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What is narrativity?

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Abstract

In recent years, narrative accounts of the self have gained increasing attention. It is widely accepted that humans are storytelling creatures, that stories shape our self-conception, and that we fail to be agents without a narrative framework. While there is less agreement on what constitutes a narrative, it is generally understood to be more than a chronological listing of life events; it is also an account of the explanatory relationships among these events—a story of how events lead to other events. However, specifying the nature of this explanatory relationship has proven difficult. As critics have pointed out, narrativists often resort to simplistic notions of narrative when faced with criticism. The concept of narrative explanation needs to be elaborated in a way that is both substantive enough to exclude trivial behaviours from being considered narratives and nonrestrictive enough to accommodate ordinary lives that may not be particularly story-like. In this paper, I review existing accounts of narrative explanation and propose a teleological account, according to which narratives consist of goal-directed explanations of a sequence of events. I argue that a teleological account of narrative explanation can be a fruitful way to clarify the concept of "narrative" in the context of the narrative self by addressing the most common objections.

KEYWORDS
goal, narrative, narrative explanation, narrative self, plot, purpose, story, teleological explanation, teleology

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1 | INTRODUCTION

There has been increased interest in narrative accounts of the self in recent years[1]. Although narrativist views differ in many ways, there is widespread agreement that human beings typically see, live, or experience their lives in view of a larger life narrative or story. One of the early proponents of the narrative view, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), quotes Barbara Hardy with approval: "We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (p. 211). MacIntyre argues that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal" (p. 216). Dennett (1992a) puts it this way:

> We are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behavior, and we always try to put the best 'faces' on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the center of that autobiography is one's self. (p. 114)

Marya Schechtman (1996) argues that constituting an identity requires conceiving one's life as a story with the form and logic of a conventional, linear narrative. She maintains that we constitute ourselves as persons by forming a narrative self-conception that guides our experience and organisation of life. Charles Taylor (1992) goes further, arguing that to determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand them in narrative form, as a "quest," and see them as a story (p. 52). This is an "inescapable structural requirement of human agency" (p. 52).

David Velleman (2005) articulates the relationship between lived and narrated life explicitly, arguing that "an autobiography and the behaviour that it narrates are mutually determining" (p. 9). He maintains that our ability to narrate the past is closely tied to our ability to narrate the future and that these prospective narratives influence subsequent behaviour. We not only narrate our behaviour but also act out of our narratives.

I am a product of my past in many profoundly important respects. No one would deny that. However, the narrativists make the more interesting claim that one's narrative interpretation of the past is pivotal for self-understanding and self-control. Thus, what is distinctive about the narrativists' claim is the essential role that narratives play in constructing a self-conception. According to narrativists, human beings typically unify and organise their experiences by situating their actions, motivations, desires, goals, values, character traits, and so on in a life narrative that traces their origins and plots their development. In order to construct a self-conception, one needs to have an understanding of how the events in one's life hang together in a narrative.

There is much less agreement on what constitutes a narrative. It is generally considered more than just a chronological listing of life events; it is also an account of the *explanatory relationships* among them—a story of how the events in one's life lead to other events. However, specifying what that explanatory relationship amounts to has proven difficult. Note, for instance, that representation in a narrative need not be a conscious representation. Narrativists would denounce this requirement as too stringent. It is not even clear whether narrative representation is necessarily linguistic.

One problem with this ambiguity is that narrativists often resort to a thin notion of narrative when faced with criticism, as critics have stressed (Christman, 2004; Lamarque, 2004; Strawson, 2004; Zahavi, 2007). For example, Strawson argues that if someone says that making coffee is a narrative because it involves planning, sequencing, and so forth and that everyday life is full of such narratives, then the claim is trivial. One can fall prey to the generality constraint when addressing the triviality constraint. If narratives are defined restrictively based on the conventions of works of literature, many ordinary lives may not qualify as narratives. The concept of narrative must be defined in a way that is both *substantive* enough to exclude trivial behaviours from being considered narratives and *inclusive* enough to encompass the ordinary experiences of everyday life.

[1]See, for example MacIntyre (1981), Dennett (1992), Taylor (1992), Schechtman (1996), Velleman (2005), Hardcastle (2008), Goldie (2012)

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In this paper, I ask whether the models of explanation available in the philosophy of science can account for the explanatory force of narrative. Explanation occupies a prominent place in the philosophy of science, and I cannot do it justice here (see Woodward & Ross, 2021 for a review). Instead, I focus on a specific type of explanation, namely teleological explanation, and argue that narratives render events intelligible based on goals and purposes, much like teleological explanations.

It is important to note one caveat. Narratives come in all shapes and forms, from myths, fairy tales, and fables to avant-garde literary pieces such as Camus's intentionally absurd novel The Stranger or nonlinearly plotted movies such as Memento and Pulp Fiction. Although a general theory of narrative explanation is desirable, it may not be possible given its wide variety. In this paper, I will focus on a core form of narratives, which are usually found in myths, fairy tales, fables, life narratives, and historical narratives. I will not be concerned with avant-garde novels and movies, as these genres generally react to and modify in one way or another the core forms of storytelling and are hence difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate within any general account.

This paper is organised as follows. In the first section, I provide an overview of two accounts of narrative explanation: causal and emotional theories. In the second section, I argue that narratives offer goal-directed explanations, similar to teleological explanations. In the third and final section, I consider common objections to the teleological view and show that it can address them all.

2 | NARRATIVE EXPLANATION

Musicians work with notes, painters work with colours, and storytellers work with events. In the context of narratives, an event is a change (McKee, 1997). For example, if you wake up and see that the streets outside your window are wet, even though they were dry before you went to sleep, you assume that an event has occurred, such as rain. Events in a narrative are related to each other in a pattern or sequence called a plot. Consider E.M. Forster's (1956) famous example: "The king died and then the queen died" is a temporal sequence of two events. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. In a temporal sequence of events, we ask, "and then?" whereas in a plot, we ask, "Why?". An answer to the question "Why?" is, of course, an explanation. Hence, Forster conceives the plot as a form of explanation, but what kind of explanation is it?

For Forster and many others, the answer is a causal explanation. The causal view of the plot can be traced back at least to Aristotle. According to Aristotle, a sequence of events hangs together in a plot because later events are necessary or probable consequences of the earlier events. Noel Carroll (2001) provides a modern rendering of the causal view. Carroll argues that narratives are temporally ordered and pertain to a single subject, but the narrative connection among events is tighter than mere temporal succession and subject matter. What makes the connection tight is that earlier events in a narrative are causally necessary conditions for the occurrence of later events. Earlier events may not be sufficient to bring about later events because there may be other causes. However, Carroll maintains, that later events could not have happened without the earlier events. This causal necessity provides a tight connection between the narrated events. Carroll suggests that the causal content of a narrative also underlies its explanatory potential. Narratives are used to explain how things happened because they track causal networks.

Emotional accounts of narratives offer an alternative to causal accounts. Velleman (2003) argues that a sequence of events qualifies as a story because it has the power to initiate and resolve an emotional cadence in the audience. In this view, stories are designed to elicit particular emotional responses from the reader. The story begins with the circumstances that initiate some emotions or sequence of emotions, and it ends when that emotional sequence is brought to a close. For example, a story might begin with a puzzling situation that arouses the reader's curiosity. The story then develops, resolving the puzzle and satisfying the reader's curiosity. For example, consider the puzzlement:

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> Puzzlement is typically aroused out of the blue—indeed, as a response to out-of-the-blueness—and it tends to motivate behavior designed to resolve it into the emotions associated with discovery. The latter include horror, which is a temporarily paralyzing emotion that is therefore static and self-sustaining at first; yet horror eventually gives way to fear, which motivates behavior designed to resolve it into relief. Thus, horror is by its nature an emotional complication, temporarily delaying a sequence initiated by puzzlement and concluding in the relief of fear. Horror is an emotional middle, to which puzzlement stands as the beginning and relief as the end. In carrying the audience through this emotional cadence, a tale displays the structure of what is known as a horror story. (Velleman, 2003, p. 16)

According to Velleman, stories generally lead their audiences through familiar sequences of emotions, such as the sequence from puzzlement to curiosity to foreboding to dismay to grief. In this way, stories enable their audiences to assimilate events not to familiar patterns of how things happen, but rather to familiar patterns of how things feel. Story audiences understand narrated events because they know how going through such an emotional sequence feels.

Although the idea that story events are bounded by an emotional sequence or cadence is appealing, I am unsure how far it can go. One immediate concern is that not every emotional sequence is a story. For example, musical pieces such as symphonies or piano sonatas also have an emotional sequence, even a more distinctive one. Still, they are not narratives in any ordinary sense of the term. Of course, this is not an insurmountable problem for the emotion theorist, who can specify other conditions to obtain, such as the existence of characters, events, time, and setting, in order to count something as a story besides the emotional sequence.

A more serious concern with emotional accounts is their applicability in narrative self-views, as it is unclear whether they satisfy the generality constraint. Many everyday stories do not have a tangible emotional sequence. For example, gossiping about a boss, recounting a day's events to friends, or sharing a past story at a family dinner may not have a clear emotional arc. Moreover, even the life stories of many people would be pretty dull to listen to and fail to resolve an emotional cadence in any audience, unless the individual had an exceptionally triumphant, mysterious, or suspenseful life.

To clarify, I do not intend to suggest that these ordinary stories would not elicit any emotional response from the audience. In other words, I am not claiming that ordinary stories are emotionally neutral. Instead, my claim is that the events in these stories are not typically sequenced emotionally. Identifying emotional sequences such as puzzlement, curiosity, foreboding, dismay, and grief in everyday stories about the misdemeanours of a boss, an ordinary day at work, or one's time on a college rowing team is challenging. Yet, these ordinary narratives are still perfectly good candidates for stories.

Emotion theorists might deny that these ordinary narratives are proper stories, but this would exclude several stories from consideration. A more plausible response would be to grant that these ordinary narratives are narratives but to deny that they are good. According to Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982), a critical aspect of what makes a story good is its ability to arouse particular emotional responses in the audience. Therefore, emotion theorists might be correct in claiming these stories are not good. However, even if they are not masterpieces of literature, these ordinary narratives are still stories. If these ordinary narratives constitute stories even though they lack an emotional sequence, perhaps emotional sequence is not what binds events together. The emotional theory might be a better theory about what makes a sequence of events good, pleasurable, or interesting, but not about what makes a sequence of events a story, i.e., what makes them hang together.

It is helpful to distinguish between the aesthetic and epistemic dimensions of narratives. The aesthetic dimension concerns the story characteristics that make a narrative a good example of its class, i.e., the things that make a story enjoyable or interesting. Emotional theory is a plausible candidate for explaining the aesthetic dimension of narratives, as people may find particular stories good, enjoyable, or interesting because of the emotions that these stories arouse. On the other hand, the epistemic dimension concerns how narrative renders events intelligible. It is related to how narrative segmenting, ordering, and interpreting events make sense of a chronology that

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is otherwise difficult to make sense of. Emotional understanding can contribute to the epistemic dimension but cannot fully explain it.

In terms of revealing the epistemic dimension of stories, the motivation behind the causal theory is a step in the right direction. Narratives connect earlier events to later events in a particular way, rendering them intelligible as a whole. However, I think the causal theory gets this relationship backwards. According to causal theory, earlier events are causally necessary for later events in a story. I believe that the opposite is true: later events are necessary for the occurrence of earlier events because the relationship between earlier and later events is not causal.

Consider Carroll's example: "Aristarchus hypothesised the heliocentric theory, thereby anticipating Copernicus' discovery by many centuries." According to the causal theory of narrative, Aristarchus' anticipation of the heliocentric theory cannot be a story because the earlier event is not causally related to the later event. Carroll, therefore, bites the bullet and argues that this is not a narrative unless there is a causal line of influence between Aristarchus' discovery and Copernicus'.

Velleman (2003) is not convinced that there is no story to be told about Aristarchus and Copernicus because of their mutual isolation in the causality web. He contends that any sequence of events, no matter how improbable, can provide material for storytelling if it completes an emotional cadence. I share Velleman's suspicion but for different reasons. The story's plot can be made more evident by enforcing the classic third-person omniscient view.

> Aristarchus hypothesised the heliocentric theory, but his views were rejected in favour of the geocentric theories of Aristotle and Ptolemy, and he died in despair. Little did he know that he had anticipated one of the most significant scientific discoveries of many centuries.

Even the sceptic would be hard-pressed to deny that the story of Aristarchus and Copernicus is a story. Similar stories are often told about misunderstood scientists and artists who were not appreciated in their time. Although Aristarchus's hypothesis was not accepted in his own time, his efforts were not in vain, as he anticipated an important discovery. However, the events depicted in the story are not causally related.

The causal theory of narrative cannot explain why Aristarchus' anticipation of the heliocentric theory is a story because Aristarchus could not have causally influenced Copernicus' discovery. However, after Copernicus' discovery, Aristarchus' hypothesis can be reinterpreted as an anticipation of it. A fictional connection can then be ascribed between Copernicus' later discovery and Aristarchus' earlier hypothesis, as if Aristarchus unknowingly foresaw Copernicus' discovery and there was an intentional link between the two. Intention attribution is a defining characteristic of narratives, which I will explore in more detail later in this paper.

By their very nature, narratives create a sense of intention by constructing fictional connections between events that lack an actual causal link in the real world. These fictional connections cannot be causal, because ordinary causes cannot function backwards. However, they can be teleological. Teleology is the idea that some things can be explained by appealing to their purpose or goal. Telos, meaning endpoint, purpose, or goal, was used by Aristotle to refer to a process that has a very definite goal, a final cause, so to speak. Telos has also been used to refer to the termination of an end-directed process. As Mayr (1992) notes, several philosophers have designated as teleological any processes that "persist toward an endpoint under varying conditions." I use the term "teleological" in this latter sense. Generally, the terms "purpose" and "goal" are used in functional and behavioural explanations, respectively. However, for simplicity, I will use them interchangeably depending on the context, as the distinction is not important in the case of narratives.

In teleological explanations, the *explanans* is always a goal or purpose; the *explanandum* is the event in question. More importantly, the *explanandum* depends on the *explanans* such that the former occurs for the latter's sake. A later event can give meaning to a former event, such as Aristarchus' efforts becoming meaningful, considering Copernicus' discovery. Hence, in teleological explanations, a chronologically later event, i.e., the end result, is considered an explanation of a chronologically earlier event. Teleological explanations of why an event occurred assert that it happened for a second event to occur or produce a particular result. For example, the

man ran to catch the train. In this case, catching the train is the goal of running. Teleology seeks to answer a why-did-this-happen question by answering a prior what-is-its-purpose or what-is-its-goal question. To explain something teleologically is to cite the purpose or goal toward which it naturally tends. Teleological explanations have a forward-looking character in this sense and tend to reverse the chronological order of events by their logic.

The claim that a sequence of events is teleologically directed toward an end at which point it stops is a substantive claim that goes beyond the claim that the sequence merely ended at that point. Woodfield (1976) argues that the claim is not only that the earlier events led to the end, but also that there was a force pushing the events in that direction, such that later events provide an understanding of why the earlier events occurred. In other words, the later event reveals the purpose of the earlier events and makes them intelligible. Earlier events occur to achieve a goal, which is revealed by later events. According to Woodfield, this is the crucial characteristic of teleological explanations.

A teleological sequence of events differs from a coincidental sequence of events in that the former can be understood in terms of its purpose or goal, whereas the latter cannot. It also differs from an ordinary causal sequence of events, such as a hurricane causing a tree to fall down. In an ordinary causal sequence, events occur in accordance with strict causal laws; therefore, if we knew the laws and the initial conditions, we would be able to predict the outcome. However, this is not enough to make the sequence teleological. In a teleological sequence, the later events provide an understanding of why the earlier events occurred. In other words, the later event reveals the purpose of the earlier events and makes them intelligible.

For example, the hurricane may have caused the tree to fall down, but the hurricane did not blow in order for the tree to fall down. If the tree had been in a different spot, the hurricane would not have chased it down. This added goal-directedness marks the difference between teleological sequences and ordinary causal sequences. A system is considered goal-directed if it persists toward an end state under varying conditions. This is known as *equifinality*. A goal-directed system shows plasticity in its behaviour in the sense that it makes a series of attempts until the goal is achieved. Whereas humans are paradigmatically goal-directed, hurricanes are not.

I propose that narratives provide goal-directed explanations similar to teleological explanations. In narratives, hurricanes chase down the protagonists, if not trees, and this goal-directedness distinguishes narrative explanations from causal explanations. Narratives organise events into an intelligible whole by interpreting and connecting a series of attempts to achieve a goal. The protagonist's pursuit of a goal under varying conditions exemplifies equifinality in stories. Narratives begin with events or states that create a goal or introduce a problem for the attainment of an existing goal, and through a sequence of episodes, the protagonist tries to find a way to achieve the goal. Narratives usually come to an end when the goal is achieved or the protagonist refrains from the goal through some transformation. Thus, the events in a narrative can be seen as a teleological or goal-directed sequence. In this sequence, earlier events occur for the sake of some goal and are usually the type of events that bring about this goal. In the teleological view, a plot consists of a sequence of events connected by goals.

3 | TELEOLOGY: GOALS, PLANS, AND OBSTACLES

According to Labov (2010), when a narrator decides to tell a story, they must solve a fundamental problem: where to begin. The most remarkable event, say e_0, is the most salient, but the narrator cannot start with it. This would give away the most interesting part of the story from the start. Instead, to tell a story about this salient event, the narrator must answer the question, “How did this (remarkable) event come about?” The answer requires a shift in focus backwards in time to a precursor event e_1, which is linked to e_0. The process will continue recursively e_2, e_3, and so on until an ordinary, mundane event e_n is reached, for which the question “Why did you do that?” is absurd because e_n is exactly what we would expect the person to do in the situation described. The event e_n is called the orientation. Orientation is used to introduce the context, time, and persons involved in the story to come. Labov gives an example of a narrator telling of a time he was on shore leave in Buenos Aires:

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a. Oh, I was settin' at a table drinkin'.

The mundane and non-reportable character of the orientation requires a *triggering event* to set the narrative in motion toward the most remarkable event. Thus, (a) is followed by:

b. an' this Norwegian sailor come over
c. an' kep' givin' me a bunch o' junk about how I was sittin' with his woman

The triggering event initiates a goal for the protagonist, referred to as *the superordinate goal*. In Labov's example, the superordinate goal is to safeguard the narrator's safety against the sailor's threats. The narrative progresses toward fulfilling this superordinate goal after being set in motion by the triggering event. While in many stories, the superordinate goal aligns with the protagonist's objectives, there may be instances where it deviates. While protagonists often drive the narrative with their own aims, superordinate goals can encompass broader themes, messages, or arcs that transcend individual characters. For instance, in "The Hunger Games," Katniss Everdeen initially aims to save her sister, but the rebellion against the Capitol becomes the overall superordinate goal. The decision of whether or not to align the superordinate goal with the protagonist's depends on the desired effect and the type of story being told. Both alignment and divergence can produce engaging narratives with distinct strengths and complexities.

A narrative moves forward by telling one event after another and by approaching or at least seeming to approach a conclusion to those events, a finish, closure, or telos. In the example above, one of the narrator's friends saves him just in time before he is attacked, thereby satisfying the superordinate goal of preserving his safety. Events are depicted insofar as they contribute to satisfying the superordinate goal. Thus, the superordinate goal has a pervasive influence on the depiction of story events.

Many famous stories have superordinate goals. For example, in Macbeth, the Scottish lord commits murder *in order* to become king. He continues to commit murders to preserve his kingdom, but his political ambition ultimately leads to misery and death. Similarly, in Pride and Prejudice, the superordinate goal is to obtain good marriages for the protagonist and many other characters. Even more recent works of fiction use this core form of narrative. For example, in The Lord of the Rings, the superordinate goal is to prevent anyone from putting the One Ring on their finger. In the TV show Breaking Bad, a chemistry teacher who learns he has cancer starts cooking crystal meth *in order* to secure his family's future after his death. When the superordinate goal is aligned with the protagonist's goals, it provides a clear and compelling motivation for the protagonist's actions and decisions throughout the narrative. The protagonist's pursuit of the superordinate goal drives the plot forward and shapes the overall trajectory of the story.

Achieving the superordinate goal of a story typically requires a plan involving subordinate goals. In simple stories, such as the Norwegian sailor story, the superordinate goal can be achieved through a single attempt, such as a friend arriving just in time to help. However, more complex stories require the protagonist to devise a plan in order to achieve their superordinate goal. In Breaking Bad, for example, Walter White teams up with a former student, Jesse Pinkman, and devises a scheme to become partners in an attempt to combine their skills to manufacture and distribute the purest crystal meth on the streets. Walter would cook the product, and Jesse would use his street connections to distribute it.

In a story episode, the protagonist attempts to achieve his or her current subgoal. If the outcome is unsuccessful, the episode may end, but the protagonist often tries again. In other words, goal paths are *recursive*, meaning that any number of attempts to achieve the same goal may occur. For instance, during Walter and Jesse's early days of selling Albuquerque's finest meth, they encountered a series of problems with local drug dealers. Jesse knows that Krazy-8 is a drug dealer in Albuquerque, so they approach him in the hopes of making a deal. However, Krazy-8 attempts to rip them off instead. After their failed business deal with Krazy-8, Jesse reaches out to another local crime boss, Tuco Salamanca, to see if he is interested in buying larger quantities of the pair's high-quality meth.

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In this respect, narratives exhibit equifinality. The protagonist's actions are typically equifinal, meaning that the protagonist can circumvent obstacles. When one route toward a goal is blocked, the protagonist can pursue other routes to achieve their goals. In fact, many stories develop on the basis of the interplay between the protagonist's goals and the obstacles they face. This conflict between goals and obstacles drives the story forward. These obstacles can be internal or external. Internal conflict is a struggle within the character, such as a moral dilemma, psychological conflict, or physical conflict. For example, in The Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield struggles with his identity as a teenager; in Les Misérables, Jean Valjean struggles with his values; and Macbeth struggles with his desires.

External conflict is a struggle between the protagonist and an outside force, such as another character, a group of people, nature, or society itself. For example, in Breaking Bad, Walter White struggles against the villain Gustavo Fring. In The Odyssey, Odysseus struggles against the forces of nature. In To Kill a Mockingbird, Atticus Finch struggles against the racist society of the American South. The story progresses as the protagonist struggles to overcome these obstacles and achieve their superordinate goal.

The teleological view holds that narratives involve protagonists performing actions to overcome obstacles in pursuit of goals. Many actions, states, and events described in narratives are related to goals: they are either part of a goal plan structure or form an obstacle to achieving a goal. Thus, a goal plan hierarchy is a fundamental organisational mechanism for structuring narrated events. Because of their centrality, readers or listeners of a narrative should be able to infer the connections between goals and other story elements to understand it.

The central claim of the teleological view, that story goals provide an organising principle for narratives, is well supported by empirical evidence. Extensive research in psychology suggests that story goals do indeed provide an organising principle for narratives (Graesser et al., 1994; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). Narrative comprehension is fundamentally rooted in understanding the goals, attempts, and outcomes that drive the narrative forward. These goal-based structures provide the framework for individuals to interpret and remember the events depicted in stories. People make online and offline goal inferences to follow, understand, and remember stories (Suh & Trabasso 1993). Moreover, developmental studies suggest that understanding goals, attempts, goal failures, goal reinstatements, and ultimate success leads to children's ability to narrate coherent stories (Berman, 1988; Stein, 1988; Trabasso & Nickels, 1992).

The teleological and causal views of narrative differ in their understanding of the relationship between events in a story. The causal view holds that earlier events in a narrative are *causally necessary* for the occurrence of later events. This means the later events could not have happened without the earlier events, even if there were other possible causes. The teleological view, on the other hand, denies the claim of counterfactual causal necessity. In other words, the earlier events in a narrative are typically not causally necessary for the later events unless there is only one way to achieve a goal. Therefore, earlier events are *contingent* on the superordinate goal in the teleological view. This means that the earlier events were not bound to occur, but were instead possible, and there were other possibilities.

Beatty (2017) suggests that narratives can be considered branching trees of possibilities. The occurrence of an event in a narrative opens up the possibility of several different outcomes but also forecloses the possibility of others. These possibilities exist because goals can be achieved via different paths due to equifinality. Equifinality is the principle that the same outcome can be achieved through different means. In narratives, the protagonist can achieve a goal in various ways. For example, a protagonist might achieve his or her goal of becoming a successful entrepreneur by starting their own business or by working for a large corporation and eventually rising through the ranks. The specific path that the protagonist takes is less important than the fact that they achieve their goal.

The structure of a narrative is not a simple, linear progression of events, as the causal view would have us believe. Instead, it is a more complex probabilistic system that includes sequences of events that can be divided into different sequences or paths. These sequences represent the different choices the characters in the narrative could make and the different ways the story could unfold. This complexity is what makes narratives lifelike.

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Narratives explain events by incorporating the human element. They consider the motivations, beliefs, and values of the people involved and how these factors influence their actions when faced with external conflicts. Narratives not only explain what the actors did but also foreshadow what they could have done instead. By explaining a series of events based on the actor's intentions, narratives provide an understanding of why people do what they do. As Bruner (1986) puts it, narrative "deals with the vicissitudes of human intention" (p. 13).

4 | TRIVIALITY AND GENERALITY CONSTRAINTS RECONSIDERED

According to the teleological view, narrativity is a psychological capacity for explaining event sequences through interpretation and connection within a goal-plan hierarchy. Thus, narrative explanations involve both action plans and goals. In this view, a narrative self is defined by the ability to explain one's life through achieved or failed goals and plans, and by actively setting future goals and planning their achievement. While a complete defence is beyond this paper's scope, I propose that cashing out "narrative" in the narrative self as a teleological explanation holds promise. This aligns with prominent accounts of agency (e.g., Bratman, 2000) and offers a potential framework for understanding narrativist claims like the common assertion that future events determine the meaning of past events in narratives (Altshuler, 2021). However, further exploration is needed to address potential objections regarding triviality and generality.

One objection to the teleological view is that it trivialises the notion of a narrative if ordinary actions, such as making coffee, count as narratives. Making coffee is goal-directed action; therefore, at first glance, it may seem to meet the definition of a narrative according to the teleological view. However, it is essential to distinguish between goal-directed behaviours, such as making coffee, and goal-directed explanations. Goal-directed behaviours are actions that are performed to achieve a specific goal. Goal-directed explanations, on the other hand, provide a deeper understanding of why an action was performed by revealing the actor's mental state and the intentions behind their actions. According to the teleological view, narratives are goal-directed explanations and, not simply goal-directed behaviours. This implies that narratives extend beyond mere sequences of actions and incorporate explanations that delve into the underlying goals and intentions driving those actions. In other words, narratives are not merely a chronological arrangement of events but a dynamic interplay between events and the motivations that drive them.

Another sense of triviality is the ease with which humans can construct stories about any ordinary event. Even though making coffee is a goal-directed behaviour, one can turn it into a story if one wants to. However, the ease of narrative construction should not be mistaken for evidence of the simplicity of the underlying psychological process. Narrative construction has a long and protracted developmental trajectory. For example, Trabasso and Nickels (1992) showed striking developmental differences in the narrations of younger and older children and adults. As children develop, they increasingly use hierarchically organised plans in their narrations. Their research suggests that children's narrations change from predominantly describing states and identifying objects to narrating isolated actions between the ages of 3 and 5 years. They describe actions related to the superordinate goal, including the subgoals of these attempts. By the age of 9, children and adults narrate according to a goal plan hierarchy by making connections between subgoals and superordinate goals. This suggests that narrative construction is a complex psychological capacity that is difficult to master.

Does the teleological view of narrative extend to the ordinary experiences of everyday life? The common practice of explaining behaviour through goals and intentions suggests that it does. When individuals seek to comprehend the reasons behind a person's actions, they frequently invoke mental states, encompassing both personal motivations (e.g., underlying goals or intentions) and contextual factors (e.g., desired outcomes or external influences). Numerous researchers have proposed that a person's mental states, including beliefs, goals, and intentions, serve as a fundamental framework for understanding and explaining behaviour (Malle & Holbrook, 2012; Moskowitz & Olcaysoy Okten, 2016; Reeder, 2009). This mentalising framework is not limited to explaining others'

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behaviour; it can also be applied to understand our own actions. For instance, we might explain our decision to pursue higher education by stating our desire for a quality education and a fulfilling career. We could justify our decision to start a business by expressing our aspiration to be our own boss and make a positive impact on the world. Our decision to have children might be attributed to our yearning to form a family and nurture future generations. These explanations fall within the realm of teleological reasoning.

An objector might concede that people reflect on their lives in terms of goals but still contend that many lives lack the grand, overarching goals often seen in fictional works. This objection overlooks the fact that the purpose of ordinary life does not require extraordinary achievements. This is where literature and ordinary lives diverge. Unlike fictional characters, whose lives often revolve around grand, overarching goals, the purpose of ordinary life can be far more modest and attainable, centred on nurturing relationships, contributing to the community, or pursuing personal passions. Numerous individuals find something that imbues their lives with meaning and significance, and the paths to achieving this purpose are as diverse as the human experience itself. For instance, a parent may find fulfilment in nurturing their children, a doctor alleviating suffering, a scientist expanding our understanding of the universe, and a religious individual serving their faith.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that narratives provide goal-directed explanations similar to teleological explanations. Like teleological explanations, narratives organise events into an intelligible whole by interpreting and connecting a series of attempts to achieve a goal. In stories, the protagonist persists toward a goal despite varying conditions and obstacles. I further suggested that a teleological account of narrative explanation can be a fruitful way to clarify the concept of "narrative" in the context of the narrative self by addressing the most common objections. However, ultimately, it is up to narrativists to decide whether the teleological view can do the job they want the notion of "narrative" to do.

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