

EXPERIENCE BEYOND STORYTELLING: LÁSZLÓ TENGELYI ON THE NARRATIVE IDENTITY DEBATE

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Abstract

The article focuses on narrative identity theory and its criticism in the work of László Tengelyi. It shows the particular way László Tengelyi challenges narrative identity theory by employing the concept of “experience”, which is inspired by certain phenomenological, especially French-speaking, philosophers. In the concluding part, some open questions in Tengelyi’s account of selfhood are addressed, such as the retrospective character of the narrative, the notion of action as adventure, and the role of the ethics of alterity in the philosophical analysis of personal identity.

László Tengelyi (1954–2014) devoted an important part of his philosophical work to the problem of personal identity. He gradually developed his own account of personal identity or selfhood in a critical debate with so-called “narrative identity theory”. The criticism was presented at length for the first time in the book *Der Zwitterbegriff Lebensgeschichte* (1998) which found its more accomplished version in *The Wild Region in Life-History* (2004). Tengelyi challenges narrative identity theory by employing the renewed concept of “experience”, which was made possible by certain phenomenological authors such as Merleau-Ponty, Levinas or Richir. He continued to be preoccupied by this question even in his subsequent work, *Erfahrung und Ausdruck* (2007).

I will start the paper by discussing some fundamental features of the concept of identity, selfhood and change and by briefly introducing the main questions of the narrative identity debate (section 1). In the second section, I will unpack Tengelyi’s phenomenological criticism of the narrative approach to personal

identity.¹ In the third section, I will expose the main implications of this critical exchange for the phenomenological core notion of “experience”. Finally, in the concluding section, I will deal with some open questions in Tengelyi’s account of selfhood.

The notion of “person” – or of “self” – implies persistence over time. Human beings change over time both in their bodily constitution and in their way of thinking and acting. They acquire new experiences, or simply get older. Yet human beings are generally supposed to be the same in certain respects. What does this “sameness” or “identity” consist in? We may roughly, but usefully, distinguish two approaches: one in which (1) identity is conceived as something given and other in which (2) identity is conceived as something achieved or created.

(1) Philosophical debates on personal identity sometimes focus on the criteria of the possibility of reidentifying a person as being the same, for example, as having the same DNA, the same fingerprints or some other bodily features (the somatic approach). We are the same because there is something in us that has not changed at all, or that has changed in a way that does not interrupt the continuous existence of ourselves. The notions of “identity” and “(radical) change” seem to exclude one another.

(2) There are, however, other accounts that take personal identity to be more like something we do or contribute to establish. By making plans or by cultivating certain capacities (professional skills, demeanor, or just a hobby), one constitutes a certain kind of identity or constancy over time, which seems to be different from the continuous existence guaranteed by certain somatic features or psychic states.

These divergent approaches entail different notions of “being identical” or “being the same”. To distinguish them, we may usefully pick up on the distinction, established by Paul Ricoeur, between “sameness” of a person and its being a self (“selfhood”).² A person can be said to be the same over time because, for instance, he or she has the same body or the same memories over time. Yet this explains only what it means to stay the same, to be recognizable or re-identifiable at different points of time, but it does not explain what it is like to be a “self.” What is more, the criteria (or some of the criteria) of “sameness” may be applied not only to human beings but also to any material entity. “Selfhood”, by contrast, is traditionally associated solely with human (or living) beings. In twentieth-century philosophy, this

¹ Some reflections of this text make part of a more broadly oriented article that has been published under the title “Narrative identity and phenomenology”, *Continental Philosophy Review*, DOI 10.1007/s11007-016-9381-5.

² Ricoeur Paul, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, pp. 11f., 140f.

point was emphasized by Martin Heidegger, who clearly rejected the model of the substance (of the “sameness”) for analysis of the “self”:³ the self is not a “steady” (unchanging) substance; even if someone stays the same, it is because he or she has successfully sought to remain constant. This “selfhood” is thus another model of personal identity: identity (constancy) is not simply given; it is actively maintained, as, for instance, in the example of constancy in friendship.⁴

Moreover, it is even conceivable that profound changes constitute part of one’s own selfhood, provided that they are either initiated or appropriated by the person himself or herself. Christine Korsgaard makes this point in her criticism of Derek Parfit when she says: “Where I change myself, the sort of continuity needed for identity may be preserved, even if I become very different. Where I am changed by wholly external forces, it is not.”⁵ Korsgaard follows a precisely delimited objective when she argues in favor of a view according to which “my own personal identity essentially involves my agency.” Nevertheless, the point she wants to make holds true at an even more general level. If we conceive of personal identity as sameness, the notions of “(radical) change” and “identity” are mutually exclusive; if we conceive of personal identity as selfhood, they are not.⁶ A profound change may contribute to my own identity if it is either brought about by myself or retrospectively appropriated by myself (the second possibility being less present in Korsgaard).

1. Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative identity theory focuses on personal identity primarily in terms of selfhood. It argues that personal identity is to be taken as the unity of one’s life as it develops over time. As a prominent advocate of the theory puts it, this approach elaborates “a concept of a ‘self’ whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which

³ Heidegger Martin, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1993, § 64.

⁴ Ricoeur P., *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 148.

⁵ Korsgaard Christine M., “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit”, in: R. Martin – J. Barresi (eds.), *Personal Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, pp. 168–183, here p. 178.

⁶ Nevertheless, it may be misleading to appeal to radical change (discontinuity, interruption) as that which separates the sameness (incompatible with radical change) from selfhood (compatible with it). The entire conceptual background is different: *what counts as change* is in each case different. A difficult personal decision that opens up a new life period is not a change at all, as far as the *sameness* of the person is concerned. Thus not only two different concepts of identity (sameness and selfhood), but also two different concepts of change are required.

links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.”⁷ This unity, however, is not merely a result of the activity of the person. If we conceived of personal identity so that this identity depended solely on what we ourselves did, we would end up embracing a position close to Sartre’s existentialist philosophy: “man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.”⁸ This is what narrative identity theory tries to avoid by pointing out that the unity of one’s own life depends only partly on what he or she does. The unity of a life is to be taken as a story in which the person is but a character: his or her story comprises what he or she does as well as the unpredictable and irreversible events he or she has had to face.⁹ Thus the unity of one’s life does not result from one’s plans and deeds, but emerges from the complex concurrence of deeds and events. Precisely because this unity is neither simple nor predictable, the advocates of this theory assert that this unity has the structure of a narrative.

Consequently, the notion of narrative plays a crucial role in the further development of the theory. To define this notion, authors like Paul Ricoeur and Alasdair MacIntyre have drawn both on fundamental categories of twentieth-century narratology (elaborated by scholars such as Gérard Genette or Roland Barthes) and on the classical analysis offered by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The fundamental ideas, which have remained relevant to the present day, concern the structure of the “plot” (*muthos*) and the idea that the narrative (of a tragedy, in the case of Aristotle’s *Poetics*) is an “imitation” or “representation of an action” (*mimêsis*; Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b24–25). This remarkable exchange between philosophy and the other humanities opens the theory up to further elaboration in a variety of ways.

It would be wrong to present narrative identity theory as homogeneous. There are important divergences within it. To name but one: the relation between a life and its narrative can be conceived of differently. For some advocates of the theory, life contains a narrative structure, or, as MacIntyre puts it, our “stories are lived before they are told.”¹⁰ For others, the story-like structures of our lives are constructed by telling the stories: “The narrative constructs the identity of the character [...] in constructing that of the story told.”¹¹ If the latter were the case, the narrative would

⁷ MacIntyre Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd ed. 2007, p. 205.

⁸ Sartre Jean-Paul, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, transl. by Carol Macomber, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 22.

⁹ MacIntyre A., *After Virtue*. See also Taylor Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 47; Carr David, *Time, Narrative, and History*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 4f.

¹⁰ MacIntyre A., *After Virtue*, p. 212; see also Carr D., *Time, Narrative and History*, p. 61.

¹¹ Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 147f.

not just “imitate” or “represent the actions”; the very notion of *mimêsis* would have to be either modified – this is what Ricœur actually does by emphasizing that all story-telling produces something (it organizes events)¹² – or abandoned in favor of a more post-structuralist or de-constructivist idea of the relation between the narrative and the narrated life.¹³

Although we may encounter important critical exchanges among some advocates of the theory (for instance, Ricœur’s reading of MacIntyre),¹⁴ the more fundamental objections come from non-advocates.

(I) One cannot dispense with numerical identity

Narrative identity theory does not answer the problem it was designed to solve. It is concerned with the unity of an individual’s life. When asking “How do I conceive of my life as a whole (as one)?” the theory presupposes the identity of the person asking the question. One thing it presupposes but does not explain is the person’s numerical identity. The narrative-identity proponents too hastily abandon the question of a person’s reidentification. It seems, however, that they should focus on this question directly, since it constitutes the chief precondition of their theory.

(II) Ambiguity: A descriptive or a normative claim?

Moreover, the claim that a person’s identity is narrative identity is ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems to be purely descriptive: each of us conceives of the unity of his or her own life by means of a narrative. On the other hand, the claim is normative: if life is to have an ethical quality (to be good or morally decent), it should be coherent, it should make a whole that can be made into a story. Both claims need to be justified, each in a different manner; and both claims can be invalidated, or at least their universal character may be put into question. One may even defend the value of a non-narrative, “episodic” life.¹⁵

¹² Ricœur P., *Time and Narrative I*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 34.

¹³ Butler Judith, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2005, pp. 7f., 37f.

¹⁴ Ricœur P., *Oneself as Another*, p. 158f.

¹⁵ Strawson Galen, “Against Narrativity”, *Ratio. An international journal of analytic philosophy*, vol. 17/4, December 2004; see the polemic by Hyvärinen Matti, “Against Narrativity Reconsidered”, in: Göran Rossholm – Christer Johansson (eds.), *Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory*. Bern, Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 327–345.

(III) The self is irreducible to any kind of narrative

It is useful to consider that as it develops in time and forms a “life story”, our experience is to be understood as spontaneous, as something largely “beyond our control”. It follows – for Tengelyi – that we could “hardly claim that our selfhood and self-identity would be a mere product of our storytelling activity”.¹⁶ By making this point, Tengelyi invites us to go back “from the theory of narrative identity to phenomenology”,¹⁷ the latter being capable of showing not only that the self is irreducible to any narrative we construct about it, but also, that the self is necessarily distorted by narratives.

2. Phenomenological Criticism: Tengelyi on Life-History

Where does the invitation to go back from the theory of narrative identity to phenomenology lead us? The position Tengelyi elaborates in his critical exchange with narrative identity theory may be expressed negatively: the life-story precedes and evades the narrative we may tell about it. He articulates this negative claim along different lines. In what follows, two of them will be briefly sketched.

(I) Against MacIntyre: Actions are not “enacted narratives”

A prominent advocate of the theory, Alasdair MacIntyre, affirms in his *After Virtue* that life is a story we contribute to by our own actions. When acting, we each put forward the story of our lives. MacIntyre expresses this by saying:

I am presenting [...] human actions in general as enacted narratives [...] It is because we live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction.¹⁸

¹⁶ Tengelyi László, *The Wild Region in Life-History*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2004, pp. xxvi and xix; see also Merleau-Ponty Maurice, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 399; see also, from a different perspective, Arendt Hannah, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, Munich, Piper, 2005, pp. 222–234.

¹⁷ Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, p. xix.

¹⁸ MacIntyre A., *After Virtue*, p. 211f. See also Carr D., *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 61.

Tengelyi persuasively challenges this view by pointing out that if an action is to make part of a story, it has first to cease being something we simply do and to start to be – at least in some respect – something we experience. Oedipus, after being offended by a stranger, retaliates this offence and kills him. Nevertheless, this action turns out to be something different from just killing a stranger. It *happens* to be the murder of his own father. It is only as far as it is unintended, as far as it is something that happens to us, as far as it stands beyond our control that the action starts to constitute a part of a story that is worth-telling. Without any further qualification, actions do not make part of a story. As Tengelyi rightly puts it: “It seems that it is not so much as an accomplished deed but rather as an experienced event that action finds its place in a narrative.”¹⁹

In other words, the basic elements upon which stories are built – events – have to be un-expectable or surprising.²⁰ Actions – in so far as they are pieces of purposeful behavior – are *not* surprising, at least not to the agent himself or herself. When saying that actions are “enacted narratives” MacIntyre commits a categorical mistake.

(II) Against Ricœur: Are we co-authors of the meaning?

Another important advocate of the narrative identity theory is Paul Ricœur who tries to defend the theory against one major objection: when one tells the story of one’s life, one is not the author of this life. The theory thus obscures the difference between being the author of actions – the agent – and being the author of a story – that is, a story-teller or a story-writer. Narrative identity theory seems to confuse the two meanings of “being an author”. Ricœur tries to face this objection by making an important distinction: “But should not the equivocality of the author’s position be preserved rather than dissipated? By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning.”²¹

What exactly has Ricœur in mind when talking about the narrator being “co-author as to the meaning” of his or her own life? Ricœur situates his analysis of personal identity into the larger context of his reflections on ethics. He embraces a teleological, Aristotelian variant of ethics, according to which the fundamental context is our aiming at the “good life”. An individual is a coauthor of the meaning of the life that she narrates if she is able to see or “interpret” the events and actions

¹⁹ Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, p. 45.

²⁰ Surprise in a twofold manner (*peripeteia*: reversal of the situation; and *anagnôrisis*: recognition) is a constitutive feature of *muthos* in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (chap. 11).

²¹ Ricœur P., *Oneself as Another*, p. 162.

of her life as contributing to or being part of this life she is aiming at. It is precisely this teleological orientation that is refused by Tengelyi,²² who points to experiences that seem not to develop against any teleological background, experiences such as profound hesitation or personal crisis. Tengelyi does not give us many examples, and the ones he does offer are taken from literature and are highly dependent on the way he interprets the respective passages from novels by Thomas Mann. Let us nevertheless assume that there are experiences of “alterity and strangeness in life-history”²³ which cannot be incorporated into the set of anticipations that one has at the moment. Tengelyi calls these points of the life-story by a term borrowed from the late Merleau-Ponty: the “wild region” of the life-history (or by terms of his own coining, including “radical turn in life-history” and “destinal event in life-history”).²⁴ As these experiences cannot be, according to our author, understood either with the help of our past experiences or with the help of our plans and expectations, we are completely passive or receptive to that which offers itself, be it the unexpected advice of other people or an unpredictable course of events. Tengelyi describes the situation we face in the “radical turn in life-history” as follows:

It is not as a result of *our* initiative that a new sense emerges here. On the contrary: here our activity is reduced to discovering a spontaneously emerging sense. These considerations urge us to distinguish the phenomenon of a spontaneous emergence of sense – of a *Sinnbildung* – in the history of a life, from all the sense bestowal – *Sinngebung* – by the subject.²⁵

If it is true that there are “wild regions”, if sense emerges at turning points of our lives, then we are no longer authors as to existence or coauthors as to meaning. This does not imply that our capacity to grasp our life in the form of a story is futile. It only implies that it is retrospective. This nevertheless has an important consequence: our life (life-history, *Lebensgeschichte*) is much richer than what is fixed by a narrative. In other words, “life-history” is not to be considered the same as “personal identity”. To quote Tengelyi again:

If we consider life-history as a region where a spontaneous formation of sense takes place, and we further conceive of self-identity as something which is at stake in every attempt at a *retroactive fixation* of a spontaneously emerged sense, the difference of

²² Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, pp. 137–139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

the two concepts becomes unmistakably clear, even if it remains true that they belong inseparably together.²⁶

As a result of the first criticism (addressed to MacIntyre), the notion of “action” as a constitutive part of a narrative is rejected. Our actions start to form part of our story once they reveal themselves to be something that happens to us. In the second line of criticism, the concepts of a radical turn and of the spontaneous emergence of sense were articulated. It follows for Tengelyi, that the life-history is not identical with our notion of – narratively articulated – personal identity. To substantiate this point better, the very notion of “experience” has to be analyzed anew. The experience should not be conceived of only (or primarily) in the framework of the theory of intentionality (as, for instance, the “fulfilling experience”), but more in the sense of the spontaneous emergence of meaning in conflict with previous expectations. This is what Tengelyi himself undertakes – inspired by authors like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Richir – both in his *The Wild Region in Life-History* (2004) and subsequent *Erfahrung und Ausdruck* (2007).

3. Experience and Discontinuity

Experience – as analyzed in the criticism of the idea of the narratively constituted identity of a self – is not the source of our knowledge, but that which disturbs our previous knowledge. Tengelyi unequivocally embraces this view when defining experience “properly understood” as “the emergence of a new sense in conflict with previous expectations.”²⁷ The disturbing and elusive character of some experiences is promoted to the defining feature of experience as such.²⁸ It is not the confirmation of our expectations, but the conflict with them that, according to Tengelyi, merits to be named “experience”.

It may be objected – with Husserl – that we can experience both confirmation and deception, and, consequently, that the possibility of both is the defining feature of experience of real things and events. Thus even the refutation of an anticipation forms part of the continuous chain of our experience.²⁹ Each experience implies

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁸ “experience shows that the process of sense formation repeatedly escapes from our grasp”; *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

²⁹ Carr articulates a Husserlian answer to this emphasis on the unpredictability of our experience and our passive role in it: “If we think of our passive experiences as being exemplified by the intrusion of the unexpected, then we may be inclined to think of the present as being cut off from the past

the understanding of the horizon of the thing perceived.³⁰ We understand that the perceived object has its internal horizon of other possible experiences of the same thing, as well as its external horizon of possible experiences with other objects. Thanks to these structures, every experience can be “extended in a continuous chain of explicative individual experiences.”³¹ My experience has its possible and impossible continuation; it is either a fulfillment or refutation of my anticipation (of my empty intentions); the thing perceived has its “realm of *a priori* possibilities”;³² its “*empty horizon of familiar unfamiliarity*.”³³ Husserl claims that there is a structure of experience which predetermines the possible and impossible, familiar and unfamiliar, course of experience. Let us call it the continuity claim.

Tengelyi suggests that the possibility of experiencing a refutation of our expectations is not enough to qualify this continuous chain as an experience of the real, in so far as the refutation does not exceed the horizon of the “familiar unfamiliarity.” If the new experience is to be qualified as an experience one *gains*, it has to offer a new sense that is irreducible to what we expected. The sense that emerges in the experience one gains is not the result of the sense-bestowal (*Sinngebung*), but of a spontaneous sense-formation (*Sinnbildung*).³⁴

Consequently, the experience implies discontinuity. When thus refusing the continuity claim of Husserlian phenomenology, Tengelyi draws on important ideas of post-Husserlian French thought, for instance, on Levinas, who emphasizes in *Intentionnalité et sensation* (1965) the “unpredictable novelty,” the emergence of impressions that are “beyond any kind of anticipation or expectation, [...] beyond any continuity.”³⁵ In the life-history of an individual, this means that his or her

(it does not fit in with what has gone before) and the future (it shatters our expectations of what will come next). The response to this sort of paradigm is that it confirms rather than denies the role of retention and protention. Without the temporal *Gestalt* including past and future there would be no past pattern to disturb, no expectation to shatter.” Carr D., *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 42.

³⁰ Husserl Edmund, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1985, p. 27, published in English as *Experience and Judgment*, transl. by James Spencer Churchill and Karl Ameriks, London, Routledge, 1973, p. 32. “Every experience has its own horizon.”

³¹ *Idem*.

³² Husserl E., *Erfahrung und Urteil*, p. 32; *Experience and Judgement*, p. 36.

³³ Husserl E., *Experience and Judgement*, p. 38; *Erfahrung und Urteil*, p. 35. “Leerhorizont einer bekannten Unbekanntheit”.

³⁴ Tengelyi László, *Erfahrung und Ausdruck: Phänomenologie im Umbruch bei Husserl und seinen Nachfolgern*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007, pp. 15 and 45.

³⁵ “La nouveauté imprévisible de contenus [...] création qui mérite le nome d’activité absolue, de *genesis spontanea* [Husserl, *Zeitvorlesungen*, 451] ; mais elle est à la fois comblée au delà de toute prévision, de toute attente, de tout germe et de toute continuité et, par conséquent, est toute passivité, réceptivité d’un « autre » pénétrant dans le « même », vie et non « pensée ».” Emmanuel Lévinas, “Intentionnalité et sensation”, in *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1994, pp. 145–162, here p. 156.

experience may comprise possibilities that he or she cannot have anticipated, and yet may subsequently prove to be decisive in his or her life. In order to spell out his challenge to the Husserlian view of experience, Tengelyi presents some examples from belles-lettres. His favorite example is from *Doktor Faustus* (1947) by Thomas Mann. The young protagonist – Adrian Leverkühn – a talented musician, decides to abandon music and to study theology. He writes a letter to his music teacher, Wendell Kretschmar, explaining that he is incapable of the real warmth and naivety required to compose music, since – because of his arrogant, cold, and mocking attitude – all “methods and conventions” appear to him as “good for parody only”. His teacher replies that these capacities are perhaps precisely what may be required to create truthful art that breaks the spell of the beautiful illusion. The reasons for Adrian’s refusal to become a composer turn out – in the eyes of another character – to be the opposite: they are reasons for his embracing the career of a composer. What is more, Adrian “is himself aware of this fact”, as Tengelyi puts it, “at the bottom of his heart”. They are present, but not known to Adrian. Let us read Tengelyi’s description of this hidden presence of tacit reasons that are understood – by the writer of the letter – in the opposite sense of that understood by the reader of the letter:

The meaning of Adrians’s letter gets detached from the intention of the writer, and enters a career of its own. It becomes Kretschmar’s task to grasp and to articulate this meaning, emerging of itself – a meaning that cannot be reduced to any meaning bestowed by a subject.³⁶

This example is paradigmatic for Tengelyi, since it shows the intimate connection between the discontinuity of a life-history and the presence of the other who contributes to make explicit the sense that emerges “of itself”.

Tengelyi challenges the Husserlian continuity claim by generalizing precisely this structure of experience. To put it differently – and again in the context of a life-history as experienced from the first-person perspective – it may turn out to be true that what is possible for me, what I am capable of, is beyond what can be intended by me, and yet may enter into my life-story. These cases show experience “properly understood”.

³⁶ Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, p. xxv.

4. "Split of the self"

What idea of the self is implied by these reflections? The self was, thus far, characterized by Tengelyi mostly negatively. Narratives are not constitutive of who we are (our selfhood); they are but attempts to fix firmly the meaning that has emerged in our life "of itself" and "beyond our control." These attempts always fail, and are taken up anew. Tengelyi explains in length why they fail, but he is less explicit as to why are they taken up anew. This dissymmetry may betray a more fundamental tendency of Tengelyi's thought. It can be better grasped by focusing on three assumptions Tengelyi embraces: (i) narratives are retrospective and deal solely with experience, not with action; (ii) action, once liberated from the narrative grasp, brings about the "split of the self"; (iii) the very question of self-identity is suspect, since the fundamental feature of the self is the split, not identity or unity.

(I) The retrospective character of narratives

In order to clearly mark his distance from the narrative identity theory, Tengelyi elaborates his criticism in a series of conceptual distinctions and dissociations. According to a succinct passage, we are led:

[...] first, to dissociate lived experience and narrative fabulation from each other; second to distinguish the spontaneous sense formation not only from all sense bestowed by a subject but also from all retroactive sense fixation; and finally, to discern life-history and self-identity.³⁷

In Tengelyi's reflections, narratives can have but two meanings. They are either "fabulation" or acts of "retrospective sense fixation." Let us now focus on the second possibility (narratives are retrospective), and consider the first one later. "Indeed," says Tengelyi, "it is only the experience that is involved in action which may be interpreted as a virtual or inchoate story awaiting narration, while action itself resides in a dimension that has nothing to do with storytelling."³⁸ Tengelyi makes a strong – and Aristotelian – point against MacIntyre and Carr in showing that action can be recounted in a story not insofar as it is simply an intended action, but insofar as it comprises an element of unpredictable experience. In the subsequent step, when stating more precisely what narrative does with the experience, Tengelyi

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47; see also pp. 49f.: "it is solely experience which is grasped by, and expressed in, narratives."

tends to interpret narratives in terms of reductionist accounts of what happened. Stories designed to express one's own life are, according to Tengelyi, "incomplete, or even simplifactory".³⁹ Tengelyi sketches repeatedly an opposition between the ambivalent and uncontrollable multitude of the life experience and the univocity and simplicity of the story told: "A story necessarily curtails and impoverishes the experience it is designed to express: by unifying and homogenizing its multifarious shreds of sense, it deprives it of its ever changing ambiguity."⁴⁰

This view can be challenged in at least two ways: (1) as offering rather simple idea of the narrative, (2) as standing in opposition to other views Tengelyi himself holds.

(1) As we saw in section 1, the relation between life and narrative can be conceived of in different ways. A narrative can "imitate" or "represent" a life, or it can contribute to shape it in different ways, for example, by organizing its events (be it retrospectively or prospectively). Tengelyi embraces the idea of narrative giving us a simple, retrospective, and impoverished notion of the life it recounts. He accepts neither the de-constructivist view (narrative construes the story, and, thereby, one's own life), nor the hermeneutic one, developed especially by Paul Ricoeur (the mutual relationship between life and narrative).

By claiming that narratives offer an impoverished account of what happened, Tengelyi comes close a position criticized by Ricoeur as a "naïve conception of *mimêsis*", according to which narratives represent or imitate the life that is bare of any narrative structure. Nevertheless, according to Ricoeur, the relation between a "life" and its "story" is not a relation in which one (the story) imitates the other (the life), but one of an "unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience". Ricoeur makes his point by saying:

It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history.⁴¹

The narrative is not an impoverished imitation of the "real life", but an attempt to organize the elusiveness of life, an attempt that is understood as provisional. It is not a one-way relation between the reality and its representation, but a di-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48. See also Drummond John, "The 'Cognitive Impenetrability' and the Complex Intentionality of Emotions", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 11, no. 10-11, 2004, pp. 109-126. See p. 119: "narrative captures less than an individual's life... narratives, by virtue of their selectivity, impose more unity than life itself has manifested."

⁴¹ Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, p. 162.

alectical or mutual relation between the evading and unformed “matter” of life and the forming (“organizing”) principle of story-telling. The mutual character of the relation implies two things. First, the “real life”, even though repeatedly told, never ceases to be “elusive”. Second, the narrative organization, even though it may successfully put different life phases into a coherent story, is always exposed to further revisions.

I believe that Tengelyi could have accepted what Ricœur calls a “more subtle” idea of *mimêsis*, as well as the emphasis on the elusiveness of life. In my understanding, the real reason why Tengelyi refuses Ricœur’s account lies elsewhere. Ricœur describes the mutual relation between the elusive life and the narratives as a dialectical path of *appropriation*.⁴² This goes in the opposite direction to Tengelyi’s focus on alterity in our own life-history. And yet, even if we side with Tengelyi, we are not obliged to follow him in advocating a rather simple idea of the narrative understood as a retroactive sense impoverishment.

(2) What is more, the view of narrative as a simplifying expression of the narrated life stands in certain contrast to what Tengelyi says about “expression”. He adopts the idea of Merleau-Ponty, who believes, according to Tengelyi, that expression and experience stand in a relation of an “*irremediable* – because *innappropriable* – alterity”.⁴³ Tengelyi characterizes the relation between experience and its expression as follows: “it is the experience of a never entirely surmountable contrast between experience and expression which primarily reveals the reality of the real.”⁴⁴ He demonstrates this unsurmountable contrast by referring to the famous example of Proust’s Swann and the Vinteuil’s sonata.⁴⁵ The little piece of music gradually becomes expressive of the love of Swann and Odette, the “national anthem of their love”, receiving – in the course of their relation – different meanings and contributing to their own experience of their love. The moving character of the meaning of the sonata (and of their love) is for Tengelyi an example of the “*sense in the making*”. The obvious question is: cannot life-narrative be counted among other means of expression? Cannot it have a status similar to the sonata in the Proust example? The story told about our past life does not have to be but a simplification. On the contrary, it can create a different sensibility, it can uncover new and surprising meaning in our past experience, without nevertheless

⁴² *Idem*.

⁴³ Tengelyi, L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, pp. 28–42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–42.

abolishing the difference between experience and expression.⁴⁶ Why does Tengelyi deny to the narrative the privilege to count as one of the “expressions” of our experience? There seems to be certain incongruity between Tengelyi’s understanding the narrative as a simplifying expression of experience and, on the other hand, his analysis of the expression as standing in a contrastive relationship to experience.

These two suggestions do not invalidate the contribution of László Tengelyi to the narrative identity discussion. His criticism of Macintyre and his idea of “enacted narrative”, as well as his criticism of Ricœur’s claim that the agent is author of his or her own story “as to its meaning” (section 2) remain highly convincing. Being preoccupied to demonstrate the shortcomings of the narrative identity theory, Tengelyi takes narratives to be failed attempts to grasp what happened. A more detailed account could show that the focus on narratives as retrospective grasp of what happened (i) does not have to imply a simple idea of narrative as an impoverished imitation and (ii) does not rule out the possibility that narratives can count as expressions that stand in a creative relation to our experience.

(II) Action and the “split of the self”

Narratives do not consist only in retrospective grasping and expressing our experience. They can help us to imagine the future course of our action. And yet, for Tengelyi, this amounts either to falsifying and simplifying our action or to being mere fabulation – let us recall his words: “action itself resides in a dimension that has nothing to do with storytelling.”

What idea of “action” is behind this negative statement? Why should we reject the assumption that narratives make part of our actions and decisions, that they enrich our imagination concerning our possibilities to act, or even that the narratives we construe are themselves ways we act?⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Kearney Richard, *On Stories*, London and New York, Routledge 2002, p. 132f.: “And there is a sense in which the untold life is perhaps less rich than a told one. Why? Because the recounted life prises open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception. It makes a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds which supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting. Our exposure to new possibilities of being refigures our everyday being-in-the-world. So that when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important respects.”

⁴⁷ Consider Bolton’s notion of narrative and storytelling in his book on Charter 77. He is interested in the “role played by storytelling in forging group identities”, and notes: “One task of any opposition is to assemble individual experiences into a more structured set of stories that can define the perspectives and values of the larger group; one task in studying Charter 77 is thus to look at how it unified oppositional stories that, until then, had remained scattered and anecdotal.” Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under*

Tengelyi sketches a picture of the self in which narrated experience is but one “half” of the self, the other half being the “action”. He distinguishes the “prospective attitude of action” from the “retrospective attitude of storytelling”; the “self” lives in alternation (“oscillation”, “pendular movement”) between the two, that is, between retrospective storytelling and future-oriented acting. He characterizes this duality as a “split of the self,” which can take different forms: equilibrium in everyday life, conflicts, crises, degenerate forms (pathologies). It is experience that helps us to deal with the “split of the self,” because “experience mediates between acting and storytelling”. When trying to maintain equilibrium, the self can either grasp his or her experience in the form of a narrative (that is, accumulate accepted “shreds of sense” in a coherent story), or let the experience stimulate “unprecedented action”, open new fields in life, embrace new initiatives.⁴⁸ If the “conflict between actions and narratives” becomes intense, we may rely on experience, since, according to Tengelyi, “it is normally counterbalanced by a dynamic equilibrium inhering in experience, which, from time to time, rearranges and reorganizes the relationship between acting and recounting”.⁴⁹

When he seeks to state more precisely how experience “rearranges and reorganizes” the divide between acting and storytelling, Tengelyi refers to his idea of the turning point in a life-history or a “destinal event”. Such an event fits neither into the retrospective organization of the past experience nor in the prospective or progressive structure of the action as planned and expected. The new experience comes as a “*present which has never been future*”. Tengelyi sees this as a temporal structure complementary both to retrospective and to prospective temporality: “This does not change the fact that our expectations are fed on what we retain from the past in the present; yet we are not even able to imagine a future which would be incapable of *contradicting* our expectations.”⁵⁰ Against the background of these descriptions Tengelyi develops a concept of action not as a planned deed, but as a new beginning, as an “initiative”, “undertaking”, and “adventure”:

[...] we may bring about processes which often break out of the sphere of actions under our control, and become unmanageable. Therefore, each undertaking is an adventure.

Communism, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 16. Focusing on Charter 77 as a narrative reveals that, here, telling a story means forging a group identity (and the context for the personal identities of the participating individuals). Narrating and acting are not two separate classes.

⁴⁸ Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, p. 48f. See also Tengelyi L., *Erfahrung und Ausdruck*, chapter XV.

⁴⁹ Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, p. 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 84 and 88.

It is not only the adventure of our self-identity but, at the same time, the adventure of the sense as well: *aventure du sens*.⁵¹

This idea of action as adventure shows that the most important duality, the most fundamental “split of the self” is not the one between the retrospective and progressive attitude, but the split between the possessive and dispossessed attitude. This duality is parallel to other dualities Tengelyi refers to: standing in our control – being beyond our control, accepted – discarded (“shreds of sense”), definite (fixed) – ambiguous, static – dynamic, and so forth. Finally, Tengelyi takes all these dualities to express the fundamental dichotomy between “own” and “alien”.

The question is of course whether the mentioned dualisms are parallel and even reducible to the most important own – alien dichotomy. Is for instance our experience of time or action to be understood primarily through the lens of the own – alien dichotomy?

In some of his time analyses, Tengelyi comes very close to Henri Bergson. The idea of the present which has never been future is similar to what Bergson suggests, when focusing on the present as unpredictable novelty (“the real precedes the possible”) and when criticizing the idea of a future based on the anticipation inspired by past experiences.⁵² Despite this evident proximity, Bergson does not associate the dynamic, becoming, and unpredictable aspect of our experience with the “alien”. On the contrary, unpredictability and dynamism are characteristics of the true or profound self, whereas the static and the predictable are features of the superficial self.⁵³ Why should we associate unpredictability with the “other,” and not with the “self”? What entitles us to equate control and possession with the “self,” but not with the “other”?

Concerning the notion of action understood as something that develops beyond our control, Tengelyi runs the risk of committing a similar categorical mistake that he himself criticizes in his comments on MacIntyre. By focusing on action as the initiation of an unpredictable adventure, he attributes to action features that were supposed to characterize experience and clearly distinguish it from action. Does Tengelyi himself not collapse the action – experience distinction which he often takes to be clear cut? Whereas MacIntyre underestimates the experiential aspect that may be present in our actions (and thanks to which they deserve to be told in a story), Tengelyi downsizes the active aspect that makes our actions something we do rather than merely something that happens to us. It is possible, and

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵² See Bergson Henri, *Le possible et le réel*, Paris, PUF, 2015.

⁵³ Bergson Henri, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris, PUF, 2013, second part.

useful to challenge the way Tengelyi describes time and action from the viewpoint of the own – alien distinction, and also the way he distributes the own/alien marks. I believe that reasons behind Tengelyi's distinctions and their application are more of an ethical than a phenomenological nature. We cannot properly assess them without taking into account the ethical horizon of his reflections.

(III) Personal identity and ethics

When Tengelyi dissociates life-history and self-identity, he understands self-identity in terms of self-control, self-possession, and self-knowledge. Such an *identical* “self” fixates its own experience by way of retrospective narrative and conceals the richness of experience which always also contains “discarded shreds of sense.” The identity of a self is understood as a sphere of self-possession, which is closed up and immune to encounters with otherness – be it the otherness of other people or of one's own life.

Tengelyi associates the very question of self-identity with the *egoistic* perspective. When interpreting both Husserl and Heidegger, he takes “self” to mean “appropriation” of alterity, not an encounter with an alterity that dis-appropriates the self.⁵⁴ Something similar holds true for the idea of a teleological ethics that is based – as in MacIntyre and Ricœur – on the idea of aiming to lead a good life. Here – according to Tengelyi – the self tries to grasp its own life, to impose certain meaning on it, instead of waiting for the meaning to come from unpredictable encounters. The most important – negative – picture of the self as being appropriating and possessive is the idea of the “sense-bestowal” (*Sinngebung*) associated with Husserl.

And yet, even if we concede that there are activities in which a “self” tries to appropriate and possess otherness, it does not follow that these activities may be promoted to be the defining feature of “the self” as such.⁵⁵ Moreover, it may well be that the “self” recounts a story of his or her own past in order to make it understandable, in order to appropriate his or her own past and thus to create a self-identity.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, this constitution of self-identity by means of sto-

⁵⁴ Tengelyi L., *The Wild Region in Life-History*, pp. xx and xxxiii.

⁵⁵ The question is, what concept of the “self” we refer to. It may well be that a more fundamental notion of self does not imply any sort of “egoism”. E.g. the concept of the “minimal self” in D. Zahavi tries to grasp the fact that all experiences have as their fundamental dimension the “mineness” or “for-me-ness”, without having to count as “egoistic” or “closed to otherness”. See D. Zahavi, *Self and Other*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2014, p. 21f.

⁵⁶ For a picture of a surprisingly clear-cut separation of “own” and “alien” (“other”) in the activity of storytelling, see Tengelyi L., *Ibid*, p. 51f.

rytelling happens very often, if not all the time, in inter-personal relations: we tell a story because we were invited to. Maybe the wrong assumption behind the narrative identity theory, but also behind some criticisms of this theory, is that there are self-oriented narratives. If we free ourselves from this assumption, we can refuse the narrative identity theory without losing the riches of the story-telling. What is more, if it is true that we create our self-identity as a response to a question addressed by another, our self-identity does not exclude the other, and it should not be categorized as the sphere of “my own”. Moreover, it would indicate that he topic of identity and alterity are inseparable. Does not the ethics of alterity hamper the attempt to deal with the problem of personal identity by creating an image of a separated, egocentric self?

This question will be left here without an answer. By way of a concluding observation, I will point out at the relation between personal identity and ethical concerns. Both in Tengelyi and his ethics of alterity and in Ricœur and his teleological ethics, the question of personal identity stands in the foreground: once, in order to be dispelled, the other time, to be set on a safe ground. In the first case, it is ethically suspect to be a self (closed up against otherness). In the latter case, we have an ethical exigence to be a self (for example, to be constant in friendship). In both cases, the question of personal identity is inherently an ethical one. Does it follow that each philosophical claim concerning a person’s identity is intrinsically an ethical claim? László Tengelyi has the merit of articulating considerable number of observations that substantiate a positive answer to this question.⁵⁷

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