NARRATIVE FOUND IN NIETZSCHE:
ILLUMINATING OUR LIFE-AFFIRMING STORIES

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Abstract
In a modern age where many have abandoned God and have turned to science, a new problem emerges, which is that of meaning. With the death of God comes the birth of new ways in which we can begin to define and give meaning to our lives. This paper suggests that a Nietzschean conception of narrative can help to replace the meaning that people experience as lost once they abandon belief in God.

Nietzsche’s philosophy offers a powerful way to artistically overcome the philosophical notion of the death of God. His solution not only helps us cope with the absence of God, but also illuminates the way in which we can thrive because of it. Nietzsche’s solution is to view our lives as existential works of art, whereby we are left up to the task of affirming our lives. With the death of God comes the birth of new ways in which we can define and give meaning to our lives. The burden that follows is that Nietzsche can only explain that we need to affirm an artistic life, but he cannot tell us how. If Nietzsche were able to articulate how we create an artistic life, then it would no longer be an authentic creation of our own; it would be Nietzsche’s. This would once again leave us with the same problem we originally had with God in control of our lives. We would, once again, not be the ones who give meaning to our own lives. Because of this, Nietzsche is left up to the task of urging us to take artistic control of our own lives while at the same time not overstepping the prescriptive side of his life-affirmative philosophy by telling us exactly what to do. My goal in this paper is to reduce the ambiguity that may be inherent in Nietzsche’s philosophy by making sense of his philosophy as narrative. I want to propose that the concept of narrative is helpful for understanding what Nietzsche believes the final product of his life-affirmative philosophy ought to be, namely, that each of us should make our lives into a narrative.

In a modern age where many have abandoned God and have turned to science, a new problem emerges, which is that of meaning. The belief in science cannot give someone the kind of meaning or purpose that is inherent within the belief in God. When one believes in God, one’s life can all make sense; if anything bad happens, there is a sort of comfort that comes with the understanding that God has a plan for, and is in control of, one’s life. When one believes in God, life can make sense; there is a sense of unity and purpose that comes with the belief in God. Conversely, science alone cannot create such a sense of purpose and unity. In fact, the contrary seems to ring truer: science tends to explain away much of the value that can be found within the world, leaving many people in a state of apathetic nihilism.

Nietzsche’s philosophy directly addresses such a “death of God,” and gives us a way to move past God’s “death” without falling prey to any sort of apathetic nihilism. In other words, Nietzsche does not believe that either one chooses to live a meaningful life by believing in God or that one lives a meaningless life by denying Him. In fact, Nietzsche posits that there is a third option, which is able to circumvent the problems that arise in the aforementioned beliefs. His solution is to make our lives into a work of art. Much like a painter’s blank canvas, Nietzsche believes that we can view our lives as a canvas on which we can paint however we please.

For those who believe in God, God becomes a kind of artist, insofar as He has a plan for their lives. This is an exciting and comforting thought for the believer, since she is able to have a firsthand account of

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1 This is not to say that the two are necessarily incompatible, but rather that many abandon the notion of God and attempt to replace it with the notion of Science.
the way in which God is sketching out her life. And even if parts of the painting do not seem to fit or look ugly (e.g., the times in which she goes through hardships), she has a sort of comfort to fall back on, knowing that it will all come together once God is finished sketching out her life story. Just like one who observes an artist at work, the believer can find comfort in knowing that the disjointed strokes in her life will ultimately have a place and make sense in the grand scheme of things, since every work of art eventually comes together to create a cohesive whole.

In light of this, it becomes easier to see why the non-believer has turned to a life of apathetic nihilism: the artist (God) for her life-painting has walked away. In fact, He never even began to paint in the first place; there was no artist! What one once saw as intentional and intricate strokes, creating a cohesive life-painting, is now seen as a conglomeration of disjointed strokes that have no intentional or thought-out connection. Where the believer is able to have a cohesive and meaningful life, the non-believer must cope with the thought that there is no plan or meaning in her life.

While Nietzsche is at first sympathetic to the nihilist’s bleak state, he is ultimately joyful, and even thankful for the position she is in, because the nihilist can now have a new sense of freedom. The “death of God” means the death of any predetermined plan for our lives, but why should that be a bad thing? For Nietzsche, this is the greatest possibility we could have, because it means that we are now in control of our own life-painting. Nietzsche’s challenge for us is to pick up the brush and create our own goals and our own sense of meaning and end up with a unique life-painting that cannot be replicated. So instead of mourning over the thought that there is no inherent meaning, one should rejoice over the fact that we now have creative control over our lives.

In fact, this is the first time that such a possibility has existed. For the believer, there is a submission that must ensue in understanding that God has a plan for her life. Conversely, the apathetic nihilist has ignored or overlooked the gift that she has received in the form of being in control of her own life. In both the case of the believer as well as the nihilist, their lives will always be muffled with artistic constraint; they have denied a life of artistic originality.

Such life denial is easy to succumb to. It takes bravery to pick up the brush and begin creating one’s own work of art. With such a sense of ownership comes a certain amount of responsibility, which is not seen in the life of a nihilist or believer. If the nihilist does not appreciate the kind of life she has, she can deny it, referring back to the thought that there is no meaning to life. Similarly, if the believer does not like her life, she can deny a sense of ownership of it; God has everything figured out and under control. In both cases, they deny creative control over their lives.

Nietzsche admits that it is not easy to truly be life-affirmative. It is much easier to live in a life-denying state where herds of others reside. For the one who daringly affirms one’s life, there are no herds of people. An existential life journey takes place, whereby the individual leads an authentic life, filled with the style and meaning that one chooses to give it. No one is by her side, telling her how to paint her life. She is left up to the task of painting a picture that no one else has painted; she is blazing a trail that no one else has yet traveled; she is living dangerously and saying “Yes” to whatever life gives her. In a section from The Gay Science, entitled For the New Year, Nietzsche says the following:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things—in this way I will be one of those who make things beautiful. Amor fati [love of fate]: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let looking away be my only negation! And all in all, to sum it up: some day I want to be only a Yes-sayer?  

The one who is truly life-affirmative affirms the whole thing—the past, the present, and the unique possibilities that come with the future. They are the ones who have been able to say, “Yes” to their fate, to their lives in their entirety. For example, being good at the piano entails that one accepts everything that

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led up to the point of one’s current piano playing skills, even the counter-productive events. In other words, inherent in the artistic plan of becoming a piano player are the times of weakness in which one gave up on playing the piano, but eventually came back to it. It was only through the summation of all of the past events that one was able to have the ability to become a good piano player in the present. Furthermore, it is only because of our present that we have the unique kind of opportunities for our future! Nietzsche believes that in some way, every thought, action, and experience we have is linked. Big or small, every event continues to define and shape parts of who we are, which in turn, defines the kind of possibilities we have for the future. The task with which Nietzsche challenges us is to take such a network of integrated events and interpret them in an artistic way. We must “survey all the strengths and weaknesses of [our] nature and fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.” An integral part of our life-painting are those strokes of weakness, which highlight and help create the overall work of art. Because it is only by saying “Yes!” to all of our past that gives us our future possibilities. In other words, saying “Yes!” to one’s life means affirming all of it—all of the past, the present, as well as the future.

While adamant about viewing one’s life as an “artistic plan,” Nietzsche is also clear in articulating the difficulty in living out such a life. It is far easier to affirm some parts of one’s life, but deny others. It is easy to affirm one’s piano-playing abilities, but deny the times when one gave up on trying to learn. But Nietzsche wants to show that affirming parts of one’s life while denying other parts cannot actually occur. If one were to affirm one’s piano-playing abilities, but deny the times when one wanted to give up, one has not actually affirmed one’s piano-playing abilities at all. What one has not realized is that it is, in part, because of the times that one wanted to give up that one was able to become a good piano player. Furthermore, it may be easy to say “Yes!” to the present—a sort of carpe diem—but it is a burden to truly say “Yes!” to all of it. Carpe diem challenges us to find meaning in the moment. Amor fati pushes us to find meaning in a whole lifetime. Affirming our lives means accepting our whole lives, everything that has been done, is being done, and will be done.

To test whether we are truly willing to affirm our whole lives, Nietzsche challenges us to view our lives as though they would occur infinitely, the same lives, over and over again. Would we be willing to affirm all of our actions—the past, present and even future ones—if we knew that they would be performed over and over again for an infinite number of times? Such is the test of the “eternal return,” wherein all of history is replayed infinitely. Everything in our lives would be the same, but it would have already been played out an infinite number of times and will continue to be played out an infinite number more. Every action, from big to small, will be done over and over again for all of eternity. Nothing will be changed from one version of us to the next; we are the same us with the same options who choose the same things every time the universe resets.

Fortunately, we do not have to truly believe in the eternal return to apply such a concept to our lives. The goal is to ask whether we would affirm our lives and do it all again, not changing a thing, even if we had the chance to do so. Nietzsche wants to see if we are truly willing to say “Yes!” to our entire lives, just the way they are as well as the way they will be. This also highlights the way in which it is only through affirming our present lives (which means to affirm all of our past) that we are ever able to look forward to our future possibilities, which are particular to the individual who is making her own original life-painting, giving style to her life.

Once we have been able to apply the test of the eternal return and still say “Yes!” to our lives, we have overcome the kind of sickness that is found in the rest of the life-denying herd. We have gone far beyond what the believer and nihilist were able to do, and can have the richest and most fulfilling lives possible. It is not a life dictated by anyone or anything else and it still has the rich sort of meaning we can only get when we understand that we are completely free to explore and create our unique possibilities and give style to our lives.

What an invigorating challenge, to make our lives into works of art! But Nietzsche cannot tell us the way to begin to say “Yes!” to our lives. He can only offer us ways to respond to the death of God.

Remember that the death of God also meant the death of predetermined meaning; we lost our sense of orientation in the world, not knowing where to go or what to do. There were no guidelines for our lives anymore. And because of this, Nietzsche challenges us to realign ourselves in the world the way we see fit; we must blaze a trail into the future and venture outside of the conventional lives we so often see. We must create a unified and original life-painting, not a counterfeit piece of work. But in order for us to endeavor on such a track, we cannot demand that Nietzsche tell us specifically what we must do in our personal lives; that choice is up to us. However, I would like to offer up at least one way in which we may apply Nietzsche’s philosophy, which is to reinterpret our lives as a narrative.

Narratives have an appealing quality, in that they are able to take participants through adventurous journeys. They are able to bind together the past, present, and future in a fluid way to make sense of an overall story. As Paul Ricoeur writes, narrative “construes significant wholes out of scattered events.” It takes fragmented events and puts them into a cohesive and meaningful background, allowing particular plots to appear in the foreground. It can thematize particular lives, presenting them as cohesive projects. In many ways, it can reintroduce the role that God had played without our having to revive Him. Where God was able to give us a plan for our lives, narratives give us a kind of plan, too. Narratives do not tell us what we must do in our future, but it groups our past events in such a way that we feel as though we have some sort of trajectory. When we understand our lives as a narrative, we are able to better make sense of the way in which events in the past have been unified and how such unification can help project our futures in unique ways.

Moreover, the function of narrative is in no way foreign to us; rather, quite the opposite is true, in that it is the way in which we all typically communicate. So the leap from using narrative in our lives to actually viewing our lives as a narrative is not as big as one may think. All people, at nearly every age, are able to use narrative and apply it to conversation. For example, children often adopt a narrative approach to communication. When at the dinner table, a child’s mother may tell her to recount what happened at school for dad to hear. The exposition the child will typically give is in the form of a story. Both children and adults alike find it much easier to talk in terms of overall plots than to attend to every specific detail. So when the child begins to tell her father what happened at school today, it is in terms of specific events, in which the rest of the details are given in order to draw out certain features of the main event. The child may say, “Today, at recess, I went out to the swings and watched Jimmy do a back flip.” The child is able to recount an experience or plot (Jimmy doing a back flip) and give it a background against which it is highlighted (at recess, on the swings). What the child does not, and in fact cannot, do is recount her entire day at school, e.g., the number of people who were around watching Jimmy, the actual height of the swing set, the height of the back flip, etc. In other words, the child does not talk about single disjointed occurrences throughout the day, but rather describes events along with their contexts. This is an approach that we develop at a young age and never abandon. When we are challenged with reflecting upon the kind of person we are, we do not give an exacting account of our entire life history, but rather reflect on instances that are brought to light by reference to a context. In other words, the way we normally think is already in the form of narrative, so to think of our lives as such is a small yet meaningful step for us to take.

When we adopt the narrative approach to our own lives, we gain a sense of orientation to our being-in-the-world. What we once interpreted as disjointed happenings in our lives, we can now see as integral parts of a larger whole. We can cast ourselves as the protagonist in our own story. And when we do this, we are able to build our own story with our own sense of meaning. We begin to take on an artistic way of viewing our lives. We can interpret events in new ways and can apply them to current as well as future goals. As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps write, “Narratives situate narrators, protagonists and listeners/readers at the nexus of morally organized, past, present, and possible experiences.” As narrators, we are left up to the task of artfully constructing our lives into a sensible whole. This is not to say that

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narratives tell us how to create works of art out of our lives, but rather that we can view whatever happens in our lives as parts of a cohesive work of art or of a unified plot that is being disclosed to us.

This is, in many ways, a kind of lens through which we can interpret Nietzsche’s test of the eternal eternal return. While the eternal return challenges us to affirm our entire life, narrative can further highlight the way in which it is woven together. The eternal return is not just about saying “Yes” to every individual instance that will be replayed throughout eternity, but also to see and affirm our lives as a whole. While Nietzsche’s test forces us to affirm all of our lives (including the past, present, and future), narrative accentuates the way in which our lives are unified as a story; we cannot take bits of the story, change other parts, and still have the same protagonist with the same ending. We must affirm the story at hand, our story with our own ending.

One criticism that may be developed is that it seems as though narrative does not necessarily force us to affirm our whole lives. In fact, it seems entirely possible to view our lives as a narrative while still being life-denying. For example, if Nietzsche is right in claiming that the only sort of person who is able to be life affirmative is one who has accepted the death of God and has begun to artfully create meaning in one’s life, then it seems entirely possible that someone like Pope John Paul II could have viewed his life as a narrative as well: he certainly had a unique story and it did not involve accepting the death of God. But viewing our lives as a personal narrative goes beyond just having a story; it demands that we be willing to take responsibility for our lives, a responsibility that cannot be found for one who has given up, or does not have control over, one’s life. In other words, viewing our lives as a personal narrative involves the ability to have authorship of what is being written (or else it is no longer our story and becomes someone else’s). So in the case of Pope John Paul II, we may be able to view his life as a narrative (not our own personal narrative, mind you) but he cannot, since he no longer thinks that he is the author of his own story. While the Pope's story may be viewed as a narrative from the outside (i.e. from other people's perspectives), the decisive difference is that he arguably did not take up the task of writing his own narrative from the inside (i.e. from his perspective), which we know because he believed that he did not need to write his own narrative, that it was written by God for him. Similarly, the nihilist is not able to view her life as a personal narrative either, since she has not taken ownership of the kind of meaningful life she is living. Personal narratives are able to adjust our view toward a meaningful, cohesive lifestyle in which we are responsible for being the authors of our lives.

As a result of viewing our lives as one coherent story, we are able to gain a sense of autonomy, which may have otherwise been lost. A personal narrative is just that, it is personal. Just as Nietzsche emphasized the way in which we are our own painters for our own lives, narrative makes us our own protagonists in our own story with our own goals and adventures. Just as no one can paint our own life-painting, no one can write the story for us. We are in control of what happens in our lives, as well as how the plot ensues. But to say that we are in control of everything in our lives seems nonsensical; surely the bad things in our lives were not something we chose. This is very true. But what narrative is able to do is to mediate our involvement in the world. It is able to thematize events in particular ways. It helps give us a sense of unity, putting enigmatic and frustrating situations into a contextualized plot. In this way, unsettling events that were once rigid can now be smoothed out and understood. Because of this, narrative can be used in therapy in order to help patients accept and deal with traumatizing events. In the case of sexual abuse, victims often feel as though they have lost their sense of humanity and personhood, and may view themselves as objects or as “Others.” For such victims, narrative becomes a way to highlight their sense of self and regain autonomy in their lives. They can begin to make sense of, and deal with, horrible events by recontextualizing them, thereby shifting the way in which the victims view their senses of self. It makes saying “Yes” to all of one’s life a much more palatable task.

In fact, nearly all personal narrative stories center on a problem by which one must overcome. Every good protagonist experiences some sort of antagonist. Whether it is a physical antagonist or a non-physical one, the protagonist is faced with a problem or challenge. Again, we see that personal narrative is not only able to make sense of bad events and help regain control over our lives, but it also gives us a certain drive, or goal to pursue because of it. Instead of feeling victimized by troubling events, we can interpret them into our narrative. Once we do this, problems become particular ways in which our unique
narratives develop; they becomes ways in which the sloppy strokes of life add to the meaning and uniqueness of the individual.

Similarly, as new challenges arise, we are able to give new interpretations to old events. Because narratives about the past are told in the contextualized present, meanings behind past events can shift. Our present moment is not static, but rather consistently changing in dynamic ways as we progress throughout our lives. As our present moment changes and becomes recontextualized, we may be able to reevaluate past “meaningless” events as being consequential and important. For example, if one’s car breaks down, at first it may seem as though there is no point for such meaningless inconveniences to occur. But the moment that it can be related back to something great happening in our life—say, for example, a stranger gives me a ride and we end up getting married—the meaningless event is revealed to be deep and purposeful; we simply were not able to access it. Our limited foresight is not able to predict the kind of development past actions may have on our future state of affairs. Once some events are transformed from the meaningless to the meaningful, we can begin to view other events that do not make sense as parts of plots that have not yet been revealed to us. In other words, because our story is not over, past events have the potential to resurface and reshape parts of our present and future lives. In this way, the one who views her life as a personal narrative is able to do two things that the others cannot. Where people normally view bad events as meaningless and horrible happenings, the one who views one’s life in terms of a personal narrative identity can (1) reinterpret bad events as a challenge to be overcome, further developing the way in which one views oneself as well as advance one’s overall story, and (2) one can suspend judgment of bad events until one’s meaning has been revealed at a later point in time.

But the beauty and life-affirmative element to narrative goes far beyond the way in which we understand and view the past. Narrative is able to build on one’s past in meaningful ways by seizing upon the potential one has right now. By doing so, we are able to create a single, coherent, unified story—a common theme, or connecting thread, whereby our past, present and future are aligned. The key, though, is that we have the task of aligning them. Thus Nietzsche first mourns the death of God. This is not to say that our lives are now empty, but rather that we now have a new responsibility to orient our own lives, without any knowledge of how to do it. Nietzsche’s entire philosophy calls attention to the way in which our life is one life. The death of God is often a large blow to the way in which we may think of our lives as unified wholes. But Nietzsche is earnest to point out that we have actually been unchained and let loose. We still have a story and in fact it is a coherent one. We just have to become illuminated by the way in which we now have artistic control of making our own stories. Narrative unifies our stories into powerful wholes that enable us to say “Yes!” to our entire stories and to become willing to live them out over and over again. It creates for us a protagonist who is able to love her fate (Amor fati), thereby loving all of her life, no matter how the story ends.

REFERENCES


