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Against the Narrative Self

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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Introduction

There is an intense debate in philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, and related disciplines over whether the self is narrative in form. The main claim of the narrative theory of self can be interpreted both in a factual and normative way. The psychological or descriptive narrativity thesis stipulates that our sense of self is inherently narrative and that we experience the world in a narrative fashion. It is a claim about the nature of ordinary human beings, about how they normally live life and organize their experience (Strawson 2008, 11). The normative narrativity claim is that we should define our sense of self based on a self-narrative because doing so is essential for leading a good life. Some even state that having a self-narrative is necessary for a human to be considered a person. “Some, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons” (Schechtman 1996, 94). Although one might take the denial of selfhood as a negative evaluation here, Marya Schechtman recognizes that ‘person’ is an honorific title only if one assumes that ‘non-personal’ means the same as ‘subpersonal’ or that people with non-Narrative sort of subjectivity are inferior (Schechtman 1996, 100). She claims that the narrative self is only one valuable form of existence, but at other instances insists that an explicit narrative is needed to lead a good life. My aim is to show that the narrative self, that is, thinking of ourselves as a protagonist in a story, is a problematic view to hold. I argue against both the descriptive and normative narrativity theses.

In the first chapter, I lay out some of the views of the narrative self.¹ The naturalistic account of Daniel Dennett and Jerome Bruner informs us that the self is a self-created project in which we construct our autobiography, which is more or less a work-in-progress life-story starring us as the protagonist. I identify their account as the strong narrative theory of self for the reason that they think the self is constituted by an *explicit* self-narrative. Schechtman’s view on narrative self posits that our sense of self doesn’t have to be an explicit endeavor. Rather, our sense of who we are can be based on an *implicit* and automatic narrative that we should be able to give others on a local level. While the aim of the weak narrative theory of self is to make our actions and experiences intelligible to others and ourselves, the strong narrative thesis of self aims at creating greater meaning in life. It moves beyond just accounting for and explaining our behavior to

¹ Although there is slight variation in the terminology of each author I analyze, I use the term ‘narrative self’ throughout my thesis. Schechtman’s phrase ‘narrative self-constitution view’, Cavarero’s ‘narratable self’, Bruner’s ‘self-making or self-creating narratives’, and Dennett’s ‘center of narrative gravity’ all refer to roughly the same thing, so I stick to the term ‘narrative self’ for the sake of simplicity.

others. It's a person's narrative quest for larger meaning, so it understandably involves deliberate reflection on an agent's part. Adriana Cavarero's account of the narrative self is similar to Schechtman's view in the sense that the content of our self-narrative isn't essential to who we are, but Cavarero emphasizes the theatrical and courageous urge to expose and reveal our self-narrative as an essential part of who we are. The act of narrativizing can involve not just a single narrative, but a plurality of narratives that emphasize not the end result of a polished narrative, but rather the tangled process of storytelling.

In the second chapter, I have two goals. One is to argue against the descriptive narrativity thesis by relying on Galen Strawson's rebuttal. His main argument against the descriptive narrativity thesis hinges on the claim that the narrative outlook is certainly not a universal experience of how people apprehend their selves. To convey his point, he draws the distinction between four different temporal dispositions that people can have: Episodicity, Diachronicity, Narrativity, and non-Narrativity. While Diachronics understand their selves to be extended in the past and future, Episodics don't figure themselves in such a way. Similarly, whereas people with a Narrative outlook see or experience their life as a narrative or collection of stories, those with a non-Narrative outlook don't.

The second goal of my second chapter is to reject the normative narrativity thesis. For those who don't share this widespread impulse to narrate and to conform the shape of their life into the standard models, coming up with a coherent life-story is an anxiety-ridden experience. Having fragmented, disjointed, fractured, and disintegrated accounts is common for those who don't experience life in a narrative structure. Therefore, the question of who an Episodic or non-Narrative person is in terms of a life-story is tantamount to asking her to impose some structure on her previously lived moments and anticipated future. The narrative archetypes and story schemas that are helpful for some people limit and constrain their life rather than make it meaningful. My idea of the nested narratives is that our self-narratives are embedded in larger narratives pertaining to our national, social, political, and linguistic milieu. The idea of narratives within narratives, I argue, is helpful to demonstrate that our articulated self-narratives are structured and encoded, if not strongly determined, by the master narratives of our milieu. By questioning this derivative aspect of the strong narrative thesis of self, I question the personalized meaning that the strong narrative thesis of self promises. I reject the weak narrative thesis of self by questioning whether it can be called narrative at all since it is missing the salient features of self-narratives, that is, storytelling and coherence. Besides not being able to

make and contribute to creating meaning, the weak narrative thesis of self also does not answer the question of “Who am I?” Not many people would give an explanation of why they are doing what they are doing to tell one who they are. That doesn’t happen because we are not looking for justifications for people’s behavior when we ask them who they are, although this can inevitably come about in their account of selfhood.

In the third chapter, I defend a non-Narrative account of the self. My first step is to unravel the association between narrativity and accountability. The idea is that the narrative view of self provides an individual with the sort of continuity that makes her a more responsible individual. I disagree. I bring up Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem as a counterexample to show that having a well-articulated self-narrative that is carefully constructed and corroborated with the account of others doesn’t entail that one is more ethical or responsible. If anything, it highlights the dangers of how storytelling can enable us to justify anything. My second aim is to show that being non-Narrative does not mean that one won’t take responsibility for one’s past actions or hold oneself accountable for future promises.

Chapter 1

Overview of the Narrative Theories of Self

“Who are you?” said the caterpillar.
“I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—
at least I know who I was when I got up
this morning, but I think I must have been
changed several times since then,” said Alice.
— Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865)

Before I sketch out some contemporary theories of narrative self in this chapter, I will state what this thesis is and is not about. This thesis is about refuting the descriptive and normative accounts of the narrative conception of self and defending a non-Narrative one. This thesis is not about the ontology of self. Although I don’t delve into whether the self is real or not, what is its nature or essence, I note the variation in different positions of the philosophers I consider, so here I give a brief word about the ontology of self for the authors I consider. Both Dennett and Bruner begin their discussion of the narrative theory of self by claiming that there is no such thing as an essential self that sits there to be identified and investigated. Instead, the narrative self is an abstract object, a useful fiction, a psychologically constructed idea that helps us makes sense of who we are, who we were, and why we are doing what we are doing. For Cavarero and Schechtman, the self is a real entity and is not simply a convincing illusion that we prop up to cope with our condition.

My plan for this chapter is as follows. First, I clarify the distinction between identity as sameness—‘what’ someone is—and identity as selfhood—‘who’ someone is. My thesis is focused on ‘who’ someone is. Second, I identify form-finding, coherence, and unity-seeking features of the rectilinear narrative as their salient features. Third, I distinguish between the strong and weak form of the narrative self based on the criterion of articulation. I consider the strong narrative thesis of self as an explicitly articulated autobiography that coherently connects all our life experiences, whereas the weak narrative thesis of self is an implicit unarticulated self-narrative that one is able to formulate on a local level. I, then, discuss how the narrative self is constructed with constraints from outside and inside. This brings me to the question of whether the narrative self identifies

with being the narrator or character. Last, I wrap up with a brief discussion of how self-narratives require storytelling and coherence with or without revision. This sets the stage for the second chapter in which I show that retrospective storytelling and coherence-seeking—especially confabulation via revision—can be a serious challenge to self-knowledge and self-understanding.

1.1. *Idem* vs. *Ipse*: What am I? vs. Who Am I?

There is a vast ocean of philosophical literature on the concept of personal identity. Broadly speaking, we can zero in on two quite distinct issues. Identity as *idem* or sameness attempts to answer the question “What am I?” and identity as *ipse* or selfhood attempts to answer the question “Who am I?”² On the one hand, when we think of persons as objects in the world, we are interested in knowing what makes them the same over time (Schechtman 1996, 68). This is the reidentification question, which essentially asks what makes a person at some time t_1 the same person as she is at another time t_2 ? (Schechtman 1996, 1-2). The central concern is to identify the conditions that specify what unifies a person over time. To achieve that end, reidentification theorists seek to stipulate the relation between two distinct person-time-slices, where ‘person-time-slices’ is a term used to describe a duration from a person’s history. They want to explain what makes two time-slices belong to the same person (Schechtman 1996, 77).

On the other hand, when we think of persons as subjects in the world, we are interested in knowing the unique account of their inner lives or consciousness and their character traits. I identify this as the problem of self, as an internal relation of oneself to oneself or an inner subject of experience. Schechtman identifies this as the characterization question, which asks of the characteristics that make a person who she is. It asks which beliefs, values, desires, and other psychological features make a person who she is. The characterization question concerns the sort of identity that is at stake during what Erik Erickson called an “identity crisis” (Schechtman 1996, 74). When a person is unsure of the defining features of her set of characteristics that make her who she is, it can be said that

² St. Augustine distinguishes between the two questions “Who am I?” and “What am I?” in a curious manner. He writes, “I turned then to myself, and I said to myself, ‘Who are you?’ I answered, ‘A man!’” (*Confessions*, 10.6) and “What then am I, O my God? What is my nature?” (*Confessions*, 10.17). The distinction is in terms of whom the questions are addressed to, with “Who am I?” directed by man to himself and “What am I?” directed by man to God. In other words, to know who we are, we turn to ourselves and to other people, and to know what we are, we look for a universal category that we might ascribe to. Contrary to the intuitions of proponents of narrative self, St. Augustine answers who he is in terms of the universal category of ‘man.’

she isn't sure of her characteristic identity. The characterization question "seeks to define a relation that holds between a person and particular actions, experiences, or characteristics that are hers" (Schechtman 1996, 77). The answer to "Who am I?" is expected to capture the uniqueness and singularity of a person. For Cavarero, one senses oneself to be oneself in an unreflective manner, that is, one recognizes one's own self with a non-knowledgeable familiarity (Cavarero 2000, 34-36). My thesis will focus on the problem of self or the characterization question.

The reidentification and characterization problem are related not only because they can be applied to the same person, but because to attribute a characteristic or action to a person is intertwined with the question of whether that person is the same as the one who performed an action or to whom we attributed a given characteristic (Schechtman 1996, 68-69). The most obvious examples come from our legal system, where holding a person morally responsible inevitably brings the two problems together. For instance, when we ask whether an act of murder can be attributed to a person, we want to know whether the person to whom we are attributing this act is one and the same as who committed the murder. A less sinister example: when a doctor prescribes some medicine to a patient for her pain, there is good reason to make sure that the person is one and the same as the person whose past self felt the pain. Additionally, the questions of 'who' and 'what' someone is are inextricably connected as Hannah Arendt succinctly summed it up: "The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is" (1958, 19). However, the main aim of this section is to draw the distinction between personal identity over time and selfhood and to reiterate my earlier point that I will only discuss the problem of self. From now onward, I refrain from using the word 'identity' in the context of selfhood because I want to avoid mixing the characterization question with the reidentification problem.

1.2. Salient Features of Narratives

Before I write about self-narratives, I will briefly discuss the nature of narratives in general. Doing this is important because when I think of the logical consequence of these features such as form-finding, or more specifically, story-telling, I come to the conclusion that the narrative self demands intelligibility at minimum, and a high degree of coherence at the other end; both of which are substantially insignificant for describing one's self.

To answer the question 'What are the fundamental features of a narrative?' I begin by clarifying that my discussion is limited to the structuralist definition of narratives, often

referred to as the standard or traditional view of narrative (Vice 2003, 95). Structuralist conception of narratives has two aspects: story and plot. The narrative content makes up the story or *fabula*. The story encapsulates the chain of events or happenings that a character goes through in a certain time and place. This is the ‘what’ of the narrative, which captures the content of the story (Chatman 1978, 19). The narrative discourse makes up the plot or *suzjet*. Narrative discourse or plot makes up the ‘how’ of the narrative, that is, “the means by which the content is communicated” (Chatman 1978, 19; Prince 2003, 21). Simply put, a narrative is constituted of elements such as setting, characters, tension or conflict, climax, plot, themes and resolution (Fireman 2005, 475). The traditional paradigm of narrative holds that a narrative connects all its constitutive elements. It also spots continuities and change over time among these elements (Vice 2003, 95). The former feature, that is, connections between elements, differentiates narratives from other forms of written texts that record change over time (Vice 2003, 95). Historical records such as chronicles or annals do not make connections of the events that they list. Although they are factual written records listing events in the order of their occurrence, there is no sense of closure. The events aren’t presented to give a sense of resolution and there is no attempt to reach an aim. There is also no explicit link between events noting the significance for the beginning or ending. The events in a narrative, on the other hand, slowly progress in a specific direction and the developmental unity arises from more than just chronology. Narratives not only note the connection of different elements, but they also draw our attention to the events’ significance for the ending. Narratives have what may be called a *telos*.

As mentioned earlier, the events in a narrative progress over time in a linear fashion. However, the linearity is not limited to its chronology. Narrative attempts to seek internal coherence between its elements (Vice 2003, 95). As a result, narrative establishes a unity. This means that a narrative highlights certain patterns and makes them comprehensible within the overall context of the whole story. Elements of a narrative are meaningful only in relation to the whole. If we pluck one element, say, the characters, then it isn’t hard to imagine that the story falls apart and we are left with an empty plot devoid of energy. The same is also true for events or parts of a storyline. If we remove one event out of a narrative, the snippet might be insightful, funny, canny etc. on its own, but it will definitely lose the meaning it had in the overall story. So perhaps a character recalling herself tripping over her untied shoelaces isn’t only to crack a joke, but to show that the lady walking her dog was indifferent to her woes. Strawson has identified this form-

seeking and form-imposing characteristic of a narrative as one of its most essential feature (Strawson 2008, 23).

Moreover, it can be said that some sort of form arises because the telling of a narrative is evaluative, as suggested by Avril Thorne and Kate C. McLean. Unlike an event narrative or the memory of the event, *telling* the narrative or *telling* the memory of the event is evaluative. This is because the narrator is trying to make a point to a listener/audience/reader (Fireman 2005, 479). This attempt to convey a point gives narrative its directedness towards an ending. Suppose we zap through an event as though it was a fast-forwarded video. We will just have the facts in succession. There will be no interpretation or perspective. However, when an individual recalls the same event, it will be hued with her subjectivity, her personal taste, and what she deems important. Therefore, the telling of the event will be evaluative, giving the narrative a focused perspective. Thus far, we have learned that according to the standard conception of narrative, a narrative follows a linear trajectory that connects its constitutive elements in a coherent manner, emphasizes patterns, imposes a unity, and seeks resolution. A cautionary note that I would like to give here is that not all narratives have all these features. However, the traditional view of narrative constitutes selfhood and is most relevant to the discussion about self and experience. Cavarero concurs with Arendt's assertion that an individual life is unique precisely because its rectilinear course of movement defies the cyclical order of biological life (Arendt 1958, 19). Schechtman also emphasizes that the traditional linear narrative constitutes a person because only a conventional story can express the kind of subjectivity that allows for the life of a person (Schechtman 1996, 105, 114).

1.3. The Narrative Self

In this section, I provide a provisional picture of the narrative conception of self by giving a basic taxonomy of some of the existing narrative views. I consider the narrative account of self that is put forth by Dennett, Cavarero, Schechtman, and Bruner. In the following three subsections, I parse through these authors' work to distinguish between the strong and weak form of the narrative self. I explain how the narrative self is constructed with constraints from outside and inside, and how this line of thought prompts me to figure out whether the narrative self identifies with being the narrator or character.

1.3.1. Strong and Weak Narrative Theses of Self: Explicit and Implicit Self-Narratives

The narrative view of self makes two claims: (1) Our sense of self is narrative; (2) Our experience is narrative in structure (Schechtman 1996, 395; Vice 2003, 93). The two claims are interrelated in the sense that selves lead a life that is narrative in form. The narrative conception of self posits that we are characters—usually central characters such as the protagonist—in a self-making narrative about ourselves. In other words, the narratives that we tell about ourselves to others and to ourselves constitute our selfhood. The second claim of the narrative self is about narrative processing, that is, our experience of the world is unavoidably narrative in structure. This means that the narrative form is a basic pre-condition to experience and to understanding ourselves at all. I categorize the narrative self as either strong or weak thesis.

One reason why I identify an account of the narrative self as strong or weak is the clarity and degree of the articulation of a person's self-narrative.³ When a self-narrative is taken as a coherent life-story or collection of stories constructed from our memories of our experience, then we are dealing with the strong narrative account of self. Dennett and Bruner's account can be taken as strong narrative views of self. Dennett writes about the unity of our life saying, "We are all virtuoso novelists...we try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography" (Dennett 1992, 83). On a similar note, Bruner states that our cumulative self-making stories even take the form of genres (Bruner 2003, 210). Proponents of the narrative self are in general agreement that our self-narratives are works-in-progress and that we never get to finish a full-scale autobiography since we aren't only balancing the past with our anticipated future, but also our past with what might have been, perpetually rewriting it (Bruner 2003, 215-216). Words like 'spinning,' 'unfolding,' 'molding,' 'construction,' 'weave' etc. are used to show the active part an agent has in creating her self-narrative.

In the weak form, the self-narrative does not need to be explicitly articulated or be consciously explicated. There isn't a stringent prerequisite on a person to have an autobiography that she carries in her head, although she may take the time to reflect self-consciously to understand where she comes from, where she is going, and how parts of her life fit together (Schechtman 1996, 105). A person may not know what her self-narrative is, but she certainly experiences her self and the world as a narrative (Schechtman 1996, 114; Cavarero 2000, 37; Vice 2003, 96). According to Schechtman's narrative theory of

³ I use the word 'self-narrative' to mean the narrative that one tells about oneself.

self, a person must be able to articulate her self-narrative, to give a psychologically sound story of what she is doing and why she is doing it at least on a local level. The idea is that one's implicit self-narrative isn't wholly subterranean in nature, so for instance, if someone asks, "Hey, do you have kids?" or "What brings you here?" or "Why did you get upset?" one should be able to answer. Schechtman proposes that narration can be a largely implicit process that can be detected in the quality of one's experience and the choices one makes, although it is only an explicit narrative that makes one a person (Schechtman 2011, 407; Schechtman 1996, 119).

There are two ways that the past can leave an undeniable vestige on our present.⁴ Either some specific events can greatly shape a person's present or a global characteristic from the past can cast a shadow on her present. People who have been through some traumatic experience can often forget or repress the specific details of the painful incident, but they can still suffer from depression or emotional turmoil resulting from their trauma. Global characteristics of a person's past about, say, her socioeconomic status, rather than her current circumstance, may condition her present sense of financial security and quality of life (Schechtman 1996, 111). A person raised in the Depression era, for instance, might go out of her way to just save pennies or she might decide to walk in bitter cold instead of spending money on a cab without recalling specific episodes of hunger or deprivation. Schechtman wants to make the case that retaining traits of thrift and financial conservatism are deeply part of a person's self-narrative, even if they can't recall or explain them with evidence from the past. To be clear, Schechtman doesn't want to paint a strict psychologically deterministic picture. Her point is to emphasize that the past gives us more than memories of our experiences (Schechtman 1996, 111). Our past also gives us an implicit "script"—a sense of self, an idea of who we are which relates us to the kind of story we are living and the kind of story we have lived (Schechtman 1996, 111).

To be psychologically intelligible, a person has to be able to relate her beliefs, desires, values, emotions, actions, and experiences and identify her guiding principles. So to be a distinctive single subject, to know who one is, is to delineate the contours of one's well-defined character. The extent to which a person's self-narrative can be intelligible will vary. While the ideal self-narrative will make every aspect of a person intelligible, the weak self-narrative will barely thread the random sequence of experiences that one has

⁴ The weak narrative view of self rests on a Freudian intuition that there are hidden, if not repressed, aspects of our past that influence our current behavior and experience. A person may not be able to excavate these hidden aspects, but they nevertheless inform her present well-being (Schechtman 1996, 110).

undergone. In between, there is myriad of variation. Most people are able to intelligibly cohere their life-story with a few anomalous parts. Teenagers going through an identity crisis have a conflicted story. People with dementia have a disjointed story and so on (Schechtman 1996, 98).

I distinguish the strong and weak account of the narrative theory of self because the reasons in favor of these two narrative views of self are different and equivocating between them will only lead to confusion when I make the case against them. The strong narrative view of self has a consoling role in the sense that it gives meaning to our lives, and it portrays us having agency over how our life takes shape. The weak narrative view of self makes us intelligible to others and ourselves. This isn't to say that the strong narrative view doesn't aim at making us intelligible. Finding an overarching meaning and significance to our lives is a much stronger form of making oneself comprehensible to oneself and others. In short, at one end, we have an unreflective, unarticulated, intuitive picture of self-narratives, and at the other end, we have a highly organized structure constructed with conscious deliberation. Personal narratives can be taken as guiding our decision-making process, our attention, and our autobiographical remembering in an unreflective manner. Schechtman writes, "The sense of one's life as unfolding according to the logic of a narrative is not just an idea we have, it is an organizing principle of our lives. It is the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours" (Schechtman 1996, 113).

1.3.2. Constraints on the Narrative Self: Inside and Outside

Recognizing that people can be mistaken about themselves and that they don't exist in vacuum, the narrative self places two constraints on the kind of narrative that constitute selfhood (Schechtman 1996, 94). First, one creates a self-narrative in accordance with one's unique subjectivities and orientation. The impetus for the claim that individuals create their self by means of self-created narratives takes an individual's inner life and her attitude towards her actions and experiences into account. Second, there is a limitation to self-constitution. In order to be a person one's self-conception has to be in agreement with the intersubjective account of one's story, that is, it has to be in accordance with the account that comes from the people around one (Schechtman 1996, 95). According to Bruner, our self-making narratives are determined by what he calls "the inside and the outside." From the inside, self-making narratives are dependent on memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, and subjectivity (Bruner 2003, 210). In a similar vein, Bamberg describes

this internal organization of narrative as human interiority, where the actions and events are spelled out as outcomes of motives that arise from a character's complex traits and interiority (Bamberg 2010, 10). Here 'interiority' refers to what Bruner understands as a character's memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, and subjectivity. I take it that the inside or private aspect of self-making narrative reflects our urge for agency. Incorporating our ideas and beliefs into our story shows our desire to express our values, leave our mark, and portray our characters as exercising free will.

From the outside, self-making narratives are limited by the unspoken, implicit cultural expectations, the praise and blame of others, and what we think others think and expect of us (Bruner 2003, 210-211). Writing about the modern self, Bamberg writes that it is "deeply intertwined with the development of nation states and local communities—particularly the city, the emergence of the subjectivity of the young citizen..." (9). The external form of organization of character development takes plot to provide order to human action. Additionally, it lends meaning to life by providing a set of possibilities (Bamberg 2010, 10). This is to say that our culture and other social influences provide us with possible scripts or suggested storyline to organize our lives according to it. My understanding is that the outside or public forces that influence a self-making narrative show our commitment to others. It shows that we care about the social mores of our culture and social institutions. Bamberg sums up the inside and outside facet of narrative self by stating that the narrative self is an interplay between human interiority and culturally available models of continuity (Bamberg 2010, 10). Although self-making narratives are created by a continuous exchange between inside and outside, private and public sources, they leave room for maneuver. The idea is that a person can display her uniqueness by her self-told accounts that are different than those of others (Bruner 2003, 211).

1.3.3. Self as a Protagonist or Narrator?

Does the narrative self define itself as a character or does it identify itself with the author/narrator? The tension between inside and outside, private and public aspects of the narrative self can help us understand whether we are characters or authors of our narratives. When we think about the insidedness or private aspect of the narrative self, we realize that the self is fashioned as an author of the narrative. This is because by inserting our feelings, ideas, and beliefs into a story or simply creating a story based on our subjectivity, we become authors. It is our lens that we are using to look at the world. However, when we consider the outside or public aspect of the narrative self, we realize

that the self can be identified as a character. Outside influences from our sociocultural environment shapes our narrative self in that it provides overarching scripts with suggested roles.

Dennett, however, doesn't share this understanding that the private aspect of the self corresponds to a person identifying as a narrator of her story and that the public aspect of the self corresponds to her identifying as a character. Selves, according to Dennett, are the characters in the narratives that our brains spin. To illustrate the distinction between entities that generate autobiographical narrative (narrator) and the protagonist in the narrative, he lets us consider the famous line 'Call me Ishmael' from Melville's *Moby Dick*. Here, Dennett wants to say, we can see that this sentence comes from Ishmael the character and not Melville the author. Human brains are like Melville and the autobiographical stories humans weave are like the fictional character Ishmael (Dennett 1992, 76-77). The thought experiment of a novel-writing machine, which has been programmed to generate novels, demonstrates this distinction further. Suppose this novel-generating machine outputs a novel that begins with 'Call me Gilbert' and which tells an autobiographical narrative of a character named Gilbert. Now suppose further that this novel-generating machine is a robot that moves around on wheels and has a television eye. It, too, begins its novel with 'Call me Gilbert' and generates an autobiographical narrative with Gilbert at its center. But the difference between the novel-generating computer and novel-generating robot on wheels is that the robot's narrative has an uncanny resemblance to what is happening to the robot in the real world. Dennett argues that Gilbert isn't the robot, but is rather the fictional protagonist of the narrative (Ibid, 78-79).

1.4. Salient Features of the Self-Narratives

Personal narratives share a common set of rules or resemblance by which we can distinguish them from language use in general. Schechtman maintains that although the narrative conception of self demands that a person hash out her self-conception in a traditional linear narrative, there is room for a wide range of possible self-narratives (Schechtman 1996, 105). This means that despite having some conventional or standard form that a self-narrative can take, it still remains fluid enough to account for a cluster of narrative forms (Schechtman 1996, 103).

What are these fundamental features common to personal narratives for the construction of self? Life narratives can't be like literary narratives in two respects. First, since self-narratives are continuously evolving in real time, they can't be said to reach a

resolution. Even the climax can't be pinpointed unless some time has passed. Second, self-narratives can't be neat and tidy like fictional narratives. They help us organize unorganized material into an interesting story, into what Punday calls "human temporality" (Bamberg 2010, 10). It means that the narrative self transcends the unruly chaos of scattered events and gives meaning by creating a structure. By imposing order on something that seems messy, the narrative self is our creative expression of life. This form-imposing activity of the narrative self plays a fundamental role in giving us a sense of agency. We get to define our selfhood the way we want it. We recognize that the self isn't something that is handed down to us, but is rather something we weave as self-made persons (Vice 2003, 98; Bruner 2003, 209). It is satisfying to know that our selfhood is something we have had an active role in molding. The overarching function of the narrative self is to create personal meaning and to share our experiences with others (Fireman 2005, 475).

There are two main characteristic features that are present in all self-narratives. These are storytelling and coherence. Storytelling is a specific version of form-finding (Strawson 2004, 26). A third feature that isn't necessary, but may be relevant, for the self-narratives is that one will confabulate⁵, revise, and fabricate one's account when one apprehends one's life. The tendency to revise involves more than just changing one's view. It may be unconscious. It may be conscious as in when a person lies to others on purpose and then semi-consciously alters her account to the point where she loses her awareness of the revision (Strawson 2008, 24). Whether it's conscious or unconscious, confabulation lets us construct a better image of ourselves by letting us integrate disparate information about ourselves into a coherent story. Dennett and Bruner agree that revision in the form of construction and reconstruction is an important aspect of the narrative self. Schechtman and Cavarero seem to be agnostic about revision, although they are clear that no significant revisions should occur. It can also be said that the constructive nature of memory is such that it edits and reorders, which may or may not fabricate. Many think we are unreliable narrators of our own life. Some think that we can remember without distorting. Some think that revision is always charged, that it is motivated by moral emotions such as pride, conceit, regret, remorse etc. A more specific claim is that we revise in our own favor. Both of these claims—that revision is charged and that we revise in our own favor—are false (Ibid, 25). Motivating moods and emotions including modesty, low self-esteem, gratitude

⁵ The root of the word 'confabulation' comes from the Latin *fabula* (story).

or forgiveness can make one to revise to one's own detriment. Some people forget the good things they have done (Ibid, 26). Revision may happen in a person's narrative because she forgets things and finds form in the limited material she remembers. Some may revise because they can't find a satisfying form in their life (Ibid, 25). 'Flashbulb' memories can be inaccurate despite our conviction of their certainty (Ibid, 26). In the next chapter, I address how all three of these characteristics of the self-narrative—storytelling, coherence, and revision—can lead to self-deception and straying away from who one truly is.

Chapter 2

Augmenting Strawson's Argument Against the Narrative Self

“To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world
which is doing its best, night and day,
to make you everybody else—means to fight
the hardest battle which any human being
can fight.”

— e. e. cummings, *A Poet's Advice to Students* (1958)

In this chapter, I try to highlight the critical points of Strawson's rebuttal of the narrative theory of self. In the first half of the chapter, I argue against the descriptive narrativity thesis. To do this, I lay out the distinctions Strawson draws between four different temporal temperaments such as Episodicity, Diachronicity, Narrativity, and non-Narrativity. These are four psychological tendencies or “natural ways of experiencing life in time” (Strawson 2007, 86). These distinctions are made to demonstrate that narrating our life and defining our selfhood in terms of our life-story isn't a universal innate impulse. There are deeply Episodic and non-Narrative people in whom this impulse to narrate is missing, simply because they neither grasp themselves extended in time nor are inclined to create coherency through ongoing storytelling. In the second half of the chapter, I present my arguments against the normative narrativity thesis: challenge to self-knowledge, artificiality, and nested narratives.

2.1. Temporal Dispositions: Episodicity, Diachronicity, Narrativity, non-Narrativity

Experiencing oneself as a whole human being (with an obvious biological continuity) and experiencing oneself as an inner subject of experience or inner mental entity or 'self' are two different things. This was touched upon in the beginning of the first chapter (section 1.1) when I differentiated between the questions 'What am I?' and 'Who am I?' The latter is one's self-experience and Strawson identifies four different temporal outlooks that a person can have when they experience themselves as an inner subject or self. These outlooks are a person's subjective experience of how she places herself in time.

For Strawson, Diachronic self-experience is that “one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” (Strawson 2008, 13). If a person has the sense that she has persisted over a long time period or even for her entire life, then she has a Diachronic disposition. On the other hand, an Episodic self-experience entails that one “does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” (Strawson 2008, 13). Episodics are the complete opposites of Diachronics in the sense that they don’t experience their self to be extended in time, although an Episodic may sometimes vividly feel that some past event happened to her (for example, embarrassing moments) or she may experience tense emotions about some impending event in the future (for example, anxiety about death) (Strawson 2008, 13).

Strawson identifies three main differences between Episodics and Diachronics. The first difference arises because of differences in self-experience. The self-experience of the present may be different in these two dispositions because of how the past informs the present. While it is true that the past shapes how one is in the present, Episodics assert that the past isn’t alive as the past for their present moment (Strawson 2008, 15). Strawson writes, “The way I am now is profoundly shaped by my past, but it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as such” (2008, 20). It has special relevance for the present state insofar as it has shaped the present state, but it doesn’t cast a looming cloud or shadow over the present. This runs counter to the weak narrative claim because an Episodic temperament doesn’t dispose one to be anchored by the past. It neither excessively colors the present nor impacts the overall quality of one’s self-experience as Schechtman states about the weak narrative thesis of self. I will return to how an Episodic outlook relates to weak narrative view of self in the next section for they are not the same.

The second difference between Episodics and Diachronics is in terms of their interest in their past. Strawson says that as an Episodic, he doesn’t have any special interest in his life as a narrative with form or without form. I don’t agree with this criterion that Episodics are those who have no interest in their past, and that Diachronics have some vested interest. An Episodic person can have an interest in her past if she wants to figure out something about the past (e.g. Where did I put my keys?), if she wants to remember something about the past (How was last Thanksgiving?), or if she wants to rectify something about the past (e.g. I can apologize for the window I broke and fix it). Interest in the past is an ambiguous criterion, both because an Episodic might have an interest in her

past and because a Diachronic person might not have any interest in her past. Therefore, I do not take interest in the past or lack thereof as a distinguishing mark between an Episodic and Diachronic person.

The third difference between Episodics and Diachronics arises because of their differing sense of being the same over time. For example, when an Episodic is apprehending herself as a self, she has no significant sense that her self in the present moment is the same as that in the past. Therefore, it seems that the events from the past didn't happen to the self of the present even if the memories associated with these events have a 'from-the-inside' character (Strawson 2008, 16-17). Having 'from-the-inside' character to one's memory of an event doesn't entail that the memory must necessarily be grasped as something that happened to the self that is considering it (Strawson 2008, 17).

Now I move on to discuss Narrative and non-Narrative outlooks. If one has a Narrative disposition, then "one sees or lives or experiences one's life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories" (Strawson 2008, 11). The upper-case psychological Narrative outlook involves a subjective construing of the events of one's life (Strawson 2008, 22). It has to have a stronger sense of unity than just the unity of a biologically single human being or just the unity of a sequential record of one's history. In other words, the Narrative outlook has to engage in an active construal of one's life, which involves some sort of "large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking" (Strawson 2008, 22). This form-finding is necessary and minimally sufficient for Narrativity. Furthermore, one is genuinely Narrative if one has a storytelling tendency when thinking of one's life. Simply put, when one is disposed to think of one's life as some narrative genre, then one must necessarily possess a Narrative outlook (Strawson 2008, 24). Although Diachronics may be Narrative in their outlook, that is, they may see or experience themselves as a narrative or quest development over time, it is not necessary that they have to be Narrative (Strawson 2008, 23). One can think of the Narrative outlook as a more specific form of outlook than the Diachronic tendency.

To be non-Narrative is to not see or live or experience one's life as a narrative or story or a collection of stories (Strawson 2007, 86). This is not to say that one has trouble forming memories, or that one lacks a robust personality. Non-Narrativity just entails that one's self-experience lacks large-scale coherent narrative. At this juncture, one might ask what all these distinctions in temporal dispositions amount to in the argument against the descriptive narrativity thesis? In the following section, I address precisely this by engaging Schechtman and Strawson's arguments.

2.2. Episodicity, Non-Narrativity, and Weak Narrative Thesis of Self

First, these distinctions show that self-narrating is not necessarily a universal way of apprehending our selfhood, and thus, human diversity is highlighted. This serves as the first step to rejecting the descriptive claim of the strong narrativity thesis. The descriptive narrativity thesis loses ground when we question the universality of the narrating impulse. Some are narrative by nature, while others are not. To make the claim that the self is our innate impulse to reveal and expose ourselves by means of stories that we construct and reconstruct depending on our circumstances is to ignore non-Narrative self-experience.

Second, I claim that these distinctions can also help clarify that an Episodic and non-Narrative person doesn't have a weak narrative thesis of self. That we can make a person's actions intelligible in a local sense and find out why she is engaged in some activity is not evidence for saying that that person experiences herself as a character in a dormant story that unwinds in time. What someone is doing in the moment, whether it is writing a short reminder or walking some place, is hardly something anyone would say represents them, that that is who they are. These are things we all do everyday to get by. Both Schechtman and Cavarero would maintain that the weak narrative thesis of self is having this unreflective sense that one is living a narrative, which can be unearthed and its content can be made manifest if one probes oneself. There is a latent story whose hazy contours can be explicated if one is persistent with enough why's. While an Episodic and non-Narrative person can make herself comprehensible on a local scale, that doesn't mean she is convinced that all her mundane episodes are meaningfully relevant for the overall scheme of her life.

It is a strange suggestion to make that the weak self-narrative is a narrative at all. This is because in its unarticulated form, it is missing all the essential features of a narrative that were identified in section 1.4, that is, the weak claim of the narrative theory of self neither has to have a high degree of articulated structure on a global scale nor a story with an extraordinary form-finding quality. This is where Cavarero's and Schechtman's assertion that content is not essential to a person's weak narrative thesis of self becomes relevant. The strength of the weak self-narrative rests on the premise that content is not essential; what is essential is the process, so if you are ever pressed to explain yourself, you are able to narrativize your actions. A person doesn't need to narrate her life consciously, yet if she doesn't, she remains hidden from herself and from others because "the unexposable is the non-existent" (Cavarero 2000, 57). On the one hand,

Cavarero thinks that a “human existent” displays and reveals her unrepeatable uniqueness through storytelling, and on the other hand, she makes the claim that a human existent is narratable—hence, unique—only insofar as she is exposable.

I make the claim that content isn’t as inessential to the narrative self as the weak claim makes it look. Without content, there is no story, which is what captures the singularity of an individual. Cavarero gives an apt example about two Italian women in Milan attending writing workshops at a ‘150-hour school.’ Their names are Emilia and Amalia. While Emilia struggles with writing her autobiography despite narrating her story for the umpteenth time, Amalia has a knack for writing beautiful prose. Upon seeing that Emilia is unhappy with being unable to connect her life-story in an organized way, Amalia writes a biography for her friend as a gift. Emilia is moved to tears by her friend’s gift, so much so that she even carries it around with her, relishing the tangibility of her story. Cavarero wants to say that it isn’t the lack of literary talent that prevents Emilia from coherently weaving the “intolerable sequence of events” of her life, but rather “the impossibility of personally objectifying the material of her own desire” (Cavarero 2000, 56). Is the narrative self a need to objectify the material of one’s own desire? The answer lies in the classic rule of storytelling: in the absence of a public space of exhibition, there is no life-story (Ibid, 58). Emilia fears that not having the (political) space to reveal who she is, she may not leave any story that is worthy of narration. In other words, what makes the narrative self of any use to a person in her life is its sheer tangibility when it is exposed to others.

If we carry an unarticulated self-narrative with us, if this is how we are, how do we pick our self-narratives? The social language of stories is such that it is highly polished, laden with rules about what constitutes a good story as opposed to a dull one. In the above example, Emilia is not so much dissatisfied with not having a story as she is with not having the right kind of story. She has her story written and she narrates it quite often, but it’s not the way she and others would recognize it as having a beautiful arc.⁶ Nobody

⁶ In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes about the common structure and patterns in hero myths and stories from around the world. He identifies the following stages of the hero quest: An out-of-place hero gets a call to adventure; she is reluctant to embark on the quest, but eventually accepts the call to enter an unknown world; she gets some help from an ageless guardian in the form of magic or an object; she finds allies who help her along the way; she overcomes many obstacles before coming across the final ordeal; she bags the rewards of her struggle and returns home as a hero, where she transforms the reality in some sense. He writes, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 1968, 30). Perhaps those who construct a narrative self see their life journey as this hero quest.

necessarily stigmatizes ordinary narratives about ordinary things one happens to do, but there is a cultural expectation and individual striving for presenting our self as unique, if not truly extraordinary. Ironically, in wanting to be singular and unique, we become a dime a dozen because the narrative arc that we love is that of a hero. Arendt writes, “Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words” (1958, 186). We can only be satisfied when our own lives have taken an aggrandizing tone, without, of course, appearing aggrandizing. We want our lives to look like myths with us overcoming obstacles and odds, and while it might be true that we have undergone many struggles, the construction of the narrative self can provoke feelings of inadequacies even among people like Emilia who might identify as having a narrative self. Coming up with a coherent narrative self is more of a skill that we develop than an innate impulse.

Often, before old people pass away, they go on for nights narrating their stories, as though they know that what they have to say must be said before “the final silence” of death stops their stories.⁷ There is an urgency to get their stories off their chest, to leave behind something of theirs in the form of their life-story. The fear that a life led in the absence of a public space of exhibition leaves no life-story, that a life without any way of showing that it existed is somewhat apparent here. The narrative self can be said to be our way of coping with our own perishability, that when we are gone, perhaps someone might remember us by our story. I acknowledge that stories are a powerful tool without which we might not fully know our past, our history, our people, but I also think that to mistake stories for who we are is a dangerous thing.

In the next sub-chapter, I go over my arguments against the normative thesis, a common notion among proponents of the narrative self, which states that we should construct a narrative self because that will help us with leading a good life. For Charles Taylor, who holds a strong narrative theory of self, the fundamental requirement of human agency is that we identify the good, we orient ourselves to that good, determine our relative distance from that good, and assess whether we are on the right direction (Strawson 2008, 19). And for Alasdair MacIntyre, living a good life means that one brings one’s narrative quest for the good to completion. Seeking the good life can only happen when one takes up a narrative perspective (Strawson 2008, 19). Of course, this is not necessarily connected to a person’s religious commitment as Strawson suggests because if

⁷ I borrow this phrase “the final silence” from Audre Lorde’s writing on the transformation of silence into action.

one can sum up the philosophical literature of ancient Greeks, the one thing that will appear is the question of good life. To have an ethical view such that it is narrative doesn't mean that that is the only ethical or good life there is. What we care about in life might be converted into a story. But it might not be. We might not be able to trace the shape of our development, but still might live a good life, "content with a private fantasy...in which I figured as Mr. Nobody" (Strawson 2005, 20).

2.3. Artificiality of Self-Narratives

As I mentioned earlier in sub-section 1.3.3, the narrative self can either be taken as a character or as a narrator. Now I will examine the consequences of thinking of ourselves as the narrators of our narrative self. At first glance, it seems that being the author of our life stories should not be worrisome at all, but when we pause to think, we realize otherwise. Vice suggests that in our commitment to exercise agency by revising the storyline of our narrative, we lose sight of facts or "what really happened" (103). This is because holding onto a specific interpretation makes it harder to know the facts or even other perspectives. We get bogged down in spinning a tale where things are under our voluntary control. I do not think that agency is the art of rearranging events as a bouquet that pleases our aesthetic ideal. In fact, cherry picking our life events into a narrative that fits our vision poses a serious challenge to self-knowledge. By insisting on a certain view of ourselves, we become unaware of those facets about ourselves that are irrelevant to our narrative self or that may contradict our narrative self. In the third chapter, I discuss how this self-reinforcing aspect of the narrative self can be a challenge to self-knowledge, to knowing who we are.

Recall that one of the characteristic features of the narrative self is that when we look back on our autobiographical data, we pick and delete information as well as arrange and rearrange the selected elements into a clear pattern. One of my objections to this form-imposing aspect of the narrative self is that it is artificial. It is only in our reflective hours that we think of ourselves as narratives. The process of articulating a strong self-narrative is deliberate, seeking form, coherence, and significance. It is only in retrospect that we find form and significance, that we are able to construct a story. Life is chaotic and we need to be comfortable with its chaos and its uncertain development, without needing to force a potentially false unity on it. In the attempt to make life into an art piece, we also lose enjoying the here and now. Instead of living in the moment, we become attuned to details that might serve our narrative, we evaluate the importance of different moments and try to

connect it to past events. Simply put, the narrative self requires an exhausting mode of reflection that evaluates the past and present events and seeks to link it to an imagined end or destiny—an unlikely mode of self-experience for Episodics, if not most people. Even deeply Narrative Diachronics aren't immune from the artificial crafting of their narratives. The order that manifests in a narrative self is reflective of the power structures of the world in that it allocates more significance to some perspectives as oppose to others. While it is true that our values play a role in determining which events are incorporated and which event are erased from our narrative self, the narrative self is in constant conversation with our cultural constraints.

The reconstructive nature of crafting self-narratives is such that one is constantly involved in narrating. The more one engages in telling one's past experiences, it is no doubt that one's self-narrative becomes progressively more polished, but it has the potential to veer off from its original course. It strays away from facts to a partial perspective that is self-fulfilling. There is evidence that telling, retelling, revising, and scrutinizing our self-narratives constantly or repeatedly leads to large enough changes that brink on being called fabrications (Strawson 2008, 23). Of course, not all people are prone to significantly changing the facts about their life-narratives, but the possibility can't be dismissed so easily. The strong narrative claim about self has to face this criticism since it is, by definition, an ongoing process that is continuously involved in adjusting to one's changing views and aims. However, the appeal of the weak self-narrative is that one doesn't have to articulate one's story. This lets it escape the criticism that the more we narrate, the more we alter our self-narrative.

2.4. Nested Narratives: Scripts Emerging from Narratives Embedded Within Narratives

The appeal of the strong narrative thesis of self is that it gives us freedom to define our selfhood the way we want it. In order to refute this reason given in favor of the strong narrative thesis of self, we have to keep in mind the distinction between self as a character and self as a narrator. If we are characters, then the downside is that we risk being pushed by the expectations of others like dried leaves in a wind. Recognizing that as people immersed in a specific sociocultural environment, our stories about ourselves, about our roles, about our lives are informed by our milieu. We pick up, whether consciously or unconsciously, predetermined roles. Bruner writes, "All cultures provide presuppositions and perspectives about selfhood, rather like plot summaries or homilies for telling oneself or others about oneself..." (211). On a similar note, Alasdair MacIntyre emphasizes that

the way we make our stories, the roles we play in our lives are dependent on the stories that are transferred to us through our culture (Vice 100). Although these plot summaries orient ourselves in the world, give us a general sense of direction, and lay out a convenient road map for us, they also limit us in many ways. By assigning specific roles to people, the narrative self, which is molded out of expectations and perspectives handed down to us from our sociocultural environment, limits us. It reduces our identities to prejudicial stereotypes and other culturally available roles. Here ‘prejudicial stereotype’ means a generalization which is based on a judgment about a social group and which is not reflective of evidence. For instance, when a black man refrains from helping a woman carrying her heavy luggage on an empty train well past midnight, he does so because he does not want to scare her off. By not helping despite his desire to help, he participates in the culturally available role assigned to him. He limits his story, and therefore his narrative self, because his narrative self has internalized a worldview with racist roles. At times, the narrative self also dehumanizes when we unconsciously adopt on roles that degrade us and we define our self as only those roles. Vice eloquently recapitulates this point by stating, “we risk mythologizing, restricting possibilities, misinterpreting events and people as we see them as irrevocable elements of a larger story of which we are protagonists” (Vice 103-104).

Historically marginalized groups have always looked at themselves through the eyes of the dominant class and have developed what W. E. B. Du Bois termed as “double consciousness.” In *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois writes,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois 2008, 8)

Whereas for Du Bois, true self-consciousness is realized when one is able to merge the two conflicting selves, I don’t think that reconciling “warring ideals” is the way to go. It is precisely this demand of unity and this want of constructing a consistent and coherent structure that places the burden of explaining oneself to others as a self-narrative. Making oneself comprehensible by means of one’s self-narrative is geared towards answering

“Who are you?” rather than “Who am I?” Not many people would give an explanation of why they are doing what they are doing to tell one who they are. That doesn’t happen because we are not looking for justifications for people’s behavior when we ask them who they are, although this can inevitably come about in their account of selfhood. For an Episodic and non-Narrative person, imposing a narrative structure on her fragmented, disjointed, fractured, and disintegrated life experience is similar to what Du Bois describes as the reconciling struggle of a black person in America: full of anxiety. The question of who an Episodic and non-Narrative person is in terms of a life-story is tantamount to asking her to place some structure on her previously lived moments and anticipated future and to see herself through the gaze of others. By virtue of its coherence criterion, the narrative self doesn’t accommodate for narratives that are disintegrated or that are impossible to unify.

Life narratives are embedded in linguistic and sociocultural frameworks that tell us what is important to remember and how our autobiographical past should be recounted (Fireman 2005, 476). As persons engaged in continual interpersonal and cultural exchange, our narrative self demands a constant constructive process (Fireman 2005, 476). My idea of nested narratives—a story enclosed within another story—is that a person’s articulated self-narrative is necessarily informed by her milieu, and this is somewhat evident by the hierarchical nature of the nested narratives. The smaller narrative embedded within the larger narrative depends on the larger one both for structural and content support, although this language of prior and latter or lower and higher is something that I avoid doing. I use the word ‘milieu’ to cover a range of social influences that one is immersed in. Milieu includes a person’s cultural, linguistic, religious, historical, and social framework. These frameworks tell us what is important to remember, how our autobiographical past should be recounted, and what should ultimately be included in our life narratives. Our self-narratives are embedded in large narratives that nudge us to shape our stories. I bring this argument against the strong claim of the narrative self to challenge the notion that our self-narratives give us personalized meaning.

One objection against the idea of nested narratives is that it insinuates that our agency is an illusion in the sense that perhaps we don’t consciously choose our self-narratives, that our self-narratives are limited by the so-called templates we are handed down by our milieu. Although we can personalize these templates and render them sophisticated by adding layers of narratives, and we can subvert what we find problematic in the story schemas of your milieu, perhaps who we are remains unanswered, mainly

because the language of stories is a social language, and as such, can't ever be said to be our own. By questioning this derivative aspect of the strong narrative thesis of self, I question the personalized meaning that the strong narrative view of self promises.

Chapter 3

Defending a Non-Narrative Account of Self

“Man's hope can paint a purple picture,
can transform a soaring vulture into a
noble eagle or moaning dove.”

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

In this chapter, my aim is twofold. First, I show that constructing a well-articulated self-narrative doesn't make one any more ethical than if one doesn't have a narrative. I begin by proposing that we need to unravel the assumption that having a sense of persistent narrative self is needed for holding ourselves responsible. Second, I discuss why a non-Narrative outlook doesn't entail not taking moral responsibility.

3.1. Unraveling the Association between Narrativity and Accountability

In this section, I try to show that there is no strict association between narrativity and accountability, that is, one is no more likely to be responsible if one has a self-narrative than if one does not. It is not hard to imagine a person who can make her actions and behavior intelligible to others and herself by means of a coherent story, and yet be utterly unethical. Although the example I write about—Eichmann's defense in his trial in Jerusalem—can be taken as an extreme example of an irresponsible person who we might not relate to, I think that the reason it seems far-fetched is because we judge him outside of his story.

Adolf Eichmann was a member of Heinrich Himmler's SS unit, where he rose through the SS hierarchy from dealing with Jewish affairs to finally becoming part of organizing the logistics behind “the final solution to the Jewish problem.” After the war was over, Eichmann managed to escape to Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 1960, he was apprehended by the Israeli secret service agents and taken to Israel for a trial in Jerusalem. The trial was controversial because he was arrested without the permission of the Argentinian government, tried in Jerusalem for crimes against the Jewish people, and later

sentenced to death. Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* stirred further controversy. One reason among others was because of how she characterized Eichmann. Rather than describing him as a demonic or evil person on par with murderers and sadistic people, Arendt thought that Eichmann was like a "clown" who was simply unable to think.

Describing himself as an obedient bureaucrat, Eichmann adamantly insisted that he had not violated any law and that he had done what was expected of him. He had obeyed the orders that were given to him. He even claimed that he was not an anti-Semite. On the one hand, Eichmann understood the extent of the cruelties that the Nazi party had committed because he distanced himself from Nazi party's anti-Semitism. On the other hand, he was proud of his accomplishment of efficiently coordinating the whole process of exterminating the Jewish people in Europe. He took pride in giving details about how he had organized, negotiated, and planned the task of getting rid of Jewish people. How did he reconcile these two diametrically opposite positions? The answer lies in narrating his life experience as an SS bureaucrat; it lies in storytelling.

Eichmann was simply an avid storyteller. Although to the reader Eichmann's storytelling ability is unimpressive in that his narration barely moved from hackneyed phrases and proverbs, he can be said to have a stable narrative self. Laced with a coherently articulated self-narrative, Eichmann was able to put his personal conscience to rest, simply because everything made sense. He had done nothing wrong. His insistence on doing the right thing by following orders, on not feeling any remorse for his role in the Holocaust, on his appeal to relatable clichés, is demonstrative of the fact that self-narration can help us justify anything. Storytelling, no matter how rigorous form it takes, no matter how well articulated it is, no matter how coherent it is, and no matter how well corroborated it is with other people's account, has the uncanny feature of confirming what one already sees and believes, and what one wants to see and believe. This is especially true for the narrative self because that self is only one character—and the main one—whose lens we get to see through. There is no critical distancing from the only character that one is.

It can be said that Eichmann's case is an unfair counterexample to demonstrate that narrativity bears no relation to leading a good life, to holding oneself responsible for one's past actions. It's an extreme example to which most people cannot relate because most people think that they would have had the good sense to act otherwise if they were in his place in Nazi Germany. My main point is that when one has a self-narrative, which is both

in sync with one's own self-conception and with the account of others, then it is likely to affirm the same self-narrative that one is already fixated on. There is no self-correcting mechanism because the retrospective act of narrating constructs a self that is cocooned in the same layers of stories. Furthermore, this self-affirming quality of self-narratives is such that the more one engages in formulating it, the more one is satisfied with its explanatory power. It sustains the image of who one wants to think one is. In addition to, that, the absorptive quality of well-articulated self-narrative is that it not only allows for neglecting recalcitrant snippets, but also reshapes and reinterprets information that could potentially challenge the narrative self. They equip us with a way to deal with disruptions without undermining us.

We see what we want to see and we have the ability to see what you want to see when we engage in narrating our life-stories. In other words, we have a bias to believe and confirm what we already believe. This is called the confirmation bias, which is our tendency to look for evidence that confirms our already held beliefs (Kahneman 2011, 80-81). This is bad news for the narrative self because if we seek stories that strengthen our self-narratives, we might ignore aspects about ourselves that don't make sense for our self-narratives. What is the strength of the narrative self is also its weakness—we discard irrelevant details or amplify others to construct our life-story only to become less nuanced in capturing who we are. All good stories tie together what has meaning for the overall whole, which means that constructing a narrative in which different elements hang together well is inseparable from selective editing.

Whether or not Eichmann was a thoughtless person who had committed evil out of his sheer inability to have any moral sensibility as Arendt claimed, I do not know. Eichmann, however, was someone who understood that he could make himself comprehensible insofar as he could iron out the contradictions and inconsistencies of his self-narrative. For Eichmann, an idealist was not only someone who believed in an idea, who didn't steal or took bribes, but an idealist was someone who lived for his idea and was prepared to sacrifice everything and everyone for this idea. When he said in the police examination that he would have sent his father to his death, he did not only mean that he was obliged to obey orders, but he meant that like all good idealists, he would have the sense to cast aside his personal feelings and emotions for his idea (Arendt 2000, 318).

Stories have an incredible explanatory power, and while their incantatory and mesmerizing ability is touted as one of its strengths—stories can render us comprehensible to others and ourselves—it can be equally pernicious. It is the explanatory power of stories

that can convince us to explain away almost anything. One can rationalize, justify, and make things seem reasonable in the context of one's stories. So it is not that a person's narrative self strengthens her moral compass or ethical outlook, although it may explicitly aim at some good, but it simply spins a stable image. I think it is a highly misguided intuition that if one is non-Narrative and one doesn't apprehend oneself as being extended in time as a coherent story, then one will refuse to take moral responsibility and fail to keep promises.

Is meaning and explanation of our past experiences and current behavior important in the account of selfhood? While it is important for some to create their own meaning by storytelling, I claim that the quest for meaning in life is not the same as the quest for truth about one's life. What this translates to for the narrative theory of self is that all we have to do to create our self-narratives is that we have to make our experiences cohere in such a way that it gives meaning to our life and it makes things intelligible. Ultimately, one can build a highly coherent life-story without being truthful. Eichmann's case is an example.

3.2. Challenges to non-Narrative Life: Continuity of Self and Responsibility

Here, I argue that non-Narrative people can take moral responsibility or fulfill social obligations without any problem. The primary concern that comes up against a non-Narrative person is about the continuity of their feelings of obligation. Episodics might not keep their promises. Episodics might not admit to their wrongdoings, whether it is some serious crime or just a minor transgression. Behind these concerns is the intuition that if one doesn't have a story where the narrating "I" senses that the narrated "I" is one and the same, then one isn't ready to hold oneself accountable for what one did since one can get up and declare, "I don't think and feel that that was me!"⁸ Strawson gives two reasons to counter these objections. First, an Episodic can have feelings of obligations. She can feel remorse, guilt, shame, pride etc. just like anyone else. Complex emotions like that often occur with some judgment on the part of the person who is feeling these emotions. This means that so long as there is a certain judgment or understanding of her situation, she will have remorse, guilt, shame etc. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear that feeling such emotions necessarily leads one to act ethically or appropriate.

⁸ I think this objection is more related to the reidentification problem because the worry is that the non-Narrative self is not persistent over time, but it nonetheless shows up in the context of the characterization problem.

Second, being an Episodic and non-Narrative person doesn't mean that one has no concern for one's past actions. On the contrary, one understands that one has inherited a special set of items from the past self, and the same holds true of one's present self to the future. Confusing Episodicity and non-Narrativity with no continuity at all is mistaken. There is continuity as a biological being. But more importantly, Episodic non-Narrative people generally care for other people just as much as anyone else. Having no sense of living life as a linear narrative doesn't dissolve their intuitions about what's the right thing to do in a certain circumstance. The case can be made that our moral care and concern is not related to continuity as one coherent life-narrative.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, the narrative theory of self states that our self is narrative in structure and that we experience the world as a narrative. Interpreted in a factual way, the idea is that our sense of self is intrinsically narrative, and that we experience our lives as a narrative (Strawson 2008, 11). This is the descriptive narrativity thesis. The normative narrativity thesis is that we should live life as a narrative because doing so is essential for leading a good life. I argued against both the descriptive and normative narrativity thesis.

I set out by summarizing the narrative accounts of Dennett, Cavarero, Bruner, and Schechtman. I categorized their views into the strong and weak narrative claim of the self. More specifically, I identified the naturalistic account of Dennett and Bruner, which states that the self is an ongoing construction of our life-story in which we are the protagonist, as the strong narrative theory of self. The strong narrative thesis of self is constituted by an *explicit* self-narrative. According to Schechtman's view, our sense of who we are can be based on an *implicit* narrative that we should be able to give others on a local level. While the aim of the weak narrative theory of self is to make our actions and experiences intelligible to others and ourselves, the strong narrative thesis of self aims at creating greater meaning in life. Cavarero's account of the narrative self is similar to Schechtman's view in the sense that the content of our self-narrative isn't essential to who we are, but Cavarero emphasizes the urge to expose and reveal our self-narrative as an essential part of who we are.

I argued against the descriptive narrativity thesis by drawing on Galen Strawson's distinction between four different temporal dispositions that people can have: Episodicity, Diachronicity, Narrativity, and non-Narrativity. While Diachronics understand their selves to be extended in the past and future, Episodics don't figure themselves in such a way. Similarly, whereas people with a Narrative outlook see or experience their life as a narrative or collection of stories, those with a non-Narrative outlook don't. I clarify that Episodicity and non-Narrativity doesn't entail that one has a weak narrative thesis of self. While it is true that the weak narrative thesis of self doesn't have to unify one's entire life as an explicit narrative, which might give one the impression that this laxation allows for the little narratives to be fractured, but the general idea is that one can arrive at a larger narrative if one takes the time to reflect. Therefore, I do not equate the weak narrative thesis of self with an Episodic temperament because Episodicity does not entail any form of coherence.

In my argument against the normative thesis, I rejected the weak narrative thesis of self by questioning whether it can be called narrative at all since it is missing the salient features of self-narratives, that is, storytelling and coherence. Besides not being able to make and contribute to creating meaning, the weak narrative thesis of self also does not answer the question of “Who am I?” Not many people would consider an explanation of why they are doing what they are doing to tell one who they are. I rejected the normative thesis of the strong narrative thesis of self by arguing that demanding a unified and coherent life-narrative from Episodic non-Narrative people places an unnecessary burden on them. Reconciling fragmented accounts is not the answer to who one is. Second, I state that if we understand our self-narratives to be embedded in larger narratives pertaining to our national, social, political, and linguistic milieu, then we may see that our own self-narratives are closely structured by the master narratives of our milieu. The language of stories is a social language, and as such, can’t ever be unique.

Finally, I defended a non-Narrative account of the self. It is commonly thought that if there is no continuous narrative self, then there is no moral and social commitment from a non-Narrative person. However, I unravel this questionable line of reasoning by discussing Eichmann’s case to show that there is no strict association between narrativity and accountability. This historical example highlights the dangers of how storytelling can enable us to justify anything because the capacity of self-deception can remain unchecked due to the self-reinforcing aspect of self-narratives. I, then, touched up on why non-Narrativity doesn’t imply that one isn’t morally responsible.

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Abstract

Against the Narrative Self

Narratiivse Mina Vastu

In my thesis, I argue against the narrative conception of self, the idea that our self is narrative in structure and that we live life as a narrative. First, I differentiate between the strong and weak narrative view of self. I classify Dennett and Bruner's account as the strong claim, Schechtman and Cavarero's as the weak narrative claim. Second, I reject both the descriptive and normative narrativity thesis. I question the universality of a Narrative outlook. I argue that the artificial constructing of a narrative self is not conducive to self-understanding and that our choices of structuring it might be limiting. Last, I defend the non-Narrative conception of self against the common objection that without a self-narrative one cannot be held accountable. I discuss Eichmann's defense in Jerusalem along the way to untangle the link between narrativity and accountability.

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