

NARRATIVE NATURALISM

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In our time, John Dewey might be called a “religious humanist,” although if he were able he might object. I am a secular humanist. Dewey’s philosophy informs many of my most significant interactions, but I do not explore in them, as Dewey did, what it means to be religious. Naturalistic philosophy and the sciences support the assertion that religious experience is meaningful in quality, not that meaningful experience is religious in quality. We can achieve a full sense of direction and personal identity through a creative, narrative method of working within natural experience with no sense of the supernatural. My method is drawn from a multidisciplinary study with philosophical naturalism at its core. I hope that my thesis will be put to use, then tested for its efficacy.

For some, meaning in life is not a pressing concern, but it is for me and for many others everywhere. There are those who respond with much goodwill toward religion but also those who think that they have been very damaged by it. In the cultural debate, this is the great divide. We must engage in thoughtful conversation and form coalitions for common ends. Can we do so while preserving distinctions that make a difference? In the public square, in studies and in the polls, semantic confusion is rampant, and implicit interpretations often frame the issues. Connotations count.

Following Dewey, philosophical naturalists are able to describe and defend quite effectively our ability to lead the fullest possible lives. As a species, we seek meaning in many contexts; with the assistance of the sciences, philosophical naturalism is more than capable of providing it. Science is more than just one language among many for describing the

world and how it works. No other ways of knowing should exclude or contradict without good evidence the best that science has to offer. Fortunately, there is much common ground among the sciences and the humanities and the arts, although in the past it has often been lost in translation. The success of science, naturalism, and an ethical, inclusive humanism depends in no small part upon our willingness to use terminology that could help to dissolve the sort of problem that should not need to exist.

Richard Rorty thought that “a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.” There is a place for argument but also one for changing the subject’s parameters when they no longer suit our purposes. Rorty follows Dewey in thinking that some large and complex issues can pragmatically be evaded; they disappear when they no longer seem relevant or necessary.

About the author

Judy Walker is a graduate of Wellesley College with a degree in sociology and anthropology. She earned her JD from the University of Colorado School of Law and served as an Assistant Colorado Attorney General in the Higher Education Unit representing Colorado state institutions of higher education. She joined the University of Colorado Foundation in 1985, where she worked for thirteen years as the Director of Development for the Boulder Campus College of Arts and Sciences and then as a Vice President for Development specializing in fund-raising management and major gifts. She is currently a Center for Inquiry (CFI) Institute fellow specializing in philosophical naturalism and a former CFI board member.



About this paper

“Narrative Naturalism” began its development as a multipart course titled “Naturalism through Narrative: Knowledge, Ethics, and Identity in the Creation of Meaning,” which Ms. Walker taught at the CFI Institute Summer Session in August 2008. Ms. Walker further developed ideas from the 2008 course into the current paper, which she first delivered at the CFI conference “Dewey’s Impact on America and the World” held at Amherst, New York, October 22-24, 2009. The paper was reprinted in the proceedings book of the conference, Paul Kurtz, ed., *Dewey’s Enduring Impact: Essays on America’s Philosopher* (Prometheus Books, 2011). The paper was adapted into an article, also titled “Narrative Naturalism,” which appeared in the April/May 2010 issue of *FREE INQUIRY* magazine and was later reprinted in the best-of-*FREE INQUIRY* anthology *Secular Humanism and Its Commitments* (Inquiry Press, 2012).

Just as there is no one “Absolute” with a capital *A*, there is no one “Meaning” with a capital *M*. We value the multiple perspectives in our philosophy. Still, we may think about the biggest questions that do converge, especially when we are suffering. Looking forward, do we have hope? Looking back, can we say that we have reached our personal and professional goals? Did we deal well with inevitable conflict and loss? Did we attempt to help others and to further good in the world? Will we tell the stories of our lives to ourselves and others with understanding and, in largest measure, with joyful satisfaction? Will it matter that we ever lived? Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is all about meaning. Meaning is amenable to study and is ours to create, not to “find” in the sense that there is an ultimate answer for all.

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle famously said: “A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. . . . [T]he plot . . . will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it.” I see this as Dewey’s problem-solving cycle of sentient life, one that forms a mode of conduct that can produce an intensely felt quality of exhilaration, achievement, and fulfillment. This primary narrative of meaning is both scientific and aesthetic, without reduction or exclusion. When Dewey urged that scientific, philosophical naturalism should be seen as a stance that can address a wide variety of natural, social, and practical problems, he successfully articulated an inclusive match between the methods of science and the emotional, inspirational advantages of aesthetics. Experience that he often called “religious” is included in this synthesis.

Although Dewey talked more about art than about narrative, he never ignored the temporal, dramatic nature of reality because he saw art as an activity, a process of perceiving the environment and of making decisions about it. He thought of the ordering of experience as an aesthetic project overall. He felt the rhythmic pattern of critical inquiry itself, making a five-point analysis of observation that is easily reducible to three aspects less difficult to remember: situation, study, and solution—the equilibrium of habits, the disruption of harmony, and the attainment of growth.

Dewey’s action-oriented, aesthetic philosophy has stood the evidentiary test of time. Meaning for Dewey has a productive, positive, and unabashedly affective quality. He knew the importance of managing both emotion and thought, even though the neuroscience to support his view had not yet been articulated. And he emphasized the development of good habits of mind to achieve chosen results. Dewey figured the findings of cognitive scientists with

his willingness to talk about imagination in his explorations of the mind. He directly addressed the art of creating meaning in a way that stressed its transformational quality without relying upon a transcendent realm that exists apart from the natural world. Dewey knew that the exercise of choice in problem-solving has a deeply passionate component that should never be ignored, as emotion is necessarily put to the service of reason.

Robert Solomon said: “It is because we are moved, because we feel, that life has a meaning.” This reflects emotion’s etymological sense of movement, of being moved, of motivation. Philosophical naturalism is already completely prepared to incorporate what science has shown, and now we can use the scientifically supported value of passion to our advantage. Our advocacy of science and philosophical analysis no longer will seem so cold to so many people; it will no longer seem that something important is missing, something that can be offered only by religion and religious practices in a cultural bargain that sacrifices knowledge on the altar of feeling. Ignoring emotion at their peril, many proponents of philosophical naturalism have tacitly ceded too much of its wide-ranging territory to religion. We must renew instead our understanding of Dewey’s primary emphasis on the felt qualities of life. Emotionally satisfying, meaningful experience is a crucial component of what humans need, but we don’t have to be religiously inclined to get it.

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has shown that reason and emotion are inseparable. Reason *includes* emotion, an important point that those who contrast reason to religion should consider. Damasio confirms that emotions are crucial to the decision-making process. We can educate our emotions but not suppress them entirely, nor should we. This is not to say that in all situations we should act upon our emotions without any critical thought. We all know that such an approach can be a recipe for disaster. But we should learn to use our emotions wisely because they provide us with important information about how we are doing as we make our way in the world. We can readily catch ourselves in the act of knowing and feeling as we explore our environment through time. Damasio says that “you know you exist because the narrative exhibits you as protagonist in the act of knowing.” In other words, you are the movie-in-the-brain, emerging within the movie. With your physiologically embodied, emotionally laden reason, you create, moment by sequenced moment, your autobiographical self.

Our passions are informed—and transformed—in

the entirely naturalistic process of inquiry. This has been Dewey's position all along.

The expansion of reason's connotations in this way will enable an entirely naturalistic humanism to address much more directly the alleviation of emotional suffering. No one wishes to be enmeshed in a deeply troublesome situation. But there is meaning to be made in the process of resolving it. Psychological studies show that a victim can become a protagonist by incorporating trauma into a new, more stable narrative, emphasizing what of benefit has been learned from the experience. The trauma is not ignored or excised; it is contextualized, so that it no longer operates as the central, defining theme. Damasio asserts that suffering puts us on notice that our decision-making strategies should change. After trauma, the felt quality of the experience can become one of accomplishment through the development of a new sense of self. Dewey, too, saw that problematic situations are opportunities for growth. This call to action is central to his philosophy, with an imaginative, creative, and aesthetic orientation permeating his entire analysis.

It is time to broaden our aesthetic sensibilities again, as Dewey did. Dewey often mentioned imagination in his work. He said that "the connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is closer than is usually thought. The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea." He also defined an imaginative experience as "what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world." Imagination, like emotion, no longer exists as a concept implicitly opposed to reason. All ideas are imaginative, which is fine—as long as there is thoughtful inquiry to back them up. Susan Haack says that "imaginative speculation is essential, but imaginative hypotheses have to stand up to evidence." Ruth Anna Putnam concurs: "To say that one has developed one's philosophical position in response to the moral impulse, or in response to any other passionate concern, is not to say that one does not have or has not given intellectually compelling reasons for that position." We should take an informed and ethical approach to our imaginative activity.

Imagination is closely connected to creativity. Damasio stresses that progress has been made toward building "a two-way bridge . . . between neurobiology and the humanities, thus providing the way for a better understanding of conflict and for a more comprehensive account of creativity." Creativity is our imaginative, aesthetic identity in action.

Problem-solving is creative. That's good, because we have to do it all the time.

As I delved into research primarily in philosophy but also in psychology, cognitive science, and literary theory (including new subdisciplines often called "cognitive narratology" and "evolutionary literary studies," which reach out sincerely to the sciences), I started to see a pattern, a rhythm, a familiar method of ordering experience throughout. It was the basic movement of narrative:

beginning - middle - end

stasis - crisis - resolution

observation - testing - conclusion

situation - study - solution

understanding - doing - making

being - doing - becoming

epistemology - ethics - aesthetics

truth - goodness - beauty

We can use story cycles like these deliberately to our advantage to acquire knowledge, act ethically, and create meaning in our lives.

Narratives enable our ability to transmit the felt qualities of our experience to others and even to ourselves. They bring both order and emotional resonance to any significant situation. Narratives are inherently aesthetic, indicating that critical analysis is also an art. Our ends-in-view, goals, highest aspirations, and ideals deeply inform the plots of our lives. The scientific, narrative trajectory of problem-solving (and, better yet, of problem-*finding*) can easily include the positive connotations of productivity, inventiveness, and constructive, ameliorative development. Critical inquiry is therefore generative, effective, imaginative, and creative. This is a fully organic understanding.

I found that scholars in many areas have explored the significant role of narrative in the creation of meaning. From philosophy, for instance, Mark Johnson calls the journey to narrative wholeness in experience the "source-path-goal" schema, adding cognitive science and linguistics to Dewey's assertion that an organism's inquiry about its world

involves the rhythm of an initial state, the encountering of a problem or conflict, and its resolution, resulting in the felt quality of fulfillment, growth, or transformation. Johnson also follows Dewey by stating that “our imaginative rationality is the chief means we have for dealing critically, creatively, and sensitively with the novel situations that arise for us each day.” And as Thomas Alexander says, “To preserve the narrative, dramatic structure of existence, for Dewey, is to preserve the dimensions of the possible and the actual; these are . . . dimensions of nature.” Narrative in this case is not merely descriptive; both implicit and explicit stories reflect an inherent structure of the mind. We often consider a variety of alternatives and possible future outcomes before we act. Dewey called this a “dramatic rehearsal.” At the end of each such story, we have a point of view from which we imaginatively perceive the situation’s outcome as a whole. Owen Flanagan supports the vital role of narrative, as well: “Many thinkers have converged on the insight that a narrative conception of self is the ‘essential genre’ of self-representation. . . . We narratively represent our selves in part in order to answer certain questions of identity.” He agrees with Daniel Dennett, who metaphorically calls the self “the center of narrative gravity” to explain the idea that we are all, in effect, the narrative agents and novelists of our lives.

From other fields, anthropologist Pascal Boyer, like Antonio Damasio, says that the narrative drive “is embedded in our mental representation of whatever happens around us.” Similarly, evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides say that “stories are told in a way that mimics the format in which experienced events are mentally represented and stored in memory, in order to make them acceptable to the machinery the mind uses to extract meaning from experience.” Cognitive narratologist Manfred Jahn notes that “the cognitive sciences themselves have begun to recognise the ‘storied’ nature of perception, sense-making, memory and identity formation.” Social psychologists Kristin Sommer and Roy Baumeister state that “the evidence suggests that the process of organizing and describing life events in narrative form facilitates the development of meaning.” And cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker indicates that “the basic script of an agonist tending, an antagonist acting, and the agonist reacting underlies the meaning of the causal constructions in most, perhaps all, of the world’s languages.”

The *agon*, a Greek term for “conflict” or “contest,” can be used to represent the second stage of the narrative cycle of beginning, middle, and end or of stasis, crisis, and resolution. Johnson also highlights the *agon* around which the narrative turns, leading to resolution in a structure that

“provides the most comprehensive, synthetic unity that we can achieve.” Seen in this way, a struggle, or even great suffering, can become a challenge, a problem to solve, with the realistic possibility of personal growth. Tragedy is no longer the final, felt outcome of an extremely problematic situation. Its victim can regain autonomy by turning the meaning of the past into future ameliorative action. Narrative transforms suffering.

I’ve developed a mnemonic device that helps me to be mindful of my greatest challenges and most important goals. I call it the *triagon*, a term I coined to symbolize my deliberate use of narratives when I need them. It reflects a framework for the many ways to state the cognitive, situational sequence of stasis, crisis, and resolution. With another nod to the Greeks, I see it as an *organon*, a tool or instrument for acquiring knowledge. Aristotle mentioned the three modes of the human *ergon*, or work: knowing, acting, and producing—the *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis* of daily life. The *triagon* reflects my secular humanism as a naturalistic worldview with its principal philosophical components of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics supported by the scientific method of situation, study, and solution. I see the *triagon*’s movement through a situation’s big or little wholes which have a narrative’s beginnings, middles, and ends.

Dewey continually comes to mind. Larry Hickman has commented on the similarity between Dewey’s triadic template and C.S. Peirce’s conception of categories. Kim Díaz calls it “Dewey’s rhythm of inception, development and fulfillment.” Observations like these from our philosophical tradition bring to the *triagon* key reminders of the emotional, aesthetic, imaginative felt quality of the process of thought, turmoil, and transformation; situation, suffering, and growth; mind, motivation, and meaning. This method, this narrative, is the being, doing, and becoming of knowledge, ethics, and identity. It is the nature of inquiry itself.

The *triagon* moves from stasis, through conflict, toward an integrated improvement through time. Irving Singer said that the number three establishes “a sense of reconciliation.” The *triagon*, with its inclusion of the agonistic in experience, helps me to put into proper sequence all that I have tried to think and learn. Although I know I am no blank slate, I am able to analyze my circumstances more effectively by seeing them as manageable, consciously narrated stages that help me to focus on the ameliorative, transformative, felt quality of my life.

The *triagon* is also a way to tell the story of a naturalistic, humanistic life as a creative work of art. As I read

Nietzsche's evocations of "life as art," I wondered what such an analogy could mean for the practice of philosophical naturalism today. Alexander Nehamas explains that "Nietzsche looks at the world in general as if it were a sort of artwork; in particular, he looks at it as if it were a literary text." For individuals, life as art, narrative, or literature can be seen as the real representation of a *bildungsroman*, a story of the coming of age of those of any age, depicting the journey of a protagonist in the shaping and maturing of his or her personality. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* are great examples of the genre.

The transformation of daily decision-making into an autobiography is an aesthetic experience. But some narratives are better than others. We must develop our plots with ethical as well as creative intention. When I view my life as an artistic whole to which I aspire, I think of it as more understandable, inventive, and emotionally integrated. When I consciously try to produce results of value to myself and others, my life becomes more meaningful. Using the *triagon*, I think of hindsight, foresight, and insight, each with ethical responsibilities attached. Nietzsche's "joyful wisdom" is within our reach as a worthy part of any satisfying form of self-creation.

Nevertheless, I know that it is unrealistic to expect that I will feel calm, centered, and enthusiastic at every moment. I realize now that I need to recognize the point at which I am in the grip of the middle part of a problematic narrative. I try not to shove my acknowledgment of emotion aside in an ill-conceived attempt to find some immediate relief. As I consider my suffering without rushing the process, I become more confident that I will feel in time the peaceful, hopeful satisfaction of a job well done, in spite of the tragedies in my past, the continuing difficulties I must face, and the acknowledgment that I will die. For me, calling my experience "religious" has not been necessary; it is aesthetic in every most exalted sense. As Dewey said in *Art as Experience*, "The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life."

I call that movement, that narrative, that culminating and transformative experience *sublime*. The sublime should be seen as an adjective more than a noun, though to say so is heresy against its philosophical and literary history. It has no actual existence, either in an order above our daily experience or below a religious domain in any essential way. Instead, we may use it, or other words like it, to explain what "religious" experience actually is. As the artist Agnes Martin has stated so well for all of us: "The artist tries to live in a way that will make greater awareness of the sublimity of reality possible." I see in the sublime the connotations of a process derived from the implications of its etymology: it defines a threshold, an adventure. The sublime can be used to describe the ameliorative, transformative resolution of a triagonal, narrative encounter with conflict. We may use it to remember that fear, sorrow, or pain can be contextualized in a middle stage of a naturalistic narrative, not suffered as a tragic inevitability. We will not remain at the brink of an abyss; we will move instead toward a greater understanding.

There is risk in this adventure and also great reward. There is a feeling of ascendancy at this threshold, without the confusion caused by any supernatural implications. As Paul Kurtz would say, there is no need for a "transcendental temptation." When a final burden of personal misfortune is lifted in a narrative, transformative sequence, it feels like freedom. I think of the sublime as what Dewey meant by the imaginative, felt quality of wholeness as a metaphor for meaning. It exemplifies the feelings of exhilaration and joy that we can achieve at the end of a successful situation. This elevated outcome is made more powerful by science, not less. Profound joy can be produced by cultivated, natural habits of thought; the feeling is the same. Joy is joy.

"Religious" experience is meaningful in quality; meaningful experience is not "religious" in quality. Meaningful experience is fully ours to make, and its story is ours to tell. □