

ENTANGLEMENT IN STORIES

(Wilhelm Schapp)

BENJAMIN'S AND ARENDT'S INFLUENTIAL ELABORATIONS ON storytelling are well known. However, this is not the case with Schapp, especially since none of his works have been translated into English and are not really known beyond the German-speaking world.¹ Hence, a short introduction may be warranted. Schapp studied law, but also philosophy in Freiburg under Heinrich Rickert and Georg Simmel. After becoming acquainted with Husserlian thought through Wilhelm Dilthey, he went to Göttingen where he studied with Edmund Husserl from 1905 to 1909. He was the second of Husserl's students to write a dissertation under his supervision. It was published in 1910 under the title *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung* (*Contributions to the Phenomenology of Perception*). Despite being a work that both draws on and critically debates (though only implicitly so) Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, which had appeared ten years earlier and which, even later, remained Schapp's principal reference to phenomenology, his *Beiträge* are not simply a further development of phenomenological thought. The immediately striking features of this work are its almost complete lack of technical vocabulary, the radical refusal of all abstraction, the primary focus on sensible appearances and highly detailed descriptions of them, and, especially, its wholesale rejection of the idea of "general"—that is, eidetic objects. In other words,

already in this early work Schapp departs from phenomenology as a philosophy of essences. Because of what Hermann Lübbe—in what is still one of the best discussions of Schapp's later work, *In Geschichten verstrickt*—has thus termed “the declared end of phenomenological Platonism, that is, of phenomenology as ‘a philosophy of essence,’” Schapp's approach to perception has been qualified by some as an original phenomenological realism.² But Schapp's *Beiträge* also already prepared for the departure from classical phenomenology's understanding of perception as the prime experience, in which the encounter with what is given *in propria persona* takes place, to an experience of things exclusively within stories.³ In any event, in order to achieve the objective of describing what happens in perception if it is to be the originary place of the encounter with the things themselves (*die Sachen selbst*), the *Beiträge* perform a radical, independent, uncompromising, even an idiosyncratic appropriation of the early concept (that is, before its transcendental turn) of phenomenological description. Applied to the phenomenon of sensible perception, Schapp executes this methodological program without recourse to concepts that he holds to be foreign to this phenomenon with the aim of raising “the logos of the sensible world” to consciousness as a *logos* thoroughly distinct from the concern with essences of pure thought.⁴

Thoroughly situated in the movement of phenomenological inquiry, Schapp's dissertation is, as I have already pointed out, not deferential to phenomenological thought as an academic discipline. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that he did not opt for a university career as a philosopher after having completed his dissertation. He pursued his training as a lawyer, which during his years in Göttingen already provided him with an independent income. Only after his retirement in the fifties of the past century, and the publication of numerous works on law-related matters, did Schapp return to his early interests. Incidentally, as he makes clear

in his later books—particularly, in *In Geschichten verstrickt* (1953) and *Philosophie der Geschichten* (1959)—his primary concern in these works about stories and the philosophy of stories, which, as could be shown, continues his early phenomenological investigation into the *logos* of the aesthetic world, is fundamentally indebted to his practice as a jurist for whom each case is, indeed, a function of the stories that constitute it.⁵ As we will see, stories, even as they represent for Schapp the most originary phenomena, are anything but eidetical forms. They are intrinsically concrete and tangible formations (*Gebilde*), not only in general but also for each singular individual entangled in them. In his exploration of the human being's entanglement in stories, Schapp undoubtedly has Husserl's concerns with the lifeworld in mind. But the first part of *In Geschichten verstrickt* is devoted to an analysis of the *Wozudinger*—that is, of things that are created by humans for a specific purpose—in the production of which, “world” emerges.⁶ This analysis is a clear indication that Schapp's work is above all a response to Heidegger's analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time*, and more precisely, to the latter's analysis of equipment, or rather, of useful things (*Zeug*). By taking as his starting point the structures of the creation of *Wozudinger*, Schapp argues that rather than being a pre-existing frame for such creation, the “world” is formed as the surrounding world by this creation so as to subsequently manifest itself in the stories in which the human being finds him- or herself entangled. In other words, the world is a moment in stories, intelligible only through the unity that characterizes them, and is equi-original with the creation of *Wozudinger*.

More generally speaking, *In Geschichten verstrickt* takes aim at Heidegger's reference in *Being and Time* to Plato's *Sophist* and his demand not to engage “in telling a story” about Being, and Dasein's way of being in the world.⁷ In contrast, Schapp argues that the analysis of *Wozudinger* shows that all these things are woven into contexts, frames, or horizons,

and that it is impossible to experience or account for them independently of these relations. The intended point of the analyses of these contexts or horizons within which the *Wozudinger* created by humans are embedded, and which correspond to what Schapp understands by stories, is to show that such analyses never result in the discovery of general concepts—of the order of genres or species, for example—that could serve to account for them in general or ultimately, by way of a concept such as Being, but only in more stories. Although Heidegger’s name is not even once mentioned in the book, *In Geschichten verstrickt* seeks to counter Heidegger’s existential understanding of Dasein’s world in terms of the general question of the meaning of Being, holding that, in truth, the human being is, as the title suggests, entangled in stories, and that its world is one of stories. Stories, as Schapp understands them, are thus, as the reference to entanglement suggest, of the order of an existential condition of the human being, in advance of their potential linguistic articulation. Their being told is, as Paul Ricoeur remarks in a brief reference to Schapp in *Time and Narrative*, a “secondary process.”⁸ The very potentiality of a human being’s story to be told is thus rooted in the stories in which such a being finds him- or herself existentially entangled from the start. Such entanglement is, as Schapp notes, characterized by “internal silent speech,” which may be thought of as the mediating condition that makes it possible for the stories to be explicitly told.⁹ Not all stories are necessarily told, but qua the silent speech that accompanies them, they are governed by the *telos* of being told. Actual realization in the form of a told story is grounded in the silent speech that accompanies it and that presses it to be told, to be communicated. In the second part of the book, entitled “*Verstricktsein in Geschichten und in Geschichte* [Entanglement in Stories and in History],” Schapp goes one step further: “The tradition considers stories and history to be something *in* the world. By contrast, for us, the world and history in which we are entangled

are the same. For us the world is only in history, or, at first, only in the stories, in which the individual is entangled or co-entangled.”¹⁰ Rather than situating the human being within the perspective of the history of Being—a history in the singular—the human being’s world, according to Schapp, is constituted by a plurality of histories or stories. Stories as told stories, but also history in the sense of *historia*, are verbal or literary formations that presuppose the human being’s entanglement in a world of stories—including those of others, which in being told are spun further through their narration. As Schapp writes, the one reason for narrating stories in which one is entangled is not that they are finished and may be passed on, but they “are stories that [as living stories] are driven forward, that should continue, that is, stories in which the place from which one starts [*angegangene Stelle*] should write, as it were, the continuation.”¹¹ Certainly at first, the notion of entanglement suggests the passivity of the one who finds him- or herself in the midst of a story. But stories are not finished end products. Indeed, the seeming passivity of the entangled one is counterbalanced by the telling and retelling of his or her story, which makes the story actively move forward.¹²

For Schapp, what is fundamental is not the problematic of Being. Stories, by contrast, are of primary significance, and from them alone, humans, animals, things emerge, entangled in them. Entanglement (*Verstrickung*, though at times he also speaks of *Verwicklung*) is the very way in which one or something *is*, and that means, is within a story. As already mentioned, Schapp systematically avoids philosophical terminology and categorization. Thus, rather than “being-in” (*In-Sein*) which according to Heidegger is a fundamental existential structure of Dasein regarding its relation to the world, the notion of entanglement (*Verstrickung*), taken from ordinary language, serves him to describe, in accordance certainly with what Husserl had called the “natural view of the world,” one’s living

relation to it. In English as well as in German the term has mostly negative connotations of being ensnarled, embroiled, imprisoned, or caught in something that hampers or obstructs—a lie, or contradictions, for example.¹³ In general the prefix *Ver-* serves to amplify the noun or verb that it precedes—as in the case of the noun *Verstrickung*, the state of being entangled—and such amplification potentially has a latent pejorative signification. But when it comes to being entangled in stories, “entanglement” has such negative connotations only if the stories that happen to a subject affect it from the outside, rather than from within.

Let us start out by noting that the primary meaning of the term “*Verstrickung*” refers to the operation of knitting, and it means to use or finish up the knitting yarn. As the prefix *Ver-* indicates, even in its figural sense of being entangled, “*Verstrickung*” designates the state of being within a knitted fabric and, in the case of Schapp’s use of the term, being within the texture or web of a story. Indeed, the expression of being “*verstrickt*” literally suggests finding oneself in a fabric, or a web of narration. And by the same token, what one is entangled in—namely, stories—are therefore of the order of a web or woven pattern. Schapp points out that “he uses the expression ‘entanglement’ in a broad sense, and that he wishes the term ‘the entangled one’ to refer to anyone to whom a story happens, who stands in its middle, or belongs to it.”¹⁴ The term thus suggests that the human being is not first an independent entity to whom stories happen subsequently, but that he or she is from the start within stories and is what he or she is only by being entangled in stories. A story never happens to oneself from the outside. One is always within stories. Entanglement thus means involvement-in, and it suggests, in particular, that one can never extricate or abstract oneself from what is fundamental—namely, being in stories—precisely because such fundamental entanglement in stories is the condition for being what one is, a human being. Since entanglement

is not something provoked by some stories and not by others, but rather is what makes the story a story to begin with, it is impossible to exit from it. But such entanglement does not signify a form of divine natural necessity as personified by *Ananke*, who spins the fate of gods and men on her adamantine spindle. In no way does it suggest a fatalist lack of freedom by the one involved in it, not only because one is what one is to the extent only that one has a story, but also because one has not just one story but stories in the plural. As the titles of his works indicate, entanglement is a *plurale tantum*. By its nature entanglement is an involvement in always multiple stories. Indeed, as Marquard points out, “only he who participates in many stories, has—by way of the separation of those powers that are the stories—through the one story a freedom from the respective other story. He or she who has only one story does not possess this freedom.”¹⁵ Since the entanglement Schapp has in mind is one in multiple stories, it is also a condition of the human being’s freedom insofar as it frees him or her from a monolithic total and totalizing story.

A commentary on one passage in particular from *In Geschichten verstrickt* should help me bring into relief those characteristics of stories that in Schapp’s work might be pertinent to what interests me in this study. Schapp remarks,

[w]ith each story the one who is entangled in it or those who are entangled in it come into view (*tauchen auf*). The story stands for the man. It extends, or deepens itself without effort on our part, as it were, into the man depending on the weight inherent in the story. We also are of the opinion that the access to the man, to the human being, is accomplished only through stories, through only his stories, and that the corporeal appearance of the human being is also only an appearance of his stories; that his face, for example, also tells stories in its

own way, and that the body is a body for us only insofar as it tells stories or, and this amounts to the same, hides or seeks to hide stories.¹⁶

The sentences, which state that “a story stands for the man,” or a few lines further, “that each story stands for a human being,” condense in the most succinct fashion the fundamental signification that, according to Schapp, stories have for understanding the human being.¹⁷ As he explains, “[W]ith this we mean that our ultimate (*letztmöglichen*) access to the human being is through the stories we have of him.”¹⁸ Hence the significance of all stories. Indeed,

[w]hat we essentially know about human beings seems to be their stories and the stories that surround them. Through his story we encounter [*kommen wir in Berührung*, in tactile fashion, that is also, and at the same time, the happening of a becoming entangled through such touch in] another self. The human being is not the human being as a being of flesh and blood. In its place his story imposes itself on us as what is most proper to him (*sein Eigentliches*).¹⁹

At one point, stories are referred to as “the last intelligible part in itself of a non-closed whole that comes into view with it,” and are, subsequently, compared to atoms.²⁰ “Entanglement is the final indivisible part,” by means of which justice is to be done to what being human properly means.²¹ What the human being is, in essence, in his or her very humanity, in what is most proper about him or her, in his or her very selfhood, is defined by his or her concrete stories, and tangibly accessible (in tactile fashion—that is, sensibly) only through these individual and singular stories in which he or she is entangled.

At this juncture the reason why I precede the discussion of storytelling in Benjamin and Arendt by extensively exploring Schapp’s philosophy

of stories should become clear. For what interests me in this study—the phenomenon of the inability of the survivors of the holocaust to tell their stories—it is Schapp who makes the most sweeping case for the fundamental role that stories and storytelling represent with respect to the human condition. From the perspective of Schapp's assessment, the muteness of the holocaust survivors appears literally as a *skandalon*—that is, both an annoyance or offence—to such a theory and a snare or trap into which it falls when venturing to address this phenomenon. For, indeed, as my conclusions suggest, the muteness in question is a trap that when addressed in theories about the story and storytelling, might force them to reconsider the nature of the story as a form of sense.

Stories, consequently, are the most primary as regards the nature of being human. According to its concept, a story implies that rather than being withheld, it is told to be heard. But before I pursue the importance of these implications, I must linger for a moment on the stories themselves. Each human being is entangled in many stories. After having evoked stories that are one's own (*Eigengeschichten*) and that, furthermore, weigh heavily on oneself (*die einem im Nacken sitzen*), Schapp writes that “[s]tories may remind one of scarred wounds, that at any time can reopen, or of wounds that do not heal at all.”²² Not all the stories in which one is involved are thus of the same order. Following these stories, with which one actively seeks to come to grips in one way or another, Schapp brings up “the flight or escape from one's particular stories,” which he characterizes as a flight from the world (*Weltflucht*).²³ Needless to say, these stories from which one flees, are also stories that press hard, if not too hard, on oneself. But such flight or escape from stories, Schapp holds, “belongs also to the stories.”²⁴ For Schapp then, one is never without a story; if by fleeing from one story, one still is within a story, this means that all flight from stories is a flight into another story. Now, as regards all those stories that press hard upon

oneself, whether one tries to cope with them or flee from them, “the ultimate (*letzte*) stigma that characterizes them is that they are *my* stories.”²⁵ These particular stories or stories that are my own (*Eigengeschichten*) are stigmata, not only in the sense of being marks that ultimately define oneself, but also in the sense that as marks burned into me, they resemble wounds like those of the crucified body of Christ. As such, these stories are my utmost own stories, the essential stories in which I am entangled and that say who, ultimately, I am. Insofar as they are mine, these stories “are separated as it were from the stories of others by a wall over which one cannot climb.”²⁶ But in the same way as the stories in which others are entangled are the only way to come close to them, “our own stories—the way in which we live them (*wie wir sie bestehen*), and are entangled in them, the way they loosen or become inextricable,” are the only way to come close to oneself.²⁷ But it is also always only from within the horizon of the stories in which one is entangled, and from whose story-world one cannot exit, that one can encounter oneself.²⁸

As I have pointed out already, stories qua stories imply that they are told and addressed to those who listen to them. A singular story, Schapp writes, “is intended to be retold.”²⁹ From this it follows that living stories (*lebendige Geschichten*) are never finished products; they continue by being retold. As a result, “each story stands in a living interconnectedness with other stories, perhaps, with all stories.”³⁰ Schapp adds that “one can perhaps say that each story is prepared within the horizon of each other story, or that there is a place for the other stories within the horizon of each story.”³¹ In short, a story as a story is a told story; it is what it is only if it can be, and is, shared with others. Through their intrinsic communicability stories are never isolated stories—an isolated story is a contradiction in terms. They are never untold because they might be untellable. On the contrary, they are interconnected in a living, hence not closed, larger whole, in which

what began with a story continues to have effects and consequences. For this reason, Schapp could also contend that the flight from one's utmost own story still belongs to one's story.

The problematic I am interested in requires the examination of still one more aspect of Schapp's theory of stories. In order to further develop the role played by the one who is entangled in a story, Schapp makes a distinction between self-entanglement (*Selbstverstrickung*) and the entanglement of an other in a story (*Fremdverstrickung*). One's belonging to a story always appears to a listener, reader, or judge as an entanglement of an other in a story. If Schapp considers self-entanglement to be "the core of his study," is it not because, thanks to a story's intrinsic appeal to listeners, this entanglement also concerns the inevitable perception or experience of the self by an other self?³² All entanglement of an other is, Schapp states, "the self-entanglement of an other," the implication being that entanglement in stories is the fundamental mode in which the selfhood of others is experienced.³³ Without another's self-entanglement in a story, no access whatsoever to him- or herself is possible. More precisely, such self-entanglement is not only the condition of selfhood but also of all possible relations between the self and others. But what about the relation of this self to others who encounter it through its stories, and who themselves are what they are only insofar as they live in their own stories? How does "the self-entanglement of an other relate to my own entanglement?" Schapp asks.³⁴ The question concerns the relation, or participation of "the most proper," or "utmost own [*eigensten*] story" of each singular human being—his or her "*ureigene Geschichte*"—in the stories of others.³⁵ According to Schapp, the lines of connections, the interconnections between stories regarding the self, oneself, and the stories of others point to an ultimate commonality (*Gemeinsamkeit*) that concerns being human itself. According to Schapp, "being human is exhaustively

determined by this entanglement in stories: the human being is the one who is entangled in stories."³⁶ In other words, being human not only means to have a story of one's own, but to have a story that is entangled in the stories of others and vice-versa. This web-like entanglement constitutes and is the ultimate commonality of being human.

Before I pose the question regarding the consequences that, according to Schapp, would follow from the destruction of one's ability to tell one's story, it must be pointed out that in *Philosophie der Geschichten*, Schapp acknowledges the fact that one can be ordered to hold one's tongue. But a prohibition to speak, to speak aloud, does not affect what he termed "silent speech," which continues to accompany the stories that press hard to be told.³⁷ Though forbidden to tell one's story, both the ability to silently speak and the power to loudly speak remain intact. A prohibition to speak in no way impairs one's capacity to do so. Yet such impairment of the ability to speak both aloud and silently is what is at issue with the soldiers returning from World War I and, in particular, with holocaust survivors.

Stories, Schapp holds, are wholes, totalities, and are constantly present as such wholes or totalities in the course they take.³⁸ The past and the future always belong in an original fashion to the whole they represent. In addition, the stories themselves, as such wholes, have a beginning and end that are grounded in what precedes and follows them. Only in being interconnected in this fashion to stories that precede and follow them do they possess unity and wholeness. But if this is so, can an inmate of a death camp have a story at all? If in the world of the inmates there is only "stagnant time," and "history has stopped," as Levi reports, this world no longer has the temporal unity of stories.³⁹ It lacks the web-like structure in which humans qua humans are entangled. Cut off from their past and being exposed to a future that is no longer a future since it means certain death—which as Levi has noted, is, in the case of the *Muselmänner* (most

of whom, significantly, were Jews), no longer a death properly speaking, and, I add, no longer experiential in a succession of events—the inmates cannot even be said to have had a present.⁴⁰ For them the in-between in which life unfolds, constituted by a beginning and an end, no longer obtains. Furthermore, narrating one's story presupposes a sequential order, an interlocking sequencing of events; but if time has become stagnant, it is no longer possible to link occurrences into an unfolding course of events. Yet if already for temporal reasons alone the lives of the inmates of the death camps can no longer take on the form of a story, they also are no longer entangled. The existential category of entanglement no longer seems to make any sense in their case. Entanglement in stories is constitutive of the singularity of an individual, a singularity of which the inmates have been stripped at the very moment a number has been tattooed into their flesh. In distinction from the story that is one's own—mine—and that like a stigma says who I am, the number engraved in one's flesh deprives one immediately of a story of one's own. It makes one storyless. The number spells what I am for the oppressor, not for me, nor for others for whom my story is the only way to encounter me in a sensible and tactile fashion in all of my singularity. And since the story that the number in one's flesh tells is not my story, but who, or rather *what* I am for the oppressive other, the camp inmate has no story anymore and thus evidently has nothing to tell. His or her muteness is not deliberate; it results from the dispossession of a story of his or her own.

But could one not also hold that the survivor has only one single story, a *Sondergeschichte* as it were, one that allows for no other stories beside it—that is, a story that lifts the subject from its entanglement in multiple stories? Preventing the subject from having other stories, such a dominating story forced upon the victim is one that, in Schapp's understanding of being entangled, deprives the subject of all freedom and turns

entanglement into a nightmarish hell. The inability to tell one's story would thus imply that at the limit one has no story anymore because having only one story equals having none, and that, as a consequence, one thus lacks all possible singularity. Because they are untellable, the untold stories of the holocaust survivors do not let themselves become part of the region and regimen of stories—of what Schapp called the “ultimate commonality of human beings’ entanglement in stories.” If, furthermore, all stories somehow fit themselves, as Schapp asserts, “into the grand stories-reality [*Geschichten-Wirklichkeit*] (if we are allowed to speak of such a thing), and participate in it,” it also follows that the untold stories of the holocaust survivors and, by the same token, the individual's inability to forge a singularity, are excluded from that reality.⁴¹ In short, the muted victims fall entirely outside of “the grand-stories reality,” history tout court. Having no story, they also have no history that would embed them in a “grand stories-reality.”

From what we have seen so far, having no story to tell affects both the very identity of the self and its participation in the web created by the ultimate commonality of being human—that is, in this web in its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. A self dispossessed of the ability in question would be lacking a self and a world: in short, such a self would, according to Schapp, necessarily fall entirely outside the network of stories in which human beings are entangled and co-entangled. Such a self would be an abstraction impossible to comprehend except as an abstraction, with which one could not come into tangible contact. This raises an additional question. In a discussion of the issue of “mutual understanding [*Verständigung*],” and its presupposition of being entangled in a story common to all, Schapp points out that “what is important about mutual understanding is not that one understands the other, but that the miracle of [understanding] already presupposes the possibility of reception,

and the readiness of reception of the whole human being together with his whole story within humanity with its [whole] story.”⁴² In sum, the inability to tell stories does not only prevent inter-human understanding; on a deeper level it is a sign of the breakdown of the miracle of understanding—that is, of reception as the very condition of the possibility of mutual understanding, a breakdown of which no possible story could tell the story. However, such a breakdown is something that Schapp’s theory of storytelling can in no way envision—what he advances about the flight or escape from one’s story still takes place within a story—since it does not occur within a story to begin with. On the basis of the fundamental tenets of Schapp’s theory on stories, the breakdown referred to is a *skandalon*. As already suggested, the silent speech that accompanies all stories, and that predisposes them to be told, is the condition of possibility for assuming the form that makes stories communicable. But the muteness that one encounters with the survivors of the extermination camps, if it is not simply a silence about what they have endured, implies the silencing of the silent speech that imbues stories with an inclination toward being told, and that makes their telling into the constituting goal of what a story is. In short, if this silent speech has been silenced the victim cannot possibly have a story. Yet, within Schapp’s theory such a thing seems to be unthinkable. If the story of having no story is not an issue, it is because such a non-story cannot be told. To explicitly acknowledge such a possibility would require rethinking what a story is.

There is no place in Schapp’s theory for considering the possibility of a full destruction of what Benjamin called an “inalienable possession,” which in fact, had so far been considered the securest of all our possessions. If at all conceivable such a possibility can, for Schapp, at best be considered only in the abstract, as an inconsequential play on words, a non sequitur. But perhaps Schapp faces the possibility of the scandalous

nonetheless in the form of a more menacing form of abstraction. To substantiate this suggestion, I briefly turn to his *Philosophie der Geschichten*, where, interestingly enough, it is pointed out that “stories are ur-phenomena, ur-formations, much more originary [*urhafter*] than the formations of science.”⁴³ Stories, then, compete with the formations of the sciences. Given the ur-phenomenal nature of stories, the inability to tell stories reflecting the human being’s existential condition of being entangled in stories is a clear indication that the depletion of this ability would radically strip a human being of his or her humanity. Yet indeed, such a possibility materializes in Schapp’s reflections in the context of what the sciences do with their formations to the human being: they reduce the world and the human being to abstractions that have no existence, abstractions that deplete the human being of his or her constituting ability to form and live in stories. “Abstraction,” in Schapp’s work, I suggest, is the formation within which the problematic of the complete divestment of stories is indirectly envisaged, and at the same time completely covered over. Schapp’s entire theory of stories is geared as a response to this dehumanizing threat that, according to him, lurks in the formations of scientific (and philosophical) abstractions. Indeed, the frame within which Schapp takes up the issue of stories is motivated by the Husserlian device or motto: “To the things themselves,” which he, however, understands as those of the real and sensible world in which there are, in distinction from the philosophical or scientific world, no such abstractions. But by opposing the concreteness of stories to the so-called abstractions of sciences, does Schapp relieve himself of the means of thinking not only what threatens the story from within, but also what it is that makes them tellable to begin with?