

10.1 Meta-Narratives

Here's a story about a student named Asli. Asli works her way through a critical thinking text and improves her ways of thinking, talking, writing, and living in general. She starts off lonely, rather poor, and not terribly critical in the way she goes about things. But by the time she's finished the book, she's acquired an exciting new set of concepts and skills that lead her to engage in a critical way with everything from the news to Hollywood films to her university assignments. She flourishes, becomes wealthy, respected, admired, popular, powerful, and immortal, capable of traversing and even manipulating space and time by mere act of will.

Despite its rather implausible ending, one might say that the story here is of the sort that has guided the writing and publication of this book. The story, as Aristotle says of all good stories, has a sequential beginning, middle, and end, ordering particular events and investing them with meaning. But stories aren't just about particular people or events (this isn't just the story of Asli the critical thinker). They also possess general forms and features that resonate through our cultures. Philosopher and critic Jean- François Lyotard (1924–1998) articulated important ways to think about the stories that order and invest meaning in our culture. In his explosive 1979 book, *The Post-Modern Condition*, he called these “meta-narratives” or “grand narratives.”

Stories that govern stories plus a whole lot more

“Meta-” is a prefix deriving from ancient Greek, and it means “beyond,” “across,” “throughout,” or “of a higher order.” The term “metaphysics,” as it's typically used in philosophy, is concerned with the concepts that underwrite all of physics: all that physics assumes about the nature of reality and all that composes the most general, basic, and pervasive dimensions of physics. So, while physicists might be concerned with the particular laws governing the causal interactions of specific beings, metaphysicians are concerned with being, time, causation, and lawfulness themselves.

According to Lyotard, the modern world has been ordered by one very general meta-narrative – the story of reason progressively overcoming myth. As a metanarrative or grand narrative, this story informs and structures many of the stories we use to make sense of our lives. Our lives as knowers are ordered by the story of science progressively overcoming ignorance and superstition by disclosing the true features of reality. As a result, our political lives gain meaning as part of the story of our progressively and rationally overcoming oppressive customs and traditions through various kinds of liberation – e.g., ending slavery, extending the franchise to women, legitimizing unions, learning to tolerate different religions, expanding the institutions of marriage, and so on. You know the story.

Governing, varying, and disintegrating narratives

How is all this related to critical thinking? Well, for one thing, meta-narratives not only give us templates to structure and lend meaning to our lives; they also govern us in practice by ordering people's values, conduct, and judgments. For this reason, some refer to meta-narratives as “master-narratives,” and as critical thinkers we ought to assess whether or not the “masters” that govern us do so well: whether they ought to be sustained, or whether we ought to dismantle or

deconstruct them and replace them with something else (or nothing at all). Thinkers belonging to what's called the Frankfurt School (see 10.8) along with various postmodern and post-structuralist critics have argued, in fact, that modern conceptions of reason have led to all kinds of undesirable practices and events – from the rise of the National Socialism to racism and cultural imperialism. Lyotard himself argued that the attempt to impose a way of thinking and acting upon others who don't order their lives through it lies at the heart of injustice. Partly as a result, post-modernity is characterized by the disintegration of not only the modern meta-narrative but of all of them.

Thinking critically, then, can involve scrutinizing meta-narratives. First, figure out just what meta-narratives are in play, and then assess what sort of posture to take toward them – subversive, sustaining, or otherwise. Lyotard identified the modern meta-narrative of *progressive rationality*, but we'd like to suggest you consider a few others [see exercises below]...

Meta-narratives sometimes overlap and reinforce one another. Sometimes they clash and conflict, perhaps more so as time goes on. It's going to take capable critical thinkers not only to identify and untangle the meta-narratives governing our world but also to plumb their effects and their value. Is it possible for the world to be meaningful without meta-narratives? What meta-narrative governs the story of meta-narratives itself? If everything is governed by a meta-narrative, is there any place left for justified belief or knowledge? If meta-narratives leave no room for justification or knowledge, is this a reason to be suspicious of justification and knowledge, or is it a reason to be suspicious of the idea that meta-narratives govern our language? If they do leave room for justification and knowledge, how might we know?

Exercises and study questions

1. What is the meta-narrative of post-War Europe in the discourse of contemporary popular culture?
2. What is the meta-narrative of Africa in Europe and North America? Can you find any indication that Africans have a different meta-narrative of Africa?
3. Compare the meta-narratives governing ecological and economic discourses.

[*Ted says:* Some people use the term 'meta-narrative' to denote the type of plot that a story has. (Some stories are stories of love and loss, of innocence to experience, of the individual vs. society, etc.) Talking about different kinds of plot is fine, but the notion of a *master narrative*, per above, is especially good for thinking critically about society and culture.]