Review of Donald E. Polkinghorne, Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences

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Philosophy and Rhetoric

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together or makes them interesting, is the narrative dimension. The natural form of the meditation is the narration. Descartes, not a supporter of the concept of narrative truth, nonetheless presents his Meditations on First Philosophy in a narrative form of himself which depends at every turn on leading metaphors as the grounds and beginnings of his arguments. In this he sets the tone of modern philosophy—the continual identification of philosophical thought with argument and truth seemingly reached by arguments, but at the same time using the full range of rhetorical speech to accomplish the basis and communication of his philosophy.

In conclusion, the view that philosophy is about arguments is correct if it also acknowledges that arguments live within the other senses of speech, especially the metaphor and the narrative. These forms of speech are not part of argument; arguments are part of them.

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Book Reviews


Disenchanted with the results of research paradigms based on those of the natural sciences, social scientists in a variety of disciplines have attempted in recent years to find more humanistic ways of studying human existence. Scholars such as Clifford Geertz in anthropology, A.L. Becker in linguistics, and Erving Goffman in sociology, have suggested that humans and our artifacts can best be understood through interpretive modes of study which seek to uncover and describe how people create meaningful, coherent worlds. To these scholars and others, it has become apparent that narrative is one of the main strategies people use for making events and actions cohere: things make sense when they fit into a story.

Perhaps because psychology, with its relatively unified quantitative experimental research paradigm, has made clearer progress than have other, more fragmented social sciences, psychologists have come late to the humanistic turn. Donald E. Polkinghorne, a professor of counseling, writes in this context. Disturbed that the findings of experimental psychology seem to have little relevance in clinical psychology, Polkinghorne decided to "look at what could be learned from the practitioners about how research should be done," and found that "practitioners work with narrative knowledge" (x). His book is about the role of narrative knowledge in human existence, and the role narrative should play in psychological theory and research.

P's views about narrative are rooted in the idea that human existence is embedded in three realms, the material, the organic, and the mental: people are matter, life, and consciousness. The higher realms are influenced by the lower, but each has its own patterns of organization, its own "logic." While we make sense of the material realm by means of cognitive strategies such as categorizing and taxonomizing, we understand human experience in a more poetic way. The kind of meaning people use to make sense of the human
world—human actions, and events which affect humans—is primarily narrative.

What, then, is narrative meaning? This question can best be answered, says P, through qualitative, interpretive analyses of discourse. Narrative is a way of structuring experience into talk, and is contrasted with the “paradigmatic” way of creating coherence on which formal science is based. Paradigmatic discourse gives events meaning by fitting them into syllogistic or strictly chronological structures; narrative discourse gives events meaning by fitting them into plots, which display the significance of events in relation to each other.

P devotes a chapter to each of two disciplines which have a tradition of concern with narrative. First, he summarizes the debate in history about whether historical accounts are scientific. P points out that many historians have come to see historical discourse as a special type, constructed and evaluated by different criteria than is scientific discourse. The writing of historians attempts to create “coherence . . . brought about by emplotment” (60); first-order events are fitted into explanatory stories rather than into patterns which create logical proof. He then deals with the treatment of narrative in literary theory, beginning with the search for a universal system or “monomyth” which unites narrative plots in various cultures. Structuralism brought to literary studies a concern with the mental structures underlying humans’ construction of experience, and with the basic structural or functional parts of narratives.

P next traces the roles narrative has played in psychology. Early in this century, there was considerable interest in individual psychology, and hence in life history, but the emphasis shifted after World War II to research and theorizing based in “the epistemology of formal science” (104). Some psychologists, however, have recently begun again to think about narrative. Students of personal identity claim that satisfactory self-identities are based on coherent “self-narratives.” Stimulus-response models of human behavior are being replaced by cognitive models, in which narrative is seen as one of a number of knowledge structures humans use to construct experience; cognitive scientists are accordingly concerned with what our basic concept of a story is like. Life-span studies of the sort popularized in the book *Passages* deal with life histories, and some organizational psychologists see joint stories as constitutive of social organizations. Finally, Freudian psychoanalysis has been reconceptualized by some theorists as the joint construction of a coherent life story by analyst and analysand, and new attention is being paid to Freud’s insight that “the meaning of an event can be radically dependent on what happens later” (129), that events have meaning, in other words, only in the context of narratives.

In the final two chapters P presents his own case for the importance of narrative for the human sciences. He attempts first to “assemble a narrative theory for the practice of the human disciplines” (125). This theory consists of three claims about the centrality of narrative in the creation of human experience. First, P claims with Paul Ricoeur that narrative is crucial in the “production and reproduction of the multilayered human experience of time” described by Heidegger (127). Second, narrative makes physical movement into meaningful action by showing how actions are linked to consequences in human plans and projects. Actions can be understood only in relation to narratives, not simply as responses to physical causes or the results of rules. Third, rather than being a physical body or a set of unique memories, the self is a narrative construction. We understand ourselves as expressions of a story which develops throughout our lives, a story in which we may play different roles at different times.

Human scientists, then, need to do two things. First, they need to describe the narratives by which people experience time, configure their actions, and define their identities. Second, they need to develop systematic ways of using narrative to explain why things happen in the human world, as a supplement and a corrective to scientific modes of explanation better suited for explaining facts about the lower realms of existence. P’s treatment of descriptive narrative research consists of summaries of studies by a rather diverse group of scholars, done for a variety of purposes, and a caution about restrictive typologies of plot types. P does not make clear the specific purpose of the research he proposes, and he is unable to use any empirical research of his own as a model.

The section on explanatory narrative research is very brief, but more thought-provoking. P is concerned here with the crucial question for humanistic social scientists: How do we know when we’re right in the absence of measures like validity of test instruments, reliability of data, and statistical significance of results? In order to be explanatory, says P, a narrative must be coherent: comprehensive, unified, inclusive of all relevant events and exclusive of irrelevant ones. The events from which the narrative is created—the data—must be authentic, collected according to procedures analo-

Society as Text is an ambitious synthesis of what might be called the rhetorical-hermeneutical turn in contemporary social science. That is, Professor Brown rejects the Enlightenment ideal of a privileged, ahistorical, neutral language—scientific foundationalism—and along with it, of course, the role of the social scientist as disinterested observer. Like Marx, Brown wants to change society, not just study it; he finds “the tradition of rhetoric . . . both as analysis and as practice . . . a place of the integration of knowledge about society with political efforts at social transformation” (p. 2).

In brief, the argument is as follows. Contemporary society is pathologically dissociated in two realms: the public sphere, dominated by “a positivistic, instrumental conception of rationality” and serving a “techno-administrative corporate or statist elite”; and the private sphere, “the affective self . . . the locus of rational feelings, values, and emotions” (pp. 1–2). The public persona is a functionary, dedicated to cold-blooded calculation, while the private persona is the romantic self, dependent “on the very bureaucratic system it hates.” The result is alienation and/or wild swings between “the termite colony and the Mystical Body,” as Gabriel Marcel expressed it (p. 33). Public life too often lacks moral foundation; private life seems unrelated to and powerless in the face of the Leviathan. To overcome this bifurcation, or thesis and antithesis with no synthesis, requires “restoring judgment to its former privileged status in intellectual and public life” (p. 1).

Thus far Professor Brown’s argument resembles Gadamer’s in Truth and Method. Techne in the form of sheerly calculative reason constitutes the chief threat to hermeneutical-rhetorical reason. Furthermore, like Gadamer, Brown criticizes “normal” social scientists for being blind to root metaphors, “literalsists who deny the origins of their truth forms in language” (p. 2). But there is more to Brown’s case than a reaffirmation of interpretation as the human-making act. He borrows from Walter Fisher the metaphor of society as narrative text and, with full awareness of his debt to theorists like Vico and Kenneth Burke, advocates “the logical method of dialectical irony as a potential discourse for humanizing political practice” (p. 3).