

MCINTYRE AND STRAWSON ON THE ROLE OF NARRATIVITY

Comparison between McIntyre and Strawson on the Role of Narrativity

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Abstract

Galen Strawson, a British Philosopher, is concerned about two aspects of life. Unlike many philosophers and theorists, he is not for the theory of “narrativity” (Strawson, 2005). He argues it out against two key theoretical paradigms, that is, “episodicity” and “diachronicity”. Strawson attempts to relate these two theories to the theory of Narrativity which he is completely against. On the other hand, Alasdair Macintyre, also a Philosopher, renowned for his contributions in “the study of moral and political philosophies” has a different view from Strawson (Frazer.1994). Macintyre has published a number of works, among them “Whose Justice-Which rationality; Three rival versions of Moral Inquiry; Dependent Rationality Animals, and most importantly, After Virtue”, one of his widely read publications and which constitutes a theme of discussion in this paper. Alasdair argues about Narrativity by looking into “the Virtue, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition” (Alasdair, 2007)

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Introduction

This paper compares between the views of Galen Strawson and Alasdair Macintyre on the role of narrativity in building a good life. It seeks to find out what Galen says in his work titled “The Self- Against Narrativity” and how his stand against narrativity redefines the dominant theories of life (Frazer.1994). The theoretical views of Galen have been compared to the views of Alasdair who takes a rather different stand on the role played by Narrativity. His position may be more or less emulative to the views of Galen. In his work titled “After Virtue”, Alasdair has argued it out by looking into the unity of life and its traditional conception.

The Thesis Statement

How do the two argue about the role of Narrativity in terms of bettering human life? Where do they differ and who between Galen and Alasdair seems to be more practical in approach? These are a few of the thesis questions this paper attempts to critically analyze. It first delves into the work of Galen, then discusses on what Alasdair says in “After Virtue”. The two collective views are analyzed under a subset of this paper before finally coming to conclusion.

Galen Strawson on the role of Narrativity

Galen begins by explaining the two areas he intends to argue about. He elaborately attempts to compare and contrast between empirical and normative theoretical perspectives of Narrativity. Empirical theorists are concerned about describing how things work in the observable world, “the empirical thesis about the nature of ordinary human experience” (Strawson, 2005); where as Normative theorists

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are after making judgment about the world they observe, “a case in which we ought to live our lives normatively or as a story” (Strawson, 2005).

In describing empirical narratives, Galen posits that every human being “constructs and lives a narrative, and that this narrative is ourselves and our own identities which is continuously rewritten in the form of a story” (Strawson, 2005). Human beings continuously develop based on their perpetual narrativity about their lives, reflecting in their past lives, present and even the unforeseen future. This is what Galen perhaps referred to as the thesis of empirical narrativity (Frazer, 1994).

In his second thesis, which he calls “the thesis of normative narrativity”, Galen asserts this is a situation where human beings struggle to live their lives in accordance with a certain set of principles which dictates, not how they live their life but how it should be lived. In normative narrativity, “an individual establishes his own identity only by forming an autobiographical narrative telling a story of his personal life and has to be in possession of a complete and explicit narrative about his life in order to advance into a full being” (Mendus, 2001).

Galen notes narrativity is in fact the order of the day in various academic disciplines, where individuals are engaged in an intensively fashionable process of making narrative out of themselves (Strawson, 2005). Talk of anthropology, literature studies, philosophy, religious studies, political theory, medicine, theology, psychology or even sociology, “there is a widespread agreement that human beings typically see, live or experience their lives as a narrative”. He adds all the disciplines to a greater extent approves to the narrative state of life, where life is constituted of some sort of stories or a collection of stories ranging from the furthest past to the unforeseeable futures

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(Mendus,2001). The narrative stories may be presented in form of autobiographies or what they call resumes in the modern times. He assigns a specific name to such aspects of Narrativity in the academic disciplines, terming them as “psychological Narrativity thesis” (Strawson, 2005).

In explaining further before he tells us what his stand on the role of narrativity is anyway, Galen probes into the case of theoretical perspectives of narrativity once again. Here, he is talking about “the descriptive thesis and the normative thesis” (Strawson, 2005). According to his assumptions, these two theories are made up of “four main combinations”.

As he expounds, first, “some would believe that descriptive theses are true and the normative are false”. In this school of thought, it is somehow strongly held that we are indeed living narrative lives which should not be the case. Instead, we should make it descriptive as proposed in this paradigm of thinking. The second set of thinkers, as per the arguments of Galen, would be those who believe “the descriptive thesis is falsified as opposed to the normative thesis” (Mendus,2001).This would mean that human beings are not right in living a descriptive life, and instead, life should be narrative for it to be good.

The third component which is his second last in rank is on those who believe both the descriptive and the normative thesis are true (Strawson, 2005). In this group of thinkers, a good life is a product built from both the descriptive and the normative thesis. An individual falling under this set “may think that all normal non-pathological human beings are naturally Narrative and also that Narrativity is critical in ascertaining a good

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life” (Strawson, 2005). Galen emphasizes that “this is the dominant view in the modern academic fraternities, followed by the second view”.

Lastly, there will be those who hold that neither descriptive nor normative thesis are true, or even have something to do with good life. This is the stand firmly held by Galen Strawson. He believes “the current widespread acceptance of the third view is simply regrettable” (Strawson, 2005). In the third view, just to joke the memory, it is argued that both the descriptive and the normative thesis of narrativity are true and crucial in building a better life. This is a stand that Galen is sternly refuting, perceiving it as an unfortunate assumption which is populated by many individuals.

He contends “it is not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time” (Strawson, 2005). Additionally, Galen finds it not very convincing to himself, because he believes there are a group of other people who do not live a narrative life, but they still live a good life (Matravers, 2006). This, as he checks, is hindered by both the third and the second views on Narrativity going by how he ranks them here.

In mitigating his stand against Narrativity, Galen explains, “the second and the third schools of thought would hinder human self understanding, shut down significant avenues of thought, deprive our grasp of moral possibilities, unnecessarily and erroneously anguish those who fall out of the model, and potentially distract psychotherapeutic frameworks” (Strawson, 2005). This is what he is really after making right by outdoing the wrong views of life in his own judgments.

He begins by distinguishing between two things, “one’s experience of oneself when one is considering himself principally as a human being taken as a whole”

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contrasted to “one`s experience of himself when one is regarding oneself principally as an inner mental entity” (Strawson, 2005).

What forms the basis of Galen`s point of concern is therefore “the phenomena of experiencing oneself as a self”. He notes that among the most critical ways by which individuals often think of themselves either independently or religiously “are such things whose persistence conditions are not obviously the same as the persistence conditions of a human being regarded as a whole” (Strawson, 2005). This has been expressed by different thinkers and philosophers like Proust, Parfit and Petrarch among other thinkers (Matravers, 2006). Galen, however, chose to take another distinctive viability. In his rather new approach to resolving the dominant misconception about the role of narrativity in life, he compares and contrasts between “Diachronic and Episodic self experience” (Strawson, 2005).

Diachronic self experience implies “one naturally figures oneself, considered as a whole and as something that was there in the past and will continue to be there in the unforeseen future” (Strawson, 2005). In this case, we could as well be talking about the spontaneous nature of life, where by it is nature that defines our lives either “badly or goodly”. Galen states “many people who are diachronic are also narrative in their outlook on life” (Strawson, 2005).

Episodic self experience is the typical opposite of diachronic, where by “one does not figure out oneself, considered as a self and as something that was there in the past and will continue to be there in future” (Strawson, 2005). This is an absurd side of life, “one has little or no sense at all that the self that one is, was there in the past and will be there in the future”, even though an individual may be quite well informed that “he has a

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long term continuity considered as a whole human being” (Strawson, 2005). In Episodic self experience, an individual is not likely to see himself in terms of a narrative.

It has, however, noted here that either “Episodic or Diachronic distinction” is not synonymous to “Narrative or Non-Narrative distinction” as may be construed, albeit there are remarkable correlations between the two sets (Strawson, 2005).

Alasdair Macintyre on the role of Narrativity

Alasdair Macintyre begins by stating, the modern society is socially fragmented, to the extent that purpose of unity may never be achieved. In his philosophy, human beings tend to refer to the self experiences, “episode by episode”. And a deviant from this “arena of social relationship” if its role is separated from “the Sartrean way” (Alasdair, 2007).

In his work titled “After Virtue”, Alasdair is basically discussing about “fragmentation of the modern life and the continuity of self” Alasdair argues “it is natural to think of the self as a narrative” (Alasdair, 2007). Alasdair argues further “explanation of what we are doing actually requires a reflection of the past and the future” (Alasdair, 2007). This stand contradicts the views of Galen who believes life is not built upon narratives or some sort of stories (Strawson, 2005).

The building foundations of life often have multiple historical accounts. The purposes of such accounts may be to connect to “the long trajectories of history and the future” (Alasdair, 2007). And there could be no human behaviors devoid of “intensions, settings and history”. Moreover, even “analytical philosophers” are concerned about the human actions and how human beings can individuate. As a matter of facts, there are circumstances for every aspect of life (Alasdair, 2007).

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In our daily conversations, we make statements, perhaps, about our lives in the past, present or in future times. But “to understand conversations you overhear you have to put them into a certain framework” (Alasdair, 2007). Actually, our day to day conversations have a crucial role to play, and like any other, they possess both the climax and the end. So, at the end of the day, all these constitute a narrative state of life. For instance, “if we have to describe George Washington, we may do it in a variety of ways”, meaning, George Washington “can be fit into many narratives”. This is an evident that human beings are “often in multiple narratives” (Alasdair, 2007). It is from this point that we are supposed to understand that “we are only the co-authors of our narratives...and we are subordinate in other people`s narratives” (Alasdair, 2007).

Alasdair believes human being is “a story telling animal”, ever questioning itself “what stories am I made up of?” and whether there is a point at all in its story (Alasdair, 2007). He contends tradition provides people with “the uber stories” and that irrespective of “what the empiricists say, there is continuity in the human self narratives that makes the past present” (Alasdair, 2007). To Alasdair, “we are not just psychological states or events” as others would tend to believe (Alasdair, 2007).

The concept “narrative of selfhood” may be explained on a dual thesis” (Alasdair, 2007). To begin with “we are what others think we are and that`s what make up ourselves` story”, and secondly, “we are subject to ourselves story” (Alasdair, 2007). To clarify his point, he elaborates “you may be both son and husband, but you are also the single you about which the stories are told” (Mendus, 2001). Every person is therefore accountable to stories about themselves.

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As per the views of Alasdair, “the unity of life consists in its continuity”, in which case, life perceived as moral should answer the question of what could be good about life (Frazer, 1994). If life is a quest, then what is your quest for life as a person? Reflecting back to medieval times, there were predominantly two significant features to the “medieval quest stories”. The stories “had a goal and a predetermined end” (Alasdair, 2007). In a nut shell, a good life of a person is that which he spent searching for a good life, and “the requisite virtues are those which help him find the answer to good life” (Mendus, 2001). In this way, the narratives or stories about life of our own may also be good.

Discussion

Galen is in conformity with the notion that generally, human beings can live a narrative life and if not, then at least to some extent life is a characteristic of narrativity (Matravers, 2006). This is in fact the position assumed by Alasdair.

Alasdair, however, seems to diverge and not in support of the first rank of categorization made by Galen, with regard to the theoretical perspectives of Narrativity. The first rank in this case is where “one may think of descriptive thesis as true and normative thesis as false” (Strawson, 2005). Alasdair goes for the second categorization, where the normative thesis is perceived as true and the descriptive thesis false.

Unfortunately or fortunately, Galen is not in support of either the first or the second, neither is he for the third set, where both the normative and the descriptive thesis are held to be true. Instead, Galen comes up with the fourth set where both cases

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are falsified. This is an apparent evident indicating Galen is completely “Against Narrativity”. And so; his stand is justified in accordance with his views.

Galen`s reasons for not accepting “Narrativity” to constitute the virtues of good life as held by Alasdair is that it is not ion favor of all, there are those who do not live a narrative life, yet still, they lead a good life. But this claim sharply contradicts with what Alasdair believes in(Frazer.1994).

According to Alasdair, “human being is a story telling animal”, ever questioning itself “what stories it’s made up of (Alasdair, 2007). And irrespective of what other philosophers or thinkers may say “there is continuity in the human self narratives that makes the past present” (Alasdair, 2007).

Conclusion

In general conclusion, Galen and Alasdair differs broadly in their arguments on the role of Narrativity. As much as Galen tries to convince us that narrativity is not the ultimate virtue to a good life, Alasdair wants to make us believe otherwise. We are thus left at a cross road on whose views top follow. The floor is left for debates and what to believe in remains an individualistic asset.

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