

Bennett Smith, '11
bsmith@haverford.edu
Philosophy Major
Faculty Sponsor: Heidi Schlipphacke

Fashioning the Self: The Problem of Identity and the Narrative of Achievement

Perhaps the only truly universal human belief is our personal faith in individuality. We all see ourselves as individuals with an inviolable “ownership” of that individuality. The notion that each of us is a unique entity is built into the language and into our culture. Within this framework of personal identity we seemingly subscribe to the notion that we are the authors of our own narratives: as a person in the world there are always goals to push towards at which we can either succeed or fail, and as causal agents we believe we can determine those goals. It appears that we are able to both observe the unfolding of our personal identities and shape them into the form we want them to have. And these stories seem to only stop at death: what modern mental life essentially amounts to is a relentless push toward something (achievement, happiness, success, etc.) that only stops when our bodies can't keep up.

Yet there ways in which the belief that we fashion our own narratives is threatened. We all are aware of our personal narratives, but doesn't that awareness require someone outside of ourselves to be aware, an “other,” an audience that we can't assume to be part of that narrative? In addition, our mental content is highly flexible and ephemeral; our bodies change and decay. How can we forge a consistent, stable sense of identity from characteristics that are constantly changing? What happens in the case of intoxication or brain damage when agency disappears and the narrative unwinds on its own? Are these instances of fragmentation isolated, or do they pose a bigger challenge for the notion of mental causation?

If we understand our lives as narratives, can this help us understand what it means to be a person in the world? Can we truly, accurately place ourselves in a narrative structure, like characters in a novel? How does our knowledge that the narrative will eventually end influence the way the story unfolds? What is it we are looking for, what drives us, if we know that the narrative will stop? This seminar will look in large part to the intersection of literature and philosophy, with additional material from neuropsychology, in an effort to get a better, fuller picture of what it means to be an “individual.” A sample reading list, drawn from the three disciplines, is below.

Philosophical texts or chiefly “theoretical” works (or selections thereof):

- Aristotle, *On the Soul; Metaphysics*
- Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
- David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*
- G.W.F Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*
- Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage”

- John McDowell, “Reductionism and the First Person”
- Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*
- Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*
- Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*
- Jerry Fodor, *Propositional Attitudes*
- Tony Parsons, *As it Is*

Literary texts or chiefly “literary works” (or selections thereof):

- Goethe, *Faust*
- Arthur Schnitzler, *Lieutenant Gustl*
- Franz Kafka, *The Judgment; Metamorphosis*
- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*
- Italo Svevo, *Confessions of Zeno*
- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*
- Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*
- Samuel Beckett, *Not I*
- Robert Menasse, *Wings of Stone*
- Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
- Philip Roth, *The Dying Animal; American Pastoral*

Neuropsychology texts

- Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for A Hat*
- Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*”
- Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*
- Gerald Edelman, *The Remembered Present: A Biological Theory of Consciousness*
- Israel Rosenfield, *The Strange, Familiar, and Forgotten: An Anatomy of Consciousness*
- John R. Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness*
- Kolb & Whishaw, *Fundamentals of Human Neuropsychology*, or similar textbook