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SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF NARRATIVE

by JEANETTE BICKNELL

IN THIS PASSAGE from his *Confessions*, St. Augustine recounts some youthful shenanigans: “In a garden nearby to our vineyard there was a pear tree. . . . Late one night—to which hour, according to our pestilential custom, we had kept up our street games, a group of very bad youngsters set out to shake down and rob this tree. We took great loads of fruit from it, not for our own eating, but rather to throw it to the pigs Foul was the evil, and I loved it . . . I loved my fault itself. Base in soul was I”¹

Here a mature Augustine looks back on his boyhood self with recrimination and reproach. Stealing pears is not seen as an immature prank but as evidence of a base soul. Yet for all the force and gravity of his words, it is not difficult to imagine a younger Augustine, before his conversion to Christianity, light-heartedly reminiscing with friends about these very same incidents. Of these two stories—the one he tells in the *Confessions* and the one he might have told—which provides a more accurate portrayal of Augustine’s boyhood soul? Which is closer to the truth?

Narrative and personal identity would seem to be inextricably bound.² Telling stories or imposing a narrative coherence on events is one of the main ways in which we make sense of our experience. We also get to know others by listening to their stories, thus learning the narrative coherence they have placed on events in their own lives. Over the course of a lifetime stories may change. Characters first dismissed as “bit players” may gain importance. Gestures or words earlier thought to

be unimportant may, in retrospect, take on greater significance. With time and reflection one's past may be re-interpreted as displaying error, alienation or ignorance. A cataclysmic religious conversion is only one of many factors which might prompt such reflection and reinterpretation. Illness, divorce, and the death of loved ones are other possible causes.

Here is my worry: presumably we would like to believe that our "new" stories are improvements on the old, and that they reflect greater self-knowledge, possibly even greater moral awareness. Yet given that any number of possible narratives can make sense of a set of events, how can we determine that any one story or way of understanding the past is better than any other? How are we to distinguish those stories which reflect greater understanding from those which are simply re-descriptions or re-interpretations without greater insight on the part of the individual? We may disagree about particular cases; those with a religious world view are likely to believe that, post-conversion, Augustine is telling the "right" story about the pear theft. However most would concede that some ways of understanding the world are simply less adequate than others—"less adequate" both in the sense of "less reflective of the truth" and "less conducive to good relations with others." Few would defend the worldview of the inveterate racist, for example. The problem of determining whether a story reflects greater understanding and self-understanding is all the more challenging if we take seriously the view that narrative structure is the organizing principle, not only of experiences and actions, but of the very self that experiences and acts.³ How radically must one's personal narratives change before her very identity has also changed?

Concerns about the epistemological status of personal narratives bring us up against the limitations of narrative as a tool for understanding persons. Given the under-determination of narrative by events, listening to a person's stories will not be enough to understand her. In this paper I do two things. First, I illustrate some of my worries about the epistemological status of narratives through an examination of Tolstoy's short novel *The Kreutzer Sonata*. I argue that, despite protestations to the contrary, the protagonist has not acquired greater self-knowledge. He has changed the stories he tells about himself without having understood his past or those around him any better. Then I sketch what a genuine increase in self-knowledge and moral understanding might look like. For this I will rely on the discussion in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza is particularly useful for my purposes here

because the moral transformation he describes includes greater self-knowledge. I then briefly consider another short work by Tolstoy (his late story “After the Ball”) for a concrete example of what genuine self-knowledge and moral enlightenment might look like.

I

Pozdnyshev, the protagonist of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, relates the story of his marriage to a fellow passenger over the course of a train journey.⁴ The climax of the story is Pozdnyshev’s murder of his wife in a jealous rage after he has become convinced that she has been having an affair with Trukhachevsky, a violinist. We never learn whether or not his suspicions were justified. Interspersed with the narrative are Pozdnyshev’s reconsidered views on marriage and human sexuality. These are strikingly similar to Tolstoy’s own, expounded in a (to the best of my knowledge un-translated) Afterword to the novel.⁵

Pozdnyshev claims to have greater self-knowledge than he did before his crime. He says that while he was in jail for eleven months awaiting trial, “I pondered over myself and my past and came to understand it” (p. 368).⁶ He presents two parallel causal histories of an emotional life dominated by anger, jealousy and spite, recounting events both as he understood them at the time and as he has come to see them in his newly “enlightened” state. At the time of the events he recounts, Pozdnyshev attributed his negative emotions and the quarrels with his wife either to trivialities—problems with the children, the household, etc., or to his wife’s “difficult” character. As he tells his fellow traveler these events, however, Pozdnyshev is able to identify what he now sees as the true cause of his unhappy marriage; namely, that both he and his wife were victims of the prevailing unhealthy and immoral attitude to sexuality common to their social class and contemporaries. Pozdnyshev elaborates, “The sex passion, in whatever form it is presented, is an evil, a dreadful evil, which is to be combated and not encouraged as it is with us” (p. 313). Yet there are good reasons to reject as spurious Pozdnyshev’s claims of greater understanding and to suspect that he has merely replaced one set of pretexts with another. This is particularly apparent in his descriptions of his wife and attitudes towards her.

Here is one example of the “dual history” of emotions relayed in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Pozdnyshev tells his fellow passenger that

vituperations were called forth by the coffee, the tablecloth, the carriage, a move in a card game—things that could not possibly have held the slightest importance either for her or for me. For myself I may say that at times my hatred of her reached a fantastic pitch At that time I failed to notice that my feelings of hate regularly and inevitably followed the periods of what is called love. A period of love, a period of hate; a weak period of love, a brief period of hate; an intense period of love, a prolonged period of hate. We did not then realize that this love and hate were different aspects of one and the same animal feeling. (p. 329)

By “animal feeling” Pozdnyshev has in mind what he has come to regard as the unhealthy sensuality between him and his wife.

The text of *The Kreutzer Sonata* allows at least one alternative set of reasons for Pozdnyshev’s inability to understand the cause of his emotions during his marriage. Rather than a mistaken conception of the nature of physical passion, Pozdnyshev’s ignorance of his own emotional states and unhappy marriage could stem from a lack of self-knowledge more generally. His anger could stem not from unhealthy attitudes toward sexuality but from his frustration at his inability to control his own desire, and at his inability, indeed the impossibility, of controlling his wife’s body. This desire for control is manifest in the instrumental character of his anger, and in the fact that Pozdnyshev never sees his wife as a full human being: she is always an object to be managed.

Tolstoy’s fiction contains many well-drawn and vivacious female characters; Pozdnyshev’s wife is not among them. As we are told the story through Pozdnyshev’s twisted psyche, such an incomplete portrait is appropriate. It is significant that she is never named or fully described, and hence never has full identity as a person in the account. Pozdnyshev does not see her, neither before nor after her death, as a human being with an identity and character separate from his own. With very few exceptions—incidents where we do glimpse a portrait of a more fully drawn character—she is presented as a body to be controlled or as an animal to be restrained.

Early in his narrative Pozdnyshev claims to speak for all men when he says, “What we want is the body” (p. 302). He makes an explicit connection between society women (presumably including his wife) and prostitutes (p. 303). The likening of his wife to a prostitute is enhanced when Pozdnyshev claims that women who practice birth control (again, presumably including his own wife) are prostitutes, and

further describes a prostitute as, “one who has descended to the level not of beasts, but of things” (p. 321). Pozdnyshev does not see his wife as a human being then, but like a prostitute, as a thing. At one point Pozdnyshev declares of his wife, “She is not a human being! She is a bitch, a loathsome bitch [merzkaia suka]!” (p. 360). The likening of his wife to an animal is even more explicit when he describes her as similar to “a well-fed underexercised horse in full trappings that is suddenly given the rein” (p. 332). Pozdnyshev is frank about his desire to control his wife and his frustration that he cannot, saying: “There was no rein on her at all, as there is no rein on ninety-nine percent of our women. I realized this and was afraid” (p. 332).

There are numerous other indications that Pozdnyshev is disturbed by his wife’s sexuality and her ability to control her body as she sees fit. He says that there was, “something challenging, something disturbing” about her beauty (p. 332). It is especially telling that Pozdnyshev is convinced that a factor that was “directly responsible” for what was to happen—that is, her death at his hands—is the fact that she began to practice birth control after the birth of their fifth child (p. 331). He is clearly disturbed and troubled by the possibility of his wife’s sexual freedom.

What is perhaps Pozdnyshev’s deepest insight into his own motivation occurs on the train journey from the country back to Moscow where he will surprise his wife having dinner with Trukhachevsky and kill her: “The awful thing was that I claimed complete and unquestionable ownership of her body, as if it were my body, and at the same time I realized I was unable to own her body, that it was not mine, and that she could dispose of it in a way I did not want her to” (p. 357). His act of murder can be seen as an ultimate act of control and domination. Her body has given rise to his anger and frustration, and it is on her body that his anger and revenge will be played out. It is deeply ironic that Pozdnyshev dates the beginning of his moral conversion to the third day after his wife’s death, when he sees her lifeless body in the coffin. “Only when I saw her face in death did I realize what I had done” (pp. 368–69). He finally sees her as a human being; yet at this point she is not a human being but a lifeless corpse. She has gone from being an object of sexual desire to being an object in the literal sense, a corpse.

It seems clear that Pozdnyshev’s outward actions—his temper tantrums and the eventual murder—are aimed at controlling his wife. But I want to say something more: his anger facilitates these actions and is a form of self-justification. Pozdnyshev does not get angry and strike out

at his wife; rather, frustrated by his inability to control her, he wants to strike her and so becomes angry, thereby allowing himself to commit an act that at some level he must realize is wrong. The suggestion that anger can be instrumental or directed toward a goal, and that emotion is in some way subject to personal choice or acts of will might seem paradoxical. Yet such a view of the emotions (which I cannot defend here) has roots in Aristotle and the Stoics, and has been propounded by existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre. More recently, Robert Solomon has argued that emotions can be purposive or instrumental, and Patricia Greenspan has defended the view that emotions can play a role in rational choice.⁷

Pozdnyshev's response to anger and other negative emotions falls into three basic categories: the emotion controls him; self-control and mastery of his actions despite the emotion he feels; and willing assent to negative emotions. I argue that both Pozdnyshev's assent to anger and his suppression of it are best understood as manifestations of self-control. Pozdnyshev is described as being at the mercy of his anger surprisingly few times. The most important incident is on the train journey just before the murder, when he is unable to stop his imagination from conjuring up images of his wife's infidelity and depravity (pp. 355–58). Here Pozdnyshev's anger serves to enhance his motivation for murder. If he were to imagine his wife as a loving mother, he would be unlikely to summon the resolution necessary to kill her.

At other times Pozdnyshev feels anger welling up inside him but is able to suppress it; that is, he controls his outward actions so as not to betray his inner rage. This reaction is most clearly evident in his relations with Trukhachevsky. Pozdnyshev is careful not to let his feelings of anger and jealousy show: "I was particularly attentive as I saw him out (how else is one to see out the man who has come to destroy the peace and happiness of one's home!) With particular warmth I pressed his soft white hand" (p. 344). Pozdnyshev's self-control comes from his desire to preserve his self-image and his attention to social propriety. It would not be socially acceptable to behave in a discourteous manner, so he does not. But the anger itself is an implicit judgment of Trukhachevsky, and hence of his wife as well. Trukhachevsky only represents a threat if Pozdnyshev is suspicious of his wife's virtue. Again, his assessment of her as morally suspect will make it easier for him to rationalize and commit murder.

The third and most interesting of Pozdnyshev's reactions to anger is a willing assent to fury, accompanied by intense self-consciousness. In

these cases, he is described as making a conscious choice to surrender to his anger. Such surrender is apparent in Pozdnyshev's description of what will be the final fight with his wife before the night of her murder: "Suddenly I was seized by hatred such as I had never felt before, and for the first time I longed to give physical expression to my hatred. I leaped up and made for her, but I remember that just as I leaped up I became aware of what I was doing and asked myself if it was right to give way to my feelings, and answered that it was, because in that way I would frighten her. And so instead of suppressing my hatred I surrendered myself to it and rejoiced to feel it running riot within me" (p. 346). Similarly, Pozdnyshev remembers that during the murder, "I realized everything, and not for a moment did I stop realizing it. The more the steam that my fury generated, the brighter the glow of my consciousness, so that I could not possibly have failed to perceive everything I did" (p. 364).

The third type of reaction to anger—willing assent—is most clearly instrumental, and Pozdnyshev's description of the murder scene is particularly telling. We are given indications that he has already decided that he will kill his wife to punish her for infidelity, real or imagined. He has built up to this point with every angry act and thought. When the final confrontation comes, Pozdnyshev actually luxuriates in his anger, almost savouring it as he finally revenges himself on his wife. His anger facilitates his deeds; a dispassionate murder would be inconsistent with Pozdnyshev's sense of frustration. Here, anger allows him to indulge his wounded pride with appropriate brutality.

Pozdnyshev has rewritten the emotional history of his life and marriage, and has thereby altered his self-image. At the time of the train journey he sees himself as morally enlightened (especially as to the true nature of physical passion), and as having acquired greater wisdom and self-knowledge. But has Pozdnyshev really changed? All the information we have is contained in his narratives. A close examination of the text shows that his claims to greater knowledge are at best problematic. Arguably, he has far to go before we can accept his claims of greater understanding and insight. Narrative alone cannot provide the answers; we need more information before we can come to a better understanding of Pozdnyshev. We need to know something about his behaviour, specifically his response to frustration, the extent of his ability to control anger, and his treatment of women.

II

The attempt to understand another individual and to determine the extent of her self-understanding may be informed by narrative, but cannot be limited to narrative. I would like to examine one attempt to describe the effects of a genuine increase in self-knowledge and moral understanding.

Part of Spinoza's project in the *Ethics* is to describe an intellectual or moral conversion whereby the individual attains self-mastery and is less subject to the tyranny of negative emotions. A major aspect of this process is the development of reflexive knowledge. Each person has the power to examine critically his or her mental states, come to rational conclusions about them, and suffer less because of them. The more self-knowledge an individual has, the better he or she is able to discern clearly and distinctly the reasons and causes for particular mental states, and the greater will be the capacity for self-determined action.⁸

The individual who has gone through such a conversion and is largely self-determined (the "free man" as Spinoza calls him) strives, "to conceive things as they are in themselves."⁹ Part of what Spinoza means here is that in order to understand emotional situations we must attempt to view them from a more objective point of view than the perspective of our own interests and desires. This will in turn have an effect on how we view others. The individual who is reasonable and self-determined strives to see both himself and others "in the light of eternity."¹⁰ That is, she strives to understand events as God might.

How do we know when an individual has acquired more or less adequate knowledge about his mental states? Spinoza indicates that someone who has achieved self-mastery will behave in certain ways.¹¹ First, he will be neither ascetic nor hedonistic but will enjoy pleasures (cuisine, athletics, the arts) in moderation. In dealings with others he will not be vengeful but will attempt to repay hatred or anger with love. He will help others not out of pity, hope or fear, but because it is the right thing to do. Internally he will feel self-contentment and be untroubled by hopes or fears, as these emotions indicate lack of knowledge and weakness of mind.

A caveat: I am not sure that we can expect to have definitive answers regarding another's moral and intellectual transformations. Spinoza allows that certain types of self-deception and inadequate knowledge may provoke behavior similar to that of a morally enlightened individual. For example someone who held what Spinoza would regard as

religious superstitions might behave just as charitably as someone who had truly acquired virtue.¹² For the purposes of my discussion it is enough that the individual who has acquired self-understanding will refrain from certain types of actions.

According to Spinoza, then, genuine moral development and self-knowledge will have an effect on how one sees and behaves towards others. It is in these areas that we must look to test claims of greater insight and self-knowledge. How does Pozdnyshev fare according to these lights? There are many reasons to think that he has not attained the status of a Spinozistic free man. As I have argued, his claims to moral enlightenment are not to be taken at face value. There is little indication that Pozdnyshev has come to an objective view of the events he recounts. He continues to see himself and his dead wife as having been victims of forces beyond their control. His behavior on the train where he tells his story is not that of a man at peace with himself. The narrator describes him as “nervous” with darting eyes, and painstakingly avoiding all talk and contact with other passengers (p. 285).

In order to illustrate how one of Spinoza’s free men might comport himself and act toward others, let us look at another of Tolstoy’s protagonists, Ivan Vasilyevich of “After the Ball.” The structure of “After the Ball” is quite similar to that of *The Kreutzer Sonata*. In both protagonists relate past events to an anonymous narrator. But while the often agitated Pozdnyshev speaks to a stranger on a train journey, Vasilyevich is surrounded by a group of intimates—the narrator refers to him as “our respected friend”—and is said to speak “with great fervor and sincerity” (p. 370). Vasilyevich does not make the same explicit claims to greater knowledge that Pozdnyshev does, but he is convinced that the incidents he relates have changed him: “My whole life was changed by a single night, or rather, a morning” (p. 370).

Vasilyevich tells his friends of a night, long ago in his youth, when he attended a ball and danced with the girl he loved. He remembers being especially touched by the sight of the girl dancing with her aged father. Later the next morning after the ball he sees the father, an army officer, supervising the cruel and violent punishment of a Tatar deserter. Vasilyevich is tormented by the scene and unable to get it out of his mind. His confusion and distress causes him to become a “good for nothing” (“ia nikuda ne godilsia”)—he changes his plan to join the army and his love for the girl evaporates. Yet we are given indications that his self-described status as “good for nothing” is not correct. One of the assembled listeners protests, “It would be more to the point to say

how many people would have turned out to be good-for-nothing had it not been for you" (pp. 379–80).

Vasilyevich never blames anyone else for his lack of material success, nor does the conduct of her father cause him to lose respect for the girl he once loved. Overall, the tone of his reminiscences is strikingly different from that of Pozdnyshev's. While there are numerous indications in *The Kreutzer Sonata* that Pozdnyshev has not transcended the very views on sexuality and women that he so vehemently decries, Vasilyevich's recognition of the horror of corporal punishment is meant to be seen as an instance of genuine understanding and increased self-knowledge. We can see this in the manner in which each man tells his story: Vasilyevich is calm and surrounded by friends. Pozdnyshev is socially isolated, nervous, quick to anger, and seems unstable. Vasilyevich seems to have made concrete changes in his life, beginning with his decision not to enter the army. Pozdnyshev is still riding the train.

I have illustrated my worries about the epistemological status of personal narratives through an examination of two fictional narratives by one great writer. There are several reasons why I think this a fruitful strategy. Genuine personal narratives usually lack the coherence and elegance of those recounted in literary fiction. Indeed, I think we are rightly suspicious of personal narratives that seem too polished and practiced. We expect a certain amount of inarticulateness and clumsiness in the authentic accounts of ordinary people. Moreover in a genuine personal narrative as much may be conveyed by gestures, tones of voice, and lapsed silence as is by words. While the text of a literary narrative does not change with repeated reading, personal narratives can be more or less elaborated or expurgated depending on who is being addressed. Even the stories told only for our own benefit can change with time and circumstances. When we change the stories we tell, we reflect a different understanding of the events described, or, at least, we are putting a different construction on them. To find out whether this "different" understanding is also better, we need to look beyond narrative to actions, being in the world, and the treatment of others.

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1. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City: Image Books, 1960), pp. 69–70.
2. I assume a thin conception of narrative: At least two sequential clauses, temporally ordered, about a single past event. See W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), and the discussion in Jean Berko Gleason, *The Development of Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), p. 407.
3. This is argued by David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 73.
4. I shall limit my remarks on *The Kreutzer Sonata* to those aspects which are crucial to self-knowledge and moral understanding. So I shall not discuss Pozdnyshév's (or Tolstoy's) views on sexuality or on the emotional power of music.
5. See Peter Ulf Møller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoj and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s*, trans. John Kendal (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
6. Page references to works by Tolstoy will be given in parenthesis. This translation and all others are from *Six Short Masterpieces by Tolstoj*, trans. Margaret Wettlin (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963). Note the use of the perfective aspect in the Russian: "ia obdumal sebia i svoe proshedshee i ponial ego."
7. See Robert C. Solomon, "Emotions and Choice," *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 251–81; and Patricia Greenspan, "Emotional Strategies and Rationality," *Ethics* 110 (April 2000): 469–87.
8. Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pt. V, prop. 3, 4, and scholium. See Stuart Hampshire, "Spinoza's Theory of Human Freedom," *Monist* 55 (1971): 554–66; and *Morality and Conflict* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).
9. Spinoza, pt. IV, prop. 73, scholium.
10. Spinoza, pt. II, prop. 44, 2nd corollary.
11. My description of Spinoza's free man is based on IV, 45–52.
12. This is clear in his discussions of pity and repentance (IV, 50 & IV, 54 schol.).