Is it Good to Conceive of One's Life Narratively?

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Abstract

Grace Hibshman has developed a new explanation for why narrative self-conceptions might contribute to one's flourishing: conceiving of one's life narratively, she argues, can facilitate an improved self-understanding. In this short paper, we argue that, *pace* Hibshman, life narratives tend to misrepresent and mislead. So while they may give the impression of an improved self-understanding, that impression is typically mistaken. In this respect, conceiving of one's life narratively hinders flourishing.

Keywords Life narrative · Hibshman · Flourishing · Self-understanding

1 Introduction

Some philosophers claim that conceiving of one's life narratively contributes to one's flourishing.[1] Grace Hibshman (2022) has developed a new explanation for why narrative self-conceptions might do this: conceiving of one's life narratively, she argues, can facilitate an improved self-understanding.

In this short paper, we argue that, *pace* Hibshman, conceiving of one's life narratively tends *not* to facilitate an improved self-understanding. While narrative self-conceptions may give the impression of an improved self-understanding, this

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[1] In addition to Hibshman (2022), see e.g. MacIntyre (2001), Rudd (2012), Schechtman (2007).

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impression is typically mistaken. We conclude that, in this respect, conceiving of one's life narratively tends, somewhat surprisingly, to *hinder* one's flourishing.[2]

2 Life Narratives and Self-Understanding

According to Hibshman, a *life narrative* is

> a representation of a series of some of the significant temporal events of one's life […] that organises, interprets, and colours these events and mediates an experience of them to its audience.[3] (2022: 617)

To conceive of one's life narratively,

> one needs to have at least glimpses of what it would be like to have one's life narrative presented, and to live out one's life with an implicit understanding of one's life as belonging to and informed by narratives. (*ibid*.)

Hibshman argues that conceiving of one's life narratively gives one a *second-person experience* of oneself, which can yield new self-understanding.[4]

To make the case, Hibshman draws on Eleonore Stump's account of narratives.

> A story takes a real or imagined second-person experience and makes it available to a wider audience to share. It does so by making it possible, to one degree or another, for a reader or listener to simulate what it would have been like for her if she had been an onlooker in the second-person experience represented in the story. That is, a story gives a person some of what she would have had if she had unmediated personal interaction with the characters in the story, while they were conscious and interacting with each other, without actually making her part of the story itself. (Stump 2013: 78)

Hibshman takes the account to hold 'even if a story is written in the voice of a first- or third-person narrator' (2022: 620).

According to Hibshman, however, there is no need to restrict Stump's account to readers and listeners: *authors* can also have a second-person experience of the characters and events in the story. The author achieves this, according to Hibshman, by imagining her audience immersed in the story. So when one is authoring one's life narrative—whether by writing an autobiography, by reflecting on the events in one's

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[2] See also Strawson (2004, 2016).

[3] An anonymous referee notes that this is a strong definition of 'life narrative', and suggests that Hibshman is perhaps taking *literary* narratives to be the model for *life* narratives. But, according to Lamarque (2007), there are important differences between the two kinds of narrative. A key question for Hibshman is thus whether such differences undermine her central claim that life narratives furnish one with a second-person experience of oneself. We do not explore this question herein.

[4] As we understand it, a *second-person experience* of something is the kind of experience one has when one directly encounters that something, perhaps by meeting it face to face.

life, or in some other way—one can gain a second-person experience *of oneself* by imagining one's audience immersed in that narrative:

> writing a narrative can give one a glimpse into how a reader from a second-person perspective might perceive one's narrative. In the case of Tolkien writing about Frodo and Sam, a glimpse of what Lewis might think about the narrative can help Tolkien by giving him another perspective on Frodo and Sam. But in the case of Tolkien writing about himself, a glimpse of what Lewis might think about what he is writing is not just another perspective, it is a fundamentally new kind of perspective. It is a second-person perspective on Tolkein, a rare commodity for Tolkein […]. (Hibshman 2022: 623)

It is unclear why, to obtain this second-person perspective, Hibshman requires Tolkein to imagine his audience. If narratives are second-person accounts even when written in the first-person, then Tolkein obtains a second-person experience of himself simply by immersing himself in (and thus by being an audience to) his own life narrative. If this is right, then anyone who conceives of their life narratively can easily obtain a second-person experience of themself. (We put this point aside in what follows.)

Hibshman claims that such an experience yields new self-understanding. She is not explicit about what this new self-understanding typically consists of, but it is easy to come up with simple examples. First, reflect on the fact that, if you have only had third-person experiences of Tolkein (say, by thinking about him descriptively) and then have a second-person experience of him (say, by meeting him in the flesh for the first time), you inevitably learn something new about what Tolkein is like: his manner, how he connects with others, how he makes you feel, or something else. But these are things that it is also difficult to learn about oneself through a first-person experience. Tolkein probably thought of himself as having a certain manner, and as connecting with others in certain ways, but the first-person perspective is fundamentally skewed. Neither Tolkein nor anyone else fully understands what it is like to meet oneself. So a second-person experience of Tolkein can yield new insight that was not available through a third-person or a first-person experience of him. As we interpret Hibshman, then, the thought is this: conceiving of one's life narratively might lead one to better understand one's manner, how one connects with others, how one makes others feel, and so on.

3 Misleading Life Narratives

According to Hibshman, we should be careful about our life narratives.

> [I]f the kind of life narratives we imagine having can shape how we perceive and experience ourselves, then we must choose carefully what narratives to steep ourselves in. The narratives we internalise shape what kind of narrative arcs we can envision for our lives. (Hibshman 2022: 626)

This note of caution is not benign. If one steeps oneself in a *misleading* life narrative, then one may be unable to access the enhanced self-understanding that is central to Hibshman's account—and, more seriously, one may be at risk of suffering from new self-*mis*understandings. We develop this idea in what follows.

Note immediately that Hibshman's account of life narratives is compatible with there being misleading life narratives. Specifically, for Hibshman, life narratives can be false. They cannot be radically false, insofar as life narratives are a representation of 'a series of some of the events of one's life'. That is, as we read Hibshman, the represented events must have actually taken place. But Hibshman does not demand that the representation be true or accurate—quite rightly, in our eyes, given that there can be significant variation in how people understand and interpret any given event. So a life narrative may be a *mis*representation of a series of *actual* events. Indeed, this *often* happens, when one misremembers, confabulates, mistakes emotional closure for truth, and selects events to narrate that collectively mislead. We look at these in turn.

Life narratives often misrepresent because one *misremembers* the details of the events represented in her life narrative. For example, she might remember going to the zoo as a child and be able to picture the elephants—even though there were no elephants at that zoo at that time. Or she might remember authoring a journal article years earlier, including a passage anticipating an important objection that has since become a talking point—even though no such paragraph was ever written. Such scenarios are commonplace.

This tendency to misremember is likely to have a genuine effect on our life narratives. Consider some relevant psychological effects that have been studied: we misremember events in ways that promote consistency with our current beliefs and values (Schacter, 2021); we trust our own autobiographical memories in the face of strong disconfirmatory evidence (Nash et al., 2017); and we adjust the details of what we are saying depending on the audience, resulting in parallel adjustments to our memories (Echterhoff et al., 2005). If we take such effects seriously, we should expect our life narratives to be biased by our present beliefs and values, to be resistant to counterevidence, and to be further distorted each time we tell (part of) them.

The second reason life narratives often misrepresent is *confabulation*. People tend to give (sincere) explanations for their choices that do not track their actual reasons. In their now classic study, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) asked participants to choose between four pairs of identical nylon stockings and then to explain their choices. The experimenters found that participants' choices were very heavily influenced by the position of the items, and the item that was most on their right was the one they systematically preferred. But when people offered reasons for their choices, they did not mention the position of the chosen items as a factor determining or influencing their choices. Rather, they mentioned features of the items such as their aesthetic and tactile qualities. Such studies suggest that people tend to 'confabulate' reasons for their choices.

Likewise, we suggest, when one authors one's life narrative. A life narrative is not *merely* a string of events, but one that 'organises, interprets and colours'. One important aspect of this, presumably, is a reflection on why various choices were made, and what that reveals about oneself. For example, if we present our life narratives in full,

we won't simply say 'and then I changed career', 'we decided not to have kids', or even 'I bought a camper van', without giving at least a cursory explanation for such choices. Explaining the motivations and reasons behind our key choices enables us to organise our life narrative around what moves us, giving colour to the choices we make and providing necessary context for interpreting subsequent events. But then, if we *do* explain the choices we represent within our life narratives, and if we *do* confabulate when explaining our choices, it would be remarkable if we did *not* confabulate when authoring our life narratives.[5] So we should expect life narratives to tend towards confabulation.

A third reason life narratives may tend to misrepresent is that we mistake emotional closure for truth. Consider Velleman's (2003) discussion of *emotional cadence*, an emotional arousal followed by its resolution, such as hope being resolved into gratification (or disappointment), and fear being resolved into relief (or grief). According to Velleman:

> Any sequence of events, no matter how improbable, can provide material for storytelling if it completes an emotional cadence. Twins separated at birth are ideal protagonists for a story even if their eventual reunion is a fluke. A discovery due to serendipity, a tragedy narrowly averted by dumb luck, a mundane act that unforeseeably becomes the last in a life accidentally cut short—these are the stuff not only of literary storytelling but of legend, gossip, and other forms of everyday narrative. (2003: 6)

And this is the case because:

> [a] story […] enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of how things happen, but rather to familiar patterns of how things feel. (*ibid.*).

Velleman argues, however, that:

> Having made subjective sense of historical events, by arriving at a stable attitude towards them, the audience is liable to feel that it has made objective sense of them, by understanding how they came about. Having sorted out its feelings towards events, the audience mistakenly feels that it has sorted out the events themselves, it mistakes emotional closure for intellectual closure. (*ibid.*)

So, according to Velleman, we are liable to believe stories that give us emotional closure, regardless of their truth or falsity.

These comments, if right, will hold equally for life narratives. When we engage with our life narratives, we are likely to assimilate events to emotional cadences—even when, all things considered, we thereby make the narratives *less likely* to be true. This might lead us to author a narrative that deviates significantly from our and others' memories, or that depicts events in a way that, from a more objective perspective, makes them less plausible. For example, suppose that I tried and failed

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[5] Cf. Bortolotti 2018.

to get into marketing a few years ago—I didn't manage to demonstrate the requisite skills—but that I am now happily employed as a carpenter. Then, given that an unsatisfied desire does not yield emotional closure, I might mistakenly reinterpret that period of my life: it was a process of discovery, in which I went from desiring a career in marketing for the wrong reasons, to realising that a creative manual job would make me happy. If Velleman is right that we mistake emotional closure for truth, then our life narratives will tend to misrepresent events, and their protagonists, in whatever way makes for an emotionally satisfying story.

So far, we have argued that life narratives tend to contain misrepresentations and, in such cases, are misleading. In fact, we would expect a life narrative to mislead even if it did *not* misrepresent any events.

When authoring a narrative—a life narrative or any other—we select which events to include. As a result, all narratives involve interpretation and evaluation.

> [N]arratives are of necessity selective and perspectival. Narratives can never be comprehensive or transparent. Even fact-based narratives like history or biography involve both selection and ordering of fact; some events are given prominence over others, causal relations and teleological progression are postulated, and ends or closure imposed. Narrators perforce narrate from some point of view or other, however impartial they might intend to be, and narration inevitably involves interpretation and evaluation, if only in weighing some facts as more significant than others. (Lamarque 2004: 398)

Importantly, we can select events in a way that misleads. Matravers gives a helpful example:

> Clearly, whether intentionally or not, a writer can stack the deck in favour of, or against, their subject. Viewers of Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* are likely to emerge with the belief that the subject of the film believed in equal rights and dignity for all (or, if that is too strong, at least some belief along those lines). However, if John Briley (who wrote the screenplay) had included reference to Gandhi's pronouncements about the relative importance of Asians over Blacks, viewers would not have been likely to emerge with such a belief. (Matravers ms: 3)

The film may have accurately represented a series of events in Gandhi's life but, if Matravers is right, it is misleading. It misleads the viewer into believing that Gandhi believed in equal rights and dignity for all (or something along those lines).

The same goes when we author our own life narratives. If we imagine ourselves bold, we will select the events in which we showed courage and omit those in which we showed cowardice. Conversely if we imagine ourselves timid. In such cases, there is no intention to deceive. We simply select and interpret the events in a way that confirms how we already think of ourselves. Each event might be represented accurately but, if our self-conception is inaccurate—as, given the discussion so far, we would expect it to be—the resulting life narrative will be misleading. The effect can be extreme: a man who conceives of himself as a feminist may include the time he

favoured a female candidate within his life narrative, but omit the umpteen times he favoured male candidates; someone who conceives of themselves as a victim of circumstance may omit their myriad choices—good and bad—that affected the circumstances along the way; and so on. But, one way or another, we all succumb to this confirmation bias: in authoring a life narrative, we select for inclusion only the events that confirm our self-preconceptions.

There are, then, a variety of ways in which life narratives tend to mislead. Moreover, none of these ways is particularly remarkable. When we author our life stories, we select events that confirm our self-preconception, we misremember the details of those events in ways that (for example) enhance consistency with our current beliefs and values, we explain our choices in ways that are not sensitive to the facts, and we distort details so as to package the narrative into an emotionally satisfying whole. The point is not that any one of these considerations shows that our life narratives are problematically misleading. Rather, the point is cumulative. When considered *together*, the various considerations come together to provide a compelling case that, when we author our life narratives, we tend to misrepresent *ourselves*. In life narratives, one's representation of oneself is unduly influenced by one's current beliefs, values and self-conception, as well as by the audiences one tells (or imagines telling) one's story to, without due regard to counterevidence, and these influences are all packaged together in an emotionally satisfying way that gives the mere impression of intellectual closure.

4 Self-Misunderstandings

According to Hibshman, life narratives can facilitate self-understanding. When we author our life narrative, we can imagine our audience immersed in that narrative and, if we do that, we get a glimpse of a second-person perspective on ourselves: a *new* perspective that can enhance our self-understanding.

Unfortunately, if the above is right, then life narratives tend to misrepresent. When we imagine an audience immersed in our life narrative, we get a glimpse into a second-person experience of someone other than our true selves. This may give us the impression of enhanced self-understanding: we may *think* we have gained an insight into ourselves. But, if our life narrative is misleading—and misrepresents *ourselves*—then this impression will be mistaken. On Hibshman's account, then, given that life narratives tend to mislead, conceiving of one's life narratively will tend to lead to new self-*mis*understandings.

This is not to say that conceiving of one's life narratively will *always* lead to self-misunderstandings. In some cases, a narrative self-conception may lead to new self-understanding in the kind of way Hibshman suggests. Here's a simple example:

> Jane sees herself as even-tempered. But, when Jane imagines an audience immersed in her narrative of recent events in her life, she learns that others would think her irascible. She then notices that her colleague Chidi—with whom she thinks she has a good relationship—was present at each angry epi-

sode. Jane realises that she is harbouring a resentment towards Chidi, and has become less even-tempered as a result. This improves her self-understanding.

Call situations like this—in which self-understanding is enhanced—'good' cases, to distinguish them from the 'bad' cases we have been discussing throughout.

Now, we are *pessimists*: we expect the 'bad' cases to outweigh the 'good'. The cognitive effects discussed in § 3 are unremarkable and commonplace. As we weave together our life narratives, these cognitive effects will significantly distort and undermine our self-understanding, outweighing the kind of benefits that Hibshman highlights. And there is no simple mechanism that Hibshman can invoke to keep these biases and misrepresentations in check. So far as we can tell, the author of a life narrative who is seeking self-understanding can do no more than try to mitigate each of the various kinds of risks we highlighted in § 3. For example, suppose that Buddhika plans to imagine an audience immersed in a narrative of a series of events in his life, in order to enhance his self-understanding. To maximise his chances of enhancing self-understanding (rather than self-*mis*understanding) Buddhika needs to:

(i) mitigate against the possibility of misremembering by (for example):

- narrating the events in value-neutral terms, to avoid distorting memories to promote his current values and beliefs;
- looking for, and not merely discounting, evidence against the details of his narrative; and
- not narrating any of the events to others before engaging in the imaginative exercise;

(ii) mitigate against the possibility of confabulation by (for example) avoiding post-hoc explanations of his life choices;
(iii) mitigate against the tendency to mistake emotional closure for intellectual closure by (for example) examining the narrative, and the evidence for it, dispassionately; and
(iv) mitigate against the tendency to select events that confirm his self-conception by (for example) explicitly building into the narrative any events that he was inclined to put aside, but could be perceived as relevant.

But such criteria are not easily met. The cognitive effects discussed in § 3 are likely to be deeply engrained, significantly hindering critical self-reflection. To successfully mitigate against them on any occasion will take significant self-awareness and self-control. This may not be impossible to achieve, but we should not expect it to be the norm. When we interpret our life events in the form of a narrative, we tend to misinterpret those events in unremarkable ways that, nonetheless, cumulatively lead us to misrepresent and misunderstand who we are.

These considerations give us a reason to think that—*pace* Hibshman—conceiving of one's life narratively in fact *hinders* flourishing. This view is typically associated with Galen Strawson (2004, 2016). Conceiving of one's life narratively, he suggests, is 'a recipe for inauthenticity, lack of truth to oneself' (2016: 132). The

discussion herein constitutes a detailed reason to think that, on this point, Strawson is right. When one conceives of one's life narratively, one gains a new perspective on what one mistakenly takes to be oneself—a perspective that generates the mistaken impression of a new and enhanced self-understanding. Even if one rejects Strawson's arguments more generally—even if conceiving of one's life narratively facilitates flourishing in other respects—conceiving of one's life narratively yields new self-misunderstandings and is, in that respect, a 'recipe for inauthenticity'. If flourishing is tied to living authentically, then, given the argument developed herein, there is an important respect in which conceiving of one's life narratively hinders flourishing.

Declarations

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