine A. Döring, Ästhetische Erfahrung als Erkenntnis des Ethischen. Die Kunsttheorie Robert Musils und die analytische Philosophie, Paderborn: Mentis, 1999, p. 201 and note 176. In this book, Döring argues that Musil’s ethical views resemble in many respects those of recent analytical philosophers such as Jonathan Dancy and Bernard Williams; but, as she points out on the page referred to, Musil differs from Dancy, as well as from Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, in that he does not consider narrativity, but rather lyric poetry as the paradigm of “aesthetic rationality” (“das Modell für ästhetische Rationalität”).
the novel of nineteenth-century realism. Taylor’s thesis of the importance of life-stories, on the other hand, figures in a theory of the self that is explicitly opposed to naturalist conceptions of the person and of personal identity. A conception of the narrative dimension of personal identity, in particular, is contrasted by Taylor to a notion of a “‘punctual’ or ‘neutral’ self,” that is, to an understanding of the self as a point-like entity whose “only constitutive property is self-awareness.”

Nevertheless, even if all this is granted, the difference between Musil’s and Taylor’s attitudes towards narrative can still be seen as pointing to a genuine question about the relationship between narrative and the self. For Taylor, the purpose of a life-narrative is to determine the place of the subject in relation to the good, and to explain how the subject has got there. Roughly speaking, this is also what genuine and truthful self-reflection should yield, according to Musil. Nonetheless, what the representations of attempts at self-reflection in his novel highlight is that whether a given instance of self-reflection can be considered as genuine and truthful has nothing to do with the narrative nature of the life-account developed in this reflection. As the rendering of various examples of self-reflection shows, a life-narrative that includes not only temporal, but also causal and teleological relations can constitute an authentic self-interpretation, but it can also be deeply flawed. Crucial here is whether a certain kind of experience is assigned the right place within the web of motives, desires and wishes that is reconstructed in the self-narrative; the life-account’s narrative nature in itself does not yet make it adequate or valuable. Taylor, on the other hand, describes the narrative character of a self-narrative as something that is inherently valuable or, at least, important; the narrative nature of a life-account makes it possible to interpret the individual life as a quest, and thus creates the basis for a self-interpretation that determines the individual’s place in relation to the good.

One could explain this divergence by saying that Musil does not openly acknowledge the importance of the narrative nature of a truthful self-interpretation because he is influenced by a modernist prejudice against narratives, a prejudice that imputes the perceived flaws of realist narratives to narrativity as such. But one could also try to explain this divergence by arguing that Taylor overemphasizes the importance of narrativity because he tends to ascribe the virtues of a special kind of life-narratives to narratives in general. At any rate, a comparison between Musil’s and Taylor’s views can lead to the question of whether the importance of self-interpretations in the form of life-narratives really lies in their narrative dimension as such. This question has also been raised recently by some philosophers who have criticized the

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44 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 49.
widespread conception of the narrative form of personal identity. Whether the debate initiated by these criticisms could profit in any way from the ideas concerning life-narratives and the self that are raised by Musil’s novel, I leave to others to say.

Olav Krämer
University of Freiburg im Breisgau
olav.kraemer@germanistik.uni-freiburg.de


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