

## Life Writing

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# The Philosophy of Autobiography

edited by Christopher Cowley, The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 242 pp., ISBN 9780226267920

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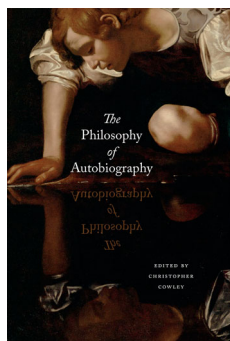
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## BOOK REVIEW

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Contemporary anglophone philosophy has paid very little attention to biography. Its traditional emphasis is on the primacy of argument, the soundness of which has nothing to do with who happens to be making it. To bring the life or personality of a philosopher into a discussion of one of their arguments brings accusation of committing the *ad hominem* fallacy: addressing the arguer not the argument. So although many leading philosophers, such as A.J. Ayer, W.V.O. Quine, Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill have written autobiographies, these are considered as mere curiosities, read but rarely studied or cited.

Ironically, this means that although it was in continental European philosophy that the idea of ‘the death of the author’ took hold, in Britain and America the authorial voice has been quietly but more efficiently and deliberately buried. This is historically curious, given the strong role of first-personal testimony in many of the tradition’s canonical texts. Plato’s dialogues are populated by characters, not impersonal arguments. Descartes’ *Meditations* was written in the form of a diary of an exercise in introspection, following the structure of a week-long religious retreat. When Hume attempted to refute Descartes’ argument for the existence of an indivisible ego, he gave not an argument but a first-person account of his experience: ‘For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time ...’

Contemporary philosophical biographophobia has been challenged recently by the increased popularity of the view that personal identity is rooted in narrative. As John Christman notes in Christopher Cowley’s timely collection of essays, *Philosophical Autobiography*, ‘We all have stories of our lives. In recent decades, however, thinkers from several fields of inquiry have insisted that *we are* the stories or our lives. That is, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, another researchers have developed models of the self or the person that portray it as having an essentially narrative structure’ (123).

The origins of this conception of the self can be traced back to at least John Locke in the seventeenth century. Locke argued that a person was individuated not by the substance that made them, be that matter or an immaterial soul, but by its psychological features. A person, he argued, is a ‘thinking intelligent being that has reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places’. This is often called the psychological continuity view of personal identity.

The inclusion of ‘different times and places’ sowed the seeds of the contemporary narrative view. Locke already saw that his view implied a special role for memory. Although being the same person over time required a certain stability of personality, beliefs, and desires, it was memory above all that linked past, present and future together into a continuous single life.

The narrative turn can be seen as a reaction against a problematic assumption made both by Locke and many of those who followed him. The psychological continuity view tended to treat the elements that constituted the self as given. To give a spatial metaphor for a temporal process, memories were like pearls on a chain and as long as memory continued to function

properly, all it had to do was keep adding the pearls and the self would continue its temporal journey.

Research in psychology has shown us that this is naive. Memories are not like snapshots or audiovisual recordings, to be accessed or played back. Memories are made, more literally than the idiom suggests. At any given moment, we are unconsciously selecting and reshaping our memories, often to make them fit with a story of our lives that we have come to accept as our true one, whether it is true or not.

As Christopher Hamilton reminds us, forms of remembering are also forms of forgetting. What we miss out matters at least as much as what we leave in (74). Such 'selective memory' is not always self-serving. Many pathologies are rooted in unhelpful narratives, such as that we 'always mess things up' or 'never do anything'.

So the psychological continuity view evolved into the idea of the narrative self, making identity over time in part a construction rather than a simple given. 'We *make* connections,' writes Garry L. Hagberg. 'The process of autobiographical writing changes the meaning and shape of our lives' (65). But as Somogy Varga shows, the question of how much the narrative of self is simply a reconstruction, a threading together of pre-existing elements, and how much it involves active construction remains a matter of debate. Varga has an easy job showing that either extreme is implausible, that the self is neither entirely given nor entirely constructed. He argues for an 'agnostic' position which maintains that 'autobiographical writing takes up a rather indefinable place somewhere on the continuum between fact and fiction' (146). On this definition, one would hope we were all agnostics now.

The idea that the narrative of self is wholly constructed would imply that the narratives we write for ourselves are not answerable to any independent reality, that there is no way of determining how truthful they are. It is hard to believe anyone seriously maintains that. Lenore Wright seems to be doing no more than stating the obvious when she writes that Beauvoir 'shows us that even if we accept that truth is always contested truth, different episodes of an autobiography can still be more for less true' (200). Contributors to this volume seem unanimous in their belief that honesty in autobiography is a real challenge and this only makes sense if there are uncomfortable truths in our lives we have to be honest about. 'Courage or other virtues are needed to follow through with truthful autobiography,' writes D. K. Levy (156).

Marina Oshana develops the importance of autobiographical memory in a very particular way. Her observation 'knowing who one is depends upon knowing what one has done' is one many share (111). Interestingly, however, if true it invites the question of how many people really know who they are. Those who wilfully or otherwise forget or distort their histories distort their self-image in the present too.

Oshana's more original claim is that 'memory, and principally autobiographical episodic memory of past experiences, is a central element in our standing as self-governing agents' (97). She allows that we might be persons even in the absence of episodic memory, as case histories of people with severe forms of amnesia suggest. But being a fully-functioning agent, capable of making meaningful choices, requires memory. Otherwise what we choose has no deep grounding, it is simply a whim of the moment.

I'm not completely convinced by this argument. Perhaps this is because I have a poor episodic memory combined with weak factual recall. When I make a choice I am not always conscious of the past grounds of my decision. Still, my choices are grounded in my cumulative experience, in ways I can't always articulate. Nonetheless, Oshana's essay is a useful corrective in a debate that tends to centre on the category of personhood as a sense of self without due attention to the importance of agency as self-directed action.

Although we all accept that memory is unreliable, some kinds of memory are more trusted than others. As Varga reminds us, Rousseau for one accepted that his memories of events could be mistaken and so his autobiography could contain unwitting falsehoods. However, he thought he could not be wrong when reporting his feelings. After a century or so of empirical psychology, we cannot be so sure today. The idea that our emotions are transparent to ourselves has become increasingly implausible. It is now a commonplace to accept that someone might act out of envy while telling themselves they are not envious at all, or be grieving for someone they claim not have loved. First-person infallibility about the contents of our consciousness is another Cartesian myth that has proven remarkably difficult to completely eradicate.

At other moments, Rousseau seemed to understand that even his own emotions were not transparent to introspection. Garry L. Hagberg points to a passage in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* when Rousseau says he has a ‘struggle to understand’ an impulse he had. As Hagberg notes, ‘this is hardly the look of a ready, immediately available inward autobiographical content’ (61). Indeed, Hagberg struggles to even make sense of what this would look like. ‘It is not at all clear what we might mean by autobiographical content being already there, awaiting transcription,’ he writes (60).

It should be pointed out that the idea that narrative forms the basis of personal identity faces more challenges than are confronted in this volume. One notable absentee from the discussions is Galen Strawson, who argues that a sizeable minority of people are by fundamental disposition what he calls ‘episodics’ who have little or no interest in their past or future selves. When episodics hear people talk about the essential presence of narrative to give identity, it is as though a different species is being described.

If, however, we do accept that our sense of self and identity is at least in large part based on the narrative we give to our lives, several questions arise. One is the extent to which it is helpful to think of this narrative in quasi-literary terms. Peter Lamarque, who appears vicariously in this book, thinks it is not helpful at all. He argues it is a mistake ‘to suppose that our own life narratives are mini-works of literature copying with the principles of literary appreciation’ (25). Life and literature contain fundamental differences, not least that while every details in a works of fiction are chosen to carry significance, much of life is simply chance.

As long as we accept that fictional and lived narratives are merely analogous rather than sharing the exact same set of properties, Lamarque’s objection remains far from devastating. As Marya Schechtman argues *contra* Lamarque, thinking of our lives in narrative terms can help us to make sense of them. Taking as an example Marc Forster’s film *Stranger than Fiction*, she says of the protagonist Harold that ‘it is by thinking about what kind of story his life is that Harold gains the perspective needed to change it’ (20). It seems unfortunate that she, like several other contributors to the volume, chooses a fictional example in an argument for the usefulness of narrative in non-fictional life, but the point still stands. ‘Stepping back from our day-to-day activities and thinking about the overall shape and direction of our lives is part of what makes us the kind of beings that we are,’ she says (31), ending with the well-earned conclusion that ‘Truth may or may not be stranger than fiction, but the two are not, at any rate, completely discontinuous’ (37).

One surprisingly neglected features of autobiographical narratives is that they contain other characters. In writing about ourselves we cannot but write about others. This carries with it a moral responsibility to be fair and to respect privacy. The Finnish writer and critic Merete Mazzarella gives a candid and thoughtful account of her own struggles about how to represent her mother in her own memoirs. She is clear from the start that she is ‘not a philosopher’, but her sensitive, inconclusive discussion beautifully models the moral seriousness with which an

author should approach these issues (178). It is hard to imagine a more conventional article offering arguments for principles to follow being more instructive.

Other writers explore the ways in which the identity of the self is at least in part determined by one's place in the social order. The idea of the self as relational – being what it is because of how it stands in relation to others – is mainstream in East Asian thought but peripheral in the more individualistic West. It is therefore refreshing to read J. Lenore Wright argues that the distinctive contribution of Simone de Beauvoir's four volumes of autobiography is the way in which it inextricably links self and other. 'Beauvoir's autobiographical reflections challenge traditional philosophical conceptions of the self by moving between the particular and the universal', she writes (195). Beauvoir employs a 'double voice', borrowing JoAnn Pilardi's phrase, in which the autobiographical 'I' can stand both for herself as an individual and for women as a whole. It 'represents the self as both singular and collective: a self in relation to others' (194).

John Christman also develops the idea of the relational self. 'Insofar as narratives depend for their meaning on their reflection of culturally located semiotics (meaning-bearing symbol systems),' he writes, 'then the person's relation to her culture becomes central to who she is, and not central in the sense of "important" but central in the sense of "constituted by"' (127). This means that when an individual is separated from their community, prevented from relating properly to it, they are deprived of important elements of their personal narrative and therefore of many resources of identity.

Christman uses the examples of memoirs and fictional accounts of the lives of slaves and American Indians to illustrate this. He suggests that when novelists like Toni Morrison 'use stream of consciousness and first-person narrative to express the memory and consciousness of those subjects to oppressive circumstance, racism and slavery in particular' they do so in a way in which the stream of voices is 'fragmented, disconnected, and jarringly incomplete, reflecting, one could say, the struggle for narrative self-reconstruction without presupposing it' (133).

Christian's conclusion can be seen in part as a response to Oshana's argument about agency. He shows that, deprived of the social narrative that forms part of the individual narrative, a person can still act with an agency that often 'amounts to a *search* for recognition by a culture' (136). Therefore 'the seat of agency is not entirely a narrative ... agency precedes narrative (in a full-blown sense of that term) but also that often being a person simply means struggling to find a social location in which one can be at home in the world' (137).

One of the more original arguments developed in this volume is for D.K. Levy's claim that the moral judgements we make about an autobiography should not be about the life of the author but the work (175). 'The character of the past (fine or foul) does not determine whether recording it in an autobiography is discreditable,' he writes. 'It is the motive in the autobiographical act that determines the act's discredit or not' (161). The 'autobiographical act', claims Levy, always has a motive and 'where there is a motive, there is the possibility of a moral judgement of the motive' (158).

On this view 'Autobiography is a testimony' (167). The biography asserts, the autobiographer attests. In writing an autobiography the author is therefore offering 'the moral judgement of her life, with her authority'. This, he claims, is 'essential to the autobiographical act' and 'the degree to which this is absent is the degree to which an autobiography is diminished as autobiography' (169).

Levy's claim is perhaps too strong. Accepting that the autobiographical act is an appropriate subject of moral evaluation does not require accepting that the life itself is not. Also, autobiography is too malleable a genre to always have to take the form of testimony about the worth of one's own life. Autobiographers such as Nelson Mandela and the Rwandan humanitarian Rusesabagina do not need to justify themselves. Their testimonies are more witnesses to the

times they went through and the people who suffered than they are chronicles of their own virtue, evident though that is. Still, Levy does a service by asking us to attend as much to the autobiographical act as the autobiography itself.


Two of the essays in the collection invite us to consider the extent to which philosophy itself requires autobiographical reflection. Lenore Wright argues that ‘Beauvoir teaches us that one cannot do philosophy without enacting autobiography’ (214). The meaning of this is perhaps best brought out in Áine Mahon’s essay on Stanley Cavell. She describes as Cavell’s ‘temptation’ his desire ‘to align the central task of philosophy not so much with analysis but with description’ (227). On this view, philosophy is more about carefully attending to and observing how things are than it is about constructing arguments and deconstructing concepts. It is, however, a kind of observation that has as its aim intersubjective agreement, not merely a declaration that this is how the world seems to me. Hence ‘Before we can claim agreement with others ... we must ensure the stability and integrity of our own experience; we must demonstrate both willingness and ability to stand by our every observation and judgment’ (234).

It is because Cavell took this responsibility seriously that he suffered the ‘anxieties of fraudulence, obscurity, and exposure’ (234). Perhaps feeling these is the pre-requisite for any honest philosophising. To take an honest look at the world, we first have to take an honest look at ourselves.

### Notes on contributor

**Julian Baggini** is the author, co-author or editor of over 20 books including *How The World Thinks*, *The Virtues of the Table*, *The Ego Trick*, *Freedom Regained* (all Granta) and, *The Edge of Reason* (Yale University Press). He was the founding editor of *The Philosophers’ Magazine* and has written for numerous newspapers and magazines, as well as for the think tanks The Institute of Public Policy Research, Demos and Counterpoint. He has also appeared as a character in two Alexander McCall-Smith novels. His website is [www.microphilosophy.net](http://www.microphilosophy.net).

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