

## PHIL30250 Philosophy of Autobiography

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### Introduction.

There are so many autobiographies on the book market: not only by philosophers (Rousseau, Mill, Sartre) but by athletes, actors, business tycoons, politicians, royalty... Moreover, these days anybody can and does publish their autobiographical thoughts on-line. So a foundational question for this module is: what are these people *doing*, exactly? And *why*?

But this module is not just about published autobiographies. It is more about the *autobiographical paradigm situation*: the Autobiographer is (i) trying to understand herself; (ii) she is trying to explain (justify) herself to a Listener, and (iii) the Listener is trying to understand her. This paradigm can take place in many different contexts, in spoken word or in writing. It might concern the explanation of a recent, discrete act; it might concern a declaration of love or hate, together with the reasons for it; it might concern a hiring panel's evaluation of a job applicant; it might concern a big decision (e.g. about career) made years ago; it might concern a person on their deathbed trying to 'explain' their whole life...

The concept of self-understanding and other-understanding are central to the module. In the case of self-understanding, we are moving away from the Cartesian ideal of self-transparency to the anguished search for obscure motivations, and the distortions of shame and vanity. In the case of other-understanding, we are moving away from the first problem of understanding the *language* to the deeper problem of understanding the Autobiographer's *experience*, as expressed through her (possibly clumsy) language.

What does it mean to 'know' another person, as when we say "I know Jones, she would never do something like that"? Once (I think) I know myself, I can then ask how 'authentic' my life is; once (I think) I know you, I can ask how 'authentic' your life is. What does 'authenticity' mean here? In its basic sense, it means living without deception or self-deception; does the notion of a "real me" make sense?

In providing your explanation or telling your story you are trying to bring me to see the world (and yourself in that world) from your point of view. This might be difficult if I do not share some of the values relevant to the explanation. In that case you may be asking me to use my imagination and place myself "in your shoes". However, your experience might remain too 'far' from my imaginative efforts. And sometimes I might be unwilling to make the imaginative effort, e.g. because I morally disapprove of your decision. Is it coherent for me to say: "I understand why you did that, even though I would not have done it in your situation"? In such a case do I *really* understand?

Another theme of the module has to do with time. I am who I am partly in virtue of what has happened to me and what I did in the past. I am who I am partly in virtue of my expectations about and plans for the future. Every individual is on their way from a determinate (only partly understood) past and toward an indeterminate (more or less unknown) future. Every individual is also a member of various relationships and memberships and she can measure her progress from past to future within the context of those relationships and memberships. Sometimes I reproach someone for "living too much in the past" or for "living too much in the future." Sometimes I accuse them of betrayal: of their past, of where they've come from, of who they are. What do these accusations mean?

It's important to spell out the starting assumptions, in order to avoid some trendy kinds of global scepticism and relativism. The problem is that if you reject any of the following assumptions, it's not clear how much you can talk about autobiography and understanding in a philosophy module. So for the purposes of this module, I will be assuming the following, and will not be spending any time arguing for them. (This also means that I do not want you to get distracted by these questions in your essays.)

- Ethics is at least partly objective.
- Competent adult humans are partly free.
- Some people do lead more meaningful lives than others.
- Every person has a character, this character might change slowly through time, and every person can indirectly control some aspects of their character.
- It is possible for one person to reliably perceive another person's mental states, perhaps even better than that person herself.
- The past has a kind of reality.

Topics not covered. The title of this module is massive, and could be filled out in dozens of interesting ways. I've chosen one set of problems, but inevitably I have had to exclude a host of other problems and approaches. Partly it's about my own lack of expertise; partly it's about the difficulty of engaging in a particular discourse and terminology without devoting the whole module to that discourse. We will sometimes bump into these discourses, but I will be careful to avoid too much immersion; just as I will ask students to avoid too much immersion:

- The subconscious, and the discourse of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis
- Serious mental illness, trauma studies
- Science fiction examples
- Brains and neurons
- Famous autobiographies by philosophers: Augustine, Rousseau, Mill, Nietzsche...

## Week by week outline

1	Mon 22 Jan	<p>Introduction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summary of module: content, structure, assessment.</li> </ul>
		*** Section A ***
	Tue 23 Jan	<p><b>Autobiography, narrative and narrative thinking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goldie P (2012) 'Ch. 2. Narrative thinking about one's past'. <i>The Mess Inside; Narrative, emotion and the mind</i>. OUP.</li> <li>• Goldie P (2012) 'Ch. 1. Narrative thinking' in the same book.</li> </ul> <p><i>Notes about readings:</i></p> <p>(i) Every week there will be at least two texts. The first text is the <i>primary</i>. That means it's the text that you have to read in order to understand the lectures, in order to take part in the tutorial discussions.</p> <p>(ii) The 12 primary texts are also the <i>only</i> texts eligible for the exam.</p> <p>(iii) The secondary texts will also be mentioned in the lectures, and they offer additional possibilities to write one of the semester essays.</p> <p>(iv) Some texts might be changed; the latest text will be the one on Brightspace.</p>
2	29+30 Jan	<p><b>The meaning of my life; and controlling the meaning of my life</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calhoun C (2015) 'Geographies of meaningful living'. <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i> vo. 32(1).</li> <li>• Hamilton C (2018) "'No one is the author of his life;'" Philosophy, biography and autobiography'. Stocker and Mack (eds.) (2018) <i>Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Literature</i>. Palgrave</li> </ul>
3	Mon 5 Feb	<i>Bank holiday. No lecture</i>
3	Tue 6 Feb  <i>Tutorials begin</i>	<p><b>The telling of the story</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jones K (2008) 'How to change the past'. Atkins (ed.) <i>Practical Identity and Narrative Agency</i>. Routledge</li> <li>• Westlund A (2019) 'Who do we think we are?' <i>Philosophy and Literature</i>, vol. 43(1).</li> </ul>
4	12+13 Feb	<p><b>Authenticity and integrity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bauer K (2017) 'To be or not to be authentic. In defence of authenticity as an ethical ideal'. <i>Ethical Theory and Moral Practice</i> vol. 20.</li> <li>• Davion V (1991) 'Integrity and radical change'. Card (ed.) <i>Feminist Ethics</i>, University Press of Kansas.</li> </ul>
5	19+20 Feb	<p><b>Guilt and shame</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ingram A (2017) 'Guilt, practical identity, moral staining'. <i>Philosophy</i> vol. 92 no. 362</li> <li>• Laing J (2021) 'Making sense of shame'. <i>Philosophy</i> vol. 97</li> </ul>
6	26+27 Feb	<b>Apology and atonement</b>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pettigrove G &amp; Collins J (2011). 'Apologizing for who I am'. <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i>, 28(2).</li> <li>• Radzik L (2004). 'Making amends'. <i>American Philosophical Quarterly</i>, 41(2).</li> </ul>
7	4+5 March	<b>Counterfactuals and regret</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masny M (2022) 'Wasted potential'. <i>Philosophy and Public Affairs</i>, vol 51(1).</li> <li>• McQueen P (2017) 'When should we regret'. <i>International Journal of Philosophical Studies</i> vol. 25(5)</li> </ul>
		<b>*** March break. No lectures, no tutorials.</b>
		*** Section B ***
8	25+26 March	<b>Knowing and understanding another person</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grimm S (2018) 'The ethics of understanding'. Grimm (ed.) <i>Making Sense of the World; New Essays on the Philosophy of Understanding</i>. OUP</li> <li>• Talbert B (2014) 'Knowing other people'. <i>Ratio (new series)</i> vol. 28.</li> </ul>
9	Mon 1 April	<i>Easter Monday. No lecture</i>
	Tue 2 April  <i>Final tutorials</i>	<b>Complicity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowles C (2021). 'Responsibility in cases of structural and personal complicity: A phenomenological analysis'. <i>The Monist</i>, 104(2).</li> <li>• Sepinwall A (2022) 'Shared guilt among intimates' <i>International Journal of Philosophical Studies</i> vol. 30(3)</li> </ul>
10	8+9 April	<b>Roles and role-performance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Care N. (1984) 'Career choice'. <i>Ethics</i>. Vol. 94(2).</li> <li>• Gotlib A (2016) "'But You Would Be the Best Mother!': Unwomen, Counterstories, and the Motherhood Mandate'. <i>Bioethical Inquiry</i> vol. 13.</li> </ul>
11	15+16 April	<b>Illness and despair</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carel &amp; Kidd (2020) 'Expanding transformative experience'. <i>European Journal of Philosophy</i> vol. 28.</li> <li>• Cowley C (2021) 'Autobiographical despair'. <i>Philosophy and Literature</i></li> </ul>
12	22+23 Apr	<b>Autobiography of evil</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rosen (2001) 'Autobiography from the other side; the reading of Nazi memoirs and confessional ambiguity'. <i>Biography</i> vol. 24(3).</li> <li>• Twiss S (2010) 'Can a perpetrator write a <i>testimonio</i>'. <i>Journal of Religious Studies</i>, vol. 38(1).</li> </ul>
13	Mon 29 April 11.59 pm	<u>Essay final draft due.</u>
14		<b>2-hour Final exam.</b> During the May exam period. Precise day and time TBC.