

Beyond the Narrative View of Life-History

The Wild Region in Life-History

By Laszlo Tengelyi

Translated by Geza Kallay

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003. pp. 248.

ISBN: 0810116618. \$29.95 Paperback.

Review by Louis Hoffman

Phenomenology of this depth has been largely relegated to the dark rooms of philosophical investigation in contemporary intellectual thought. However, as Tengelyi demonstrates, it has an important place in today's philosophical dialogues. This is particularly true when living in a society with such neurotic tendencies toward oversimplification and reification of the human experience.

This book accomplishes two main tasks. First, it provides an overview of some of the more important thinkers in phenomenology on several key topics including sensation and perception, meaning, time, life history, and intersubjectivity. Second, Tengelyi is able to expand many concepts. This expansion is not merely adding words or further delineating ideas, but rather a literal expansion which includes the often neglected spaces of the phenomenological investigation.

Tengelyi does a masterful job of deconstructing the intricacies of concepts such as sensation and life-history. This deconstruction is not in the service of reductionism, but rather broadening our understanding of these concepts. For example, considerable time is given to the process of sense or sensation. This discussion begins with a review of Husserl, Merleau-Pony, Levinas and others. Through a very rich process of comparison and contrast, Tengelyi is able to build from these understandings of sense a new perspective which incorporates the various aspects of sensory experience.

Sense, when reduced to a monolithic experience, loses richness becoming distorted. According to Tengelyi, the sense perception has already been changed from the original sensation by the time it is translated into memory, reflection, or description. That original moment of sense perception is gone and no remembrance will be able to exactly replicate that moment of original sensation.

A similar understanding can be discussed in the context of life history.

Before this reading, I had long been suspicious of the narrative perspectives. However, one cannot discount the importance of taking into consideration how narratives impact the self-identity. Tengelyi solidifies the critique by pointing that to reduce life-history to nothing more than narrative requires a mixture of oversimplification and selective focus.

Embedded in the narrative view are implicit assumptions about sensory experience and the subjective nature of life. Tengelyi is able to break down these assumptions exposing the complexities underneath. A basic narrative definition of life-history would cite it as an accumulation of the subjective interpretations of sensory experience. Yet this does not take into account that these sensory experiences are interpreted in an ongoing process. In other words, the meanings and sense fixations change once in the realm of memory or past experience. These sense experiences continue to change in an ever increasingly complex internal paradigm. While the narrative does acknowledge interpretation in terms of prior experience, it does not deal with changes in accordance with future experience. In many ways, this interpretation integrates some of Whitehead's process thought into the phenomenological realms.

The wild region is interpreted in various frameworks tracing it back to its origins with Merleau-Ponty. Tengelyi defines the wild region as "a *no-man's land* in which the opposition of the proper and the alien is not so much *sublated* (like in a higher-order synthetic unity) but is rather *suspended*" (pp. 101-102). This again points to the significance of the spaces between as being essential to our understanding of self-identity. Focusing exclusively on the self (proper) or defining identity in terms of the other does not take into account the betweens. Even a self-identity based on a mixture of the two does not necessarily account for the spaces between.

The story of this book could be summarized as dealing with the spaces between which are often ignored and the complexities which are interpreted as simple processes. While not a book for beginners, *The Wild Region in Life-History* is an important contribution to the field. In a process sense, part of what Tengelyi does is warn us not to become too complacent in our assumptions. Such complacency leads us into dangerous assumptions and false meanings. Instead, we need to continue to search for missed complexities in simplistic clothing.