

Café Philosophy

THE NARRATIVE SELF

*Story as
the
basis
of the Self*



LIFE IS AN ACTIVITY AND PASSION IN
SEARCH OF A NARRATIVE

What's Your Story?

By Tom McGuire



**"All the world's a stage
and all the men and
women merely players."**

-Shakespeare

I wonder if anyone else is haunted by the thought that if their life was made into a movie, it would get bad reviews. People often complain that their lives are dull, boring or just plain ordinary. Some decide to fight against this fate by making every moment count, embarking on adventures like base jumping, big wave surfing, risky entrepreneurship or war.

But perhaps movies and books are just an escape, and they must by necessity be larger than life. It's one thing to make believe from the comfort of your living room sofa, but how many of us would really want to be Jason Bourne? I wonder if most people would prefer to have interesting tales to tell or just eke out a comfortable, quiet, non-eventful existence. Nietzsche's famous dilemma confronts us with the terror of having regrets: Could you handle living your life over and over again the same way? Every second? We've probably all come across the wizened old man who says 'I wouldn't change a thing'. Life, despite being full of heartbreak and hangovers, taught them valuable lessons which 'made me the person I am'.

The great mythologist Joseph Campbell, whose works influenced George Lucas,

thought that myths and stories run through every part of our lives. The modern world has not abolished myths, but merely tells the same old stories in different ways. These stories, says Campbell, are so embedded in human consciousness that they can give us fascinating insights into our own life journey. A culture without myth or story is no culture at all.

This issue focuses on the idea that stories form the basis of the self, an idea often connected with 'postmodernism'. Postmodernism is often said to be an attitude in which any overarching theory of life is just another big story or 'grand narrative' which grows bigger and seemingly more real as it is perpetually told and re-told. This may at first seem to be empowering to the individual, for we can all tell our own story. But it could also undercut the very basis for genuine individuality, if the conception of 'self' is just another weaving together of narrative.

An awful lot hangs on this notion of a self. For if there is no "I", then who is to blame for any of "my" actions? Who can be applauded? Few would go to the extreme of saying that no selves exist, but there is a tendency in postmodern circles to look at the self as something constructed, imagined, conveniently assembled from mental processes. This runs against the grain of normal, everyday thinking. If there is anything that "I" know, thunders conventional wisdom, it is that "I" exist. But what is this "I" and where is it located?

Many people are uncomfortable with delving too deep in to the nature of the self. Too many comfortable assumptions

may be dangerously overturned in the process. Perhaps the real self lies buried deep under numerous layers of pseudo-self: labels, ideas and memories which conceal and confine who we truly are. Or maybe once these layers are peeled away we'd find nothing at all, that the self is only a bundle of ever-changing thoughts, feelings, perceptions and so on.

The idea of the narrative self is not without its own strange dilemmas. Is a life without an independent, detached self like a story without a narrator? And if there is no narrator, then who is telling the story? And for whom is the story being told? Without an audience to monitor our life around the clock, the answer seems to be 'me'. But this puts the self in a peculiar position, because it seems to be both the watcher of the play and its main participant. Such considerations are puzzling to say the least.

Putting these paradoxes aside, the idea of 'life as narrative' should perhaps make us look at our own experience with a lighter touch. I don't think it means turning everything into a Hollywood drama, but bringing a sense of the transcendent into our everyday existence. A common theme in stories is to find wonder in 'ordinary' things. Stories may also give us an appreciation for how unfortunate events can turn out to be for the best. No matter how fictitiously absurd our circumstances, as a character in an epic and mysterious drama we can make life playful, humorous and perhaps even meaningful.

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‘To Thine Own Self be True’

William Shakespeare



Philosophy in a Cafe

But what did Shakespeare mean he wrote these words? He seems to imply that we have a permanent self, something to which we should always be faithful. In a recent article in the *Economist*, Will Wilkinson commented that he believed that “the sense of the self is an evolutionary construction with a certain social function.” he enlarged upon this by then saying, “so we build a sense of self upon the shared moral ideology of our local culture.” Is this a true interpretation of Shakespeare’s words. We decided to ask some philosophically minded Auckland café patrons and find out what they thought about it.

First we went to the ‘Shaky Isles Café’ in Quay Street and met Victoria and Clare. Victoria (left) said she believed she was not only a physical body but also a self. She mentioned personal values as a justification for believing in a self and said she always acted in accordance with those values, adding that they made her feel more of an individual. Clare (right) was also sure she had a self and mentioned that people are all different, not the same, and considered this as proof that individual selves existed. In summary they both believed that being different from others was attributable to one’s own individual self.

Don Quixote and The Narrative Self

Stefán Snaevarr, an Icelandic philosopher asks, are our identities created by narratives?



Once upon a time a philosopher wrote an article called 'Don Quixote and The Narrative Self'. He commenced by saying: In this essay, I will discuss the question of whether our selves are constituted by narratives, ie stories.

Are we like Don Quixote, whose self was created by his reading of medieval romances: are we Homo quixotienses, the narrative self?

Or are we rather like the protagonist of Sartre's novel *Nausea*, Antonin Roquentin, whose life did not form any narrative unity? Are we in other words rather Homo roquentinenses?

The idea that our life is a story is by no means new. Thus the great bard Shakespeare said that life "...is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (*Macbeth*) However, it took philosophers some time to discover the philosophical import of this view of life. It was actually a German philosopher; Wilhelm Schapp (1884-1965) who first gave this age-old idea a philosophical twist. He maintained that we live our lives in a host of stories, which have connection with the stories of other people in various ways; so actually, our selves are nothing but cross-sections of stories. Our identities are created by a vast web of stories, as is our relationship with reality. We understand and identify things by placing them in the stories we tell about them: just like selves, things do not really exist outside of stories. We are

caught in this narrative web because we cannot exist outside of it. There is a world-wide web of stories: the world is that web.

Schapp's main book was published fifty years ago, and was ignored by the philosophical community of the day. But in recent years, ideas resembling those of Schapp's have become increasingly influential. What I call narrativism, the view that we are Homo quixotienses, is becoming quite popular.

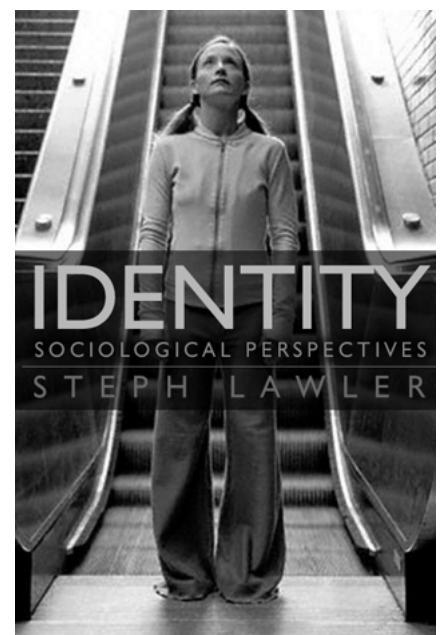
What could explain this change in the intellectual climate? I think that one of the things which brought about this pro-narrativist change is the downfall of modernism in literature.

Modernists such as French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet wanted to do away with ordinary storytelling. Ordinary stories were regarded as superficial and without any power to show the real nature of human life. Human life is simply not like a narrative, the modernists thought. This anti-narrativism had its heyday when Schapp was writing his books, so no wonder he was ignored. Then in the Sixties post-modernism arrived on the scene and telling stories in novels became all the rage again. Great storytellers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez were the darling of the literati. Believing in the redeeming quality of stories is now in vogue. Every day someone publishes a book telling you how you can become rich/famous/happy/popular by telling

stories.

My aim in the remains of this article is more modest. I want to introduce to you the thought of two celebrated narrativists. Both have developed influential conceptions of our identities as being structured by stories. The first one is Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre; the second is the French thinker Paul Ricoeur.

Like so many modern philosophers, MacIntyre's starting point is the analysis of language. He says that our utterances are not really understandable unless we can place them in narrative contexts. Imagine that we are waiting for a bus for instance, and a woman next to us all of a sudden says, "The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus, histrionicus histrionicus.*" To be certain, we understand the meaning of the sentence uttered: the problem is to understand the



point of her uttering it. Suppose that the woman utters sentences like this at random intervals, in which case this would probably be a form of madness. But her uttering of the above sentence would be rendered intelligible if for instance we found out that she has mistaken me for a person who approached her in the library some days ago and asked her for the Latin name of the wild duck. We would also understand her action if we discovered she mistakenly thought I was her co-spy and she was uttering a code sentence to be decoded by me. In each case her act of uttering only becomes understandable by being put in a narrative context. The same holds for utterances in general.

Similarly, MacIntyre maintains that personal identities must have a narrative structure. Our actions are episodes in stories, not least in our own personal stories. As the above example illustrates, any action cannot be given an identity unless it is placed within an agent's biography. Further, MacIntyre says that even if we can theoretically doubt the unity of our personality – doubt that we are the same persons today as we were ten years (or ten seconds!) ago – other people do not doubt this unity. We can for instance be held responsible for actions we did a decade ago. This can only happen because others regard us as having a narrative totality. MacIntyre uses an example inspired by Alexandre Dumas' famous novel *The Count of Monte Christo*. Its protagonist is in a certain context described as "the prisoner of Chateau d'If" and in another context "the Count of Monte Christo." To understand that we are talking about the same person only means that we can recount a story about how this person can under different circumstances be characterised in two completely different ways. In this fashion, a person's identity is precisely the same type of identity presupposed of a character in a novel or a play. This unity is in turn a function of the unity of the narrative. Thus persons are abstractions from narratives. At the same time, MacIntyre emphasises that

the concept of personal identity is not only logically dependent upon the concept of a narrative, but it's also the other way round. In other words it is meaningless to talk about a character biography unless one presupposes that its subject has a personal identity. The biography must be about a continually-existing thing. Conversely, it is pointless, meaningless, to state that some being has a personal identity through time, and at the same time deny that this being has a possible biography.

To my mind, MacIntyre's analysis suffers from some significant unclarities. He ought to clarify whether or not he thinks our actions as such are in some way narratives themselves. If not, can they only be identified by means of narratives, even they are not stories themselves? It seems to me that he opts for this option, but I cannot be sure unless he clarifies the issue.

Secondly, our Scottish thinker relies too heavily on ordinary, common-sense conceptions of action and identity, and on the particular examples he gives. I feel there is a lack of systematicness in his theories about actions and identities; his approach is too intuitive. This same holds for his idea of our lives being stories. But I do agree with his contention that actions are basically narratively structured and described.

Paul Ricoeur

Like MacIntyre, Ricoeur thinks that our actions have a narrative dimension. We fuse the temporal units of our actions together in the same way as in a story. But in contrast to the Scottish philosopher, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur emphasises the



difference between life and stories. Our lives are not narratives, strictly speaking. Stories are told, lives are lived. But narratives still play a decisive part in our lives.

In the first place, an examined life is a life that must be examined through stories. We relate to ourselves by relating stories! Secondly, narratives play an important role in the creation and sustaining of our identities. Narratives do that by mediating between two basic aspects of our identities. On the one hand, we can talk about our identity as *idem*, or sameness, or on the other hand as *ipse*, or selfhood. *Idem* is the simple identity of a person as a thing in time and space. *Ipse* is the being of self, ie the being of someone who can relate to himself and has a history which he or she can consciously reflect upon. *Idem* provides us with answer to the question 'What am I?' *ipse* the answer to the question 'Who am I?'

Idem can be divided in two sub-types of identities. One is numerical identity: my body is exactly what it is and not another body. The other type is a qualitative identity of the kind we refer to when we say that two ladies have the same dress on. The dresses are identical in

the sense of being exchangeable; they have exactly the same qualities. Seemingly, the idem is partly the identity of the body, such that I can be said to have the same body I had as a new-born baby, even though I had not developed a self, an ipse, at that time. Similarly, a person who has lost his/her self due to Alzheimer's disease might be considered the same as before in the idem sense of the word, even though he or she in some sense has lost his or her personhood.

Ipsē (selfhood), is on the one hand the type of identity we can have as characters, not least as characters in stories. On the other hand, the identity of selfhood is the identity of the one who keeps his/her promises, for example. This latter part of the self is the voluntary side of it. We can choose whether or not to keep promises. Furthermore, we create parts of our selves by keeping or not keeping promises. By such acts we create our selves as 'reliable' or 'unreliable' persons. In contrast to this, we cannot choose the character we play. We cannot choose our talents or temperament. The one who plays the role of the dim-witted guy remains stupid.

There is a dialectical tension between idem and ipse. The reason is that it makes sense to talk about ipse even though the person changes quite a bit; at the same time the idem demands consistency: we want to say we are talking about the same thing. How can it be that we have certain permanence through time while changing all the time? It is narrative which solves this problem: it mediates between idem and ipse.

In all narratives there is both permanence and change – in Ricoeur's vocabulary 'concordance' and 'discordance'; the latter being unexpected events which disturb the sense of permanence. A story manages nevertheless to unite permanence and change.

Analogously, it unites idem and its concordance, with ipse and its tendency towards discordance. It is a question of a synthesis of heterogeneous elements.

To understand this we must take a brief glance at Ricoeur's theory about the general function of narratives. Narratives, or more precisely plots, synthesise reality. A plot fuses together intentions, causal relations, and chance occurrences in a unified sequence of actions and events. Ricoeur seems to think that the plot creates a unified pattern in a chaotic series of events, ties them together, making them meaningful wholes. Thus, through the lens of the story we see things in a particular way, just as we can see the Jastrow figure as a duck, given a certain perspective. Another narrative could presumably give a rabbit perspective on things.

'Plot' plays an important role in creating the permanent aspects of human character. Just as in Ricoeur's scheme plot plays a constructive role for narratives, creating their permanent aspect, *mutatis mutandis* the same holds for human character. But despite unifying plots, narrative identities change all the time. They are not closed and static, but demand openness and freedom. In Ricoeur's own words,

"Life is an activity and passion in search of a narrative." ('Life in Quest of Narrative')

The self is not given; it is something that must be created. It must also be appropriated in communication with others and with the aid of stories: narratives can help make our lives meaningful. It seems that Ricoeur thinks that this meaningfulness is an essential part of the self.

The problem with Ricoeur's theories is first and foremost his

unclear, Continental way of expressing himself and the similarly Continental lack of examples and definitions. Further, I do not understand why narratives are needed to bridge the gap between idem and ipse. It seems to me that ipse (selfhood) is both permanent and changeable at the same time, in contrast to the idem, which is all permanence. This suggests that the idea of idem is superfluous, unless it is regarded solely as the permanence of the body (but it does seem that by 'idem' Ricoeur means something more than just bodily permanence). The ipse already contains the moment of permanence, ascribed to the idem. Maybe our French thinker ought to just do away with the concept of the idem. The narrative still has work to do, not in mediating between the idem and the ipse, but in mediating between the discordant and concordant moments of the ipse.

Despite this minor quibble, Ricoeur's thinking is extremely inspiring. He manages to show that narratives play an essential role in the constitution of our selves, without succumbing to the dogma of life itself being a story.

Conclusion

Who has not read *The Arabian Nights*? Who does not remember the cunning princess Scheherazade, who saved her life by telling the Sultan excellent tales? She had to go on recounting stories in order to evade death; similarly we must go on narrating in order to stay who we are. Thus, if Scheherazade is our mother, Don Quixote is our father, and we are narrative beings. *Homo sapiens* is indeed *Homo quixotiensis*.

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Sensation

Through blue summer nights I will pass along paths,
 Pricked by wheat, trampling short grass:
 Dreaming, I will feel coolness underfoot,
 Will let breezes bathe my bare head.

Not a word, not a thought:
 Boundless love will surge through my soul,
 And I will wander far away, a vagabond
 In Nature - as happily as with a woman.

A Poem by Arthur Rimbaud written in March 1870

Ideology and the self

JOSHUA KNOBE, a pioneer in the field of "experimental philosophy" at Yale University has contributed a fascinating piece to the New York Times' online philosophy forum on the intuitions of ordinary folk about what constitutes the "true self"

So what has this to do with politics? A great deal, it seems. Mr Knobe and his colleagues, the psychologists George Newman and Paul Bloom, suspected that intuitions about the true self largely reflect prior ideological commitments. So they concocted scenarios designed to elicit different judgments from conservative and liberal subjects. Their "conservative items" describe a person changing in a way one would expect conservatives to approve of. Their example:

"Jim used to be homosexual. However, now Jim is married to a woman and no longer has sex with men."

How much do you agree with the following statement?

At his very essence, there was always something deep within Jim, calling him to stop having sex with men, and then this true self emerged."

Likewise the liberal items, such as:

"Ralph used to make a lot of money and prioritized his financial success above all else. However, now Ralph works in a job where he does not make a lot of money and benefits others."

How much do you agree with the following statement?

At his very essence, there was always something deep within Ralph, calling him to stop prioritizing his financial success above all else, and then this true self emerged."

The results?

The results showed a systematic connection between people's own

values and their judgments about the true self. Conservative participants were more inclined to say that the person's true self had emerged on the conservative items, while liberals were more inclined to say that the person's true self had emerged on the liberal items."

This shows just how thoroughly ideological we are. Our broadly political commitments reverberate even in our judgments about the metaphysics of the self. The authentic self is the ideologically-validated self. This may help explain the widespread tendency to see those with whom we fundamentally disagree as victims of "false consciousness". We cannot help but suspect that they are in the grip of some kind of illusion, while we are clear-eyed and at home in the world as it is. Our ideological opposites are not only at war with truth, but alienated from their true selves. For conservatives, liberals who convert to conservatism have finally mastered their pathetic, craven yearning for "establishment" approval, summoned the courage to embrace the plain truth and declaim the corrosive, pretty lies of liberalism, opening up the possibility of a life happily in sync with the laws of nature, God and country. For liberals, conservatives who convert to liberalism have overcome hateful prejudice and tapped into the essentially human compassion and instinct for justice that allows us finally to acknowledge and lament our past complicity in maintaining the superstructure of privilege and exploitation entailed by the free-market, limited-government "ideal". And when our ideological comrades defect, they are lost not only to us, but to themselves.

My own view is that the sense of a stable self is an evolutionary construction with a certain social

function, which our intuitions about authenticity reflect. The primary human means of survival is social cooperation. But cooperation is fragile. We need to trust one another to follow through, to not take advantage. Coordinating on a common moral ideology facilitates cooperation, but only if we all stick to it. We cannot make others trust that we will stick to it if we cannot trust ourselves not to opportunistically change our stripes. So we build a sense of self upon the shared moral ideology of our local culture. We come to feel that to betray these values would be to betray the essential self. To prize integrity is to fear disintegration. To violate our constitutive values is to risk falling apart. This fear of falling apart—of losing one's self, of standing for nothing—prods us to keep our oaths, to pull our weight, and thus to be truly trustworthy, even when it would be to our advantage, in some sense, to cheat. So the sense of self enables social cooperation. But what matters most is not so much the content of our moral ideology, but simply that we all stay pretty much the same over time, so that we can continue to trust ourselves and one another. This is not to say that the values upon which we build stable, cooperation-enabling senses of self can be anything at all. But anything that works works, and probably there are many moral ideologies that work reasonably well.

It's not really true, despite our fears, that we will be lost to ourselves if we forsake our defining values. And it is not really true that when others forsake their old defining values for ours, they become more fully what they are. Still, as Mr Knobe and his colleagues show, we tend to think it is.

By Will Wilkinson



Narrative and Identity by José Ángel García

Identity and narrative agree well from a broadly Heideggerian perspective which argues the constitution of being through language. We could in fact go as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides if we find that a more general identification of being and thought is relevant to the subject, but one can easily get lost within such broad ascriptions especially when their relevance to narrative and identity is only implicit. Consequently I will concentrate on a line of thought which is more congenial to me, and one which I think is a more immediately relevant classical locus to ground any relationship between self-identity and narrative. I am referring to Hume's assumption that our sense of self is constituted through our associations of ideas, as an effect of memory. Narrative, though not explicitly mentioned by Hume, is certainly one basic instrument in associating memories and providing a sense of identity. Hume's discussion of personal identity begins with a more general reflection on the concepts of identity and diversity:

"We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time; and this idea we

call that of identity or sameness. We also have a distinct idea of several different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation: and this to an accurate view affords as perfect a notion of diversity, as if there was no manner of relation among the objects. But tho' these two ideas of identity, and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct, and even contrary, yet 'tis certain, that in our common way of thinking they are generally confounded with each other." (Hume 1896: 253).

If Hume's diagnosis is accepted, it will readily be seen that a narrative connecting a diversity of events will easily lead to the generation of an ideal object (e.g. a historical event) whose identity is the product of narrative configuration. Both narratives and selves seem to be among the clearest instances of the general principle which generates the identity of ideal objects--even if the principle itself is questioned as a basis for the generation of all manner of ideal objects.

The identity we ascribe depends, as usual in Hume, on habit as much as on direct experience: certainly, "where the changes are at last observ'd to become considerable, we make a scruple of ascribing identity to such different objects" (1896: 257). But if identity is created by the "uninterrupted progress of the thought" (1896: 256)--then any interruption of the thought will also interrupt the unproblematic ascription of identity. Therefore,

we might add, debate over identities which questions received notions and mental habits can seriously shake the means whereby identities are usually conveyed--or constituted.

One more interesting aspect of Hume's conception is that identity is ascribed by the observer, it is not inherent in the associated things themselves. (1896: 260). Actually, personal identity seems to require for Hume a reflective dimension, as it is ascribed by the self-observer, in his reflective capacity, not by the spontaneous connection of ideas in the mind. Identity is cemented by repetition, by semiotic doubling, whether in the form of reflection, or in the form of memory:

"the memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions. . . . As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, 'tis to be consider'd, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity." (Hume 1896: 261)

The fluid concept of the self which rears its head in Hume's conception finds a decidedly modern formulation in the work of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the self is not a substance, but a becoming, a construction, which turns back on itself to know and remake itself indirectly through signs and symbols of self-interpretation (Polkinghorne 1988: 154). Less spectacularly

perhaps than in Nietzsche, the modern self as theorized by the existentialists and by hermeneutic social science after Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, is a self which has a narrative dimension as an essential constituent. To quote Donald Polkinghorne,

“human beings exist in three realms-- the material realm, the organic realm, and the realm of meaning. The realm of meaning is structured according to linguistic forms, and one of the most important forms for creating meaning in human existence is the narrative.

“(Polkinghorne 1988: 183)

From the point of view of hermeneutic psychology, the self is a product of action and of representation, with narratives of the self as a major representational and structuring principle. In this sense reality is interwoven with narrative fictions. Ricoeur's analysis of temporal configurations in *Time and Narrative*, of the interpenetration of history and fiction in any narrative representation, is perhaps the major contemporary theoretical statement in this line of thought.

In *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul Kerby notes that the implications of narrative hermeneutics are equally relevant for historiography, literary theory and psychology:

“The stories we tell of ourselves are determined not only by how other people narrate us but also by our languages and the genres of storytelling inherited from our traditions.” (Kerby 1991: 6)

Self-narration is an interpretive activity: the meaning of the subject's past is refigured in the present: “our conscious narratives inevitably refigure and augment the pre-narrative level of experience” (Kerby 9). For thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Hannah Arendt, self-understanding involves the employment of one's experiences: we are “storytelling animals” (MacIntyre 1981, quoted in Kerby 1991: 12). As I argued in my discussion of Hume, there

is a link between access to memory and employment (cf. also Kerby 28). The narrative structuration of memories generates our understanding of the past. There is no definite meaning of the past, as we cannot escape “the historicity of our gaze and our interests.” For Kerby, “our talk of the self is self-constituting rather than referential to an ontologically prior subject. . . . The meaning of a life can be adequately grasped only in a narrative or story-like framework” (Kerby 31, 33). The distance noted by analysts of the novel between the experiencing self and the narrating self is essential for the study of subjectivity at large (Kerby 38).

Narrative is a cognitive instrument which conveys social articulations of identity. Each act of communication involves to a greater or lesser extent an act of interpretation and reconfiguration. Narrative patterns, therefore, are communicated, but they are also transformed in their application to specific instances. This is all the more the case when the narratives are self-reflective, deliberately experimental. If narrative is configuration of meaning and time, complex configurations such as are developed by artistic narrative are essential models and prototypes for creative social communication.

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[http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/publicaciones/commintern](http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/publicaciones/commintern.html)

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The paper appeared in a collective volume, *Interculturalism: Between Identity and Diversity*. Ed. Beatriz Penas Ibáñez and M^a Carmen López Sáenz. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006. 207-26.

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Philosophy in a Cafe



Jeremy at the Alleluya Bar and Café , St Kevins Arcade, K'Rd, considering his answer to the question; What is it that constitutes the 'Self.'

The 'self' can be interpreted in many ways. Jeremy (left) was asked for his views on what he perceived as the 'self.' Jeremy answered with these words;

I would perceive the 'self' as a mental representation of oneself and I think that it is constructed from outside influences and the environment throughout your whole life and that it is always changing. You have a certain amount of control over it but you have been influenced by those external things to do that so I think it's not something we necessarily create ourselves.

When asked if he thought we are influenced by the books we've read he said;

Yes, I do. I believe you have your basic personality, although I'm not sure whether this is attributable to your genes but I do think that the way you're brought up helps develop your 'self'

HUMAN BEINGS ARE INEXTRICABLY ENTANGLED IN STORIES

BY NORBERT MEUTER

Plato refers to stories and myths that serve as a point of departure and exemplification for his abstract teachings, a tradition that continues in philosophy even today. Underlying this practice is the idea that the function of narrative is to provide concrete examples in support of conceptual arguments. Hegel formulates the insight that philosophical concepts can themselves only be understood as the end result of their own story (Plotnitsky, Arkady (2005a). "Philosophy and Narrative." D. Herman et al. (eds). The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory. London: Routledge, 427–28.2005a).

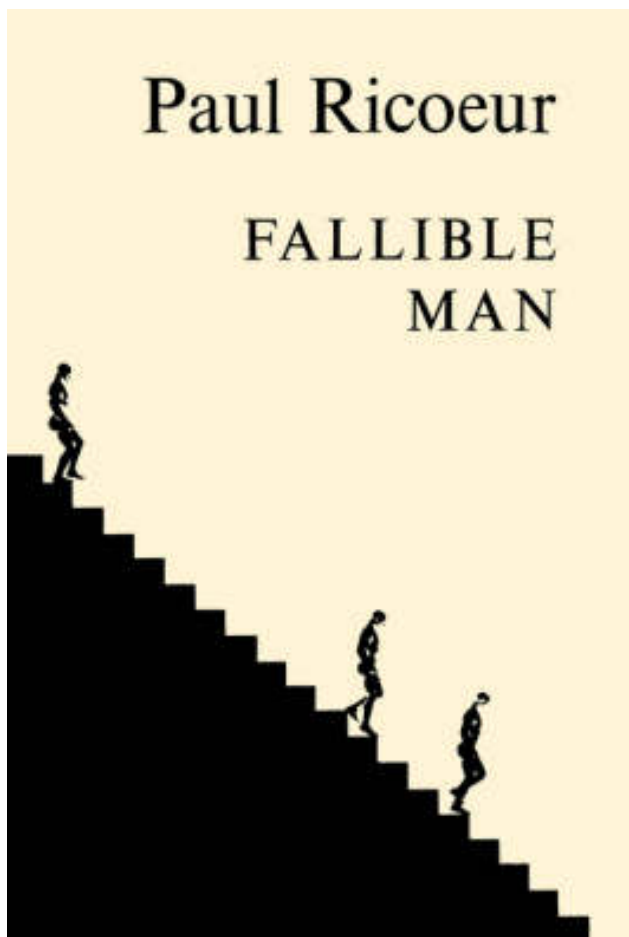
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Husserl's disciple Schapp (Schapp, Wilhelm ([1953] 1985) was the first to develop a distinctive "philosophy of stories." According to his main thesis, the human being is not the autonomous subject of his own constructions of meaning, but throughout his life is inextricably "entangled in stories" which are the prerequisite for the formation of his identity and subjectivity. Since, according to Schapp, stories are the fundamental medium without which we would not be able to perceive meaning, one is justified—with reference to Heidegger—in speaking of a "narrative being-in-the-world."

[28]

This philosophical point of departure raises questions concerning the constructive character of narrative. Explicitly told stories are symbolic constructions. The question is whether, and in what way, these constructions are connected with the experience and behavior of the individuals concerned. From a philosophical perspective, an assumed dualism of artificial form and real events (cf. 2.2 above) appears equally contestable. Human experience and behaviour do not show well-organized narrative patterns comparable to the careful compositions of fiction and history writing. Rather, the identifying and shaping of a narrative structure of a certain complexity, with a clear point of view, an individual line of suspense, a characteristic peripeties, etc., is always the result of an active endeavour. On the other hand, experience and behaviour cannot exist without some kind of structure. If, for

example, one presupposes that to act means (at least partly) to follow a project, this already constitutes a complex achievement, even on the level of action. There is constant interference in and interruption of the project in hand by other experiences, actions and projects. In addition, it is often not clear from the beginning whether one is actually engaged in a project at all. Without at least a rudimentary narrative structure, it would not be possible to find one's way even on the level of action (Danto Danto, Arthur C. (1965). *Analytical Philosophy of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.1965; Carr Carr, David (1986). *Time, Narrative, and History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.1986). The idea of a single act seen in isolation is therefore a false abstraction, and for this reason, the concept of story is as fundamental a philosophical term as the concept of action (MacIntyre MacIntyre, Alasdair ([1981] 2007). *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P.1981;



Schwemmer Schwemmer, Oswald (1987). *Handlung und Struktur. Zur Wissenschaftstheorie der Kulturwissenschaften*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.1987).

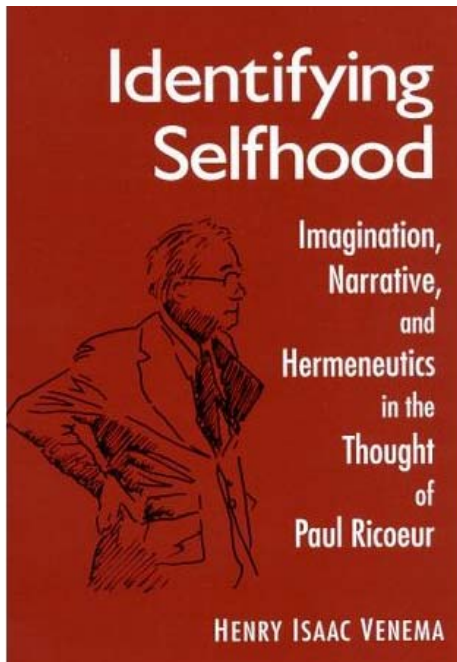
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With Ricoeur, who has put forth what is perhaps the most comprehensive philosophical theory of narrativity (Ricoeur, Paul ([1983/85] 1984/88). *Time and Narration*. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P: vol. 1 ([1983] 1984); vol. 2 ([1984]

1985); vol. 3 ([1985] 1988).1983/85), it is possible to argue a case for a kind of compromise. Ricoeur draws on the classic philosophers that are relevant here (Aristotle, Augustine, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Schapp) as well as on literary and historical theory, integrating them into a comprehensive narratological hermeneutics. Its key theoretical concept is the three-part mimesis, the aspects of which are not seen in a hierarchical relationship, but in an integrative one. Accordingly, the composition of an explicit story (Mimesis II) is always a creative act that provides a new and unique view of reality, but at the same time, this always follows on from something that has gone before this process. Every story points to a "before." The referent in this relation (Mimesis I) is the "lived world," which is itself already organized as narrative, at least in part. Because of their symbolic and temporal aspects, real-life actions have an inherently pre-narrative structure. Every explicit story, on the other hand, meets its intended target only when it is perceived by a recipient (Mimesis III). Reception is made possible because of the inherent openness of the explicit stories in general terms. These stories—regardless of how precisely and concretely they might be told—contain no truly individual events, but simply schematized conceptions that have to be concretized by the recipient. The three types of mimesis form a temporal unit as a circular cultural process that is constantly evolving: through reception, the explicit narrative configuration once again becomes part of the real-life experience of the experiencing and acting recipient who can expand, confirm or vary the pre-existing pre-narrative structures. Such a newly and differently (re-)configured real-life situation in turn forms the basis for the next explicit configuration. Narrative therefore involves mediation between common cultural standards and exceptional deviations from these standards, hence a complex interplay of tradition and innovation (→ Mediacy and Narrative Mediation).

[30]

In this model, the narrative "seeing-things-together" (*prendre-ensemble*) can be understood as the construction and



establishment of a meaningful and more or less coherent or probable order created out of dissonant, scattered or random elements. The important point is the ontological distinction between event and incident (Ricoeur Ricoeur, Paul ([1965] 2007). *History and Truth*. Evanston: Northwestern UP.1965). An incident is defined by its complete contingency, as something that occurs in a certain manner but could equally occur in a different manner, or not at all. A story transforms a series of heterogeneous incidents into meaningful events within a diachronic structure. The composition of a story is a process that organizes various components into a whole in order to produce a single meaningful effect. The narrative seeing-things-together transforms the irrational contingency of non-contextualized incidents into an intelligible contingency of events. In the tradition of Kant, this seeing-things-together can be described as a “synthesis of the heterogeneous.”

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Inquiry into the personal identity of the individual is a further philosophical area of research in the field of narrativity. Narrative

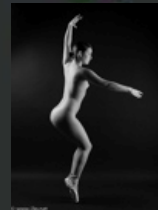
approaches to this issue (Ricoeur Ricoeur, Paul ([1983/85] 1984/88). *Time and Narration*. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P: vol. 1 ([1983] 1984); vol. 2 ([1984] 1985); vol. 3 ([1985] 1988).1985, Ricoeur, Paul ([1990] 1992). *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.1990; Kerby Kerby, Anthony Paul (1991). *Narrative and the Self*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.1991; Meuter Meuter, Norbert (1995). *Narrative Identität. Das Problem der personalen Identität im Anschluß an Ernst Tugendhat, Niklas Luhmann und Paul Ricoeur*. Stuttgart: Metzler/Poeschel.1995; Brockmeier & Carbough eds. Brockmeier, Jens & Donald Carbough, eds. (2001). *Narrative and Identity. Studies in Autobiography, Self, and Culture*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.2001; for further discussion, see Strawson Strawson, Galen (2004). “Against Narrativity.” *Ratio* n.s. 17, 428–52.2004) assume that personal identity is formed and stabilized only through the telling of stories (→ Identity and Narration). The identity of the individual person differs fundamentally from the numerical identity of individual objects. Personal identity rests upon a self-image that is physical, emotional, mental as well as practical, and this self-image is internally reflected and externally communicated in the narrative process. Corresponding to these two forms of usage, it is possible to distinguish two types of identity (Ricoeur Ricoeur, Paul ([1983/85] 1984/88). *Time and Narration*. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P: vol. 1 ([1983] 1984); vol. 2 ([1984] 1985); vol. 3 [1985] 1988).1985, Ricoeur, Paul ([1990] 1992). *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.1990): on the one hand, identity as “sameness” (German: Selbigkeit; Latin: idem; French: mêmeté); on the other hand, identity as “selfhood” (German: Selbstheit; Latin: ipse; French: ipséité). Narrative identities are invariably ipse-identities which are constantly reconfigured through the telling of stories.

By Norbert Meuter

The full essay can be found at ‘The living handbook of narratology.’

[http://hup.sub.uni-](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration_in_Various_Disciplines)

[hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration_in_Various_Disciplines](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narration_in_Various_Disciplines)



BEING SATISFIED WITH ONESELF

For one thing is needful: that a human being should attain satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art, only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims.

Friedrich Nietzsche—*The Gay Science*/233.

Spinning Narratives, Spinning Selves

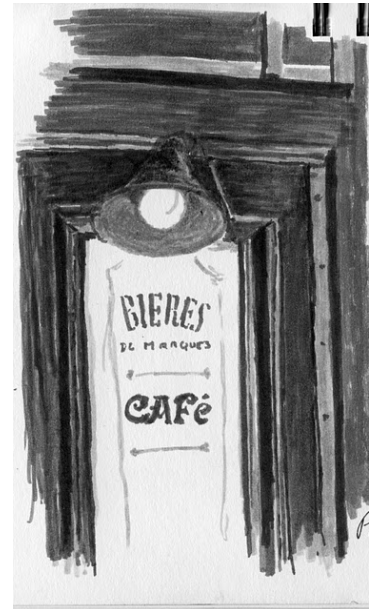
The 'narrative self' is now widely accepted by philosophers as an appropriate metaphor for the self. Philosophical interest in narrative as representative of human lives was strongly influenced by Hannah Arendt's **"The Human Condition"**



In this book, Arendt, a political philosopher, proposes that the individual discloses his/her self to the world and to themselves through both action and speech: "Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: **"Who are you?"** This disclosure of who someone is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds... This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect

passivity." (pp.178-179) Arendt claims that the 'who' we reveal through speech and action always falls into an existing web of relationships "where their immediate consequences can be felt" (p.184). Here a new narrative eventually emerges as "the unique life story of the newcomer." (p.184) However, while every individual life ultimately becomes a life-story, the individual is never the author of that story: "Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author." (p.184) Yet the 'who' that we disclose as we speak and act tells us more about the 'hero' at the centre of each story than any artefact tells us about the artisan who produced it. The personal disclosure or story therefore provides a measure of meaning to the individual lives so disclosed. This resonates with Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity and the role of memory in the formation and validation of identity.

The importance of language in defining or representing ourselves is aptly illustrated with reference to the question of colonialism. The psychological plight of the colonised has been documented with frightening clarity by the Kenyan writer



Wa Thiong'O Ngugi. In **Decolonising the Mind** (1986), Ngugi describes the devastating effects of mental domination on the minds of the oppressed, and the consequent alienation from their own culture experienced by them:

"The most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others." (p.16)

So colonial domination is not only about the loss of political autonomy, but about the dispossession of a culture. And Ngugi gives a harrowing account of the continuing psychological legacy of the subjugation of the language of the colonised to that of the coloniser. He claims in *Decolonising the Mind* that

any language is a carrier of culture as well as a means of communication, and maintains that mental control of the colonised was attained through the domination of their language. Ngugi gives a hauntingly graphic image to support this idea: "It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies." (p.28)

The culture inherent in a language is a powerful aspect of the definition of self-hood, so to be dispossessed of a language is to be dispossessed of a crucial part of self-identity. Ngugi's argument serves as a significant example of the importance of language in our self-identity or self-definition. It may be well compared with Arendt's view of the significance and fragility of the narrative self, since through narratives the deeds of individuals and communities are preserved in memory. While Arendt demonstrates the political and personal importance of such narration, Ngugi deplores the

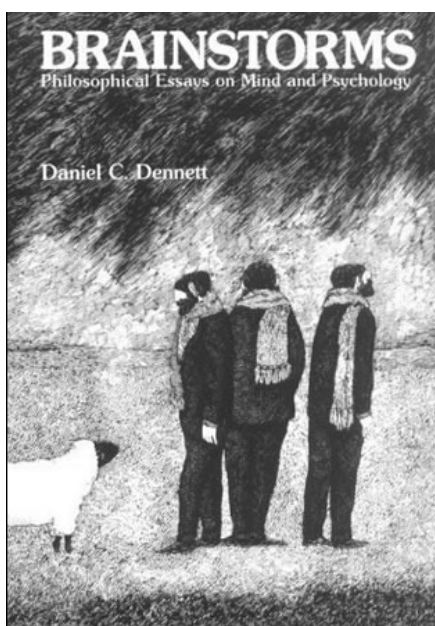
personal and historical loss of self which arises when a language is displaced.

A Web of Self

Daniel C. Dennett, an evolutionary philosopher, also argues that language is vital to the human sense of self. In **Consciousness Explained** (1992), he also claims that language is the form of representation used by humans to present themselves to themselves and to others; and like Arendt, but contrary to other theorists, Dennett also suggests that we are the product rather than the source of our narratives. Dennett uses a biological example to illustrate this. He points out that the process of evolution has produced creatures and systems which must be concerned with preserving a "distinction between everything on the inside of a closed boundary and everything in the external world" (p.174), citing the human immune system as an interesting example of this sort of system. He also proposes that the boundaries of this 'minimal' or 'primitive' self are both permeable and flexible: they may be infiltrated from the outside and may accommodate what comes inside its boundaries. A snail grows a shell which then becomes part of its 'self'; and a hermit crab may appropriate a discarded shell as a shelter, which is then inside the boundaries of its self-preservation. In demonstrating the adaptation of these creatures to their environment, Dennett is demonstrating the evolving of what we're calling a primitive self, and the necessity for the

enlargement and shrinking of boundaries so that that basic self is preserved. Moreover, the beaver will build a dam, the spider will spin a web, not because they're working to some conceived purpose, but because that's the way that they 'preserve' themselves. Dennett makes a link between this primitive preservation of self, and the human need to self-protect through narrative: "Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not building dams or spinning webs, but telling stories – and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others, and ourselves, about who we are... we (unlike professional human story tellers) do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them; like spider webs, our tales are spun but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source." (p.418)

So, just as the spider instinctively 'knows' how to spin a web, in humans there is what Dennett calls a 'center of narrative gravity' which 'knows' without deliberate or conscious planning how to unify all of the narrative that streams forth 'as if' from a single source. It is as if all the



narrative within us, in fact, all our language use, is somehow ordered and unified to present itself as if it comes from a single source. In other words, we start using language and, through the act of speaking, and especially through the repetition of our story, we spin a self. There is no conscious effort in any of this. We cannot do otherwise: “Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us.” The self we are appears through this narrative, and is the product of our narrative. We cannot become a person without this representation of ourselves to ourselves, and to others.

Dennett suggests this ‘single source’ of narrative unity (i.e., the self) is an abstraction to be understood in the way that physicists posit an abstract ‘centre of gravity’ for physical objects. He proposes that although this centre of narrative gravity for “the narrative-spinning human body” – this psychological or narrative self – is an abstraction rather than a ‘thing in the brain’, it is still a “remarkably robust and almost tangible attractor of properties.” Conversely, if we take Ngugi’s point on the damage caused by the subjugation of ‘my’ language to that of an oppressor alongside Dennett’s notion of a ‘center of narrative gravity’, we can see the aptness of Ngugi’s metaphor of a society of ‘headless bodies and bodiless heads’.

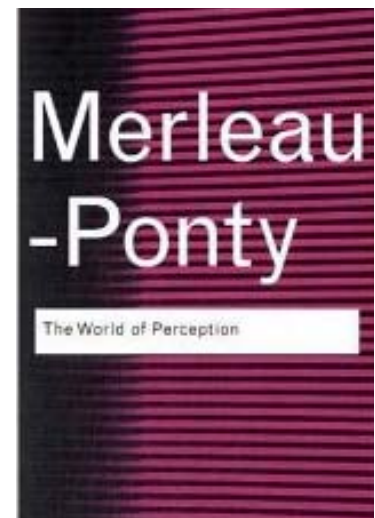
Language Emerging From Silence

Dennett demonstrates how fragile is our sense of who we are, and

how we are somehow, in some nebulous way, always ‘spinning’ our way into a self. This resonates with an idea that Maurice Merleau-Ponty has of the muteness of our pre-language state, in the sense of the silence we all encounter on a daily basis. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) he said:

“Language is a life, is our life and the life of the things. Not that language takes possession of life and reserves it for itself: what would there be to say if there existed nothing but things said? It is the error of the semantic philosophies to close up language as if it spoke only of itself: language lives only from silence; everything we cast to the others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave... language is not a mask over Being, but – if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation – the most valuable witness to Being.” (pp.125-126, italics mine)

Merleau-Ponty is suggesting here that language is ‘germinated’ in silence. His ‘great mute land that we never leave’ seems to relate to Dennett’s ‘center of gravity’ such that we spin our language use out of a great silence. Through language we get a sense of what we are; but we are always, as it were, living in a silence out of which we reach out to others. Here Merleau-Ponty does not mean ‘silence’ as a contrary to language in the way that we mean silence as the loss of sound or noise. Rather he is talking about silence as the ‘mute’ world of yet



to be spoken language. In **Phenomenology of Perception** (1945) he outlines the Wittgensteinian idea that the spoken word has meaning because of how we attach meaning to it: “As for the meaning of a word, I learn it as I learn to use a tool, by seeing it used in the context of a certain situation” (p.469, PP). As meaning must be created for words, speech thus begins in ‘silence’. To speak our thoughts, we reach, as it were, into the silent world of things which Merleau-Ponty is speaking about: our thoughts are not ‘thought’ first and then cloaked with words. To Merleau-Ponty there is no such thing as a thought that exists without language, because, without speech, how can the thought move out of the void of silence to being a thought?

“Thought is no internal ‘thing’ and does not exist independently of the world and of words. What misleads us in this connection, and

causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we can acquire the illusion of an inner life. But in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language." (p.213, PP)

Merleau-Ponty is saying that our thoughts develop as we articulate them (in Dennett's words, as 'the web is spun'): "Thus speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it." (p.207, PP) To Merleau-Ponty language is our meeting place with the world and with others, but it is also the place where we meet ourselves. The mystery of that space, of that epicentre, is the mute appeal from which the search for understanding is launched.

UNDERSTANDING THINKING

To understand language is not simply to understand the literal words and grammatical structure as it is spoken. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, it is about understanding the language behind the words, the creative process that goes on so that we 'get it' as the words are spoken or read. Just as, although a piece of music is made up of notes placed in a particular order, it is not that these particular ordered notes themselves speak to us – rather, it is the creative response that is generated by the music played which causes the appeal, and by which music is understood by us to have meaning. So it is with language:

"In a sense, to understand a phrase

is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, to hear what it says. The meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of 'psychic reality' spread over the sound: it is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear." (p.155) *The Visible and the Invisible*.

In Merleau-Ponty's concept of primary perception, our experiences of our relationship to the world and to others are given to us in such a way that we

accept them as commonplace, as our way of being in the world. The role of sensation in revealing and interpreting our world for us is often overlooked simply because it seems such an ordinary fact. We see, hear, touch and feel our world, but we are, so to speak, immersed in the experience, so that we are unaware of the multiple links that present these experiences to us already with reference to human or physical (object) meanings. But Merleau-Ponty claims that it is only by trying to understand how these perceptions shape and reveal our world that we can we truly perceive it – almost by glancing sideways at ourselves and how we are in the world; almost by stealth we perceive our world. To understand how we relate to the world and to others, to



Maurice Merleau-Ponty (14 March 1908 – 3 May 1961) was a French phenomenological philosopher, strongly influenced by Karl Marx, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in addition to being closely associated with Jean-Paul Sartre (who later stated he had been "converted" to Marxism by Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir.

become aware of how we as embodied beings can understand the phenomenon of a 'self' within this world of objects, Merleau-Ponty claims that we therefore need to step back from the world of our perception:

"Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis [which was Kant's theory of self-consciousness];... it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that

world as strange and paradoxical.” (PP, 2002, p.xv)

Merleau-Ponty is here claiming that it is the ‘intentionality’ [the directedness towards something] of perception which creates a meaning for our experience.

We appear to have an instinctive knowledge of how to make sense of our world – it appears to be something that the body ‘knows’ how to do:

“In a sense, if we were to make completely explicit the architectonics of the human body, its ontological framework, and how it sees itself and hears itself, we would see that the structure of its mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given in it.” (p.155, *The Visible and the Invisible*)

This echoes Dennett’s account of a ‘center of narrative gravity’: Merleau-Ponty’s mute world of the body has within it all the possibilities of language, just as Dennett’s center of narrative gravity is that which attracts words, speech, gesture. What Merleau-Ponty offers that is helpful to us in understanding how language provides our way of being in the world, is perhaps best illustrated by the following quote:

“Like the natural man, we situate ourselves in ourselves and in the things, in ourselves and in the other, at the point where, by a sort of chiasm, we become the others and we become world” (p.168, *The Visible and the Invisible*). Merleau-Ponty uses this word chiasm [connected gap] to illustrate the sort of interconnection that exists between self and world, between self and others, so that we are not so much connected, but rather there is a point where we intersect and become one with others and the world.

Through language and the action that

accompanies it, a life-story is created, a narrative is spun. Language, speech and gesture define us and create us, so that we are continuously spinning a narrative self that is both the preservation of our individuality and our connection with the world. Dispossession of language, of that which defines us, is, in a very real way, to be dispossessed of a unified self.

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Philosopher, Pauline O’Flynn has an MA in Philosophy and Literature from Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland.

A Poem by Yahia Lababidi

WORDS

Words are like days:
colouring books or pickpockets,
signposts or scratching posts,
fakirs over hot coals.

Certain words must be earned
just as emotions are suffered
before they can be uttered
- clean as a kept promise.

Words as witnesses
testifying their truths
squalid or rarefied
inevitable, irrefutable.

But, words must not carry
more than they can
it's not good for their backs
or their reputations.

For, whether they dance alone
or with an invisible partner,
every word is a cosmos
dissolving the inarticulate

ALISON FLOOD EXPLAINS HOW READING FICTION IMPROVES EMPATHY



Burying your head in a novel isn't just a way to escape the world: psychologists are increasingly finding that reading can affect our personalities. A trip into the world of Stephenie Meyer, for example, actually makes us feel like vampires.

Researchers from the University at Buffalo gave 140 undergraduates passages from either Meyer's *Twilight* or JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* and the *Philosopher's Stone* to read, with the vampire group delving into an extract in which Edward Cullen tells his teenage love interest Bella what it is like to be a vampire, and the wizardly readers getting a section in which Harry and his cohorts are "sorted" into Hogwarts houses.

The candidates then went through a series of tests, in which they categorised "me" words (myself, mine) and "wizard" words (wand, broomstick, spells, potions) by pressing one key when they appeared on the screen, and "not me" words (they, theirs) and "vampire" words (blood, undead, fangs, bitten) by pressing another key, with the test then reversed. The study's authors, Dr Shira Gabriel and Ariana Young, expected them to respond more quickly to the "me" words when they were linked to the book they had just read.

Gabriel and Young then applied what they dubbed the *Twilight*/*Harry Potter* Narrative Collective Assimilation Scale, which saw the students asked questions designed to measure their identification with the worlds they had been reading about – including "How long could you go without sleep?", "How sharp are your teeth?" and "Do you think, if you tried really hard, you might be able to make an object move just using the power of your mind?" Their moods, life satisfaction, and

absorption into the stories were then measured.

Published by the journal *Psychological Science*, the study found that participants who read the *Harry Potter* chapters self-identified as wizards, whereas participants who read the *Twilight* chapter self-identified as vampires. And "belonging" to these fictional communities actually provided the same mood and life satisfaction people get from affiliations with real-life groups. "The current research suggests that books give readers more than an opportunity to tune out and submerge themselves in fantasy worlds. Books provide the opportunity for social connection and the blissful calm that comes from becoming a part of something larger than oneself for a precious, fleeting moment," Gabriel and Young write.

"My study definitely points to reading fulfilling a fundamental need – the need for social connection," Gabriel said. She is currently trying to replicate the study with schoolchildren – using jedis versus wizards.

The psychology of fiction is a small but growing area of research, according to Keith Oatley, a professor in the department of human development and applied psychology at the University of Toronto and a published novelist himself, who details the latest findings in the area in his online magazine, *OnFiction*.

One of his own studies, carried out in 2008, gave 166 participants either the Chekhov short story, *The Lady with the Little Dog*, or a version of the story rewritten in documentary form. The subjects' personality traits and emotions were assessed before and

after reading, with those who were given the Chekhov story in its unadulterated form found to have gone through greater changes in personality – empathising with the characters and thus becoming a little more like them.

"I think the reason fiction but not non-fiction has the effect of improving empathy is because fiction is primarily about selves interacting with other selves in the social world," said Oatley. "The subject matter of fiction is constantly about why she did this, or if that's the case what should he do now, and so on. With fiction we enter into a world in which this way of thinking predominates. We can think about it in terms of the psychological concept of expertise. If I read fiction, this kind of social thinking is what I get better at. If I read genetics or astronomy, I get more expert at genetics or astronomy. In fiction, also, we are able to understand characters' actions from their interior point of view, by entering into their situations and minds, rather than the more exterior view of them that we usually have. And it turns out that psychologically there is a big difference between these two points of view. We usually take the exterior view of others, but that's too limited."

The findings could, Oatley believes, have significant implications, particularly in a climate where arts funding is under threat. "It is the first empirical finding, so far as I know, to show a clear psychological effect of reading fiction," he said. "It's a result that shows that reading fiction improves understanding of others, and this has a very basic importance in society, not just in the general way making the world a better place by improving interpersonal understanding, but in specific areas such as politics, business, and education. In an era when high-school and university subjects are evaluated economically, our results do have economic implications."

Paul Verlaine

Paul Verlaine at the age of 23 fell in love with the 16-year-old Mathilde Maute de Fleurville, and they married the following year, their son Georges was born in 1871.

In late August of 1871, at the advice of a friend, Arthur Rimbaud sent copies of some new poetry to Verlaine in Paris, who was taken aback by the brilliance of the work. From their first encounter, Verlaine was powerfully drawn to Rimbaud, whose arrogance and provocative behaviour shocked Mathilde and her parents, with whom they lived, as well as the established literary circles of Paris. Mathilde was frightened by Rimbaud's growing power over her husband. The two men formed a passionate relationship that was often fuelled by absinthe and hashish and characterized by love and cruelty, inspiration and antagonism, separations and reconciliations.



Caricature of Arthur Rimbaud drawn by Paul Verlaine in 1872

Arthur Rimbaud

Born in Charleville, in northern France, in 1854, Arthur Rimbaud is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of poetry. Despite his tiny body of work—only three collections (*A Season in Hell*, *The Drunken Boat* and *Illuminations*), all written before he turned 20—he influenced many 20th century artists from Pablo Picasso to Robert Mapplethorpe. Victor Hugo called him “an infant Shakespeare.”

He ran off to Paris repeatedly as a teenager, later spent time in London, crossed the Alps on foot, briefly served overseas as a Dutch soldier but deserted in Java, took jobs in Cyprus and Yemen, then settled in Ethiopia. He returned to France in 1891 and died that year in Marseille at the age of 37.



Visual: Christy BOULLET

Verlaine & Mathilde