

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2026.0010

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The Temporality of the Life-Story: A Conversation on Phenomenology and Narrative

David Carr is among the philosophers who have done most to make phenomenology's contribution to the study of narrative both explicit and systematic. His engagement with the philosophy of history began with his work on the translation of Husserl's *Crisis*, which confronted him directly with the problem of the relationship between phenomenology and history. His earliest direct contribution to the topic, the 1986 article "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity,"¹ was followed by what many regard as his major statement on the subject: *Time, Narrative and History* (1991).² In that book, Carr presented the conjoined nature of narratives, everyday life,

1) David Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity," *History and Theory* 25, no. 2 (1986): 117–31.

2) David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indiana University Press, 1986).

and the temporality of subjective experience and action, engaging with the narratological tradition and with poststructuralism and hermeneutics while arguing for the distinctive necessity of a phenomenological perspective. The work also expanded Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity to include plural subjects – nations, communities, groups – a move with evident Hegelian resonances that would prove central to Carr's later thinking.

The Paradox of Subjectivity (1999)³ represented what Carr himself describes as a kind of detour. Concerned with the concept of the subject in the transcendental tradition – primarily Kant and Husserl – and with its critics in Heidegger and the structuralists, the book sought to defend the methodological rather than metaphysical character of transcendental subjectivity. Two years later, the article "Place and Time: On the Interplay of Historical Points of View" (2001)⁴ announced a return to the problem of history, examining how subjectively embedded experience – the point of view of the agent – shapes historical experience through narrative structure. The culmination of this trajectory came with *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World* (2014),⁵ in which Carr focused on the history understood as a basis for narrative understanding.

The conversation that follows explores these themes. It addresses the phenomenological specificity of narrative – what phenomenology can contribute that structuralism, hermeneutics, and analytic philosophy of history cannot. It examines the ontological interpretation of Carr's research project, the relationship between individual and plural subjects, the contested philosophical relationship between Husserl and Hegel, and the place of Ricoeur's work in the broader landscape of narrative theory. The interview closes with reflections on the concept of experience and on the historicity of human existence that has oriented Carr's philosophical project across more than three decades of sustained inquiry.

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3) David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

4) David Carr, "Place and Time: On the Interplay of Historical Points of View," *History and Theory* 40, no. 4 (2001): 153–67.

5) David Carr, *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

FG: The topic of narrative became very popular in the second half of the twentieth century. Many different philosophical schools are concerned with this problem, not to mention scholars who originated from the narratological tradition. However, regarding phenomenology, for a long time the topic of narrative was very rarely addressed directly. At the same time, phenomenological texts were haunted by literature and even often shaped in a literary manner. Jean-Paul Sartre may be the best example in this context, but also Heidegger's interest in the form of dialogue and his studies on poetry. How do you understand the specificity of the phenomenological approach toward narrative and narrativity?

DC: I had been interested in the philosophy of history since I started working on the translation of Husserl's *Crisis*. There the issue is the relation between phenomenology and history. I was introduced to narrative by reading works in the analytic philosophy of history, such as those of Arthur Danto, Louis Mink, and Hayden White. White was also influenced by structuralists like Jakobson and Propp. But their emphasis seemed to be on timeless structures and archetypes, timelessly combined. White speaks of plot, but seems to forget that, since Aristotle, plot is spoken of as a series of actions demarcated into beginning, middle, and end. These are clearly temporal values. It seemed to me that their approach could benefit from a phenomenological account of temporality. Husserl uses the hearing of a melody to illustrate the consciousness of time. A sequence of tones is experienced with reference to a beginning and an end. A musical whole like a melody, and a narrative whole like a story, are wholes that can only exist by being deployed in time.

FG: Do you believe that phenomenology has already developed sufficient analytical methods and conceptual frameworks to justify adopting the phenomenological perspective toward the study of narratives?

DC: This is what I have tried to do in my own work.

FG: In many of your works, you have explored the importance of narrative structure for subjective experience, but in *The Paradox of Subjectivity* (1999) you were primarily preoccupied with the emergence of the self and transcendental subjectivity. In this work, the topic of narrative was not directly examined. However, I believe it still seems to remain in the background of your analysis.

DC: *The Paradox of Subjectivity* was a kind of detour from my usual focus on narrative and history. The concept of the subject in the transcendental tradition (mostly Kant and Husserl) was under attack by Heidegger and the Structuralists as being a kind of metaphysical substance. I wanted to show that they had missed the point of transcendental subjectivity, which is a methodological concept linked to the idea of transcendental critique of experience, not a metaphysical concept.

FG: In *Time, Narrative and History*, you engaged in a discussion with Paul Ricoeur's approach toward the temporal nature of narrativity of the self. You expanded his views, arguing for the narrativity of plural subjects, such as nations, groups of people, etc. This thread seems to be one of the many Hegelian motifs in your analysis. Given that Paul Ricoeur was one of the most erudite of twentieth century philosophers of twentieth century philosophy and that he often referred to Hegel's philosophy (even in *Time and Narrative*⁶) I personally find it slightly surprising that he focused so much on the impact of narrativity on the individual subject and seemed to adopt a narrow perspective on the phenomenon of narrative itself. Do you share this impression?

DC: It is true that Ricoeur has little to say about the plural subject we find in Hegel (who defines "Geist" as "an I that is We, a We that is I"). Ricoeur's great merit (and I follow him in this) is to insist on the temporal character of narrative. He does say at one point that some of Braudel's supposedly non-narrative actors in his Mediterranean study are "quasi-persons," but I've never found this very persuasive, and he doesn't follow through on this idea. In general I think Ricoeur is not as influenced by Hegel as are some of his French contemporaries, like Kojève and Hyppolite.

FG: In *Time, Narrative and History* you argued about the ontological status of the community and in *Experience and History: Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World*, you expanded your thesis now arguing for the ontological status of narrative. This seems to have serious metaphysical implications. Did you feel that you were arguing for something very controversial, especially at that time?

6) Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

DC: It is true that many philosophers, especially in the Anglophone world, are wary of the idea of a “group mind.” But my own version of this is very limited and I do not see it as an ontological or metaphysical claim. I try to make it clear that the plural subject exists only insofar as its members say “we” and act in its name. But communities can also fall apart for lack of support, and so face their own finitude and their own demise, just like the individual.

FG: Most of the humanities preoccupied with the problem of narratives do not bother with ontological investigations. For example, the narratological tradition seems to adopt nominalist beliefs without problematizing the issue directly. Where would you place yourself in the classical debate between nominalism and realism regarding your views on the ontological status of narrative?

DC: I do not see myself as part of these ontological or metaphysical debates, and so do not think of myself as nominalist or realist, idealist or realist. For me phenomenology is at best a way of describing our individual and social existence. These hardened metaphysical positions just put up roadblocks to our phenomenological understanding.

FG: In your works, you often refer to the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. However, among phenomenological researchers there is a tendency to separate Hegel’s phenomenology from the history of the phenomenological movement. One could say that, to some extent, this tendency was justified. Husserl very rarely referred to Hegel directly, and when he did, he was mostly critical. On the other hand, most of the scholars who originated from the Husserlian tradition – Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Paul Ricoeur – referred extensively to both Hegel and Husserl. How do you perceive the nature of the philosophical relationship between Husserl and Hegel?

DC: I don’t think it is correct to include Hegel in the phenomenological movement. Husserl had no time for Hegel or German Idealism, and didn’t seem impressed by the fact that Hegel called an early work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* – if indeed he was even aware of it. (I doubt that he even read it). His German followers were equally unenthusiastic about Hegel. Still, French scholars like Kojève and Hyppolite were not wrong to see that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* had more in common with Husserl than just the name. As you pointed out, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre absorbed a lot from Hegel’s

Phenomenology, and the French affinity for Marx in the post-World War II period was due in part to a Hegelian interpretation of Marx that was emphasized by Kojève. But it has to be remembered that for Hegel *The Phenomenology* was only the introduction to the vast metaphysical system that unfolded in the *Logic*, the *Encyclopedia*, and other later works. Like Wittgenstein's ladder, *The Phenomenology* was destined to be thrown away once the heights of the System had been attained. This is a direction that Husserl-inspired phenomenologists like me have been reluctant to take. *The Phenomenology of Spirit* has a lot to contribute to phenomenology as I understand it, but Hegel per se, not so much.

FG: It seems to me that recently you have moved away from the problematic of narrative. What inspires and occupies you the most philosophically nowadays?

DC: In *Experience and History* I shifted my emphasis from narrative to experience, not in order to abandon narrative, but to place it in a larger context which would make it more comprehensible. This comes at some risk, since "experience" has had many meanings in philosophy, and I had to work out a concept of experience that was appropriate to what I wanted to say. It is expressed in Dilthey's notion of historicity, a term also picked up by Husserl, Heidegger, and others. Narrative is identified with the activity of story-telling. But the historicity of our individual and collective present, past, and future is both active and passive, and is much broader than our capacity to tell stories about it. Historical experience, we might say, is what makes narrative possible.

FG: It has been a great pleasure to conduct this interview. Thank you for explaining your philosophical path and for sharing your reflections on narrative and phenomenology with the readers of *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*.



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