

Introduction: what is a philosophy of autobiography?

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We seem to be living through a boom in autobiographical writing. Every half-famous celebrity now seems to have access to publishers and readerships; politicians seem to make a lot more money from their memoirs (and lecture tours) than they did in office; sports heroes and their fans can relive the glory in much greater detail than the visual; and every non-celebrity can create voluble social media sites and blogs without any limits to vanity or banality or shame. Among the scholarly community, there has been a fair amount of recent interest among literary theorists in the genre of autobiography and 'life writing'.¹ And of course psychologists and psychotherapists have long been interested in their patients' efforts at self-disclosure. However, there has been very little direct, theoretical and systematic interest from philosophers, and as such this volume hopes to fill that gap.

One of the reasons philosophers have perhaps not been interested is that they have already been preoccupied with many of the elements of autobiographical thinking, understanding and telling. The purest case of autobiography, after all, could be Rene Descartes' *Meditations*, with its punctual, disembodied self outside time and space, describing his mental states at that moment. But in addition to the problem of scepticism, philosophers have long been interested in the nature of the self, in the problems of interpreting and understanding, in the paradoxes of self-deception, and in the meaning and narrative structure of human lives. So this volume may be less about filling a gap than about bringing together a number of long-standing debates.²

Of course many philosophers themselves have written autobiographies. Perhaps, as Stephen Mulhall (2009) suggests, autobiographical and philosophical enquiry are in many respects very similar, and many of the philosophers in question would consider their autobiographies to be adding to and consistent with their purely philosophical oeuvre.³ Certainly Augustine's tone in his *Confessions* (written in the year 398) is not that of someone trying to make money, but of someone demonstrating some of his central philosophical and religious beliefs in his own life. Considered by many to have invented the modern genre of autobiography, Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) involves a towering egotism, a relentless self-flagellation, but also a serious exploration of the limits of truthful self-representation.⁴ John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873) famously describes his nervous breakdown at the age of 20, and how he learned from it when developing his philosophy (see Ch. 4 of Barros 1998). Much of Kierkegaard's and Wittgenstein's works are explicitly autobiographical.⁵ Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1908) veers between self-parody and self-aggrandisement with the direct point of challenging many of our notions of the self, of self-understanding and self-reporting (see Steinbuch 1994). And Sartre, the ultimate *philosophe engagé*, wrote *Les Mots* (1964) very much in the spirit of both his philosophical work and public activism to date.⁶

With two exceptions, this volume will generally not discuss philosophical autobiographies in any depth. In her own contribution to this volume (Ch. 9), J. Lenore Wright concentrates on Simone de Beauvoir, famous

¹ For example, see Lejeune (1989), Barros (1998), Anderson (2001) and Eakin (1999). See also the International Association for Biography and Autobiography at: <http://www.theiaba.org/>.

² Because the philosophy of autobiography brings together so many long-standing problems of philosophy, this Introduction cannot hope to survey all the indirectly relevant literature. The footnotes are therefore highly selective and idiosyncratic of the editor's background and interests.

³ This thesis is explored in a volume edited by Mathien and Wright (2006). See also Wright (2006) and Parry (1994) and Baggini (2002).

⁴ Catherine Beaudry (1991) explores the relationship between Rousseau and his readers. What did Rousseau, while writing the book, imagine his readers to be, what did he think they expected from his book, and how did he think they would react? (The book was published posthumously, presumably because he feared certain reactions.)

⁵ On Kierkegaard, see Anthony Rudd's recent book (2012), which he calls a Kierkegaardian account of the self. There is a long-standing question of whether it is possible or necessary to understand Wittgenstein's life in order to understand his philosophy. On this issue, see the collection of papers in Klagge (2001) and the 'philosophical biography' of Monk (1991).

⁶ On Sartre, see Eakin 1985. One of the main translators of Sartre into English, Hazel Barnes, has also written an autobiography (1997), which she calls "existentialist autobiography."

not only for the landmark 1949 feminist statement *The Second Sex*, but also for her four-volume autobiography, which sets out her particular trajectory to feminist consciousness. The second exception is Áine Mahon's (Ch. 10) discussion of Stanley Cavell's two autobiographies, which are in many ways as challenging to read as his philosophy.

Three levels of autobiography

What is an autobiography? Or, more interestingly for the purposes of this volume, what does the *practice* of writing an autobiography comprise? The first simple image is again of Descartes, rooting around in the closet of his transparent mind, discovering a perceptual belief here, a factual belief there, and a cringeworthy memory over there in the mildewed corner. He's not sure any of them correspond to an outside world, let alone to a world in the past, but he has no problem describing the precise contents of his mind to himself. Right away the Cartesian schema can be challenged in two ways. First, the mind is not nearly as transparent as he thinks: there are problems of obscurity, risks of various kinds of self-deception, and the difficulty of achieving objectivity. (Consider the difficulty of distinguishing, from the inside, love from infatuation.)⁷ Second, much of the content of Descartes' own mind was influenced, if not generated, by his interactions with other people, and especially with significant family and friends; even the Latin in which he articulates his doubts had to be taught to him by someone else. Telling a more detailed story about himself – and telling the story not to himself, but to a close friend – would necessarily involve some sort of indubitable reference to the relationships and projects and memberships that partly constitute him, and that he must therefore take as pre-existing in some sense.

So even Descartes's solipsistic investigation turns out to be much more complicated than he thought. But the autobiographical practice also requires a *listener*, a listener capable of responding appropriately to the practice. Again, we can start with a crude version. So our basic schema now looks like this: the autobiographer first tries to understand an episode of her life, then tries to articulate it to the listener, and the listener then tries to understand that episode, within the context of her (the listener's) broader understanding of the autobiographer's life. The listener and the listener's responses, both those anticipated (longed for, dreaded) and then actual (and often surprising), are essential to this new dialogical schema. And of course the autobiographer's subsequent telling will reflect her own response to the listener's responses to earlier tellings.

However, even describing the autobiographical practice in terms of a dialogue, such a dialogue could be taken at three different 'levels', each of increasing distance from the Cartesian starting point. At the first level, the autobiographer has to sort out her autobiography before she takes the logically distinct step of trying to convey it to another. She trawls and dredges her memories of events, and of important relationships and projects, she explores the narrative links between past and present, as well as her own past and present emotional responses, she re-establishes her guilt for past failures, she constructs justifications for hurting others, she re-lives and relishes the successful revenge – all with a view to assembling as coherent a package as possible. Here the autobiographical telling is part and parcel of the self's on-going project of evaluating and understanding itself, an activity that partly constitutes what it means to be a self.

This first-level, still essentially solipsistic, autobiographical practice is crucially and essentially vulnerable to self-deception. The literature on self-deception is vast, and Somogy Varga (Ch. 6) outlines some of it in his contribution to this volume. The problem also relates to the phenomenon of weakness of will and the incompatibility of free will and determinism, and goes back to Plato. The central paradox can be seen by comparing it to other-deception. The used-car salesperson knows the truth about the poor state of the car: she successfully deceives me into falsely believing that the car is worth the money, and I only discover the truth a week later when the car breaks down. However, when I deceive myself, then it is not clear who is deceiving whom, nor is it clear whether I actually know the truth or not. One answer to this would be to posit different levels of the self (perhaps in a psychoanalytic vein), but the resulting structures quickly become unwieldy and over-speculative. More subtle conceptions of self-deception involve self-serving redescription of my and others' actions and reactions, my more or less deliberate selection of some facts of the past, present or future in the construction of a motivated narrative, and my maintenance of convenient beliefs and conceptualisations in the face of known disagreements with significant others who, I suspect, would be able

⁷ One popular recent philosophical topic is that of the emotions. De Sousa (1990) and especially Goldie (2000, 2012) have offered very rich conceptions of the emotions, conceptions that link them to rational understanding as well as to narrative self-understandings.

to persuade me if I gave them half a chance. Any autobiography runs the risk of these more subtle forms of self-deception, unless blunt friends with reliable memories can be regularly consulted.

This reference to trusted friends brings me to the second 'level' of the autobiographical practice. Instead of the autobiographer discovering or creating her autobiographical package and *then* delivering it to the interlocutor, the whole business of discovery and creation is essentially protracted, tentative and back-and-forth dialogical. Once again, this is part and parcel of a conception of the self as essentially dialogical. The autobiographer offers up a 'first draft' of the autobiographical episode to a friend, and the latter, in virtue of her caring knowledge of the autobiographer and of sharing some of the significant events of the autobiography, is in a position to assist the convergence on the truth of what happened and of how it was significant. This may reduce the risk of certain kinds of self-deception, which can be exposed by the friend in a spirit of gentle teasing or concern. (Of course it might reinforce other kinds of self-deception if both friends are engaged in an ethically dubious project.) The second level of autobiographical practice would also fit the therapeutic context, where an impartial listener, trained to recognise the many types of self-deception, may be in a better position to expose it without threatening an antecedent relationship. (However, it should be remembered that the autobiographer would only visit the therapist when something is wrong; whereas our volume is interested in all types of autobiographical context.)⁸ Stephen Mulhall puts the point thus:

Autobiography and biography are motivated by the requirements of truthfulness towards a conception of human life as possessed of narrative form and structure; and this is not because such forms happen to coincide with the way human existence is objectively structured, but rather because the distinctively human form of individual existence is constituted by the exercise of our capacity to tell our own stories." (Mulhall 2009, 186)

As Alasdair MacIntyre stresses in his seminal account of narrative (1984), different narratives can cohere with the same set of facts, and it is in the essence of a narrative to be contestable. In our second-level dialogue, the autobiographer and the listener might well argue about which narrative coheres better, based not only on the facts available to both of them, but also based on their joint knowledge of the autobiographer's character, as well as on their wider knowledge of human nature. To adapt MacIntyre's own example (1984, 206), a man is digging in his garden, preparing it for the winter. At the same time, however, he might be trying to please his wife after an ugly fight that morning. She had been nagging, and he had put off the garden work, but now he goes to do it in a half-sulk. However, if questioned at the time he might vigorously deny that he was digging the garden in order to please his wife. Yet, autobiographically, he might come to accept this conclusion later, under gentle prodding by a concerned friend, or when re-evaluating the shape of his marriage after his wife's death. And the sense the digging man can make of his particular marriage will also depend on the *institution* of marriage in that society, that is, on the set of shared meanings by which an outsider can reliably recognise this man as 'married', by which the man can defend himself against criticism of his marital loyalties, say, and by which the man can understand the contribution of his marriage to his life's overall success or failure.⁹

The third level

Nevertheless, this is not yet the whole story (pun very much intended). The first level I have been describing is essentially about *thought*, and the second level is essentially about *speech*. The third level involves a text:

⁸ Five of the contributors have indirectly explored the first two levels of autobiography and related questions in book-length detail, and it is worth citing them here. (i) Garry Hagberg wrote *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (2008), which is mainly a discussion of Wittgenstein and the presuppositions that lie behind the use of first personal pronoun. (ii) Marina Oshana wrote *The Importance of How We See Ourselves: Self-Identity and Responsible Agency* (2010), which explores the relationship between the self, the sense of self, and agency in the world. (iii) John Christman has written extensively about autonomy and identity, including *Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-Historical Selves* (2009). (iv) Christopher Hamilton's book *Middle Age* (2009) is a philosophical exploration of a distinctive time period in people's lives, but is also intimately autobiographical. (v) Finally, Marya Schechtman wrote *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), comprising a critique of narrow mainstream theories of personal identity based merely on reliable re-identification.

⁹ On the notion of one's *life* being structured by one's cares and one's relationships, see also the work of Harry Frankfurt (esp. 1988) and Charles Taylor (esp. 1989). The most extensive treatment of narrative over a life is Paul Ricoeur's three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988). The volume by Hutto (2007), more rooted in analytic philosophy, makes more of the connection between narrative and one's understanding of other people.

the 'graphy' in autobiography.¹⁰ First-level autobiographical thoughts are essentially private in a Cartesian way. Second-level utterances are essentially private to the two people, usually within a context of a more or less intimate on-going relationship between them, or in the therapeutic context. In contrast, the autobiographical 'dialogue' is essentially public, taking place between the author of a text and the many strangers who read that text, among whom will be a more or less specific target audience (which may include friends, colleagues – and enemies). And while the written autobiography might contain just as many intimate revelations as the intimate exchange, the reader cannot but be aware that hundreds or thousands of other readers are privy to the same revelations, and all sense of a privilege is lost. There is a paradox at the heart of every published autobiography. On the one hand, the book purports to be about a unique life, and all its details, its particular mix of fate and will, of planning and opportunism, of confidence and diffidence, are designed to emphasise just how unique it is. At the same time, if the book is to be intelligible, let alone interesting, to strangers of very different backgrounds, then it has to appeal to certain general features of what it means to live any human life.

(There are also cases in between the second and the third level: the politician who arranges for an important cabinet discussion to be leaked; the celebrity who writes an intimate letter to a friend, knowing and perhaps hoping that the letter will one day find its way into a volume of *Collected Letters*; the diarist who hopes that her grandchildren will one day be interested in reading the text; and of course the whole nefarious phenomenon of Facebook, with its ruthless pressure toward complete self-exposure before one's 300 'friends'.)

The appearance of an autobiographical book in public raises new philosophical issues. One might be called the matter of reification. In solitary autobiographical contemplation I can consider a particular thought, and then I can re-consider it. I can sleep on it, and return to it with fresh eyes. I can accept a provisional conclusion while awaiting confirmation of some sort. If I am still unclear, I can discuss the matter privately with a friend, and together we can converge on the truth, or on the best course of action. But once the thought is reified in text, it acquires a life of its own, and the author can no longer control or correct people's responses to it.¹¹ Sometimes this can be a good thing, as in those courageous autobiographies written in the spirit of bearing witness to human rights abuses, such as those of Primo Levi (1969) and Rigoberta Menchú (1983). Here one can understand the burning need to set down the experiences in print, in order to bring reluctant public attention to the abuses and hopefully to advance justice. But even with autobiographies motivated more by egoism than by outrage, it is easy to understand the autobiographer feeling reassured that her thoughts and her life, now in black and white, are established in a way that can outlive her frail biology and memory. Finally the person's experiences can be held in the reader's hand, solid and palpable.

However, the reification and loss of control have a sinister potential as well. Most of the time, a spoken thought can quickly be taken back or qualified; but this is much more difficult with a published thought, since the text will slowly acquire the weight of authoritative revelation; in comparison, any subsequent spoken comments will always seem like damage control. This makes the autobiography at once a product of great vanity and great humility: to have the confident urge to tell everyone how wonderful one is, while at the same time offering up one's life (albeit carefully manicured) for judgement and dissection and criticism by the masses, many of whom may well buy the book out of fascinated hostility rather than admiration, ready to impute 'true' intentions on the author. To paraphrase Wilde, it is clearly better to risk being maligned in the public eye than not to be in the public eye at all.

Once the autobiography is reified, this increases the risk of self-deception even further, since there is an official version that has to be sustained in the face of unanticipated criticism. In some autobiographies, especially those of politicians, the book may serve precisely to reinforce certain self-deceptive beliefs that are essential to the politician's "legacy" – that crucial possession that is even more important than the power in office, and even more fragile and dependent on the thoughts and actions of others. In general, politicians are the most obvious people to write autobiographies, precisely because they have been used to making discursive public pronouncements to justify their policies and respond to critics. The autobiography is a continuation of the press conference, and there are still scores to settle and agendas to advance long after

¹⁰ I thank David Levy for suggesting these distinctions.

¹¹ The idea of a text's independent life can be taken further, along the line of the 'death of the author' thesis made popular by Beardsley and Wimsatt (1946) and Roland Barthes (1968), each in their own way. While they were writing about fiction that was not answerable to facts in the real world, there is a similar sense in which, once the autobiography is published, it becomes public property.

leaving office. In 2010 Tony Blair wrote *A Journey*,¹² where he continued his tired defence of committing British troops to the Iraq war in 2003, and exhorted the government of the time to maintain their nerve in Afghanistan. Hilary Clinton published her *Hard Choices* in 2014, in which she not only defended some of her 'hard choices' as Secretary of State, but implicitly launched her presidential nomination campaign for 2016.

And because the published autobiography has to be written in acute consciousness of the consumer audience, it is constrained by the standards of the genre. The author has to have something to say, something interesting or funny or compelling, and he has to say it well. Most autobiographers will accept a certain amount of experienced editorial advice; but in so doing, there is a real threat of transforming the content from something true and private into something necessarily false and public, of smoothing the rough edges and enhancing the colours.¹³ This might lead to the claim that real autobiographies and fictional autobiographies can and should be read the same way: the narrator is a character along with all the others in the story. We get to know a lot more about the narrator, but that does not mean she is entirely reliable. In the extreme, this leads to the claim that the public persona behind the first-personal pronoun might have no necessary connection with the autobiographer, as long as the story coheres with enough widely-known facts. (In their contributions, both Marya Schechtman (Ch. 1) and Garry Hagberg (Ch. 2) explore and defend the idea of 'reading' the author like a literary character.)¹⁴

And because of the lack of direct feedback that characterises the second, spoken level, the third level of autobiography threatens to blur the boundaries between the private and the public. This is not only a matter of protecting third parties, for in principle the autobiographer can secure their consent to the draft before publication. However, even when the third party consents, or if they are dead and therefore perhaps no longer in a position to suffer harm, some of the revelations can be excruciating to read precisely because we have a sense that this is none of our business. Sex and hygiene are the classic areas where an autobiographer should fear to tread, but it can include other episodes whose gossip value lies precisely in their apparent privacy. I remember a friend introducing me to his fiancée, and she told me the detailed story of how they first met and fell in love, and I was moved. Later she produced a website for the guests of their impending nuptials, mainly with practical advice about buying gifts and getting to the church on time. But the website also included an autobiographical note, and there I read with horror the exact same story, the exact same details and phrases that she had previously told to me in what was now revealed to be sham intimacy. A gift had been offered to me, then taken back, moulded into tough plastic, and mass-produced for the four corners of the web.

Revealing one's private life is not only about celebration and boasting, however. Here is a notorious passage from Rousseau's *Confessions*:

With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues [...] Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous and sublime; even as thou hast read my inmost soul: Power eternal! assemble round thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings.¹⁵

¹² The choice of the indefinite article in the title is interesting. The original title was to be *The Journey*, but the publisher felt this would give off too much of the Messiah complex which many already saw in Blair. But *A Journey* actually reinforces one of Blair's most notorious verbal tactics. When pressed by interviewers, he would inevitably say something to the effect of "Look, this is the way I saw it, and this is what I believe, and so it is only right for me to act on what I see and believe, even if the results are uncomfortable for me" [note that this is *not* a direct quotation, but a paraphrase...] The indefinite article supports the idea that Blair could have taken many roads, but he chose this one, the unpopular one, and therefore deserves at least reluctant admiration.

¹³ Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography (1983), part of the *testimonio* tradition, describes the sufferings of Guatemala's indigenous peoples during its 26-year civil war. Partly on the basis of the autobiography, she was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1992. In 1999, American anthropologist David Stoll revealed that some parts of Menchú's autobiography had been altered to meet the publicity needs of the guerrilla movement to which she belonged.

¹⁴ See also Lloyd 1986. In contrast, see Lamarque 2007.

¹⁵ Quotations from Rousseau's *Confessions* are taken from the on-line Project Gutenberg file, without pagination. See: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3913/3913-h/3913-h.htm> [accessed March 2014]. Rousseau completed his *Confessions* in 1769, but they were not published until 1782, four years after his death. Rousseau started another book, entitled *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, shortly before his death in 1778, and this too was published in 1782. In the *Reveries*, he reflects on the *Confessions* of ten years earlier, and admits it was not as truthful as he claimed – not because it falsified

Moral luck and perspective

Two of the dominant motives for writing an autobiography are justification and contrition. In order to get a philosophical handle on this, it will be useful to consider the topic of 'moral luck', the term coined by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel in their 1976 *Aristotelian Society* symposium.¹⁶ Consider Williams's example of a semi-fictionalised amateur French painter named Paul Gauguin (Williams 1981, 23), who abandons his wife and children in Paris in order to devote himself full-time to his art, in Tahiti. At the time of the abandonment, it is important that he is unknown to the world, and not yet sure he even has the required talent. This is the 19th Century, and we (and Gauguin) can assume that the family's prospects without a welfare state are "grim". As things turn out, Gauguin does have talent, and more importantly, he manages to get his canvases intact to the Parisian art dealers, and his success is assured. Williams is not saying that the end justified the means, or that great art justifies cruelty and betrayal, or that an obligation to oneself overrides obligations to others. Rather, at the time of the abandonment, Williams stresses that the chances of success were so slim, and the chances of the family suffering were so great, that the abandonment could never be justified. Instead, concludes Williams, once success comes it *retrospectively* justifies the abandonment, and we – the art-loving public – should now be “glad” that he abandoned his family. And yet there were so many elements of good luck involved, both the ‘intrinsic’ luck of him having the talent and the ‘extrinsic’ luck of the absence of any number of different obstacles, that this example flies in the face of the widespread conception of morality as somehow immune to luck.

Now imagine Williams's Gauguin writing an autobiography, one aim of which would be to justify the shabby treatment of his family.¹⁷ Such an autobiography might constitute an appropriate public venue for expressing contrition, as well as gratitude for his wife's support during their time together in Paris. Often it is not enough for apologies to be offered, but, like gratitude and justice and revenge, they have to be seen to be offered. The exact nature of that contrition will depend partly on what happened to the family subsequently to the abandonment – Williams does not tell us. If one of the children had died from malnourishment, or if the mother had committed suicide, that would severely strain Gauguin's justification narrative, and it is in the nature of grief to be unpredictable in its effects. All of this would add grist to Williams's argument about the role of luck in the moral judgements we are inclined to make about past actions.

However, we can see here the role of perspective. Gauguin is writing the autobiography from within the perspective of a successful artist (in purely pragmatic terms, he could not have written it before because nobody had heard of him, and so no publisher would have been interested). That perspective already contains the story of the creative urge, the huge risks of Tahiti, the abandonment of his family, the loneliness and self-doubt, and the triumphant return to Paris: in short, by the time Gauguin tells his version of the story, he is *implicated* in it, and this will limit and inform the contrition he can sincerely and intelligibly profess about the past.¹⁸ In addition, the contrition will be limited and informed by the legitimate claims (voiced or unvoiced) for reparation and compensation that family members can place on Gauguin: Gauguin's response to such claims will reveal the depth and contours of his contrition. If Gauguin does not write about the reparations offered to his family, his readers will be entitled to wonder why not.

This notion of perspective is also the focus for Raimond Gaita's (2004, 240) important criticism of Williams's account of Gauguin. Gaita asks why we, the art-loving public, should accept Gauguin's perspective: why should we accept Gauguin's belief that it was necessary to leave his family in order to paint successfully? This is not a point about the unreliability of memory.¹⁹ The point is that even with a perfect memory, neither we nor Gauguin can ever know what would have happened if he had remained in Paris, or tried some other way to combine painting with the fulfilment of his family obligations (which, after all, he had freely assumed).²⁰ Given Gauguin's perspective, and what we know of the details that Williams

but because it exaggerated some of the unflattering episodes. For more on this, see Garry Hagberg's contribution to this volume (Ch. 2).

¹⁶ The best collection on the topic – which includes the seminal essays by Williams and Thomas Nagel, as well as an Afterword by Williams – is Statman (1993).

¹⁷ Gauguin's letters to his wife and friends have been published (Gauguin 2003), as well as his diaries (Gauguin 2011). But since the real Gauguin differs from Williams's in a number of points, I shall not discuss these. For a philosophical discussion of the real Gauguin see Don Levi's essay 'What's luck got to do with it?' in Statman (1993).

¹⁸ The metaphor of perspective is similar to that of a person's “moral vision”, as developed by Iris Murdoch (1956)

¹⁹ The classic text on this question is of course Proust's *Remembrances*.

²⁰ In other words, the farther Gauguin has gone down this particular ‘branch-line’ (the one inaugurated by the abandonment), the less he or anyone else can imagine what might have transpired along a different branch-line right

provides, we may understand why he might feel justified. But we could also understand why Mrs. Gauguin would see the abandonment as unjustified, whatever Gauguin's success. So on this question of justification, at least in the case of Williams's Gauguin, there can be – nor need there be – any absolute perspective on the matter. Gaita concludes: we can condemn him for abandoning his family, but we can accept that he had serious reasons for doing so. And there is nothing incompatible with condemning the abandonment and celebrating the paintings.

The shape of a life

A written autobiography may comprise no more than a series of disjointed reminiscences, guided by the intention to entertain. In contrast, a more ambitious autobiography will try to say something about the author's life as a whole, to distil the essence or meaning of that life, to show what its author stood for.²¹ As Rousseau puts it in the Introduction to his *Confessions*, "Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I."

In this more ambitious text, episodes will be reported in terms of their contribution to the whole, people will be described in terms of their importance in making the person who she has become. The concepts of success and failure over time will be much more central, together with various combinations of success and failure. Some of these texts will be focussed clearly on the author, while others will be more focussed on the project which made them famous. Some will be written by an author at the twilight of his life, as a way of closing up the shop and offering the last word for posterity; others will be written in middle age as an effort to take stock amid new plans for further greatness. More poignant are the sports celebrities who write an autobiography upon retiring from competition, perhaps in their mid-20s, while another several decades of obscurity await them (unless they are one of the articulate few who can remake themselves into a coach or commentator).

At the very least, trying to summarise one's life as a whole usually begins with a narrative arc, telling the story of humble beginnings (Frank McCourt in *Angela's Ashes*), from weakness to power (the politician Bill Clinton), from diligence and calculated risk to success (the businessman Lee Iaccoca), from self-doubt to certainty (the comedian Stephen Fry), from ignorance to belief (Augustine).²² The *Bildungsroman* tradition in literature (perhaps best characterised in the English language by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*) structures the narrative arc along the path of self-discovery and self-fulfilment. The literary device of an epiphany postpones the crucial self-discovery until adulthood or even to the deathbed, as in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Illyich*.

In these examples the shape of the life involves a broadly upward trajectory. But downward trajectories are often more fascinating for public consumption, and also more difficult for people to write about.²³ One striking example are the two autobiographies (1969 and 1976) written by Albert Speer, Hitler's personal friend, chief architect up until 1942, and thereafter Nazi Minister of Armaments until 1944. At Nuremberg he was sentenced to 20 years in prison in West Berlin, during which he secretly wrote *Inside the Third Reich* (1969), and then revised and published it three years after his release. From his release to the end of his life, he also offered countless interviews in the press, radio and television. The great historical question with Speer is: how much did he know about the genocide being carried out in the Nazi-occupied territories during the time that he was minister? There is no evidence that he was personally involved, beyond his deployment of forced labourers in his factories, most of which labourers were taken from concentration camps. But he spends a good deal of the autobiography speculating on what he could have known at the time (had he enquired), and more importantly what he should have known, and seems genuinely troubled by his past

through to the present. This notion of the branch-line comes from Derek Parfit's discussion of the 'non-identity problem' in Part IV of *Reasons and Persons* (1984). See also Velleman's discussion of Parfit, branch-lines and perspectives in 'Persons in Prospect' (2008).

²¹ The best places to start in the literature on the meaning of life is Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* (2013). See also his survey in (2002). For two very different approaches to the above, one inspired by psychoanalysis and the other by Nietzsche, see respectively Richard Wollheim (1984) and Alexander Nehamas (1998).

²² The idea of the autobiographer as a *convert* is explored by Riley (2004), using the examples of Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau and Sartre.

²³ See Velleman (1991) on the notion of upward and downward trajectory, and the impact this can have on overall well-being and the meaning of a life. More generally, see Velleman's anthology *Self to Self* (2005) for many insightful discussions of the nature of the self. The best discussion of remorse is in Gaita (2004).

ignorance. Alone among the 22 accused in Nuremberg, he accepted full complicity in the genocide. He admitted that it would be impertinent to try to apologise for so monstrous a crime, but there is no doubt that he is genuinely struggling to identify what his life has amounted to.²⁴

When trying to write what I have called a more ambitious autobiography, that is, when trying to make sense of one's life as a whole, there is sometimes a temptation to invoke the concept of fate or destiny, either implicitly or explicitly. Both concepts have traditionally been viewed with suspicion by contemporary philosophers. But there need be nothing suspicious or nonsensical about an ordinary statement such as "I knew at that moment that it was my destiny to become a painter," or "My sister had always been an angry rebel as a child, and it's no surprise that she ended up in prison." The philosophers' suspicions perhaps derive from the mistaken belief that the concept of fate collapses into one of the various kinds of determinism, and this would correctly seem to be incompatible with the free will that is so much a part of our everyday experience, of our understanding of human beings, and of my understanding of my life as *mine* in any robust sense.

However, more nuanced and philosophically legitimate understandings of fate in autobiography are available, again having to do with the perspective from within which the autobiographer tries to make sense of her past. Consider an example from Solomon (2003, 440). If my spouse has been an important part of my life, then the moment and circumstances of our first meeting acquires a new importance retroactively. Even if the meeting itself might have been uneventful, even if it was a massive coincidence, even if there had been a real risk of the embryonic relationship quickly dissolving under misunderstandings or physical separation, the fact remains that the meeting marked the beginning of a long and deep relationship, a relationship that provided not just a vehicle for me to develop and flourish in my own life choices, but that also came to partly constitute me, here, writing my autobiography. From within the determinate perspective I come to adopt when writing, that first meeting has generated a necessary component of my life, viewed as a whole.

Consider other examples: the exile who returns home can declare, without embarrassment or self-deception, that fate has brought her home. Far from being a statement about an external compulsion that would threaten her autonomy, the homecoming is an expression of her distinct individuality. A successful businessman can describe the failure of his first company as fated, in the sense of it being necessary for him to learn certain things about the world and about himself, for better or for worse. Two friends live in Prague in 1968, shortly after the Soviet invasion, and make plans to leave; one of them is successful, the other delays too long and is trapped by impenetrable borders and family loyalties. The unlucky Czech is then placed in a series of ugly dilemmas which his émigré colleague did not have to face. Clearly the two Czechs, many years later, will have different opinions on their respective fates, and this will colour the respective autobiographies they write about that period.²⁵

The papers in this volume

The volume begins with three pieces examining the relationship between autobiography and literature. Is autobiography merely another literary genre, with a narrator, other characters, relationships and a plot? Are we meant to 'understand', or to try to understand, the autobiographer in the same way that we 'understand' David Copperfield? **Marya Schechtman** responds to an influential paper by Peter Lamarque (2007), in which he claims that the distance between literature and real life can be seen by examining the work of literary critics, and showing how far it is from the way in which we strive to understand ourselves and others. To kick off her response, Schechtman uses the complicated plot of the film *Stranger than Fiction*: the main character Harold discovers that he is in fact a character in a novel created by a writer (who is another character in the film). By examining how Harold tries to make sense of his life in this absurd and often whimsical scenario, we can learn what it means for all of us to (try to) make sense of our own lives – and this will show that the distance between the real and the fictional world is not as wide as Lamarque suggests. Schechtman's main point is that authors and autobiographers are both partly constrained, when creating characters, relationships and plots, not only by the laws of physics, but also by human nature and folk psychology. (Even when the laws of physics can be broken in science fiction, the characters have to be recognisably *human* to remain interesting.)

²⁴ On Speer and his autobiographies, see Sereny (1994). Sumner Twiss (2010) compares Speer's autobiographies to the trial testimonies of Adolf Eichmann and Rudolf Hoess.

²⁵ This example is adapted from one of Nagel's in his "Moral Luck", reprinted in Nagel (1979).

Garry Hagberg also argues that the way we make sense of literary characters, and especially of the *words* that they say to each other, is a good model for the way we think autobiographically and read autobiographies. Hagberg makes a Wittgensteinian point to argue that the full, deep meaning of a word can sometimes only be ascertained by considering the full, deep context within which it is uttered, where such a context includes not only the facts about the particular situation, of course, but also facts about the particular relationship between the interlocutors, facts about the particular (mis)understandings each character has of the other, and facts about the history of that relationship. Importantly, the work of interpreting a literary character is similar to the autobiographer's work in writing the autobiography – it is certainly not a process of Cartesian discovering and reporting. To illustrate his argument, he provides a highly detailed examination of a scene from Milan Kundera's 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and then moves on to discuss Peter Conradi's 2001 biography of Iris Murdoch.

The third piece, by **Christopher Hamilton**, also focuses on a work of fiction, Alain Renais's 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The film is not an autobiography, but features two strangers trying to understand their lives, partly in parallel to each other, partly in dialogue with one another as a result of their brief erotic encounter. The defining event of the first character is the destruction of his family and his home in the bombing of Hiroshima; the defining event of the second character, a Frenchwoman, was her 'punishment' at the hands of a French mob for having a sexual relationship with a German soldier during the occupation. Both events are such as to make each protagonist painfully aware of their corporeal vulnerability. Hamilton claims that this kind of awareness is of crucial importance for an adequate philosophical understanding of the autobiographical impulse, because it captures more precisely both the fear of death but also the fear of forgetting.

The next three pieces concern the relationship between story-telling, knowledge and agency, and the way that the past conditions the present. **Marina Oshana** asks what aspects of a person's identity must be available to that person, and in what way, in order for that person to achieve ordinary autonomous agency and the capacity to be held morally responsible. In order to answer the question, Oshana avoids metaphysical speculation about the nature of the self, and investigates instead the precise nature of the damage to her identity that someone undergoes upon becoming amnesiac, demented or senile. Ultimately she concludes that autobiographical episodic memory (especially memory of intentions and plans) as well as persistent self-recognition, is central to self-governing agency. Oshana is careful to address some of the apparent ethical implications of her view, namely the thought that amnesiacs might be less than full moral persons.

John Christman examines the autobiography of a former slave and an oral history of an Indian chief. Part of the definition of trauma is that it is impossible to articulate what happened to one because the distinctions between self and world have been undermined. However, even when a systematic and sustained history of oppression falls short of trauma, individual members of an oppressed group may find it difficult to tell their story because their memories and self-conceptions are in tension with the public and legitimate standards of meaningful discourse. Christman uses this as a way to partly challenge those who claim that 'narrativity' is fundamental to selfhood. More importantly, it is the notion of agency at work in the narrativist models that needs to be reinterpreted in terms of what Christman sketches as 'diachronic practical identity'. Here the important component is 'social intelligibility', whereby agency can be seen as comprising a search for recognition. (There is an important overlap here with the oppression of women, as described in Wright's essay.)

Somogy Varga tackles the classic question of self-deception, perhaps the most obvious component of a new field called philosophy of autobiography. The risk presents itself at many stages of the autobiographical process: during recollection, during the struggle to understand and constructively interpret the recollections within the context of the time and the context of one's life as a whole, during the assembly of the story from the recollections, and during the reconsideration of one's self-concept as a result of recollecting. Varga focuses on the motive driving the autobiography, for the shape of the motive often determines the shape of the self-deception. When a singular motive such as justification or apology or the promotion of an agenda is not evident, this is where the risk of self-deception, intentional or unintentional, is greatest precisely because the author genuinely believes herself to be an honest broker. Varga is careful to avoid the 'post-modernist' oversimplification of thinking that every autobiography is a lie, and if the author believes its truth then she is necessarily self-deceived; instead, the best starting point is to consider the role of memory in the author's self-identity, since it is the perceived threat to such self-identity that usually drives and explains self-deception.

In next paper, **D.K. Levy** begins by rejecting the 'conventional' view of autobiography presupposed by Varga and many of the other contributors in the volume. The conventional view sees autobiography as a content (e.g. stories) whose production is challenging. It may be challenging because of limited evidence, distance, etc., or because the past is not fixed but must be determined. In either case there is a *practical* challenge to establishing the content of a life's past. (Talk of self-deception is not a genuine ethical challenge since self-deception is just another practical obstacle to establishing the content of past life.) What is missing from the conventional view is that every production of autobiographical content is accomplished by an 'autobiographical act', and it is this act that is the proper locus of the *ethical* challenge of autobiography. An autobiographical act is ethically charged because the motive behind the act is up for moral judgement, and because the autobiographer cannot control the medium, which subsequently threatens the status of that original moral judgement. Autobiographical content necessarily embodies the autobiographical act of creation, which in turn implies there is no ethically neutral autobiography.

Marete Mazzarella is the only contributor of this volume to come from a literary disciplinary background. In addition, however, she is only one of two contributors to have written an autobiography herself (1992) (the other being Christopher Hamilton (Ch. 3)). The book was in fact a biography of her mother, but this necessarily contained a good deal of autobiography. In her contribution, Mazzarella does two things. First, she reflects on the biography in order to ask about the various duties involved: primarily, of course, to her subject; but also to her siblings, who had equal interpretative 'claims' on their mother; and finally to herself. Crucially, what does 'loyalty' mean in the context of writing a public biography of someone close to you, especially when constrained by the need to tell a sellable story? To what degree is love and gratitude a source of insight and to what degree a source of distortion? How does one find the balance between respecting integrity and privacy, against the biographer's defining urge to psychoanalyse and speculate? Second, in revisiting the biography more than twenty years later, she speculates about her own autobiographical thoughts about her previous autobiographical thoughts. On the one hand, her 1992 thoughts were closer to the subject since she was still alive; on the other hand, her 2014 thoughts might have 'improved' with distance, objectivity, further revelation and discussion with siblings and friends.

The final two pieces discuss the autobiographies of two famous philosophers. First, **J. Lenore Wright** explores Simone De Beauvoir's four-volume autobiography (1958-1972) in the light of her 1949 [1997] magnum opus *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir begins with the question of what it is like to be a woman, and a woman philosopher, in the 20th Century: a question both intimately personal but also introducing a general discourse about the nature of oppression and its effect on identity (in this she overlaps with Christman's essay). With reference to the tradition of philosophical autobiography of Augustine through Descartes through Rousseau and Mill, Wright argues that Beauvoir challenges the traditional conception of the male autobiographer as the solipsist in a world of Others. As simultaneously a Self and an Other, Beauvoir is able to use this essential 'ambiguity' in taking the first step of understanding the social aspect of identity. She can then define herself authentically in opposition, while drawing on and speaking to the common experience of all women.

Finally, **Áine Mahon** considers the two autobiographies (1996 and 2010) of that most elusive of philosophers, Stanley Cavell. Cavell has always urged philosophical writing to follow lines of the subjective and the intimately revelatory. His work on philosophical scepticism, in particular, develops with a personal urgency markedly at odds with the usual standards and styles of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Áine Mahon follows these lines of the subjective from Cavell's earliest work on scepticism and modernism to his 2010 memoir, *Little Did I Know*. Pushing further on the philosopher's writerly risks and realisations, and distilling from his idiosyncratic oeuvre three guiding anxieties – "fraudulence", "obscurity" and "exposure" – in point throughout Mahon's discussion is Cavell's very paradoxical combination of the autobiographical and the philosophical, of the personal and the transcendent.

All in all, these papers constitute a rich but inevitably incomplete first attempt at defining this new area of philosophy. We hope that the papers, together with the adumbration of related issues in this Introduction, might inspire further work in the future.²⁶

²⁶ My thanks to Elizabeth Branch Dyson, my editor at The University of Chicago Press, for all her assistance and patience in bringing this book to fruition. My thanks also to two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments on the first drafts of this book.

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