

Identity and Existence in the Study of Human Traditions¹

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THIS paper is not designed as a historical survey of past folkloristic scholarship. Instead, my task is one of epistemological criticism. I intend to work through a specific logical problem with which students of human tradition are confronted when they attempt to speak consistently and in detail about the phenomena which they study. Many of the examples I will be using in this discussion will revolve around stories. However, I intend for my remarks to have a wider application. I suspect that the issues and problems I shall examine will be relevant to most of the kinds of phenomena that students of human tradition consider.

I shall be discussing the problems at hand in a way which will bring a recourse to themes which have been common in philosophy. I do not want this procedure to be interpreted as an 'appeal to philosophy' in which the putative purpose is to make philosophers legislators to social scientists, for that is not what is involved here. Instead, since the issues encountered in understanding the bases of any science are epistemological in nature, it is only normal that procedures arising from philosophy be employed in discussing a science's foundational concepts, assumptions and methods. My arguments should stand on their own merits (if any), independent of what their source may be.

I. *The Identity Problem*

The problem in which I am interested develops in this way. For instance, people often compare two or more specific stories (I use 'story' as meaning a type of communicative process) with an eye towards claiming that they are identical (or they are not identical). Anyone who has the least acquaintance with humanistic research can probably recall numerous examples of this. A storyteller often says something like the following: 'I'll tell you *the story* Uncle Joe told me when I was a kid.' Or, he may say, 'The way Smith told *that story* is wrong; now let me tell *it* to you right.' One might hear a story-teller say, 'This is *the same story* that I told you last year,' or 'That isn't the way *the story* goes.' Note that what I have called 'specific story' is a unique event, occurring at a particular time and place, as an interaction among particular personnel. Now the question arises, how is one able to judge whether one specific story is the same as another specific story. This

question can be directed synchronically, focusing upon two specific stories which occur roughly at the same time but in different locations, or cultures, or settings. It can also be directed diachronically, focusing upon two specific stories which occur at different times. In either case, the question seems to amount to the same thing in terms of logic. So, when these kinds of comparisons are made, the following question logically arises: 'How do we explain our ability to make such judgements of identity?' To answer this question is to propose a hypothesis which will explain how such judgements take place.

II. *Realism*

The explanatory hypothesis which is currently in vogue among a great many students of human tradition is a kind of Platonic Realism. The scholars to whom I refer here are not limited to the discipline of folkloristics; one finds realists of the kind here mentioned in most, if not all, of the social sciences. How this approach proceeds can be seen best by observing the way in which Realists discuss various phenomena in order to make comparisons. Again, using stories as an example, consider the following passage from Richard M. Dorson's distinguished book, *American Folklore*.

The legend—the story which never happened told for true—has anchored itself in the metropolis in urban guises. Certain *stories will traverse the country*, acquiring local details in each new city, and *circulating* among sophisticated city-dwellers as an extraordinary event, whose accuracy no one doubts. Such legends fasten particularly onto the automobile, chief symbol of modern America. In *the tale* of The Ghostly Hitchhiker, a fair young maiden signals for a lift from two youths returning home from a dance. They let her into the back seat and drive to the address she requests. On arriving, they discover the back seat is empty. In perplexity the lads knock on the door of the girl's supposed home, and explain to the gray-haired lady who answers what has happened. She beckons them to follow her into the living room and points to a framed picture of a young girl, whom they immediately recognize as their hitchhiker. 'This is my daughter,' announces the old lady gravely. 'She died in an accident on the corner where you met her, six years ago. Others have had the same experience as you.'

Sometimes one of the youths lends the shivering girl a coat, which she takes with her into the house. He calls back the next day to retrieve his coat, and finds it wrapped around the tombstone of the long-dead girl.

"*The Ghostly Hitchhiker*" has been reported over one hundred times, and has been analyzed into four distinct subtypes. *It is found as far as Hawaii*, where a rickshaw supplants the auto, and is *traced back* to the nineteenth century, in America, Italy, Ireland, Turkey, and China, with a horse and wagon picking up the benighted traveler.²

This discussion by Dorson appears to take for granted the following logical structure. A scholar becomes aware of several specific stories. He judges that these specific stories are quite similar, perhaps even identical. He makes this judgement of identity in terms of, or by referring to, *the story*. His view is that these specific stories are instances or 'versions' of *the story*. What is the nature of *the story*, according to this approach? Clearly it is thought of as being like a thing, an object. *The story* travels, *it* has a long history,

it has affected many persons. In other words, *it* exists and is real. In order to indicate this existing object which Realists posit, I shall adopt the convention of writing it in capitals as THE STORY. What else can be said about THE STORY? A Realist never perceives a specific story, rather all specific stories are versions, or imperfect copies of one or another exemplar STORY. THE STORY is not numerically identical with any of the specific stories which are 'versions' of it. This means that for Realists THE STORY must not exist in the same way in which specific stories exist. It must exist in a special way, 'superorganically', as some Realists who are anthropologists often say. Furthermore, on the Realist view, a person's act of narration in a specific story is seen as an interaction between THE STORY and a person, with the person inevitably coming forth with an imperfect copy ('version') of THE STORY. This imperfection is often pictured as resulting from some ineptitude on the part of the human agents involved (indeed, such imperfection could hardly be thought to come from THE STORY which the Realist sees as a standard, or perfect in the appropriate sense). Thus, Realists speak about 'corrupt' or 'contaminated' or 'mistaken' versions. This outlook could lead (and *has*, at times, led) scholars to view 'the folk' as being noble, albeit rather slow-witted and error-prone people.³

One can distinguish at least two kinds of Realism, depending upon what the Realist posits the exact nature of THE STORY to be. Standard Realists⁴ consider THE STORY to be an ideal series of motifs linked in a plot sequence. On the other hand, structural Realists⁵ conceive of THE STORY as being some kind of ideal formal structure with specific stories being versions of such Real Structures.

The problems which Realists must overcome are those which have plagued traditional Platonism. To paraphrase the criticism presented by William Ockham, Realists multiply entities beyond necessity; that is, they commit the fallacy of reification which involves positing the existence of an entity solely on the grounds that its existence is required by one's theory, in this case a theory of how comparisons are made. Wittgenstein has made a similar criticism in more modern terms.

The questions 'What is length?', 'What is meaning?', 'What is the number one?' etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)⁶

The Realist simply gives in to the urge to point to a real object by positing an entity conceived on the model of a piece of written literature without having any of the kinds of evidence normally required for saying that such an entity exists. Another seemingly insurmountable difficulty for Realists lies in the notion of 'participation'. This is the part of the Realist view which tries to account for the relationship between our world and the realm of the Ideal Forms (or STORIES, in our case). In a magnificent gesture of honest self-criticism, Plato raised (in the dialogue entitled *Parmenides*) the classical objections to participation.⁷ These objections can be summarized by saying that if Forms (STORIES) are in a different and unique realm

of their own, they cannot conceivably interact with the normal mundane world because Forms are conceived to exist in a radically different way than ordinary things. This way of explaining comparisons, hence, terminates in a mystery, and a mystery is no explanation.

I can imagine someone objecting at this point that I am really creating a straw monster on the basis of a few lines quoted from a book. However, I do not believe that this is the case. Words have meaning, and when persons use words in a certain way, the reader has every right to take the words at their face value. 'But surely,' someone might say, 'Dorson and others talk of THE STORY as travelling only in a metaphorical sense.' Let us assume that such talk is a metaphor? The point of the metaphor would be, it seems to me, that some *thing* which is not numerically identical to any set of specific stories, is moving about the landscape, *like* a person does when travelling. Even if Realists did not speak in metaphors, they would still have to make the point in plain language that some *entity*, THE STORY, goes from place to place, for that is the whole point of their method in studying human traditions—to find out when and where this entity (THE STORY or THE SONG or THE GAME, and the like) has left its mark. They are not trying to find out something about specific stories; rather, they want to look at what they take to be the symptoms of THE STORY's movements (that is to say, the symptoms are the existence of specific stories at certain locations and times) in order to see what THE STORY is doing.

Here my objector might say, 'Suppose, then, that the persons you call Realists dropped the aims of the historic-geographic method as their research goals—then would it not be the case that your comments would lead to nothing?' If this contingency were to happen, then perhaps Realists would stop talking about an entity, THE STORY, which 'travels'. But then they would still, presumably, want to order their data (specific stories) in some way, which would include making judgements about whether some specific data were identical. They would then still say that so-and-so specific datum is the same as (or highly similar to) another specific datum by virtue of the putative fact that such data are versions of one and the same Ideal or Exemplar Object. Then one asks of a Realist in such a case, 'Show me THE DATUM—What is it? Where is it?' The Realist either admits at this juncture that he cannot point out any such object, or he takes the step Plato took and locates the object in a special realm of existence where it can safely reside free of irritation from troublesome critics.

'But perhaps he could point it out, in a sense,' one might say, 'for what is being called THE STORY could be a hypothetical construct which the scholar creates so that he can order his data—so, it exists in the scholar's mind in the same way that any other idea exists in someone's thinking.' This is an interesting possibility, but one which I believe most of the scholars I call Realists would reject, for the general thrust of their approach seems to involve an assumption that there is an object of knowledge out there somewhere in the world which it is the scholar's job to describe. And this object of knowledge is more than just the specific stories (or other specific phenomena). The scholar's descriptions, so I think Realists would want to say,

when correct correspond to this object of knowledge which is independent of all of mankind's thought about it. And if Realists took this approach, which is the approach they probably would prefer here, then they would still be saddled with all the problems associated with Platonism, a major difficulty here being that the claim that there are objects of knowledge which are in principle independent of all thought takes one nowhere, since it is self-contradictory to say that one can know something which is unthinkable.

Suppose that someone proposed to take the other alternative implicit in the foregoing paragraph, namely to state that *THE STORY* is strictly a one-man hypothesis that is propounded to account for the putative similarity between some specific phenomena. Here the scholar is giving up the security of having an absolute standard, a special Platonic object, for ordering phenomena. That means that his hypothesis would have to stand on its own, independent of any superorganic standards. This is a perfectly appropriate possibility; however, such a hypothesis would be subject to a disconfirmation. And in many of the studies which Realists have made, if one took this interpretation of their approach, one would have to say that either the hypothesis was disconfirmed, or is of the sort which lacks observable consequences and hence is no scientific hypothesis, perhaps being instead an expression of the particular scholar's literary preferences. As Dundes suggests⁸ there seems to be no reason, other than one person's preferences, for supposing that a particular *STORY* is more like one specific story rather than another specific story. This means, if it is correct, that Realism may be a subtle way of simply enforcing or projecting one set of literary standards or preferences rather than another set—in some cases perhaps a kind of ethnocentrism. In its full-blown form Realism might be a way of making absolutes out of personal or societal preferences.

This is how the Realist response to the identity problem stands, then. There is no evidence that *THE STORY* exists as some kind of special object (the objection of Ockham and Wittgenstein). In alternative terms, one could say that what exists here are the specific stories—they exist, but *THE STORY* does not. Even if one granted that *STORIES* exist in some special way, that would not explain anything because participation is a mystery (Plato's criticism). An explanatory hypothesis that says in effect that 'this is a mystery' is no explanation, for explanation is supposed to increase understanding, not detract from it, or simply replace one mystery with another. Given these lacunae, the Realist no longer has *THE STORY* as an absolute standard by means of which he may order specific stories into a series of 'versions', or 'variants'. This result suggests that we require a thorough rethinking of how judgements of identity are made with regard to the kinds of phenomena which are of interest to students of human tradition. It shall be my purpose in the remainder of this essay to make some suggestions about how we might begin to understand this matter adequately.

III. *The Relational View*

The demise of Realism brings us once again to the question of how judgements about identity are made and to the need for a hypothesis which will

answer it. The explanation which I propose, here in a germinal form, is what I shall call the relational view, or Relationism. Since what is available to us to study are the specific phenomena relevant to human tradition, we should begin there to try to see how various human beings (not necessarily scholars only) make judgements of identity. Thus, I suggest that we focus upon the behaviour of persons who are participants in events which constitute the phenomena that interest students of human tradition. This is a considerable departure from the starting point which Realists have in studying the phenomena of human tradition, for they assume that they know how to make judgements of identity in terms of certain standards (such as THE STORY) which are presupposed to exist *prior to any enquiry into the phenomena*. This often leads them to view any departure (by non-scholarly persons) from such standards as being errors. I suggest that we begin with the original question (How are judgements of identity made?), but propose that we direct our attention to the actual behaviour of humans in their interactions with other humans in order to find the answer. By studying persons behaving, we may find out how they make judgements of identity. That is, I assume that whatever persons involved in traditional events are doing, they are by and large doing it in a correct way, and I want to study that way.

With the intent of showing that the points I want to make are relevant to many kinds of traditional processes, not just relevant to narrations only, I shall shift to another kind of example. The case I have in mind concerns a recipe for possum-grape jelly which my mother knows.

She says such things as, 'I know *the recipe*,' 'The *recipe* I use was *handed down* through my family,' 'The *recipe* our family has is almost *the same* as the one the Jones family uses.' Here is the issue in full flower, complete with appropriate substantive grammar. Consider the first statement. What are the publicly accessible behavioural criteria by means of which we say in my family that we know the recipe? Obviously someone who makes this claim should be able to prepare some jelly such that others who say 'I know that recipe' recognize it as (say that it is) a good example of that kind of jelly. Someone making this claim would also be able to teach others how to make an acceptable batch. Furthermore, one can claim to know the recipe if he can say to socially recognized experts (my mother, for example) just how to go about the job. That is, one need not actually do any cooking in order to be recognized as one who knows the recipe. Another factor might be this person's ability to teach the recipe to others such that the other persons do an acceptable job. I do not mean to say that all of these specific criteria must be met in every case one might wish to investigate; I only mean that this *kind* of criteria must be available. This approach I am advocating is a form of the Pragmaticist theory of meaning originally presented in 1878 by Charles S. Peirce. Here is his view, in a nutshell:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.⁹

The application of this in studying human tradition is fairly obvious. One learns to perform in a certain way under the guidance of a teacher such that these performances are acknowledged by the teacher as being what he calls the recipe or story or whatever. Others who say that they know this story say that the learner has it right. The learner can perform what is accepted as the story in the accepted way, getting the accepted results on the accepted occasions, and so on. That his peers say he has it right, or that they 'let it pass' is basically what it is for it to be right. One does not appeal to some eternal Platonic standard object to ascertain its 'rightness'. In other words, when we as scholars speak of the story, it is likely that we are speaking of abilities that people learn, abilities which are socially accepted to be the story in question. The meaning of the term 'the story' is given by the behavioural criteria of the term's use in some particular society. What *is* the story, then? It exists in any particular case as a set of patterned communicative ties between members of a society involving an ability which is socially delineated at any one moment by means of participant's judgements about present interactions as these participants now interpret them in terms of previous interactions between teacher-pupil, performer-audience, critic-artist, and so on. And these communicative ties are no more nor no less real than a conversation or a remembered conversation. The story is not only what the storyteller says, but also what his peers interpret, say, and do about what he says, now and in the future.¹⁰

This kind of approach has some interesting consequences. Problems of 'transmission' would be solved, at least in one sense, because no *thing* (no STORY) is transmitted; rather an ability is learned (or demonstrated) according to a teacher's guidance (or an audience's appreciation) subject to social approval. One would know that such an ability has been learned when the storyteller can 'go on' in the right way, the 'right way' being determined by the teacher and other peers. Indeed, some performances can be seen as showing that one can 'go on' in the accepted 'right' way. We could no longer talk of STORIES or MOTIFS as impinging causally upon one another. The chain of causation is operative between human agents, so the problems with which we would be concerned involve the behaviour of persons and the ways in which persons are socially interrelated.

From the above comments we can see that it is very important to distinguish between our judgements as scholars and those of the people we are studying. *Formally*, there will be little difference: in practising a discipline we have no Platonic standards to which we can appeal—'social agreement' among the community of scientific enquirers is the sole source of our standards too. However, from the standpoint of discussing the 'contents' of various human behaviour processes, there may be considerable differences between the standards used by scholars and those found in some other community being studied. And I take it that as students of man, we would want to find out what that community's standards are, not to try to impose our standards upon them. Failure to keep these two kinds of standards distinct might be called the Scholar's Fallacy. This occurs, in the case which we have been considering, when a scholar uncritically assumes that the stan-

dards or techniques for judging identity or similarity in a community he is studying are the same as his own so that he is led to interpret deviations from his standards as being 'errors', or 'confusions', or 'failures in memory', or the like.

In response to the foregoing account of Relationism, the following objection has been set forth. 'In opposition to the example of the recipe for possum grape jelly and its allied discussion, I [the objector] encountered a situation in which a singer sang a hymn text to the *same* tune, objectively measurable, to which she sang "Barbara Allen". The singer denied any relationship between the hymn tune and the tune for "Barbara Allen"—and even if other members of the same community denied the identity, we as scholars would still be justified in speaking of "the tune". Scholars need to investigate in order to understand why the singer or her community denied the identity of these specific tunes, but as we scholars cannot fail to identify these as the same tune, and we would be correct in doing so.'

The objector is perfectly correct in saying that he can objectively measure the identity of two specific tunes. This, of course will be done in terms of the relational approach within the community of scholars. That is to say, it would be quite right to say that these two specific tunes were the same according to the standards available in the scholarly community. But what is there in this that enables us to say that the result of such an application of *our* standards is *the* tune? All we can say is that this is how *our* standards work. It was somewhat unclear to me whether my objector wanted to make the additional claim that insofar as the singer he was interviewing had failed to identify the two specific tunes as being the same, that she was therefore mistaken. Whether *he* would take this step, I do not know. I do know that there have been other students of human tradition that have made that claim. And when scholars do take that step, they are confused. For an error is made only in cases in which there is present some accepted standard of correctness. Thus, the singer in this example might be acting in accordance with an accepted community standard, one that is different from the one we use. If she acts in accordance with that standard, she is correct; if she does not follow it, in terms of it she is wrong. We cannot know whether she has made an error, however, until we investigate her community's standards. Moreover, these standards may, in many cases, operate in ways that are categorically different from a particular scholar's approach. That is, as the objector's comment about 'objectivity' suggests, perhaps the singer's criteria for identity are based on subjective considerations. Here I use 'subjective' in the sense of 'pertaining to the human subject', or 'from the standpoint of the experiencing subject', not in the sense of 'whimsical', or 'arbitrary'. For example, the singer may not distinguish between 'tune' and 'text'. Or she might judge that these tunes are dissimilar due to a difference in emotional tone which she, as subject, experiences. In any case, it seems to me that a crucial first step in this matter is to find out how she makes that judgement, not to tend to dismiss her judgement as a mistake.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper (under the title 'What *Is* THE STORY?') was read at the November, 1970 meeting of the American Folklore Society in Los Angeles. The present essay is a considerable revision of the earlier piece. I am grateful to D. K. Wilgus, Robert Georges, Alan Dundes, and Kenny Goldstein for their forthright critiques of my first attempts to articulate the points in this paper.

2. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 249-50, emphasis added.

3. See Alan Dundes' comments about scholars who have been led to assume that the people they were studying were inept: 'The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory,' *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 6 (1969), pp. 9, 10, 13, 14.

4. For example, Stith Thompson, 'The Star Husband Tale,' in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 414-74. See also the above material quoted from Dorson.

5. For example, Alan Dundes, 'Structural Typology in North American Indian Folktales,' in *The Study of Folklore*, pp. 206-15.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 1.

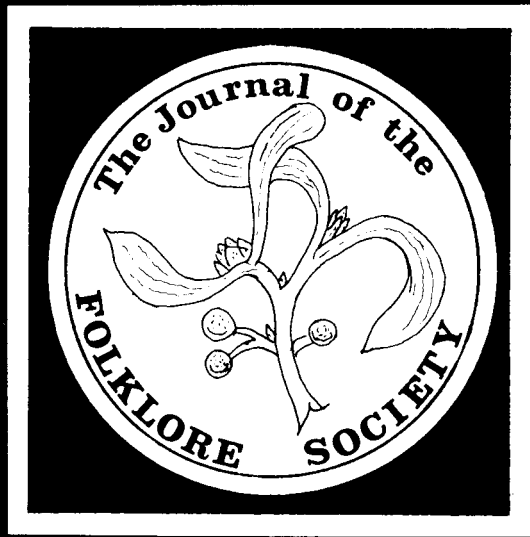
7. See Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1939), pp. 81-102.

8. 'The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory,' 6-7, 8, 11-12.

9. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), Vol. V, p. 258. Cf. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1925), ch. 5.

10. See Dewey, pp. 162-66. Cf. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 3 f.; John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), pp. 50-3. See also Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), ch. 12, 'The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art,' pp. 142-57. While their discussion is centred upon the example of poetry, particularly the kind which one 'writes', it is interesting to note that their conclusion is similar to mine. They state (p. 156) that 'the work of art . . . has a special ontological status. It is neither real (physical, like a statue) nor mental (psychological, like the experience of light or pain) nor ideal (like a triangle). It is a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective. They must be assumed to exist in collective ideology. . . .' They specifically deny (p. 153) a Platonic interpretation for their phrase 'system of norms', and they state that the literary work of art 'rather resembles the system of language' in the matter of existence.

Folklore



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