

# Don Quixote and The Narrative Self

**Stefán Snaevarr asks, are our identities created by narratives?**

Once upon a time a philosopher wrote an article called ‘Don Quixote and The Narrative Self’. He commenced by saying: In this essay, I will discuss the question of whether our selves are constituted by narratives, ie stories. Are we like Don Quixote, whose self was created by his reading of medieval romances: are we *Homo quixotienses*, the narrative self? Or are we rather like the protagonist of Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, Antonin Roquentin, whose life did not form any narrative unity? Are we in other words rather *Homo roquentinenses*?

The idea that our life is a story is by no means new. Thus the great bard Shakespeare said that life “...is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” (*Macbeth*) However, it took philosophers some time to discover the philosophical import of this view of life. It was actually a German chap called William Schapp who first gave this age-old idea a philosophical twist. He maintained that we live our lives in a host of stories, which have connection with the stories of other people in various ways; so actually, our selves are nothing but cross-sections of stories. Our identities are created by a vast web of stories, as is our relationship with reality. We understand and identify things by placing them in the stories we tell about them: just like selves, things do not really exist outside of stories. We are caught in this narrative web because we cannot exist outside of it. There is a world-wide web of stories: the world is that web.

Schapp’s main book was published fifty years ago, and was ignored by the philosophical community of the day. But in recent years, ideas resembling those of Schapp’s have become increasingly influential. What I call *narrativism*, the view that we are *Homo quixotienses*, is becoming quite popular.

What could explain this change in the intellectual climate? I think that one of the things which brought about this pro-narrativist change is the downfall of modernism in literature. Modernists such as French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet wanted to do away with ordinary storytelling. Ordinary stories were regarded as superficial and without any power to show the real nature of human life. Human life is simply not like a narrative, the modernists thought. This anti-narrativism had its heyday when Schapp was writing his books, so no wonder he was ignored. Then in the Sixties post-modernism arrived on the scene and telling stories in novels became all the rage again. Great storytellers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez were the darling of the *literati*. Believing in the redeeming quality of stories is now in vogue. Every day someone publishes a book telling you how you can become rich/ famous/happy/popular by telling stories.

My aim in the remains of this article is more modest. I want to introduce to you the thought of two celebrated narrativists. Both have developed influential conceptions of our identities as being structured by stories. The first one is Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre; the second is the French thinker Paul Ricoeur.

## MacIntyre

Like so many modern philosophers, MacIntyre's starting point is the analysis of language. He says that our utterances are not really understandable unless we can place them in narrative contexts. Imagine that we are waiting for a bus for instance, and a woman next to us all of a sudden says, "The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*." To be certain, we understand the meaning of the sentence uttered: the problem is to understand the point of her uttering it. Suppose that the woman utters sentences like this at random intervals, in which case this would probably be a form of madness. But her uttering of the above sentence would be rendered intelligible if for instance we found out that she has mistaken me for a person who approached her in the library some days ago and asked her for the Latin name of the wild duck. We would also understand her action if we discovered she mistakenly thought I was her co-spy and she was uttering a code sentence to be decoded by me. In each case her act of uttering only becomes understandable by being put in a narrative context. The same holds for utterances in general.

Similarly, MacIntyre maintains that personal identities must have a narrative structure. Our actions are episodes in stories, not least in our own personal stories. As the above example illustrates, any action cannot be given an identity unless it is placed within an agent's biography. Further, MacIntyre says that even if *we* can theoretically doubt the unity of our personality – doubt that we are the same persons today as we were ten years (or ten seconds!) ago – other people do not doubt this unity. We can for instance be held responsible for actions we did a decade ago. This can only happen because others regard us as having a narrative totality. MacIntyre uses an example inspired by Alexandre Dumas' famous novel *The Count of Monte Christo*. Its protagonist is in a certain context described as "the prisoner of Chateau d'If" and in another context "the Count of Monte Christo." To understand that we are talking about the same person only means that we can recount a story about how this person can under different circumstances be characterised in two completely different ways. In this fashion, a person's identity is precisely the same type of identity presupposed of a character in a novel or a play. This unity is in turn a function of the unity of the narrative. Thus persons are abstractions from narratives. At the same time, MacIntyre emphasises that the concept of personal identity is not only logically dependent upon the concept of a narrative, but it's also the other way round. In other words it is meaningless to talk about a character biography unless one presupposes that its subject has a personal identity. The biography must be about a continually-existing thing. Conversely, it is pointless, meaningless, to state that some being has a personal identity through time, and at the same time deny that this being has a possible biography.

To my mind, MacIntyre's analysis suffers from some significant unclarities. He ought to clarify whether or not he thinks our actions as such are in some way narratives themselves. If not, can they *only* be identified by means of narratives, even they are not stories themselves? It seems to me that he opts for this option, but I cannot be sure unless he clarifies the issue.

Secondly, our Scottish thinker relies too heavily on ordinary, common-sense conceptions of action and identity, and on the particular examples he gives. I feel there is a lack of systematicness in his theories about actions and identities; his approach is too intuitive. This same holds for his idea of our lives being stories. But I do agree with his contention that actions are basically narratively structured and described.

## Ricoeur

Like MacIntyre, Ricoeur thinks that our actions have a narrative dimension. We fuse the temporal units of our actions together in the same way as in a story. But in contrast to the Scottish philosopher, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur emphasises the difference between life and stories. Our lives are not narratives, strictly speaking. Stories are told, lives are lived. But narratives still play a decisive part in our lives.

In the first place, an examined life is a life that must be examined through stories. We relate to ourselves by relating stories! Secondly, narratives play an important role in the creation and sustaining of our identities. Narratives do that by mediating between two basic aspects of our identities. On the one hand, we can talk about our identity as *idem*, or *sameness*, or on the other hand as *ipse*, or *selfhood*. *Idem* is the simple identity of a person as a thing in time and space. *Iipse* is the being of self, ie the being of someone who can relate to himself and has a history which he or she can consciously reflect upon. *Idem* provides us with answer to the question ‘What am I?’ *ipse* the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’

*Idem* can be divided in two sub-types of identities. One is numerical identity: my body is exactly what it is and not another body. The other type is a qualitative identity of the kind we refer to when we say that two ladies have the same dress on. The dresses are identical in the sense of being exchangeable; they have exactly the same qualities. Seemingly, the *idem* is partly the identity of the body, such that I can be said to have the same body I had as a new-born baby, even though I had not developed a self, an *ipse*, at that time. Similarly, a person who has lost his/her self due to Alzheimer’s disease might be considered the same as before in the *idem* sense of the word, even though he or she in some sense has lost his or her personhood.

*Iipse* (selfhood), is on the one hand the type of identity we can have as characters, not least as characters in stories. On the other hand, the identity of selfhood is the identity of the one who keeps his/her promises, for example. This latter part of the self is the voluntary side of it. We can choose whether or not to keep promises. Furthermore, we *create* parts of our selves by keeping or not keeping promises. By such acts we create our selves as ‘reliable’ or ‘unreliable’ persons. In contrast to this, we cannot choose the character we play. We cannot choose our talents or temperament. The one who plays the role of the dim-witted guy remains stupid.

There is a dialectical tension between *idem* and *ipse*. The reason is that it makes sense to talk about *ipse* even though the person changes quite a bit; at the same time the *idem* demands consistency: we want to say we are talking about the same thing. How can it be that we have certain permanence through time while changing all the time? It is narrative which solves this problem: it mediates between *idem* and *ipse*.

In all narratives there is both permanence and change – in Ricoeur’s vocabulary ‘concordance’ and ‘discordance’; the latter being unexpected events which disturb the sense of permanence. A story manages nevertheless to unite permanence and change. Analogously, it unites *idem* and its concordance, with *ipse* and its tendency towards discordance. It is a question of a synthesis of heterogeneous elements.

To understand this we must take a brief glance at Ricoeur's theory about the general function of narratives. Narratives, or more precisely *plots*, synthesise reality. A plot fuses together intentions, causal relations, and chance occurrences in a unified sequence of actions and events. Ricoeur seems to think that the plot creates a unified pattern in a chaotic series of events, ties them together, making them meaningful wholes. Thus, through the lens of the story we see things in a particular way, just as we can see the Jastrow figure as a duck, given a certain perspective. Another narrative could presumably give a rabbit perspective on things.

'Plot' plays an important role in creating the permanent aspects of human character. Just as in Ricoeur's scheme plot plays a constructive role for narratives, creating their permanent aspect, *mutatis mutandis* the same holds for human character. But despite unifying plots, narrative identities change all the time. They are not closed and static, but demand openness and freedom. In Ricoeur's own words, "Life is an activity and passion in search of a narrative." ('Life in Quest of Narrative') The self is not given; it is something that must be created. It must also be appropriated in communication with others and with the aid of stories: narratives can help make our lives meaningful. It seems that Ricoeur thinks that this meaningfulness is an essential part of the self.

The problem with Ricoeur's theories is first and foremost his unclear, Continental way of expressing himself and the similarly Continental lack of examples and definitions. Further, I do not understand why narratives are needed to bridge the gap between *idem* and *ipse*. It seems to me that *ipse* (selfhood) is both permanent and changeable at the same time, in contrast to the *idem*, which is all permanence. This suggests that the idea of *idem* is superfluous, unless it is regarded solely as the permanence of the body (but it does seem that by '*idem*' Ricoeur means something more than just bodily permanence). The *ipse* already contains the moment of permanence, ascribed to the *idem*. Maybe our French thinker ought to just do away with the concept of the *idem*. The narrative still has work to do, not in mediating between the *idem* and the *ipse*, but in mediating between the discordant and concordant moments of the *ipse*.

Despite this minor quibble, Ricoeur's thinking is extremely inspiring. He manages to show that narratives play an essential role in the constitution of our selves, without succumbing to the dogma of life itself being a story.

## Conclusion

Who has not read *The Arabian Nights*? Who does not remember the cunning princess Scheherazade, who saved her life by telling the Sultan excellent tales? She had to go on recounting stories in order to evade death; similarly we must go on narrating in order to stay who we are. Thus, if Scheherazade is our mother, Don Quixote is our father, and we are narrative beings. *Homo sapiens* is indeed *Homo quixotiensis*.

© Stefán Snaevarr 2007

*Stefán Snaevarr is an Icelandic writer and a professor of philosophy at Lillehammer University College, Norway. He is the author of numerous books in Icelandic, Norwegian and English.*

### **Finding out more**

- Wilhelm Schapp (1976): *In Geschichten verstrickt* (Entangled in Stories). trans. by B. Heymann (2nd Ed).
- Alasdair MacIntyre (1981): *After Virtue*. Duckworth.
- Paul Ricoeur (1985): *Temps et Récit 3. Le Temps Raconté*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Paul Ricoeur (1988): *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 3, (translated from the French). University of Chicago Press.
- Paul Ricoeur (1988): 'L'identité narrative', in *Esprit*, 7-8.
- Paul Ricoeur (1991): 'Life in Quest of Narrative' in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narratives and Interpretation*, ed. by David Wood. Routledge.
- Paul Ricoeur (1992): *Oneself as Another* (translated from the French). University of Chicago Press.