

Narratives in Human Life: Perspectives within Philosophy, Contemporary Psychology and Neuroscience

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Introduction

Narratives are important from cultural and historical perspectives. Oral transmission of values in African traditions through storytelling is a well-known example of the use of narratives to express historical events and other important ideas like moral values, beliefs in divinities, the origin of human existence the meaning of life, and the importance of virtues to living a fulfilled human life. Thus, in traditional African setting, narratives are not just works of art but are a means of grooming personality, building a personal identity and in the transmission of values across generations. Greek mythology also shows the use of narratives to express ideas central to their understanding of the human being, human actions, the events in human life and the human being's relationship with the divine beings. Narratives have stayed with human being in development and they are contemporarily useful for understanding the structure of human lives in varied fields that study the nature of the human being from different perspectives. Contemporarily, different fields of study, such as philosophy, psychology and the neurosciences affirm that narratives are rooted in human nature and that human life has a narrative structure. This implies that for many theorists within these fields (each field having autonomy of in its own methods of study) human lives have been described as narratives and the human being is described as being within the process of creating a personal narrative which is intertwined with those of others and with the narrative of the community.

In everyday experience, we tell stories to explain things to others. We explain our actions and projects to others, starting from the beginning to the end. When people we meet tell us the stories of their lives, we are not surprised that they have one. In fact, we would be

surprised if, in trying to get to know someone, all he¹ had to tell us were the events of a short duration. In interpersonal relationships, we try to get to know people's background history, their youth and general interests in order to understand them better. Even more, we seek to know not just what they have done and what has happened to them but also what has motivated them in their actions. Thus, while asking open-ended questions about people's lives we, knowingly or unknowingly, request for narratives of such people's lives and of the events. Stories or narratives are rooted in human nature and are important to having a wide vision of the self and to understanding others.

Also from common experience, we notice that meaningful actions are not random but form part of a structured whole. We observe that human beings naturally tend to aim towards happiness; that human actions are carried out in a bid to be happy. In seeking to understand such actions therefore, even though we know the agent generally aims towards happiness, we seek to situate each particular action within the frame of the totality of his life aspirations. This global vision of the person can be viewed as his autobiography or his personal narrative which he constructs with all his action. A narrative understanding of the self is important to understanding a person.

In addition to what is discovered from common experience, many sciences including philosophy and psychology aim to deepen the understanding of the human being and human fulfillment in a more systematic way. That humans seek to be happy is a prominent theme in classical philosophy, especially moral philosophy, and in particular Aristotelian. The concepts which contemporary psychology seeks to clarify coincide with some philosophical (both anthropological and ethical) topics and the demonstration of their philosophical roots or background anthropology hidden in them could facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration in the quest of deepening knowledge about human nature and its flourishing.

Although the theme of happiness, self-understanding, self-fulfillment and self-determination pervades both the fields of psychology and philosophy, there are few studies showing the links between these fields. This paper aims to widen the dialogue avenues

¹ In this paper, for the sake of clarity and in order to avoid cumbersome repetitions, I will use the masculine pronouns he and his to refer to the human being whether male or female.

between fields working for similar goals which coincide in seeking to understand human life, the nature of human actions, how to develop excellence in character and even human happiness. I will focus more on the narrative understanding of the self (which I also refer to as the autobiographical self) and on the understanding and applications of narratives within contemporary psychology and philosophy.

This paper also draws attention to the complementarities between philosophy and other human sciences which consider narratives as important to understanding human actions and the structure of human life as a whole. Dialogue between psychology, philosophy and neurosciences could permit the elaboration of an integral vision of the human person without reducing him to a purely material object of scientific study while avoiding viewing humans within abstract theories of persons and humanity. Such global vision could facilitate our understanding of human nature.

The paper starts with a presentation of philosophical concept in narrative self-understanding which are also found in contemporary psychology, particularly “Narrative Psychology.” It then describe the concepts of the narrative self, seen in narrative psychology and briefly describes the autobiographical self in contemporary neuroscience. The conclusions of this work will show the possibility of interdisciplinary studies of contemporary behavioral psychology and philosophy. The establishment of a link between such uncommonly studied literature and classical philosophy is bound to give many insights to better understand human beings and human fulfillment.

Narrative Structure of Human Lives: Philosophical Reflections

Contemporary narratology, and narrative philosophy in general, proposes that the self is best understood when seen as a narrative self. The objective meaning of each human action and the meaning of human life as a whole is best understood when viewed as a narrative. The acting subject defines himself and describes his identity to other people with his actions within his personal narrative. Theorists from different fields have affirmed that narrative is embedded in human nature and is constitutive of being human. MacIntyre asserts that Anne Righter, a

writer and a well known analyst of Shakespeare's works, ascribed a belief to Shakespeare: that he portrayed human life in dramatic narratives because he took it that human life already had a form of dramatic narrative and indeed the form of one specific type of dramatic narrative.² The description of human life as a dramatic narrative is based on arguments that the human being comes to know through sense experience acquired in time and through discursive reflection upon that experience. Humans acquire knowledge by considering events that are causally connected but often temporally dispersed. The human being however unites or integrates the temporally dispersed information into a unitary narrative. The link between description of human lives in classic literature and a philosophy can be linked to Aristotle's description of art, especially tragedies and the role of imitation of nature in artistic representations.³

Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers who propose narratives as central to understanding human beings, presents narratives as constitutive of the human being and embedded in his very nature. In its basic sense, a narrative is a meaningful account of actions and their circumstances which are ordered according to a particular intention or set of intentions. For MacIntyre, narrativity is a central element in any attempt to understand the meaning of any individual actions. The way in which human actions are given meaning within the particular contexts is by their being fitted into stories and narratives which necessarily extend beyond specific action settings to include the whole of the individual's life, the stories of one-on-one relationships within families, society and traditions of thought and enquiry. One can say that, for MacIntyre, narratives -more than being a form of art- are essential to the understanding of human nature. The self can be best understood with narratives.

² See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, second edition, Duckworth Press, London, 1985, 143-144. Also see Robert A. Gahl Jr., "Human Nature, Poetic Narrative, and Moral Agency", Jacques Maritain Center: Thomistic Institute, 2001.

³ Philosophers who are well known for writings related to the narrative-self include, Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, and Carr David. Many of these authors, as well as Dan P. McAdams (a contemporary psychologist carrying out ongoing research on the narrative study of human lives) base their analysis of narratives on the Aristotelian concept of narratives and arts especially noticeable in the book *Poetics*. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, (translated by Stephen Halliwell), second edition, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995, 1450 b.20 – 1451 a.15. Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo are also known to have elements of narrative self-understanding in their thoughts discoverable in their written works.

According to MacIntyre, “a man in heroic society is what he does.”⁴ MacIntyre speaks of the agent as not only an actor but an author.⁵ With his free actions, the human being creates his personal narrative or autobiography. He builds his narrative identity which defines who he is. What is commonly called the self, MacIntyre refers to as the “narrative self” to remind us that that which he might think of as a supra-historical point of integration of our experience is in fact a unity only in virtue of the intelligibility of the stories of our lives.⁶

MacIntyre explains that the narrative concept of the self requires a twofold approach to understanding its elements. The first aspect is that “I am what I may be justifiably taken by others to be in the course of living out a story that runs from my birth to my death; I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else’s and that has its own peculiar meaning.”⁷ The second aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative I am part of the stories of others and they are part of mine. I am therefore accountable to others for my actions and I can demand accounts of their actions from them. Such accountability gives continuity to narratives of different events which although they are temporally spaced out, have unity.⁸

An important element of narrative self-awareness is that the narrative unity of a life is built around an ultimate goal. Human life can be seen to have the structure of a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end, united by a central ‘purpose-giving’ goal. Such a goal, which is the desired end in life, gives meaning to a person’s individual actions and links temporally separated actions and events. Human actions are thus seen as being carried out for the sake of and tend towards the ultimate end or intended purpose. The human being’s tendency towards an internal ultimate end is in accord with the Aristotelian concept of natural teleology, where a person’s life, even though multifaceted, is viewed as a unified structure moving towards its proper ultimate end or *telos*.⁹ Other important elements within the concept of a narrative self-

⁴ MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, mentions what Hermann Fränkel wrote of Homeric man: that a man and his actions become identical, and he makes himself completely and adequately comprehended in them. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

⁵ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 213.

⁶ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 15.

⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 217.

⁸ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218.

⁹ *Telos* is a word of Greek origin referring to the end proper to a certain reality. *Telos* is the ultimate end, the good for whose sake all other goods are sought. It is connatural to reality to have an end towards which it should be

understanding are its importance for moral agency and for acquisition of virtues. Also essential to the concept of the narrative self are the significance of other people in one's narrative and the notions of learning and accountability within one's community.

Given the view of narrative self-understanding presented above, an "application of narratology to moral philosophy contends that human fulfilment or happiness may only be achieved by living an intelligible, coherent, unified, meaningful and successful story. According to such a moral philosophy, we are all artists constantly engaged in the most important task possible: crafting our own selves by building the narratives of our lives around everyday actions."¹⁰ Thus the interconnection between all human actions within a narrative is essential for an understanding of self-perfection. Narratology has far reaching implications for directing the self towards perfection and a proper understanding of the role of virtues in the task of "self-creation."¹¹

Another Philosopher who has worked on narrative theory is Paul Ricoeur. Paul Ricoeur is widely recognized as one of the most distinguished philosophers of the twentieth century. His writings on philosophical anthropology stressed the importance of the themes of narrativity, identity and time. He held that personal identity always involves a narrative identity¹². Ricoeur further explains that narratives draw together disparate and somehow discordant elements into the concordant unity of a plot that has a temporal span. He also affirmed that narratives are made up not only of actions but also of characters or personages. The plots relate the mutual development of the story and a character or a set of characters. In addition, Ricoeur states that a narrative about human persons tells of both the connections

directed. As such, a human being, being a free living being, directs the self towards this end, towards happiness. Happiness is for all men, even though each one may consider its content differently. The ultimate end has to be within a complete vision of life. It is the good that determines the content of happiness and not happiness that determines the good. Noble acts are pleasurable for the virtuous man and fulfilling such acts gives him pleasure (not necessarily sentient pleasure) and some happiness.

¹⁰ See Gahl, *Human Nature, Poetic Narrative, and Moral Agency*.

¹¹ By saying that a person creates himself, I am referring to the fact that he defines his character and description one can give of him by his actions. For example, if I steal, I make myself a thief. My singular or multiple thefts give the world a description of me. This idea of self-creation with one's actions is expressed by Karol Wojtyła. See Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1979, 69–71.

¹² These general ideas regarding Paul Ricoeur's anthropology are taken from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See Benard Dauenhauer and David Pellauer, "Paul Ricoeur" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2012).

that unify multiple actions over a span of time performed in most cases by a multiplicity of persons and the connections that link multiple view points on and assessments of these actions.

In Paul Ricoeur's analysis of narrativity, we make sense of our own personal identities in as much the same way we do of the identity of characters in stories. He states that "the narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character."¹³ According to Ricoeur, in the case of stories, we come to understand the characters by way of the plot that ties together what happens to them, the aims and the projects they adopt, and what they actually do. Similarly I can make sense of my identity by telling myself a story about my own life. The narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur also manifests dynamicity in the life story in that (as he says), until the story is finished, the identity of each character is open to revision. Such revision should however be guided by certain standards towards which the individual directs himself. It should be directed towards achieving an end: the ultimate good.

With the above descriptions one sees the need for living out a coherent narrative which moves towards the ultimate good. However, in order to consciously make the right decisions that lead to happiness, one needs to know what the appropriate standards according to which one should live are. People should have clear reference points proper to a human being's constitutive identity which could serve as a guide in moulding the self and constructing his identity. Thus the question of what a human being ought to be arises. In relation to this question, MacIntyre speaks about the difference between "man-as-he-happens-to-be" and "man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-essential-nature". I propose that the reference which MacIntyre makes to the human being's essential nature as a guide for constructing one's personal narrative, could be understood as a call to listen to nature and the objective truth of who a human being essentially is. Thus, human nature and the laws inscribed in it form be the coordinates and guides to what a successful personal narrative should be.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, (translated by Blamey, K.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, 147-148.

MacIntyre adds that the transition from the former state (“man-as-he-happens-to-be”) to the later (“man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-essential-nature”) pre-supposes some metaphysical concepts: potentiality and act, and some account of the essence of a human being as a rational animal and above all some account of the human *telos*.¹⁴ Thus, MacIntyre’s approach to ethics is characteristically teleological, in that it interprets individual actions in terms of their ultimate end (*telos*); for him, that which is the good thing to do is that which is virtuous, and that which is virtuous is nothing else than that which will effectively lead to human fulfilment specifically *eudaimonia*¹⁵. Teleology and happiness are two important elements in MacIntyre’s analysis of human actions within narratives. These two elements are often found implicit within psychology’s account of the self and of human fulfilment. Although the elements are found in narrative psychology as will be shown in the next section, psychologists are often silent with regard to the role of human nature, with the ultimate good of the human according to his constitutive identity, in the construction of personal myths and in narrative self-understanding. One can therefore see that dialogue between narrative philosophy (as presented above) and narrative psychology could lead to mutual enrichment by both fields. I will now present narrative self as from the perspective of psychology.

Narratives in Contemporary Psychology: Autobiographical self and Narrative Psychology

Contemporary psychology is a fast growing and vast field of the humanities. Many books are being published and widely read on topics related to the human being, his behaviour, the formation of character and virtues, and how an understanding of the self can help achieve one’s aspirations, especially happiness. Currently, many psychologists place great emphasis on the psychology of normal individuals with more analysis of theories of normal

¹⁴ See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52.

¹⁵ Aristotle regards human life as consisting of aims and ends and describes the end at which all men ought to aim. He describes this end as *eudaimonia* and this word is usually translated as ‘happiness’. Interpreters of Aristotle generally find this translation unsatisfactory as happiness in common language describes a feeling whereas Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* means a certain kind of activity which is in accord with virtue. For more details see the introductory notes in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (translated by David Ross), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989.

psychology. The concept of narrative or of the development of personal identity through constructing life stories is one of such recently explored topics which are of notable importance in contemporary psychology. An increasing number of psychologists argue that people give meaning to their lives by constructing and internalizing self-defining stories.¹⁶ Studies related to narratives, autobiographical memory and autobiographical reasoning, have been carried out in psychology and these are in line with philosophical narrative theory.

As a view point within psychology, Narrative Psychology is concerned with the storied nature of human conduct – how human beings deal with experience by constructing stories and listening to the stories of others. Its very notion is that human activity and experience are filled with ‘meaning’ and that stories, rather than logical arguments or lawful formulations, are vehicles by which that meaning is communicated. Some of the theorists who are key figures in narrative psychology include Jerome S. Bruner, Kenneth Gergen, Rom Harré, George S. Howard, Dan P. McAdams, Elliott Mishler, Donald K. Polkinghorne and Theodore Sarbin. These psychologists see the study of narratives as a part of psychology.

I will limit my discussions within narrative psychology to narrative self-understanding and aspects related to the formation of a personal identity within a narrative and base my exposition of the role of narratives in contemporary psychology mostly on writings and studies done by Dan P. McAdams. I choose to focus more on McAdams’s studies because he is an example of a contemporary psychologist who is currently, actively practicing the profession and leading ongoing research on the self in narrative and the human narrative identity. His works are widely read and are influential making it worthwhile to explore the links between his findings and philosophy.

McAdams is a leader in the recent emergence within the social sciences of narrative approaches to studying human lives; approaches that place stories and storytelling at the centre of human personality. His writings, both books and published articles, are based on years of research and the author’s experiences in interactions with people in his years of

¹⁶ Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC, 2006 – The citation is taken from the book jacket.

psychological practice. The fact that McAdams' writings are based on experience and evidence from research work is another reason for which I have chosen to cite them.

McAdams presents a new theory of human identity: the narrative identity. He explains "how each one of us constructs, consciously or unconsciously, a personal myth" unique to each one. McAdams argues that every individual constructs a personal life story in order to find a sense of purpose and looks at how beliefs, values and self-images are used to create each story. I will now present some of the key ideas in McAdams' narrative psychology.¹⁷ I will explain some aspects of McAdams' findings which are congruent with the narrative self-understanding based on Aristotelian moral epistemology.¹⁸

McAdams considers the life story to be an internalized and evolving cognitive structure or script that provides an individual's life with some degree of meaning and purpose while often mirroring the dominant and / or subversive cultural narratives within which the individual's life is complexly situated.¹⁹ The central themes of McAdams' research work on narratives and personal identity, while considering the human person as actor (behaving), agent (striving) and author (narrating),²⁰ coincide with the Aristotelian theme of a narrative self-understanding described in the previous section.

McAdams described human lives as having a "storied nature." He affirms that "human consciousness is a matter of consciously taking up the position of narrator. A narrator is a

¹⁷ There are other related studies and observations made by other contemporary psychologists working on the same topic (e.g. works by Pasupathi, Jonathan M. Adler and Joshua Wagner) whose findings coincide with that of Dan P. McAdams.

¹⁸ Although there are many points which they have in common, narrative psychology does not provide objective and universal answers to questions as to the ultimate end of humans with regards to human fulfilment and true enduring happiness. Seeking explanations of human fulfilment in terms of a description of the human being's ultimate end are a philosophical task. Psychology gives proximate observations about the human mind and psyche that help one to understand human beings better. One sees the autonomy of both fields which should be maintained. I think that an inclusion of considerations about the role of the ultimate end, human fulfilment and happiness in theories about narratives of life could lead to more fruitful application of such theories as the narrative theory in psychology of the human being in general. Dialogue between philosophy and psychology could yield a rich harvest in the quest for a better understanding of the human and a mutual enrichment by both fields.

¹⁹ See Dan P. McAdams, *The Role of Narratives in Personality Psychology Today*, John Benjamins publishing Company, USA, 2006.

²⁰ Dan P. McAdams, *Personality Development: Continuity and Change over the Life Course*, a study published in *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61 (2010) 517-42.

teller. Consciousness involves a continual telling of lived experience, a kind of online stream of narration that flows through the minds of most sentient human beings much of the time.”²¹ His observations within narrative psychology present human life and all the events which constitute it as a narrative. Such narrative is considered as an intricate unit structure built around an internal unifying theme which its author has discovered and set as his guide, in order to make a meaningful and coherent story. Within narrative psychology, lives are seen to have a narrative structure moving progressively towards their end. In order to be meaningful, each human life should have a goal which directs single events and actions. McAdams describes narrative structure as the extent to which the story follows a temporal sequence of goal-oriented action.²² As earlier noted, McAdams however does not describe the characteristics of the main goal which should give meaning to the whole of human life and thus to the personal narratives. Answers to questions raised in the search of the characteristics of such a purpose giving goal for human life can be found within the fields of philosophy and even theology which respond with ultimate truths about human nature. The observations of the narrative structure of human life from psychology research are however valid and can shed more light on our understanding of the philosophical thought with which they are related.

As previously explained, McAdams observed that human actions are not random but are generally goal-oriented. McAdams notes that, even though actions occur in a temporal sequence, when they are oriented towards a goal, it gives the actions narrative unity and reflects their purpose. Such harmony in actions is noticeable when one considers that “life stories weave together a reconstructed past, the perceived present and the anticipated future in an attempt to provide the self with a feeling of purpose and unity.”²³ Human action is best understood when considered in the light of a guiding theme which directs human actions towards an end, forming a coherent stream with a narrative structure. The totality of such actions could be transcribed into a story -into a biography. Even when one has not lived with famous people, one can get to know them through reading their biographies. Through these narratives, one can often deduce some guiding principles for the actions and events and, if it is

²¹ McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006. 81.

²² See Jonathan M. Adler, Joshua Wagner, and Dan P. McAdams, “Personality and the Coherence of Psychotherapy Narratives” in *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41 (2007) 1179–1198.

²³ Jonathan M. Adler and Dan P. McAdams, “Time, Culture and Stories of the Self”, in *Psychological Inquiry*, 18, 2 (2007) 97-128.

a good story, one expects the narrative to flow towards an end and not just be an account of unrelated episodes. In that line, McAdams states that the personal myth or story brings together different parts of our lives in a purposeful and convincing whole.²⁴

Coherence represents stability and many narrative theories in psychology identify coherence as an especially significant feature of life stories.²⁵ Such coherence is given by the end or purpose in life. A practical application of narratives self-understanding is seen in psychotherapy. Contemporary research on narratives of psychotherapy has shown that a narrative understanding helps the patients to make sense of their psychotherapy, understanding their lives in terms of past experiences, present psychotherapy sessions and future aspirations and this facilitates their commitment to the therapy.²⁶ Thus narrative psychology which is congruent with realist anthropological (and philosophy in general) could have far reaching implications for treatment therapies and counselling of healthy individuals in contemporary psychology both within clinical and non-clinical psychology settings.

McAdams further asserts that we understand ourselves better with stories, whether the stories of others or our own life stories. He explains that a narrative mode of viewing life is essential to understanding the self. For McAdams, if you want to know me then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. Additionally he claims that if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I too must come to know my own story. It implies that “I must come to see in all its particulars, the narrative of the self -the personal myth- that I have tacitly, even unknowingly composed over the course of my years. It’s a story I continue to revise and to tell myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living.”²⁷ Thus, viewing life as a narrative should help one understand his life and actions better and to discover his identity.

²⁴ See McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, Guilford Press, New York, 1993, 12.

²⁵ This idea has been studied and expressed in writings by psychologists such as Dimaggio, Semerari, Habermas, Bluck, Labov, Mandler and McAdams.

²⁶ See Adler, Wagner, McAdams, *Personality and Coherence of Psychotherapy Narratives*.

²⁷ McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 11.

A Brief Presentation of the Autobiographical Self in Contemporary Neuroscience

Autobiographical self and narrative self are notions which are not limited to philosophy and psychology. Contemporary neuroscience also describes self-understanding with narratives. It is interesting to note that research in neurosciences support the notion of the narrative structure of lives described above. Antonio Damasio, a prominent neuroscientist describes the brain centres related to the formation of the “autobiographical self.” He explains the brain’s way of constructing autobiographies. According to him, “the autobiographical self is defined in terms of biographical knowledge pertaining to the past as well as the anticipated future. The multiple images whose ensemble defines a biography generate pulses of core self whose aggregate constitute an autobiographical self.”²⁸

Damasio’s approach is compatible with realist philosophy as he explains that autobiographies are constructed with the help of the memory of human experiences which were stored as maps in the brain.²⁹ As a working hypothesis, Damasio says that constructing Autobiographical self depends on two conjoined mechanisms. The first is subsidiary core-self mechanism and guarantees that each biographical set of memories is treated as an object and made conscious in a core-self impulse. The second accomplishes a brain-wide operation of coordination that includes invoking certain contents are from memory which are then displayed as images. The images are allowed to interact in an orderly manner with another system elsewhere in the brain, namely the protoself. The results of the interaction are held coherently during a certain window of time. Damasio then suggest parts of the brain which are likely to be implicated in the process or which are coordinators i.e. the CD Regions (convergence-divergence regions): the polar and medial temporal cortices, the medial prefrontal cortices, the temporoparietal junctions, and the posteromedial cortices (PMCs).³⁰

²⁸ Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010, 23.

²⁹ In the ninth chapter of his book *Self Comes to Mind*, Damasio explains the brain’s way of constructing narratives. See Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

³⁰ Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*, 212-213.

Although these hypotheses in neurosciences could be compatible with sound philosophy, and could coincide with the findings in psychological enquiries, there is need for interdisciplinary dialogue in order to adequately discover the points of convergence and allow for mutual enrichment by the different disciplines. One should however be cautious to avoid an excessively materialistic approach to the human being which ignores or even completely denies the spiritual dimension of the human being (the human soul and its spiritual faculties as explained from Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy and also in theology).

Conclusions

This paper made an exposition of narrative in contemporary behavioral psychology, demonstrating possible links with concepts of moral philosophy in them. I have presented innovative prospects in interdisciplinary research on the human being by highlighting common grounds in two disparate fields. This presents possibilities for performing interdisciplinary studies which would lead to a fruitful interchange of ideas and collaboration between the fields of philosophy and contemporary psychology. The possibilities for dialogue between two sectors of research which study the human person from different perspectives, and which are not often associated together, promises to have far-reaching effects in deepening our understanding of the human being and his fulfillment. Contemporary implications of narrative theories include also their applications in current psychotherapies.³¹

Human life, viewed as a structured meaningful narrative, is built around a central theme or ultimate goal which directs and guides the individual's actions and gives unity to the narrative. Both philosophers and psychologists affirm that the goals for which a person acts give meaning to his actions. Thus, in order to understand a person's single actions, a broad vision of his narrative and the ultimate goal which directs his whole life is required. Both philosophical and psychological descriptions of the narrative-self admit that a person needs a unified goal which gives meaning and purpose to his life. It is however important to note that

³¹ Contemporary psychologists have conducted research to develop methods of psychotherapy which make use of narratives. See Lieblich, Amia, Dan P. McAdams, and Ruthellen Josselson, (editors), *Healing Plots: The Narrative Basis of Psychotherapy*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC, 2004.

the ultimate goal as described by Aristotle and other contemporary interpreters of Aristotelian thought is not necessarily the same as that described by psychology.

Following MacIntyre's thought, (which agrees with both Aristotelian and Thomistic thought), true human fulfilment is reached only when the ultimate goal for which a person acts is according to the true ultimate good of humans or by aiming for the ultimate good which is proper to his status as a rational being. But psychology cannot be expected to give answers to philosophical questions, and it is therefore not surprising that narrative psychology does not describe the ultimate good of the human being, or the ethical coordinates which should guide his personal narratives.

It is the task of philosophy to give the answers to the question of ultimate good which can fulfil man's innermost desires. This philosophical task is complemented and made complete by theology. If one chooses a goal which is not appropriate to his being, he loses the chance to make the best of himself and his story might not make all the impact it could, his narrative might not reach an ending which is proper of humans. Such a narrative might fall short of the level of achievements possible to humans. One needs to discover that which is the true human good and that is described by philosophy. However, philosophy should take also into consideration the truths about the human being and his quest for happiness offered by particular sciences including psychology. The fact that both fields contain truths about different aspects of the human being further highlights the importance of interdisciplinary work which respects the autonomy of each field.

The autonomy of both fields is reflected in the approach and extent to which they describe human goals and the meaning of human life. Psychology gives proximate descriptions of the human mind as observed in empirical studies of the human mind and actions while reflections on the essence of the human being and ultimate reasons of human action are a philosophical task. Nevertheless, both fields can collaborate to give mutual enrichment and a deeper understanding of the human being.

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