



PROJECT MUSE®

Emotions and Narrative Selves

Valerie Gray Hardcastle

Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology, Volume 10, Number 4, December 2003, pp. 353-355 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/ppp.2004.0019

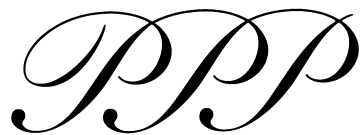


➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ppp/summary/v010/10.4hardcastle.html>

EMOTIONS AND NARRATIVE SELVES

VALERIE GRAY HARDCASTLE



IN THEIR COMMENTARIES, both Phillips (2003) and Woody (2003) agree that the affective side of personhood needs to be better addressed in narrative views of self. In their arguments, they focus mainly on how a patient or a subject is here and now. In contrast, Kennett and Matthews (2003) take a longer view and argue for the importance of a diachronic unity for selfhood. This commentary seeks to integrate these views by discussing how emotions are central to building our personal sense of unified agency.¹

Phillips and Woody are right: most philosophical discussions of the narrative view of self are overly cognitive and focus too much attention on our linguistic story-telling abilities and not enough on what it is like to be a person experiencing the world. This is too bad, for it is our affective reactions that drive our personal life narratives. Consider: of all the experiences in the world, we only chose a small subset to become or represent who we are. I regularly eat cold cereal for breakfast before heading off to work, but if you ask me to describe myself, I describe my work or my children, not my breakfast-eating habits. Why is this? I identify with my work, my family life, or my play, but not with my sleeping patterns, the trajectories I chose when I drive, or how I brush my teeth. How is it that I have selected the former activities to highlight in my self-stories, but not the latter?

I maintain that I choose the former because I have strong affective ties to them, ties that I do

not have to driving routes or personal hygiene. And these ties are what determine what gets into our narratives of self. Actually, my claim is stronger than that. I believe that our emotions not only color what we do but they also allow us to act in the first place (this discussion is greatly expanded in my forthcoming book).

Humans delight in pretending that our most prized and most humanly attribute is our forebrain, which houses, we also pretend, our capacity for rational thought. Since Plato at least we have held that subduing our passions to the iron rule of reason is our supreme aspiration; it is the ideal for human cognition. Ironically, we think that the more we are like *Star Trek's* alien Mr. Spock, the more human we really are.

But what would life really be like with an overdeveloped forebrain and without emotion? Let us consider more carefully what it is we really prize about being human. We can rationalize well, it is true, but we do so in the service of personal goals. As Aristotle reminds us, we have practical rationality; we have means-ends reasoning with a point. This is just another way of saying that it is imperative that we identify what is important to us prior to cognizing.

Obviously, one might scoff, we need an end to engage in means-ends reasoning. But often, I think, what having an end entails is not well appreciated. These days it is fashionable to believe that our fundamental ends—survival and reproduction—are set by our biology and that all

other ends (or most other ends) derive from them in some fashion. Maybe this story is true, but it obscures how ends—whether they be hardwired in or they come later—function in the human psyche.

At a bare minimum, that we have particular ends tells us that we have to tag our abstractions, interpretations, and matched patterns with valences—some things are good, some things are bad, and some are indifferent. Tagging our experiences thus is just what it means to have emotions; we are reacting affectively to our world around us. And it is these reactions that determine which inputs we respond to and which we ignore. We literally cannot move about in our world without emotion. I think, perhaps, that this fact is what Phillips and Woody are hinting at.

To drive home this point, consider a counterexample. Suppose Vulcans really did exist. What would they be like? How would they begin their days? Most of us get out of bed at some point during the morning. We do so because we want to get up and go about our business. We attach good or at least important to our getting-up-and-doing-something impressions. But if we were Vulcan, if we had no emotions, then we would never make it out of bed. We would have no reason to. Of course, we would not have made it in to bed the previous night either. Actually, we would not have survived long after birth, for we would not have ever felt the need to eat. As an aside, I note that there are a few brain-damaged souls like this around. Victims of akinetic mutism lie in their beds, awake and thoughtful, but uninterested in moving and hence unable to.

We could only do those things, if we were Vulcan, if our behavior were innately specified. If eating, sleeping, rising, and going about our day were somehow already programmed in. Vulcans could have those behavioral patterns already laid down in their brains from birth so that they run through them without emotion, much as we might hiccup.

When we look at human brains, we see that their connectivities bear out this argument. It is not the case that our oh-so-important frontal lobes were just tacked on to the hindbrain as a kind of afterthought. Instead, they are intricately

connected to the thalamus, hypothalamus, and other regions of the limbic system. Indeed, evolutionarily speaking, it appears that the cortex is really just overgrown hypothalamic tissue. Emotion is a biological highlighter that lets us choose certain objects and activities over others (and over none at all).

Suppose I am correct in my analysis of the centrality of emotions to human existence and behavior. What does this say about our self-narratives? Two things, I think. First, it tells us that items we have tagged as significant (either good or bad) make it into our stories. Those that we do not tag are not remembered, much less incorporated into our narratives. Second, it tells us that if we lose our affective tagging system, as Joanne did in Wells' (2003) article, we lose our ability to pick out what we want for our life activities and for our telling of them later. Without affective tagging, we cannot keep our experiences alive, as it were, over time.

We use our idiosyncratic desires to guide our existence, and as these desires remain constant over time, they allow us to hypothesize a common core that powers our behavior. Our very "center of narrative gravity" depends on there being something that remains relatively unchanged through significant chunks of our lifespan. Our emotional reactions are just that thing. Because we react similarly to similar inputs, we gain a sense of unity across our thoughts, actions, and reactions. This unity is then reflected in our narrative stories of self. (I note parenthetically that although I believe that language is required for getting our selves off the ground, we can express these selves in many ways, including through dance or poetry. However, one should not confuse self-expression with self-constitution. But what exactly the difference is between the two is another commentary for another time.)

Without emotional reactions, we have no stories and hence no self at all. Phillips might be right when he notes that Joanne is the worst off of the bunch. As her emotional life fades in her madness, so does her self.

At the same time, what is truly tragic about Mary—as Kennett and Matthews note—is that she cannot see constancy across her life. Depend-

ing upon which compartment is in charge, she reacts differently to the same stimuli. Consequently, a unified sense of agency eludes her and she too has diminished personhood. We need to appreciate the good, the bad, and the ugly—and we need to hang on to those appreciations over time—if we are to be genuine and complete selves.

NOTES

1. Phillips also discusses how my view of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is incorrect, and, in particular, how my view of Mary is incorrect. Needless to say, I disagree with Phillips' assessment. I do not wish to make this disagreement an issue in this commentary, however. I think that Kennett and Matthews do a fine job of articulating why one should believe that Mary has at least rudimentary multiple selves and that these selves are not integrated in such a way to allow for a

single person. Although Kennett and Matthews have other goals in their essay, I shall take them as defending my views of DID as well.

REFERENCES

- Kennett, J., and Matthews, S. 2003. The unity and disunity of agency. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 10, no. 4:305–312.
- Hardcastle, V.G. (Forthcoming). *Constructing selves*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Phillips, J. 2003. Psychopathology and the narrative self. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 10, no. 4:313–328.
- Wells, L. A. 2003. Discontinuity in personal narrative: some perspectives of patients. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 10, no. 4:297–303.
- Woody, J. M. 2003. When narrative fails. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 10, no. 4:329–345.