

Peter Goldie

The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

xi + 186 pages

\$55.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-923073-0)

Peter Goldie's final book is an important and insightful addition to the ever-growing literature on the nature of narrative and its role in our psychology. Goldie situates the book at the outset as an entry into the debate between narrativists, for whom narrative is in some way constitutive of identity, and anti-narrativists like Galen Strawson, who hold that narrative is unnecessary and possibly harmful. The two final chapters respond to the first position, though Goldie engages explicitly and in detail with only one proponent of the view. He addresses the second position indirectly throughout the rest of the book by illustrating the central role narrative takes in our lives. The book is thus in many ways less a sustained argument for a particular position than a series of illustrations of why – once we see what narratives are and how common and indispensable they are to a human life – both the narrativist and anti-narrativist views appear far too extreme. If the book has a thesis, then, it is something like this: our lives are messy, and narrative is the perfect medium for trying to keep them straight without oversimplification; but we use the narratives to manage the mess, not make it.

Like many others who have written on narrative, Goldie aims to distinguish narrative from merely causal accounts. While narratives may involve causal accounts, they need not: a narrative can involve nothing more than a string of coincidences. Moreover, narratives typically have three additional features. They have coherence, revealing some connection between the narrated events. They have meaningfulness, revealing how the narrator, or the characters within the narrative, understood those events. And they have evaluative and emotional import, revealing how the narrative's characters or its narrator feel about those events. While many writing about narrative have focused on one or more of these features, Goldie deftly moves beyond them to the interplay between the internal and external perspectives involved, to the way events can appear differently to the internal characters and the external narrator, as well as to the audience – which may, when we think through stories on our own, be the narrator herself.

This interplay of perspectives within a narrative, on Goldie's view, is what makes it such a crucial part of human life, and in fact makes it central to our nature as self-reflecting beings. Chapter two delves into this theme in detail by introducing dramatic irony and free indirect style. Dramatic irony is the divergence of perspectives. There can be an epistemic gap when, for example, the audience watches the detective attempt to find the killer, knowing all the while the identity of the culprit. But the gap can also be emotional or evaluative, as when we follow the character struggling through life, unaware that a windfall awaits him, or when we read with disgust about the baker who gleefully poisons his donuts. We can bridge such gaps between perspectives through the literary device of free indirect style, which allows the narrative to both emphasize the gap and bridge it. When, for example, the narrative speaks of the baker's devious plan, it is unclear (as Goldie explains using a quote from James Wood) who "owns" the deviousness: the narrator, the baker, or somehow both.

The importance of free indirect style to our self-narratives quickly becomes clear: in telling narratives about our past, present, future, and imagined selves, we can both convey the epistemic and evaluative stance of ourselves as characters in those narratives and reveal our own attitude toward them. On Goldie's view, memory involves a psychological analogue of free indirect style, allowing us to understand our past from the perspective of the present, to integrate it and come to terms with it; "our memories are infused with what we now know, and with how we now feel about what happened in the light of what we now know" (54). When this process goes awry, the consequences can be unhappy ones, as Goldie illustrates through his discussions of grief and trauma. In such cases, individuals find themselves with emotionally loaded memories, yet are unable to take the appropriate emotional attitude toward them. Failing to integrate their past through narrative, they cannot find emotional closure. Here, Goldie brings in his breakthrough work on the emotions, arguing that grief – like (he suggests) other emotions – is essentially a process that integrates a variety of disparate states, judgments, and events into a coherent and narratable whole. Given Goldie's emphasis on the role that the linking of distinct evaluative and emotional perspectives in free indirect style plays in our self-understanding, however, it is surprising that he largely leaves unaddressed any questions about how narratives help us reach appropriate emotions, presumably by virtue of their narrative structure. Details along these lines would have helped clarify why the resolution of grief, or the attainment of self-forgiveness, require narrative, while elucidating how our past is taken up into the future.

From here it is a quick step to the role of narratives in our thinking about the future, especially in planning agency and the acquisition of virtue. We learn from our mistakes, for example, by thinking through cases where we made them. When I lose my life's savings at the poker table I think through my decision to raise the bet, consider other possibilities, and regret not having taken them, all because the actual narrative of what transpired fills me with dread and a deep sense of my pockets' emptiness. I can, in turn, focus on one of the counterfactual narratives, imagine myself happily spending a smaller sum at the bar with my pride intact, experience a sense of joy at the prospect of that feeling, and resolve not to raise in the future. So here it is the psychological correlate of free indirect style – my emotional response to the emotion of my imagined counterfactual self – that can motivate me to better action. At this point, Goldie appropriates the standard story of virtue acquisition to his narrative account. By imagining narratives in which I avoid risks, for example, and by having positive emotions in response to those narratives and thereby endorsing them, I can form policies of avoiding risks such that they eventually become character traits, so that I no longer need to take them into account. Rather, character traits work in the background, so that when I attempt to imagine myself happily taking a foolish risk, I react with discomfort or distress, steering me away from such reckless courses of action.

Our thinking about ourselves as beings with a past and future belongs to our narrative sense of self. But Goldie argues that this narrative sense is not to be confused with a narrative self; having a narrative sense of self presupposes, but does not constitute, personal identity and survival. He argues the point in a detailed and subtle engagement with Marya Schechtman's narrative self-constitution account, focusing on her view that our survival (or survival in a subtle sense that can persist independent of the continuity of personal identity) is threatened if we cease to be able to empathize with our past selves. To note two of his arguments, Goldie holds that our self-narratives can be constructed out of materials other than memory – out of friends' accounts

of a night one cannot remember, for example – and that the ability to lose empathy is of value in itself. If I genuinely give up my gambling ways, I can no longer empathize with a former self; his emotions (for it is now an alien ‘he’) at the roulette wheel fill me with loathing. And far from threatening my survival, Goldie argues, this is a case of personal growth. We can sum up the argument with the idea that survival must be able to persist through alienation – even profound alienation – from one’s past self: “in shame one is still riveted to one’s past” (140).

Goldie’s key objection to the narrativist, then, is that our lives are too messy to be fully captured by narrative. Much of what happens to us is so coincidental and irrational that it cannot be given a coherent narrative structure without distortion. And the danger of the narrativist position is that it pulls us so far in the direction of seeking a narrative structure in our lives that we run the risk of misrepresenting what happens during their course: of thinking ourselves to be authors of our lived narratives and thus failing to comprehend in an appropriate manner all those aspects of our lives that lie beyond our control; of trying too hard to make sense of random tragedies in order to find an unattainable narrative closure and thus blocking off emotional closure; of seeing ourselves and others as having hypostasized characters as if we were playing a role in a fictional narrative genre. These “fictionalizing tendencies” may stem from our desire to find meaning amid meaninglessness, but they are dangerous nonetheless.

We might wonder whether Goldie goes too far in his rejection of the narrative self. He argues, for example, that we can reconstruct our narrative sense of self from third-personal accounts, so that even something as extreme as complete amnesia does not preclude me from constructing a narrative (126). But this is different from the case in which I can reconstruct an *episode* from third-personal accounts. Goldie insists that all that is needed for survival is “the self of personal identity, the self to which we refer when using the word ‘I’ in autobiographical personal narratives” (141). But what keeps one “riveted to one’s past,” even in cases of amnesia? Identity without internal access seems insufficient to explain the sense in which our past is still ours, and the tools with which Goldie has equipped narrative make it a strong candidate for what we need to make sense of survival in the subtle sense.

Finally, there is an omission in Goldie’s account. While dedicating two chapters each to narrative thinking about the past and the future, he mentions our narrative thinking about the present only in scattered remarks. Yet it seems important to the sorts of beings we are that we can not only reflect from our present perspective on our past and future, but that we can also reflect on our present selves by taking the past and future into account. Sweating with anticipation at the gambling table, I am also disgusted with myself in light of my disappointment with myself tomorrow. It is precisely because I am now also the man who will tomorrow face his family with his head down that I am *now* a self-reflective being; if this is right, narrative seems to be constitutive of our practical identity, if not personal identity. Nevertheless, Goldie has given us an extremely fruitful starting point from which to address these issues, adding layers to our understanding of the role of narrative in psychology. Moreover, he successfully provides concise mini-primers on memory, the emotions, self-forgiveness, and personal identity, among other topics, before fitting them under the narrative umbrella. This breadth of knowledge, combined with an engaging style, makes this a deceptively simple and immensely readable work; the kind of philosophical book that is a genuine pleasure to peruse, and one that will inform narrative theory for the foreseeable future.

Roman Altshuler
SUNY Stony Brook