CHAPTER I

Introduction

EXPERIENCE is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. Thus, the study of human behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience. This book is an inquiry into narrative, the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful. Narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organizes human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes. Because it is a cognitive process, a mental operation, narrative meaning is not an "object" available to direct observation. However, the individual stories and histories that emerge in the creation of human narratives are available for direct observation. Examples of narrative include personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels, and the everyday stories we use to explain our own and others' actions.

Before beginning the investigation of narrative proper with Chapter 2, I will use this preparatory chapter to describe the general characteristics of human existence. The first section examines human existence as a systemic synthesis of multiple kinds of reality, and identifies narrative meaning as an aspect of one of these realities, the realm of meaning. The second section then investigates the problems inherent in studying narrative meaning and suggests that, given its characteristics, hermeneutic methods provide the most adequate tools for understanding narrative.

The realms of human existence

Human existence consists of a stratified system of differently organized realms of reality—the material realm, the organic realm, and the mental realm. Narrative meaning is one of the processes of the mental realm, and functions to organize elements of awareness into meaningful episodes. The idea of different kinds of reality—in opposition to the popular notion that there is only one basic reality, the material—is explained by the concept of emergence developed in systems theory.[1] This section first describes the theory of the emergence of multiple realities, and then examines in detail the operations of the most evolved of these realities, the mental realm.

Emergence

In the course of human evolution entirely new levels of reality emerge. The regularities of these new levels are autonomous—that is, they are not susceptible to explanation on the basis of theories and laws that account for the phenomena of less complex realms.[2] An often-used example to illustrate this idea is that the theories and laws used to explain the action of hydrogen atoms and oxygen atoms in isolation do not predict or explain the characteristics of their combination—water. The integrated parts perform differently than they do when in isolation, and this difference is attributed to the special influence that comes from the characteristics of their specific organization, structure, and configuration. These establish the emerged properties of the complex.

When these levels of complexity occur with their new organizational patterns, novel and innovative capacities appear in the universe. The prediction of these new structures from the characteristics of previous levels appears to be uncertain. Emergent evolution holds that the development of new structures and properties is an ongoing process and that organizational structures of earlier levels are recombined into still more complex higher-order structures to produce additional novel characteristics. Each level which emerges contains within it earlier levels arranged as strata within the new system. The supervening of this new level on its component parts may engender in those parts, in turn, novel qualities that did not exist in them prior to participation in the new order. Thus, in the human realm the mental subsystem is both affected by and affects the organic subsystem.

Although the process of emergence is cumulative, it reaches certain threshold points of structural complexity where the properties produced by the new organization are dramatically different from earlier ones. The two most dramatic threshold points for the organization of human existence appear at the transition from matter to life and the transition from life to consciousness.[3] (James Miller has a fuller description of threshold points that includes, after the emergence of life, the appearance of the cell followed by the organ, the organism, the group, the organization, the society, and then the supranational system.)[4] The emergence of human beings from life in general to reflective consciousness and language is a threshold change that has brought about a unique level of reality that I will call "the order of meaning."

Because human existence is embedded to various degrees in the material, the organic, and the meaning realms, it includes within itself the three basic structures of reality—matter, life, and consciousness. Although each structure operates according to its own peculiar organizational patterns, the operations of the higher, more recently developed levels (for example, those involved with the deliberative and reflective use of language) is influenced by the peculiar organization of the lower levels. The emergence of the order of meaning, although it possesses unique characteristics, was dependent on the development of an organic complexity, the

conglomerate organization of a triune brain, and a highly differentiated neocortex. Jason Brown, writing about the emergence of reflective consciousness in conjunction with the development of three cerebral levels, states:

> These levels are in no sense "separate brains," but rather they are widely distributed systems that develop seriatim out of one another, serving to transform cognition to successively more differentiated states. Moreover, the levels are to some extent arbitrary; each probably comprises several—perhaps innumerable—subsystems. There are not clear transitions from one level to another, since it is not known whether the levels themselves develop as quantal achievements or on a continuum of evolutionary change.[5]

The material, organic, and meaning structures of reality are related to one another in human existence according to a patterned hierarchy.[6] It is the interaction of all these parts that produces the human realm, not merely consciousness and the other unique parts that are newly evolved in the human organism. The existence of the lower levels is the necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of higher levels: the relationship among the levels is not characterized by a simple pattern of the lower levels' subservience to the higher levels. A vertical binding exists among the strata, such that the higher levels must adjust to the lower, as the lower levels must adjust to the higher. Moreover, patterns developed at various levels can be passed along to both higher and lower levels. For example, thoughts and behaviors originally created by high-level reflective operations can be passed along as habits, sedimented at a lower stratum of the person; genetically given dispositions can be passed through to higher orders as structures of language understanding and meaningful interpretation.

This stratification is not limited to the internal organization of individual persons. It extends to the orders of cultural rules and language systems in which individuals are conjoined in social groups. The unique human capacities of consciousness and language have produced a special stratum of the environment—that is, culture and meaning—in which we exist. This stratum holds traditions and conventions to which individuals are connected in a dialectic manner; they provide individuals with a common symbolic environment that informs their categories of thought and social actions while facilitating human interaction and the accomplishment of group projects.

One of the projects of the mental realm is knowledge of the whole self. The mental realm turns its attention on itself, as well as on its organic and material aspects. The activity of self-study can be carried out in the ordinary and informal manner of self-reflection, or in an organized and formal way following scientific methods. The knowledge produced by the human disciplines, for example, is an organized articulation of one part of the human realm differentiating itself in order to comprehend its own characteristics. But because the various realms are characterized by a peculiar system of organization, no single knowledge system is capable of encompassing the full range of the strata of human existence. I will

return to the task of comprehending the various dimensions or structures of human existence in the next chapter.

The realm of meaning

Human beings have a synthetic kind of existence in which the realms of matter, life, and meaning are fused. Although these realms take on a special hue because of their union in human existence, they retain their own integral properties. The matter of human existence shares the properties of nonhuman matter. A person who plunges out of a window will accelerate at the same rate as any other material object. The organic operations within human existence function just as they do in other life forms. The realm of meaning, however, exists only within the particular synthesis that is human existence, although it is always conjoined in interaction with material and organic realms.

Because narrative is one of the operations of the realm of meaning, an explicit examination of this realm will aid in the understanding of narrative. First, the realm of meaning is not a thing or substance, but an activity. For example, the activity of building a house is different from the structure the activity produces, and the activity of the writing of a play is different from the manuscript that is produced. Building and writing are performances, not substances; it is the artifacts they produce that are substances. As an activity the realm of meaning is described by verb forms rather than nouns. The primary dimension of an activity is time, and the sequence in which the parts of an action happen can be decisive in defining what kind of activity it is. Much of the philosophical confusion about the realm of meaning has been related to the attempt to identify it as a substance.[7]

Second, the products of the activity of the realm of meaning are both names of elements and connections or relations among elements.[8] The elements on which the realm of meaning acts to establish or recognize relationships are the contents of awareness. The production of the contents of awareness is the work of the organic realm. Human existence includes the organic realm, and shares with other participants of this realm (for example, dogs and cats) a perceptual openness to the world. Our sensory apparatus and brain structures present a rudimentary experience of objects and activities. The actions of the realm of meaning add to this awareness an additional presence of relationships and connections among these rudimentary perceptions, including: (a) one perception is the *same as* or *not the same* as another, (b) one is *similar* or *dissimilar* to another, (c) one is an *instance* of another, (d) one *stands for* the other, (e) one is a *part* of the other, and (f) one is the *cause* of the other.[9] In the ongoing production of meaning, these various kinds of relationships are combined to construct connections among things.

Examples of these operations include: (a) The perception of a key seen in the lost-and-found box is related to the image of the key that is retrieved from mem-

ory through the quality of *sameness*—that is, it is the same key that was lost. The capacity to identify elements as the same is basic for mathematical and formal logic operations.

(b) The way an acquaintance eats reminds one of the way a hog eats, based on the *similarity* of the actions. The ordinary recognition that a perception is linked to a category comes about through assessing the degree of similarity that a specific perception has to a prototype image. A blue jay is recognized as a bird because of its high degree of similarity to one's personal prototype of a bird, perhaps a wren. The notion of similarity is expressed linguistically as a trope or metaphor. This capacity to note and express to another person that one thing is like another thing is basic to human communication and the growth of language systems.[10]

(c) An example of the activity of noting that a rudimentary perception is an *instance* of something has been given by Edmund Husserl.[11] Any one perception presents only a profile of an object; people see only that portion of the object directly facing them. The total object is never directly perceived. It is the work of the realm of meaning to recognize that these various profiles are instances of the same object. Out of the collection of identified instances or partial appearances the realm of meaning constructs a nonperceptual awareness of the object as a whole.

(d) The mental operation of establishing a connection between two things by having one *stand for* the other, or be a sign of something else, underlies the capacity to use symbols and language. In ordinary usage the term "meaning" refers to this particular type of connection. Charles S. Peirce, the American founder of semiotics (the study of signs), distinguished three types of "standing for" based on the degree of similarity between the sign and its referent.[12] The *icon* is a relationship in which the thing stands for the other by resembling it. For example, a diagram or a painting has an iconic relationship to its subject insofar as it resembles it. In the *index,* the relationship is concrete, actual, and usually of a sequential, causal kind. For example, a knock on the door is an index of someone's presence, smoke is an index of fire, and the position of a weathervane is an index of the direction of the wind. In the *symbol,* the relationship is arbitrary. If one person is to signify something to another through an arbitrary symbol, they both have to understand what the signifier stands for. The major manifestation of something standing for another in an arbitrary way is language. There is no similarity between the sound "dog," or the markings (letters of the alphabet) that stand for that sound, and the perceptual image to which it is linked (that is, the actual dog); it is an arbitrary but culturally agreed upon symbol.

The same object can have a number of different other objects stand for it in each of the three types of "standing for." For example, a tree in my back yard can be represented by a painting or photograph (icons), by pointing my finger at it or by observing a leaf from it (indexes), or by uttering or writing the words "the tree (*arbre, Baum, árbol*) in my back yard" (symbols).

(e) and (f) Narrative meaning is created by noting that something is a *part* of some whole and that something is the *cause* of something else. Narrative meaning is focused on those rudimentary aspects of experience that concern human actions or events that affect human beings. For example, the experiences of "feeling an ache in my muscles," "playing three sets of tennis," and "not stretching before playing" can be connected as parts of a whole episode: "I got aching muscles because I didn't stretch before playing tennis." The meaning of each event is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode. The episode needs to include both some end point as well as the contributions that the events and actions made in bringing about or delaying the achievement of that end point.

The question, "What does that mean?", asks how something is related or connected to something else. To ask what a word means is to ask what it stands for. To ask about the meaning or significance of an event is to ask how it contributed to the conclusion of the episode. It is the connections or relationships among events that is their meaning. Meanings are not produced only by individuals who register certain experiences as connected to others. Cultures maintain a system of language and pass on to succeeding generations knowledge of the connections between signifying sounds and the things and notions they signify. Cultures also maintain collections of typical narrative meanings in their myths, fairy tales, histories, and stories. To participate as a member of a culture requires a general knowledge of its full range of accumulated meanings. Cultural stocks of meaning are not static but are added to by new contributions from members, and deleted by lack of use.[13]

In summary, narrative meaning is one type of meaning produced by the mental realm. It principally works to draw together human actions and the events that affect human beings, and not relationships among inanimate objects. Narrative creates its meaning by noting the contributions that actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configures these parts into a whole episode.

The study of narrative meaning

The aim of the study of narrative meaning is to make explicit the operations that produce its particular kind of meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence.

Inherent problems in the study of meaning

Researchers are typically confronted with five problem areas in investigations of aspects of human consciousness.

(1) As mentioned above, the realm of meaning exists in a different form than natural objects do. It is an activity, not a thing. It cannot be picked up and held, nor measured by an impersonal instrument. Robert Romanyshyn suggests that the kind of reality it has is like that of a reflection in a mirror—it presents itself in our consciousness as a fleeting trace or indication; it appears as a wisp. The meanings are continuously being reconstituted as the rudimentary perceptions of consciousness change. The activity of making meaning is not static, and thus it is not easily grasped.

(2) Each of us has direct access to only one realm of meaning: our own. Because it is not available to direct public observation, the region of meaning must be approached through self-reflective recall or introspection in our mental realm. However, the activity of producing and recollecting meaning normally operates outside of awareness, and what is available through self-reflection is only the outcomes of the meaning-making processes, not the processes themselves. A further problem is that in everyday living we are normally busy attending to the world, and meanings express themselves merely in our actions and speech; recognition of their presence requires that we consciously change the focus of awareness to the realm of meaning itself. Yet when we focus on the realm of meaning in self-reflection, the meanings that are available to us can be limited by other mental operations, such as repression.

(3) Study of the realm of meaning requires the use of linguistic data. The problems of direct access to the realm of meaning can be partially overcome by the study of its linguistic expressions. Language is commensurate with meaning. Because in its ordinary use language is able to carry meanings among people, information about other people's realms of meaning can be gathered through the messages they give about their experiences. The structure of language, too, can be studied as an indication of the structure of the realm of meaning.[15] For example, both language and the realm of meaning have hierarchical and layered structures, and both make use of their own creations, such as words or concepts, in the production of more complex meanings. The need to work primarily with linguistic, rather than quantified, data in the study of consciousness does, however, present problems of analysis to the researcher, since linguistic statements are context-sensitive and lose much of their information content when treated in isolation.

(4) The analysis of linguistic data makes use of hermeneutic reasoning. Hermeneutic understanding uses processes such as analogy and pattern recognition to draw conclusions about the meaning content of linguistic messages. Hermeneutic reasoning is used in ordinary experience to interpret what the sound waves of speech or the marks on paper stand for. Hermeneutic reasoning does not produce certain and necessary conclusions, and the sophisticated statistical tools available in the behavioral and social sciences for the treatment of quantified data are of only secondary use in dealing with linguistic data. Because the contours of consciousness correspond more closely with linguistic, instead of mathematical,

structures, the methods for its study are not as precise. Nor do they stand within the tradition of the usual forms of research used by the human disciplines.

(5) The realm of meaning is an integrated ensemble of connections among images and ideas that appear in various modes of presentation, such as perception, remembrance, and imagination. It operates in a complex of interacting strata consisting of various levels of abstraction, awareness, and control. The complex organizational patterns that fold back on one another and link elements through condensation and displacement make the realm of meaning difficult to investigate.

These problem areas confront any attempt to comprehend the operations of the realm of meaning. For this reason, even though meaning is the primary characteristic of humans, it has not been extensively studied by the human disciplines.

History of the study of meaning

In the human disciplines, the study of consciousness has been the project primarily of psychology. Since its origin as a science in the 1870s, psychological research has been based on the ideal that a single scientific method could be used by all disciplines—that is, all reliable knowledge is generated by exactly the same epistemological principles. These principles require that: (a) conclusions must be based on directly available public perceptions; (b) data must be generated by experimentation—that is, an intervention in nature designed to produce changes that can be observed; and (c) general laws, which provide the explanation for why things change as they do, must be the object of science.

The first psychological research is attributed to Wilhelm Wundt's attempt to understand the elements of consciousness. His work took place within the context of the excitement over Mendeleev's publication of the periodic table. Wundt thought that consciousness, like chemical compounds, was composed of elements that combined to produce complex experiences. His research used the design principles consistent with unified science. He developed experiments in which stimuli were presented to the senses (sight, hearing, and touch) of his trained subjects, who were then asked to give detailed descriptions of the ensuing mental elements and operations. Wundt hoped to do for psychology what Medeleev had done for chemistry by developing a periodic table of the mental elements, including the principles of mental synthesis and combination. Wundt's research program was undercut by the notion of imageless thought, that is, that not all mental operations were directly available to self-observation.

During the era of behaviorism, from the 1920s to the 1960s, mainstream psychology abandoned the attempt to study consciousness and limited its data to those available to direct public perception. In the last three decades, however, there has been a "revolutionary" turn in the human disciplines,[16] a change of

focus from the study of human beings as objects in the world to the study of the mind or consciousness. This change has centered on the human mental abilities—perceiving, remembering, reasoning, and many others—which are organized into a complex system called cognition. The best-studied topics in cognitive science have been the role of cognitive activity in perception and recognition, in recall and memory, and in language production and reception. Yet despite its centrality for human affairs and cognition, the role of the narrative scheme has only recently come under study in cognitive science.

In the main, cognitive science has approached the study of the actions of consciousness with the same tools of inquiry that were developed to study the objects of the world. Computers have replaced Wundt's use of chemistry as the model for mental processes, based on the suggestion that since computers can be programmed to simulate human responses, the human mind must function like a computer program.[17] Although the first studies using computer analogies of consciousness were heralded as holding great promise, the limits of this approach are now becoming apparent.[18]

Characteristics of the study of meaning

The difficulties inherent in the study of meaning and the use of methods of limited applicability have restricted the success of the human sciences in exploring this region of human existence. However, research into meaning is the most basic of all inquiry. Husserl[19] has pointed out that the whole scientific enterprise is grounded ultimately in the perceptual and meaning-making operations of human consciousness. The understanding of our existence and action requires a knowledge of the structures that produce the experienced or lived realm from which we direct our actions and expressions. The study of the realm of meaning precedes an understanding of the manner in which human beings create knowledge, and thus informs the operations of science itself. The study of the making of meaning is particularly central to the disciplines concerned with explaining human experience.

Because the characteristics of the realm of meaning are different from those of the material realm, its study requires an alteration in the research methods the human disciplines have traditionally used to study consciousness. Although these advanced research procedures have proven very effective in many contexts, they have been of limited usefulness when applied to the study of consciousness. The human disciplines have shared the ideal that all scientific knowledge could be developed through a single and unified approach, an ideal based, however, on the proposition that all reality was of the same type. Instead, approaches must be designed specifically to study all the kinds of reality, since the use of a single approach to knowledge requires a translation of the aspects of one reality into

incommensurate categories drawn from another realm. For example, when narrative meaning is translated into categories derived from a description of objects in the material realm, crucial dimensions of the narrative experience are lost, including the experience of temporality that it contains. In addition, translation across realms of existence requires reduction of complexity and loss of information, as, for example, when narrative's intricacy is reduced to only those structures or operations that are recognized in the organic or the material realms.

Although the material realm might best be studied by the use of quantifying procedures and statistical estimates, the realm of meaning is best captured through the qualitative nuances of its expression in ordinary language. The disciplines of history and literary criticism have developed procedures and methods for studying the realm of meaning through its expressions in language. The human disciplines will need to look to those disciplines, rather than to the physical sciences, for a scientific model for inquiry of the region of consciousness.

The goal of research into the production of meaning is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of the structures and forms of the various meaning systems. This type of outcome does not provide information for the prediction and control of behavior; instead, it provides a kind of knowledge that individuals and groups can use to increase the power and control they have over their own actions.[20] This is accomplished by gathering examples of these systems' expressions through self-reflection, interviews, and collections of artifacts; and by drawing conclusions from these data by using the systematic principles of linguistic analysis and hermeneutic techniques.[22]

In order to distinguish this kind of approach from research based on quantified data, some have suggested that we call research using linguistic data "inquiries," "studies," or "investigations," rather than "research." I disagree with this suggestion. "Re-search" implies a systematic attempt to go beyond the cursory view of something in order to generate a greater depth of understanding, and the model of inquiry I have been describing meets this criterion.

In a recent review of the philosophy of psychology, Joseph Margolis reached a similar conclusion. According to Margolis:

> [They] have driven us to concede that the human sciences . . . may well be significantly different from the physical sciences, both methodologically and ontologically. Language appears to be *sui generis:* essential to the actual aptitudes of human beings; irreducible to physical processes; inexplicable solely infrapsychologically; real only as embedded in the practices of a historical society; identifiable consensually or only in terms that presuppose consensual practices linking observer and observed; inseparable as far as meaning is concerned from the changing, novel, nonlinguistic experience of a people; incapable of being formulated as a closed system of rules; subject always to the need for improvisational interpretation and, therefore, subject also to ineliminable psychological indeterminacies regarding intention and action.[22]

The plan of the book

The core of the argument I make in this book is that narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful. Thus, the study of human beings by the human sciences needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular.

Chapter 2 provides a preliminary description of the characteristics of narrative meaning through an examination of the forms in which narrative is expressed linguistically. Because narrative meaning only makes its appearance in the linguistic operations of discourse, considerable attention will be given to the unique strata of meaning communicated through discourse.

Chapters 3 through 5 give accounts of the investigation of narrative by the three disciplines most involved in its study. In recent years narrative has become a central research interest for history and literary criticism, disciplines normally located on the periphery of the core of human disciplines. Research programs aimed at investigation of narrative have also been started in psychology.[23]

Chapter 3 is an investigation of the active debate about the role of narrative in the discipline of history. In discussing the insights and outcomes of this debate, particular attention is given to the special meaning the notions of cause and explanation have as they are used in narrative history and to the recent attempts to clarify the distinction between fictional narrative and "true" or historical narrative.

Chapter 4 examines the approaches to fictive narrative texts, such as fairy tales and novels, of literary critics. These critics have attempted to develop a narrative grammar that would account for the generation of the multitude of surface stories, in a manner analogous to the account of the generation of sentences by deep grammatical structures. The recent work on narrative undertaken by literary critics has emphasized communication theory and the role of the reader.

Chapter 5 describes the early interest of psychology and other human sciences in self-theory and life stories, follows the decline of this interest, and then focuses on the recent renewal of interest in research on narrative as the basis for an understanding of life development and personal identity. Freud developed his theoretical position from patients' case histories and constructed interpretive guidelines for understanding the personal narratives related by his psychoanalytic sessions. Roy Schafer's current reinterpretation of psychoanalysis as a narrative enterprise is examined, along with the implications of narrative for the general field of human science practice.

Chapter 6 draws together the implications the study of narrative meaning has for understanding human existence. The chapter examines the areas of human action, the experience of time, and personal identity from the perspective of narrative meaning.

Finally, chapter 7 examines the role narrative meaning can perform in the work of practitioners and researchers in the human disciplines. The understanding of narrative is especially important for the work of anthropologists, psychotherapists, counselors, and a growing group of people working with meaning systems within organizations.