



Having the Time of Our Lives

Narrative Holism and the Moment

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Narrative and Anti-Narrative

Two Streams in Kierkegaard

- Kierkegaard (and particularly Assessor Wilhelm) has a clear contribution to make to the narrativist account of personal identity: an account of how the self constitutes itself out of its dispositions and moods and acquires itself as a “history” (Danish *historie*, like German *geschichte*, means both ‘history’ and ‘story’).
- Yet Wilhelm and Anti-Climacus also speak of a ‘naked self:’ a self that is not reducible to its concrete and relational properties (cf. Stokes, 2010b)
- Kierkegaard also sometimes seems to take an *anti*-narrative stance: “to arrange oneself dramatically in temporality” such that our life takes on a recognizable narrative structure runs counter to the "God's plan for existence" (WL, 251/SKS 9, 251).

Narrative and Anti-Narrative

A New Role for Kierkegaard

- Kierkegaard's usefulness to narrativist discussions of personal identity may therefore seem compromised by:
 - His references to a 'naked self' (though this is no regress into substantialism);
 - The explicitly *soteriological* character of his thought on selfhood; and
 - His anti-narrativist streak.
- However, Kierkegaard may yet have a role to play in the *next* move in personal identity theory: exploring the phenomenology of our present-tense relation to the diachronic self as a totality.

The Boundaries of Life

Narrative Holism

- Standard neo-Lockeanism appeals to psychological connections/continuities as constituting a person's identity between two (more or less arbitrary) time-points.
- Narrativism instead appeals to “the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (MacIntyre 1985, 205). The *boundaries* of a narrative stand in a relationship of mutual implication to the possible *meanings* of the narrative.
- This is closely related to *narrative holism*: the view that events, actions and intentions only *are* those things by virtue of the narrative whole in which they are embedded:

“Narrativity refers to relations that hold between events that can be considered particulars *only* by *abstracting* them from the whole of a diachronic process of which they are a part, a process that portrays a ‘story,’ in the broadest sense of that term.”
(Slors 2001: 89)

The Death Objection

End of Story?

- But if we cannot experience our death, then the final boundary, and thus the overall 'shape' (narrative meaning) of our life will be unknowable to us (cf. Carr, 1988: 7; Ricouer, 1992: 160; Stokes, 2006; Lippitt, 2007)

Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause- that it must be lived forwards. The more one thinks through this clause, the more one concludes that life in temporality never becomes properly understandable, simply because never at any time does one get perfect repose to take a stance: backwards. (JP, 1030/SKS 18, 194)



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The Death Objection

Davenport's Reply

- We often *do* know roughly how our story will end (especially in advanced age, terminal illness etc.)
- Moreover, we can live in such a way that the *meaning* of our life isn't altered by sudden death:

“... if the objection is that the time or manner of my death might undo the meaning that my life has for me in its final moments, the response is that freedom only needs to make deep narrative unity possible, not to ensure it. It is up to us to choose so that either (i) our final moments faithfully express our identity rather than undoing us, or (ii) our sense of embracing meaning continues right up to our sudden end, if it happens that way.” (Davenport, 2011: 173)

The Death Objection

A Possible Narrativist Revision

- For my life to be intelligible in narrative terms, maybe I don't need to know the *final* shape; maybe I just need to regard my life *as having* an ultimate narrative shape, even if that shape will always be unknown to me. I can still understand my life *as being* a whole, even if “what is meant by this will have to differ from what is meant by my biographer grasping my life as a whole after my death” (Rudd, 2007: 542)
- Like watching a movie without seeing the final plot twist: you won't know the *true* meaning of what you've been watching but you will nonetheless have been following a narrative quite successfully.



Narrative Time and Phenomenal Time

Following Life vs. (Re)-Telling Stories

- This leads to a phenomenological distinction between following events (leading into an undetermined future) and following a story, such as a history, where the outcome is known to us.
- In a narrative comprehension of events, the end is already prefigured in the logic of the narrative itself.

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. (Mink, 1970: 557)

Narrative Time and Phenomenal Time

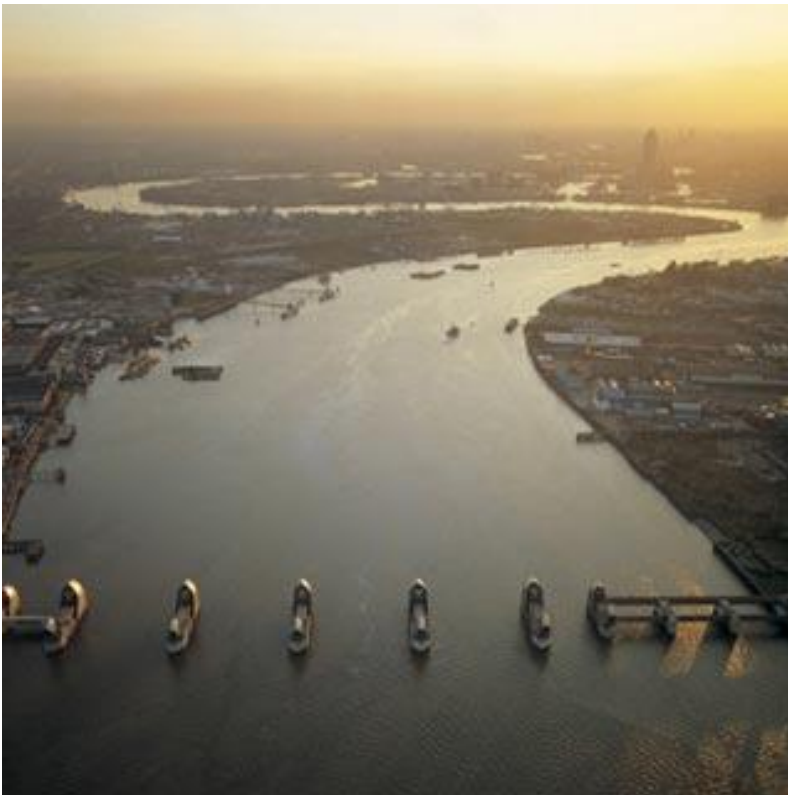
Following Life vs. (Re)-Telling Stories

- This claim + Narrative holism yields the conclusion that the events we experience aren't the *same* events as those that occur in a subsequent re-telling of events.
- This kick may be the goal that saves the game, or instead makes the losing margin heartbreakingly small – but right now it's *neither*. We won't know the *correct* meaning of these events until the game is over.



Narrative Time and Phenomenal Time

Viewing the Whole

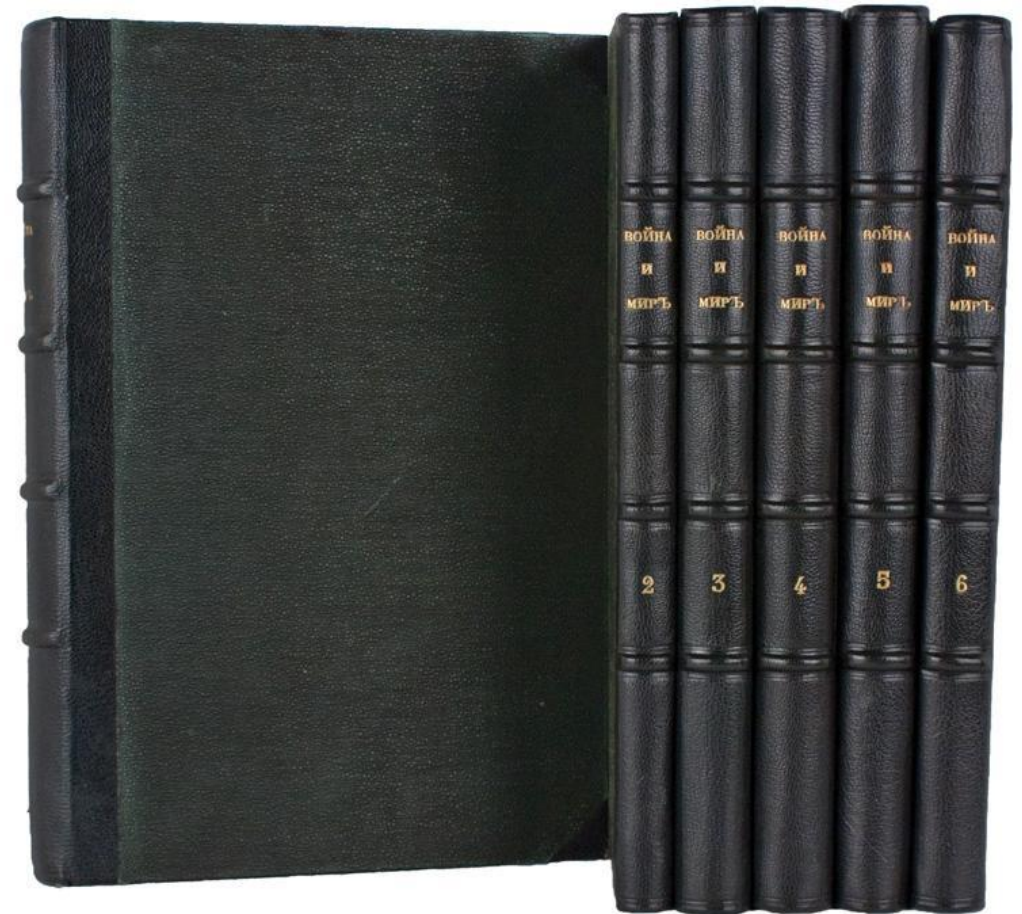


- In narrative comprehension, “time is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey.” (Mink, 1970: 554-55)
- Thus narrative time is both temporally extensive and yet *timeless*: it exists all at once.
- Ricoeur (1988) claimed that narrative is how we interrelate cosmological time (Aristotelian time, the “time of the universe”) with phenomenal time (Augustinian time, the “time of the soul”). Yet here it seems that what has come apart is phenomenal time and *narrative time itself*.

Narrative Time and Phenomenal Time

The 'Now' of Narrative

- There is no point in a narrative that is *essentially* now; the now that is “where we’re up to in the story” is arbitrary.
- Yet in phenomenal time, it’s *always now*, the point from which past and present are co-ordinate.
- Even where we’re “up to” in our life-story can be arbitrary (we can mistakenly stop telling the story too soon)



Narrative Time and Phenomenal Time

A New Division?

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Selves and Persons

Synchronous and Diachronic Identity

- An important emerging distinction between *selves* (present-tense, figured non-reflectively in present-tense experience) and *persons* (diachronically extended, practical, relational).

“The narrative self-constitution view can thus be separated into two distinct claims. First is the claim that in order to constitute oneself as a person—someone with the capacity for moral responsibility, prudential interest, relations of compensation and related person-specific activities—one must implicitly organize one’s experience according to a narrative that recognizes past and future experiences as one’s own in the sense that one sees the past as having implications for one’s present situation and choices, and the present as having similar implications for the future. Second is the claim that in order to constitute oneself as a self, one must have a narrative in which one experiences the past and future as one’s own in the strong sense of experiencing the present as part of the whole narrative.” (Schechtman, 2007: 171)

Selves and Persons

Experiential and Narrative Approaches

- Developing his earlier work on the ‘minimal self’/‘narrative self’ distinction, Zahavi (forthcoming) claims that the narrative self is reflectively constructed, whereas the “experiential approach” to selfhood turns on a non-reflective “first-personal sense of givenness” in self-experience.
- Zahavi is at pains to point out that we need both the narrative and experiential dimensions (and more besides) for a full understanding of human selfhood. Yet he also remarks that the experiential approach is “the more fundamental of the two” (Zahavi, forthcoming). Phenomenal selfhood is a prerequisite for diachronic narrative selfhood, but not *vice versa*.
- A further conceptual priority at work here too: all our self-narrativising, our relating to ourselves as diachronically-extended wholes, takes place *in* phenomenal consciousness – and accordingly, happens from the given *here and now* of phenomenal time.

Kierkegaard's Contribution

Living in Two Times at Once

- In phenomenal time, then, we somehow view the river from above *from mid-stream*. What, phenomenally, is this like? What is it to *identify with* a diachronic whole here-and-now?
- Kierkegaard prioritises the phenomenology of following events over that of narrative; cf. *Works of Love's* denunciation of one who:

“...without the consent of eternity [...] ends where the end is not; instead of, like someone taking dictation, continually having his pen poised for what comes next, so that he does not presume meaninglessly to place a period before the meaning is complete or rebelliously to throw away his pen.” (WL, 252/SKS 9, 252)



Kierkegaard's Contribution

Living in Two Times at Once

- On the other hand, Kierkegaard develops an account of what it is to relate to oneself as a diachronic totality from the here-and-now, and the corresponding temporality of living in time (*timelighed*) and atemporal eternity (*evighed*).
- Assessor Wilhelm in *Either/Or* develops one account of living in time and eternity: through self-constituting ethical projects such as marriage, the ethicist “solves the great riddle, to live in eternity and yet to hear the cabinet clock strike in such a way that its striking does not shorten but lengthens his eternity” (EO 2:138/SKS 3, 137).
- Wilhelm's account basically non-eschatological (cf. Stokes, 2010a).

The Moment

Time, Eternity and Direction

- By contrast, Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety* and by Kierkegaard under his own name in “An Occasional Discourse” (aka “Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing”) sees eternity as inherently tied to concepts of *final judgment* over the totality of a life.
- Haufniensis: we live in the Moment (*Øjeblikket*), the “intersection” of time and eternity:
“The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time. As a result, the above-mentioned division acquires its significance: the present time, the past time, the future time.” (CA, 89/SKS 4, 392)
- The *soteriological* character of eternity is what gives phenomenal time its directionality (cf. Stokes, 2010a)

The Eleventh Hour

Biological Narrative and Final Judgment



- “An Occasional Discourse” distinguishes between two orders of temporality: a biologically schematised order in which “everything has its time,” and eternity as *immortality*.
- Eternity is not understood as continuity with earthly life, but as final judgment. (Compare *Christian Discourses*: “There is not one more word to say about immortality; the one who says one more word or a word in another direction had better beware of judgment” [SKS 10: 215/CD: 206]).
- The conjunction of biologically schematised time and the ever-present prospect of final judgment over the whole gives phenomenal time the character of *the eleventh hour*.

Kierkegaard's Contribution

Limitations and Future Directions

- As mentioned, the soteriological character of Kierkegaard's thought may be an impediment to its philosophical application, and we must be careful when using Kierkegaardian concepts outside of their 'natural habitat.'
- Yet the structure of this sort of soteriological thought may have non-theistic analogues in how we relate to ourselves as diachronic wholes, and how this impacts upon our experience of time. ("If I died right now, would it all have been worth it?").
- Are these sorts of questions built (non-thetically perhaps) into our assessments of our practical identity? (Are they implied by narrative holism?)



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