



Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences. by Donald E. Polkinghorne

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Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences. By Donald E. Polkinghorne. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. Pp. xi + 232. \$44.50 (cloth); \$14.95 (paper).

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Donald Polkinghorne believes that our lives are like players who strut and fret their hour upon the stage. He proposes that we understand our destiny by attending, not to the stars or to the code bred in the bone, but to the plot that gathers up our scattered actions and makes them significant. It is a tale that is told and that is to be comprehended scientifically in narrative, and we have been speaking it all along.

In *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, Polkinghorne, a professor of counseling and a practicing psychotherapist, maintains that “human beings exist in three realms—the material realm, the organic realm, and the realm of meaning” (p. 183). This last is the domain of the human sciences, and developments in several of them suggest that the keys to understanding are furnished by narrative. In a preliminary chapter, he defines “narrative” as a story relating a series of events, either true or false. Narrative construction and comprehension correspond, he asserts, to one of two kinds of human rationality—“narrative rationality,” which “understands synoptically the meaning of a whole, seeing it as a dialectic integration of its parts” (p. 35), or the other kind, which uses formal logic and mathematics and dominates the sciences of the material and organic realms. In three subsequent chapters, Polkinghorne, in summarizing the work of several theorists in history, literature, and psychology, intends to provide models for the other human sciences, models of the way narrative meaning both produces and explains human action. It is the philosophers of history—especially Ricoeur—who furnish Polkinghorne with the elements of his own conception of how narrative ought to function as the fundamental instrument of the human sciences.

In the current philosophical dispute about the nature of historical explanation, Polkinghorne sides with those who believe narrative accounts have a unique explanatory power. In contrast, Carl Hempel and other logical empiricists argue that every science explains events by showing that they are governed by general laws. Hempel maintains that narratives in history explain events only to the extent they make appeal to the requisite laws and antecedent causes. Polkinghorne agrees that the covering law model serves the natural and biological sciences, but he thinks it fails to capture the meaning of human action. In his view, history and the other human sciences require a kind of narrative logic, which essentially has two aspects: first-order sentences that refer to events that “have actually happened in the way reported in the sentences of the narratives” (p. 62) and a second-order synoptic coherence among the statements, that is, a configuration in a plot structure (p. 63). It is the plot structure that

displays the human experiences told about, especially their temporal dimensions.

Polkinghorne proposes that a person's own narrative understanding of his or her life causes the behavior expressive of that intimate story; therefore, in his view, scientists must learn to read people as they would a text: "Acting is like writing a story, and the understanding of action is like arriving at an interpretation of a story" (p. 142). It would be a mistake, he thinks, to try to explain human behavior by using general laws, whether these be physical, biological, psychological, or social laws, since "bodily movement is 'caused' by the meaning to be expressed" (p. 142).

Polkinghorne's book captures the enthusiasm for narrative that has recently animated much discussion in the philosophy of history and in literary theory. And he has done a decent job of summarizing the various views expressed in these areas, though, for the uninitiated, the descriptions may seem a little vague. However, there are several problems in Polkinghorne's account that may cause anyone working in empirical science or the philosophy of science hesitancy about his conclusions.

First, a vagueness envelops too many of his assertions about the nature of narrative knowledge, for instance, when he proclaims that the human sciences "do not produce knowledge that leads to the prediction and control of human experience; they produce, instead, knowledge that deepens and enlarges the understanding of human existence" (p. 159). Since the Enlightenment, the criteria of science, that is, "knowledge that deepens and enlarges the understanding," have been prediction and conceptual control through the application of general principles. It is incumbent on anyone attempting to discover another kind of rationality to show that it is not merely the complexity of situations and poverty of appropriate laws that distinguish the human from the natural sciences. Although the antecedents of a human act may never exactly reoccur, this itself does not imply that the meaning of "narrative cause" is different from "cause in formal science," as Polkinghorne seems to think (p. 173)—else we must abandon the death of the dinosaurs or the formation of our solar system to storytellers outside the pale of "formal science." Surely, other things being equal, we accept as plausible a narrative history that conforms to relevant, well-confirmed physical, biological, or psychological principles and reject as implausible a history that violates such principles.

Polkinghorne's own analysis of narrative, while making some interesting points (especially about its temporal dimensions), lacks the resources to establish necessary distinctions in applying narrative to the explanation of human actions. So, for instance, when he maintains that we construct our own behavior much as a writer formulates a narrative text—an interesting idea with some potential—he goes little further than reiterating the proposal. He never attempts to distinguish, for instance, the several basic ways in which meaning is expressed in narrative. In our personal narratives, when the author is simultaneously the actor, it is not easy to see how various kinds of meaning might be comparably expressed

or be the “narrative cause” of behavior. Shakespeare, it seems, intended the actions of the porter in *Macbeth* to provide emotional relief before another round of heinous murder, but the character himself intended no more than to respond to the knocking as if he were the merry keeper of the devil’s door. If we are gatekeepers spinning out our actions along a narrative line, we may hear the knocking, but not recognize the purpose of the imaginary door.

Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man. By Andrea Nye. New York: Croom Helm, 1988. Pp. x + 244. \$49.95.

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Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man is a succinct summary of the ways in which feminist theory encounters and does battle with liberalism, Marxism, psychology, and structuralism. Andrea Nye finds that these theories allow for dialogue with men but do not significantly advance feminist objectives. Can women use these theories without entrapment? Working over these theories helps correct the theories, but a feminist perspective requires building on women’s experiences. By using as her prologue Ovid’s tale of a weaving contest between Athena and Arachne, Nye sets the frame for her interpretive reading of feminist theory. Some women use the text and symbols of male argumentation, only to be bested by those who draw on female experience to write their stories. Yet, those who weave in women’s terms are, while finer craftsmen or women, divorced from power.

Liberal democratic theory and socialist critiques of capitalism do not explain gender inequity, nor have the social movements undertaken in their name alleviated the plight of oppressed women. Equal rights, equality of opportunity, and the right of participation and consent were denied women when they could not vote. While liberals of the Humean or Rousseauistic stripe, and even women like Madame de Staël, called attention to women’s differences (natural and social) from men, democratic theory per se allowed for a new conception of persons. By emphasizing the social and legal nature of relationships and by formulating very general principles of natural and equal rights, liberalism lighted the way for equitable treatment of those not yet included in the fraternal bond. The lead was taken by Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor, and John Stuart Mill.

Legal equality—freedom from (overt) discrimination—has not assured women genuine, equitable social and economic treatment. Such treatment requires constant state intervention, which, Nye argues, runs counter to liberal democratic theory. Moreover, such theory rests on ideas of individual rights that are often in conflict with each other, as in abortion and pornography disputes (woman vs. fetus, right to view pornog-