Defending the Middle Ground in Narrative Theory and the Self

David Lumsden

Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology, Volume 20, Number 1, March 2013, pp. 29-31 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/511259
Defending the Middle Ground in Narrative Theory and the Self

David Lumsden

Keywords: adjudication of narratives, whole life narrative, subject of experience.

I am grateful for the responses from Serife Tekin and James Phillips to my paper (Lumsden 2013), for they allow me to clarify my position. Tekin (2013) accurately characterizes me as attempting to salvage the value of narrative theory without accepting the more stringent demands that have been required or implied, notably the necessity for personhood of a whole life narrative. She notes that I attempt to provide an alternative view of the unity of a person, to the degree that there is that unity, by seeing a self as a bundle of narrative threads. She acknowledges my suggestion that the bundling involves connections at both conscious and unconscious levels. She says we are left with a problem, the ‘adjudication-of-narratives problem’ (AP): if different narrative threads offer different and conflicting narrations of the same episode, how does the person choose, or adjudicate, between them? This process could be a significant one for a psychiatric patient.

I consider the AP to be a very real problem to which I can only offer a few modest thoughts in response. One response is that the position I describe at least has the advantage of avoiding the potential damage to psychiatric patients of presenting them with the unachievable ideal of a whole life narrative, comparable with some physical ideal represented by a model’s Photoshopped photograph in a magazine. That advantage may seem modest, if narrative theory as such is unable to solve the AP. Even so, Tekin does supply the beginning of an answer to the problem. We need to acknowledge the subject’s audience as contributing to the creation of an appropriate narrative, and the adjudication between rival narratives.

One comment of Tekin’s prompts me to introduce a clarification of my position. She says that feature (iii) of narratives, that narratives are incomplete, supports my claim that whole life narratives are not required. That is not an argument I want to rely on, for I consider there could be a narrative that reasonably counts as a whole life narrative despite its being incomplete. That is, it covers the full temporal stretch of a life, and moreover covers all the major activities of that life. Such a broad sweep narrative deserves to be called a ‘whole life narrative,’ even though it is inevitably incomplete, lacking as it does all the details of a life. My position is that even such a broad sweep narrative is not required for personhood. That is in addition to the general point that narratives are inevitably incomplete.
Another clarificatory remark I should make concerns the tightness of connection between subject and experience. Tekin correctly notes that degrees of tightness of connection do not provide the solution to the AP and indeed my talk of tightness of connection is not intended to play such a role. It merely relates to the impossibility of separating the subject from the experience. In my view, a narrative thread could play the role of the subject.

Phillips (2013) occupies a significantly different position from me on narratives and the self. I distinguish between those who think that narratives are continuous with life from those who think they are discontinuous. I belong to the latter group, shown clearly by my allegiance to Feature 3 of narratives. Phillips is in the other camp, along with MacIntyre (1981). They think that life in itself has a narrative structure. The role I see for a narrative is as something internal, which certainly provides shape to a life as lived, but could never characterize the entirety of the life. Phillips’ position comes to the fore when he says:

The notion that a life is complete while a narrative is incomplete is true only if a life is defined as a series of events, or, say, like a glass of water—complete if filled to the top but incomplete if only half full. In contrast, a human life, described as a meaningful narrative unity, could be said to be complete even with millions of irrelevant details left out of the narrative account. (Phillips 2013, 13)

There is something I can agree with in this, for it can be interpreted as an endorsement of the idea, as described, that a broad sweep narrative can be a whole life narrative. My claim is that a fully functioning person need not contain such a narrative, even though there do need to be narrative threads that are linked in ways I have described. But this is a position that Phillips finds extremely puzzling. He says:

What remains puzzling about Lumsden’s account is that he understands narrative connectiveness so well, but then, rather arbitrarily and—in my opinion incoherently, limits it to “narrative threads.” (Phillips 2013, 21)

Phillips is working with an opposition between life as a series of events, which he associates with analytic philosophy, and life as ‘a web of meaning-related activities,’ which he links with the continental tradition. I embraced a contrast like that and was prepared to abandon the former view, which can be traced to Locke, in favor of the latter view. But my central thesis is that it is possible to do that and accept that actions and experience are holistically linked in a way that ties action and experience in a narrative way to a subject, but still insist that the holism need only apply to narrative threads. It could turn out that such a position is incoherent, and after all some fences do not contain enough depth to provide a seat, but I do not believe that Phillips has demonstrated the incoherence.

I should now turn to Phillips’ main theme, that philosophy should learn from psychiatry and psychopathology. I strongly support this in principle; the trick is to carry it out effectively. Phillips provides us with some rich case studies, which can only be discussed briefly. In summary, although those cases no doubt support the view that psychotherapy cannot avoid consideration of a patient’s narrative, I do not think that they provide clear-cut support for the importance of whole life narratives. Mr. Smith’s narrative is suffused with depression. Is Phillips saying that he has a whole life narrative already, but an unhelpful one? Possibly. Or, is he saying that his narrative is selective, and achieves that consistent depressed tone by leaving out successful aspects of his life? In that case, it might be possible to argue that he should move in the direction of a whole life narrative. But that is not the obvious line of treatment. The depressed tone may in part involve excessive emphasis of insignificant failures, as well as neglect of areas of success. Narrative change may well be the recipe, but a whole life narrative may not be required.

In Tom’s case, it could be argued that it is excessive reverence for whole life narratives that is part of the problem. Tom needs to understand that life does not always progress smoothly towards long established goals that provide structure for a whole life. He needs to be told that he can try something else, even if it turns out to be temporary. It is unwise to take his word for it about whether you can live a narrative. That misapprehension may be at the core of his problem. Ms. Harris
has a fragmented life, and one that needed greater consistency. But it is a huge leap of faith to assume that what she needed was help in constructing a whole life narrative that made sense of all she did and experienced. No doubt she did recount her experiences as they occurred, so far as she could. It is not my position that narratives can only be constructed after the fact. For narrative threads to compose a self they must be available to guide action and interpret experience as it happens. Similarly, with regard to Phillips’ comments about Patricia Deegan, there is no need to deny that she provides an authentic account of her experiences of psychotic episodes. Moreover, there can be value in attempting to fit them into an account that relates them to more successful parts of her life. But that does not necessarily require a whole life narrative. Linda Bishop does need greater narrative unity than she has, but again it is not clear that a whole life narrative is what is required.

References