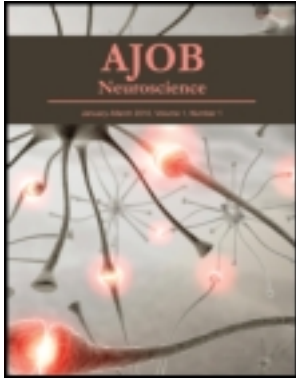


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Narrative Practice Apart From Truth

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or consciousness (Morris 2012). This perhaps explains why Jimmie G. has the sense phenomenologically that he has not really felt alive for a long time.

A person, and such identity over time as an individual can achieve under “normal” circumstances, is a construct consisting of a constellation of character traits, dispositions, proclivities, patterns of behavior, and the like that allow for “self-knowledge” in the sense of classic Greek philosophy (*gnothi seauton*) or the various admonitions of Ralph Waldo Emerson to be true to oneself above all else, as well as “self-reliant.” These same traits allow for persons to project a sense of identity (and authenticity) apparent from a third-person perspective. However, because persons cannot be fully reduced to their brain functions, and given the phenomenological nature of consciousness, particularly self-consciousness, their essence cannot be fully discerned from the outside, even when armed with the most technologically sophisticated scanning devices. Therefore, we must temper our truth claims about the nature or inner lives of individual persons. Failure to concede these important limitations may lead to ethically problematic conclusions about a whole host of things, such as whether a person is experiencing pain, suffering from a clinical depression, or possesses the intent necessary for a criminal conviction.

Persons or selves are beings in process and transformation, integral aspects of which are reflection, deliberation, and action, which are framed through moral imagination.

What allows this process to be intelligible is the context provided by narrative (Johnson 1993). While we all share a common biological humanity, the difference between you and me and Jimmie G. is the capacity for narrative identity. As the poet said, “You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories.”

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Narrative Practice Apart From Truth

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Mary Jean Walker (2012) defends self-narrative from accusations—grounded both in epistemological observations and empirical studies—that people cannot be trusted to give accurate accounts of themselves. She gives three possible reasons we can trust narrative truth: (1) We can trust self-narratives if we place the right constraints on how we evaluate narratives, (2) we can call a narrative “correct” for reasons other than how it conforms to the facts, and (3) stories capture truths of a different type (or types) altogether. All of these arguments attempt to endow self-narrative with a variety of truth. That is, these arguments try to locate an analog to veridical statements within narrative.

Walker, however, may either have played into her opponent’s hand or rendered irrelevant the task of finding an analogous sense of truth in narrative. I prefer the latter situation to the former: Once we accept that self-narratives are enacted, and actions guided by self-narrative are interpreted as a continuation of those narratives, the “truth” of the narrative is less important than the narrative’s history.

These attempts to pick up self-narrative’s pieces—by cashing out characteristics unique to narrative in terms familiar to chronicles or annals—may place unnecessary demands on self-narrative.

Opponents of a narrative theory of self-understanding worry that self-narratives are often inaccurate, misleading, or outright false. But suppose we take Ricoeur’s suggestion: Some narratives are more “correct” than others, and that only means “some narratives enable us to have more peace of mind and live in better ways” (Walker 2012, 72) than others. We could try to advertise self-narrative thus: Hidden behind every person’s self-narrative is a list of facts about what they can bear to think or say about themselves, and these facts are essential in getting to know a person. Such advertisements would miss the point. It is not enough to say that we can somehow mine truths about a person from the narratives they choose: The structure of and our interaction with the narrative would only take a back seat to the truths derived.

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The psychiatrist, for example, who “[desires] more ‘objective’ tools to produce physical and perhaps standardized representations of mental illness” (Borgelt, Buchman, and Illes 2010, 8) would rather not settle for “a second-rate sense of truth” (Walker 2012, 72) mined from patient’s self-narratives. This person might, however, recognize that self-narrative practices are also self-normative: The patient partially codifies his or her identity in the form of a narrative, and patients enact their own narratives as they go along. By participating in the patients’ self-interpretive practices, the psychiatrist opens another avenue of investigation (or treatment). Perhaps it is less important to find a place of truth in self-narratives; perhaps it is more important to find a use for narrative practices (both self-narrative and otherwise), just as we find a use for statements of fact.

Walker, however, tries to elucidate how we can take seriously facts expressed in self-narratives—or how we can find analogously factual elements of narrative. That is: We can redeem self-narrative if we place constraints on narrative, substitute “factual” talk for “correctness” talk, or if we find new sources for “truth” in the narrative. I wouldn’t argue that there is no room for truth in self-narrative, and I couldn’t: Recorded narratives share too much with recorded facts not to participate in typical truth practices. It wouldn’t, however, make much sense to talk about the facts of a stage production for too long: which character did what, and whether or not we remembered the events correctly. At some point we must talk about the characters in an interactive way.

Walker, of course, recognizes that some factive demands are difficult to apply to narrative. For instance, she argues it is difficult to ask factual questions about a personality that is still in the works: “to ask for some final truth seems misguided; the point of different descriptions lies rather in how these different ways of thinking about themselves might affect the person’s actions, and their attitudes toward those actions” (Walker 2012, 73). Walker has in mind factual questions that may not yet have an answer; the question “Is she an organized person?” may only have a single appropriate response, “We’ll see.” However, both Walker and I recognize self-narrative’s ability to effect future self-narrative: The narrative’s author plays no small role in determining the truth of the statements the author makes, but that only renders factual questions more difficult to answer. If “the processes of self-interpretation do feed into construction

of some truths, and do so in a way that does not diminish their status as truth” (73), it becomes difficult to know how to parse apart processes of self-interpretation from self-evaluation. In other words, it becomes difficult to tell the difference between claims about “how I have acted” and claims about “how I plan to act.”

In fictional cases, discussions about narrative resemble an investigation of facts, but those investigations become less about the facts at their periphery. For instance, we could ask whether Hamlet is a hero or a coward. An investigation could look at the facts of Shakespeare’s play for clues—in fact, it must—but it couldn’t stay there for long. We might question how Hamlet justifies his desire for revenge; or we might end up asking counterfactual questions, “What might he have been like if Claudius hadn’t killed his father?” If I ask similar questions about my own self-narratives, they would seem strange. The question “Am I an organized person?”—to use Walker’s example—could be answered, “I will find out at some point.” The question could also be followed by a further consideration—“I’m not sure I want to be an ‘organized’ person. No, I’m certainly not that sort of person.”

That is: Any question a person poses about their narrative is a potential milestone from which the person can reevaluate and replot his or her life’s course. The questions we can ask about fictional characters can go beyond all of the possible facts. In the case of self-narrative, on the other hand, factual questions become practical. Further, even though the cadence of self-interpretation and self-evaluation seems factual, coming to a conclusion about what sort of person to be is something else entirely. To be as clear as possible, Walker and I are not in disagreement about the features of self-narrative. I only argue that cashing out the unique properties of self-narrative in terms of “narrative truth” obscures the properties of self-evaluation.

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