NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF[1]

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Abstract

An approach to the identity of persons or selves based on the creation of a self-narrative may capture a holism among experiences, as a narrative could provide a linking thread, as well as demonstrating the relationship between an experience and its owner. On this approach, the self is identified with the narrative object so, for a person to persist is for the self-narrative to persist. The notion of personal identity through time cannot be divorced from personal identity at a time. Once we fully appreciate that, we need not follow Schechtman in presenting her narrative approach to personal identity in terms of the characterisation question as opposed to the reidentification question.

1. Theories of persons and selves

Philosophers typically use the phrase 'personal identity' to talk about what it is to be one and the same person over time. The term 'numerical identity' is used to capture that notion of being one and the same thing while, in contrast, 'qualitative identity' means having many of the same significant or obvious qualities. Thus, the standard philosophical topic of personal identity is the *numerical* identity of persons, with a focus on identity through time. We can also consider issues of numerical identity at a time. For an object such as tree,

numerical identity at a time amounts to its spatial extent at a time. Are this root and that branch both parts of the same tree? For persons, identity at a time is less straightforward.

'Person' is an unusual category of thing, and this is reflected in issues concerning identity. Many philosophers, following John Locke (1690/2001: 266–280), distinguish between the identity of persons and the identity of human beings, where the latter concerns the identity of a live human body. Being the same *person* is thought by many to be something determined by a person's psychological characteristics. Locke is particularly influential here, saying that 'person' stands for 'a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking …' (268). Most of the debate following Locke has centered around issues of personal identity through time, but this focus on self-reflective consciousness also speaks to the issue of identity at time, for what is contained within that self-reflective consciousness would constitute the psychological extent of the person at a time. This focus on what experiences a person can be aware of as their own, typically employs use of the reflexive suffix 'self' in 'himself', 'herself' or 'myself'. This, no doubt, is what has led to the use of 'self' as a noun, by authors both in Locke's day and more recent ones, such as Williams (1974), to refer in effect to a person, but with an emphasis on a person's ability to self-reflect.

Locke's account has frequently been explicated in terms of memory. It is apparent, however, that it is too strong a requirement to say that I need to remember some earlier time for those experiences to be mine (Reid 1941). We often simply forget what we did or experienced. Even where two moments in the life of a continuing person are not directly linked by memory, there still can be continuity of memory provided the two moments are indirectly linked by a series of steps, each of which is a direct memory connection.

Psychological continuity need not be wholly based on memory, though, as continuity of character traits may also be important. This comes to the fore where a person no longer retains memories to an adequate extent, but yet their character still shines through. Oliver Sacks' (1985, Chapter 2) description of a person with severe retrograde amnesia may provide an example. Sacks refers to Luria (1976: 250–2) who says, "But a man does not consist of memory alone. He has feeling, will, sensibilities, moral being — matters of which neuropsychology does not speak." On the other hand, where some physical or psychological trauma affects a person such as to bring about a major change

of character, we are tempted to allow the continuity of memory to trump the change in character and affirm continuing personal identity. Psychological continuity also includes the forming of intentions that may later be carried out.

2. Psychological Continuity and Parfit

An influential modern version of the psychological continuity view is that of Derek Parfit (1971; 1984). He focusses initially on direct psychological connections, including memories of past experiences, intentions that lead to actions, and persisting beliefs and wants. Consider my mental state at about 9 am this morning and compare it with my mental state at about 9 am yesterday. If I am reasonably alert, then this morning I remembered various things I did yesterday morning, and perhaps various feelings I had then, and maybe this morning I carried out some things on the basis of intentions I formed yesterday. Parfit says that we have 'strong connectedness' between such moments when we have enough direct connections between them. But it is unlikely that I have strong connectness between 9 am this morning and 9 am 27 years ago (unless that were a particularly significant day). Even so, we still want to be able to say that I am the same person I was 27 years ago. Parfit explains that personal identity depends on overlapping chains of strong connectedness; there are many steps of direct connectedness that link up the whole life. Parfit's (1984: 205–6) chains of connections are similar to the series of moments connected by memory that I mentioned above.

Bishop Butler (1736) raises a charge of circularity against the kind of psychological criterion typified by a memory criterion. The charge is that it is veridical rather than delusive memories that are required for the criterion but, in order to know whether we have a veridical memory, we need to already know whether we have the same person. In response, Parfit (1984: 220) defines a kind of memory-like experience, which is causally related in some appropriate way to the earlier experience, without the identity of the rememberer and the original experiencer being simply presupposed. He calls this 'q-memory' or 'quasi-memory' (Parfit 1971; 1984). How to restrict the kind of causal relationship is a matter for debate. Analogous to quasi-memories, there are quasi-intentions and so forth. These quasi states may be used to define personal identity without circularity.

Parfit's psychological continuity account is a form of reductionism for personal identity, as will be discussed further in section 4. It goes with that

territory that there can be circumstances where there is no clear answer to a personal identity question (Parfit 1984: 213). This does not disturb him as he thinks that what matters, including what one is attached to in planning one's future, can be detached from strict identity (Parfit 1984: Chapters 12 & 13). This outcome reflects the awareness that Parfit and others have of the potential of the psychological continuity account to allow that a person could divide into two branches. His view allows that we could be concerned for the future of each branch.

While the psychological continuity tradition is strong amongst philosophers of personal identity, it has its rivals. The view known as 'animalism' claims that for the familiar case in which persons have the form of human beings, a kind of animal, the criteria that determine what it is to be the same human being also serve to determine what it is to be the same person, providing the human is still a person and not in a persistent vegetative state (Olson 1997; Olson 2007). At the other extreme is 'the simple view', the view that personal identity is a unique and strict form of identity not admitting of degrees, which can take the form that personal identity simply depends on the identity of a soul (Shoemaker and Swinburne 1984: 20). It is directly opposed to any form of reductionism.

3. Introducing the notion of a narrative and how it may relate to the self

A narrative approach to the self is often presented as a rival to the psychological continuity theory, although we could regard it as a close cousin (Gillett 2013: 43). I shall specifically consider the idea that we create ourselves by constructing a narrative.

The notion of a narrative is applied in a wide variety of contexts and, unsurprisingly, narrative theory is a broad church. The notion of a narrative is often traced back to Aristotle, although his primary target was what made for a good dramatic tragedy (Hyvärinen et al. 2010: 2). The notion, central in literary theory, is applied in a wide range of disciplines. For example, it provides a school of thought in historiography, with Louis Mink (1974) being influential in relating historical narratives to literary narratives. Within cognitive psychology, Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990) played a crucial role in bringing the notion of a narrative to the fore, and Oliver Sacks (1985: 105) is also influential in that area, saying;

> If we wish to know about a man, we ask 'what is his story, his real, inmost story?' — for each of us *is* a biography, a story. Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us — through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations.

Sacks' work shows how the narrative approach can be useful in describing clinical cases that can be described as 'disorders of the self'; see also the more recent work of Lloyd Wells (2003) and Maria Medved and Jens Brockmeier (2010).

The focus on the self created by a narrative is further developed in philosophical work. Alasdair McIntyre (1984) played a seminal role in the narrative approach to the investigation of the self within philosophy. That use of the notion of a narrative is to be found in both the continental philosophical tradition, notably Paul Ricoeur (1992), and the analytic, for example Daniel Dennett (1992) and Marya Schechtman (1996), who will provide a particular focus here. My account will relate the narrative approach to the self to the topic of personal identity as described in sections 2 and 3 above, but we should note that the narrative approach was not developed in that particular framework. Schechtman brings the narrative approach into contact with that framework but not without disrupting key assumptions, as we shall see.

Given the breadth of work in narrative theory it should be no surprise that a clear, agreed definition of 'narrative' will be elusive. Nevertheless, inspired by examples from the 'home turf' narratives (novels, biographies and soap operas), I suggest some key features of a narrative, on the basis of which we can address the notion of a self-narrative:

- ☐ It involves a sequence in time.
- ☐ It is created by an author or authors.
- ☐ It is available to consciousness.
- ☐ It is incomplete in the sense that a narrative does not include all details in the person's life.
- ☐ It expresses a theme or plot, which provides an emphasis and interpretative lens for events.

Clearly, within that last point especially, there are a number of ideas that cry out for elaboration and there are other points that are open to challenge, as

we shall see, but let us proceed to apply these ideas to self-narratives. I am suggesting that narratives are incomplete and not just in the sense of being unfinished. While a person's life is typically awash with trivial details, what is needed for the construction of the self is the construction of a theme or structure of themes. Narrative theory need not be applied to persons in this way, though. For example, MacIntyre (1984) and Phillips (2003) speak of *a life itself* having a narrative form. That is different from the claim being considered here and involves a conception of narrative in which narratives *can be* complete. In this view, narratives can be said to be 'continuous with life' (Carr 1986: 16).

How should we start to articulate the notion that a self is created by the construction of a narrative? What is the alternative? Naïvely, we might want to say selfhood is handed to us on a plate as part of our human biological heritage. While our biological heritage is surely crucial, it may be so in a way that leaves room for such a narrative construction process. Brian Boyd (2009) provides a comprehensive biocultural account of storytelling. He argues that story telling is adaptive as "it has sharpened social cognition and extended our capacity to think beyond the here and now" (p. 206). While he himself is not convinced by the view that the self is essentially narrative, which he says is widely treated as 'almost a truism', he does explain and defend the view that humans are natural story-tellers (pp. 159–60). As an echo of Chomsky's (1965: Chapter 1, section 8) notion of a language acquisition device, we might be tempted to say that humans have a 'narrative construction device'. That would suggest a highly specialised innate cognitive process, but all that is really needed to support the Narrativist approach to the self is that humans have good story telling abilities from an early age, abilities that can be applied to the task of creating one's own self-narrative.

Michael Gazzaniga (1998) regards 'the self as the product of stories we tell about ourselves' and does appear to posit a biologically real 'device' when he speaks of an interpreter in the left hemisphere that constructs 'intelligible and coherent narratives' about what goes on in our mental lives. There are two questions here and each warrant further enquiry: first, are humans natural story tellers? Boyd offers an evolutionary explanation in favour. Second, does such a story telling capacity get employed in the creation of a self-narrative that defines the self?

The narrative construction of the self view certainly has its critics. For example, Peter Lamarque (2004) thinks that, while there is interest in specific forms of narrative, there is little interest in narratives in general, and the

tendency to understand all narratives on the model of literary narratives leads to narratives in general being overvalued. With respect to narratives and the self, he considers that narratives are stories that exist only when told and when we focus on the narratives one tells about oneself there is nothing to support grand claims about self-identity. Lamarque certainly provides a corrective to an uncritical enthusiasm for the notion of a narrative. His focus on narratives that are told, though, may make him miss insights about an implicit self-constructed narrative that never gets fully told.

Galen Strawson (2004) offers a more radical criticism of narrative theories of the self. While allowing that some people may have narrative structure to their lives, he is adamant that not all do, including himself. In the context of that discussion, he distinguishes between people who are Episodic and those who are Diachronic. He says (p. 430) one is an Episodic if "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." The Diachronic is one who *does* naturally consider oneself like that. He says 'Episodics have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms'. This represents a sceptical view about selves as continuing entities. That is a legitimate position in logical space, but one we need to leave to one side if our interest is whether the notion of a narrative is useful in understanding the persistence of selves. Strawson does allow that there are persistence conditions for human beings, given the distinction between human beings and selves.

4. The appeal of the narrative view

What motivations are there to explore a narrative approach to the self? In particular, does this approach have advantages over a psychological continuity approach? The narrative approach, it is argued, avoids the unrealistic reductionism of the psychological continuity approach (Schechtman 1990: 73). We can understand reductionism in this context as the view that experiences (or, as we shall see later, person stages) function as discrete entities like Lego™ blocks that can be used to build up a self. But experiences typically are not discrete, and narrative theory contains some prospects for explaining their interconnection. It may also tell us what it is for an experience to be mine.

First, let us consider why experiences in general are not discrete. My total experience of going to the cinema on a particular occasion cannot be completely separated from the visit being with certain particular friends or

family members in a certain familiar place. Schechtman (1990: 79–84) cites Edward Casey (1987: 25–6) who describes the experience of seeing a certain French film with English sub-titles; see also Lumsden (2013: 5). Schechtman is discussing a possibility that arises in connection with Parfit's notion of a quasi-memory, sketched above in section 2. Parfit (1984: 220) suggests the situation of one person's memory being surgically implanted in another's head could provide an instance of the second person having a quasi-memory.

Schechtman points out, though, that the transportation of a bare replica of the experience, would jar hugely with the mental life of the recipient. The recipient may be unlike the original subject in French language ability and may have no knowledge of those friends or family. Where there *are* people known in common, the emotional connections to them are likely to be different. That lack of coherence would surely make it feel less like a memory and more like a disturbing alien input. If, on the other hand, surrounding features of the original subject are imported along with the memory, such as associated memories of those family members, then we are on the road to changing the recipient into something more like the original subject, which jeopardises the goal of detaching the notion of quasi-memory from assumptions about personal identity. The interconnectedness among memories that this example illustrates is not rare, but commonplace. Thus a Lego block model, which the transplantation scenario presupposes, is misleading. A narrative theory holds prospects for explaining the nature of the interconnectedness of experiences, by providing a linking thread.

This leads into the question of what makes an experience *mine*. Paul Ricoeur (1992: 133) opposes the way that Parfit reduces personal identity to particular mental states connected in a certain way, saying, 'But can what is one's own be a particular case of the impersonal?' He thinks that it is an essential feature of an experience that it is *someone's* experience, and he endorses a narrative view of the nature of such a subject of experience. For him, the reality of the self is fundamental, in a way suggestive of the simple view, mentioned above. But the interconnectedness of experiences can alternatively be viewed as positively *creating* the subject of an experience. As one experience blends into another, the experiences 'hold hands' in such a way that a larger entity takes shape. Similarly, where an experience is linked into a whole narrative structure, we can see that the structure is a self, the owner of the experience. Whether there needs to be a self-narrative that covers the whole of a person's life may be contested (Lumsden 2013).

The motivations for a narrative understanding of the self that I have

outlined here are of a broad theoretical nature and do not emphasise a rival specification of persistence conditions for selves, which could seek confirmation from our intuitions about particular cases. Even so, we can regard the persistence conditions for selves on this view as follows. Rather than attending to the *content* of the self-narrative, we need to attend to the constructed narrative as an object, one that is constantly changing as the story gets added to, as well as being revised or even degraded with the passage of time. The general idea is that this object is the self, so to follow that object is to follow the self. To speak of an 'object' here is not to speak of a typical physical object, but a virtual object that might be transmittable from one human body to another.

Thus, just as a psychological continuity theory of personal identity could allow for body swaps, in the kind of way that Locke describes between a prince and a cobbler, so similarly could a narrative account of personal identity, understood this way. Two people could swap bodies on this account if the narrative object of each is transmitted into the other body so that it becomes sensitive to that new body's experiences and leads to its behaviour. What form of transmission is required is a matter open to debate, in much the same way as the kinds of causal processes required to preserve memories or quasi-memories are open to debate within the psychological continuity theory.

5. The circularity problem for narrative creation

Earlier I suggested that narratives are created by an author (or authors) and this should apply to a narrative that creates a self. Here we have a new circularity issue, for we appear to need the self to be already present in order to serve as author of the narrative. We should acknowledge the possibility of co-authorship for, if I am feeding off the reactions and conceptions of others in constructing my narrative, then I am not authoring alone. But this does not solve the problem, since I must be at least a leading author of my self-narrative.

In one place, Daniel Dennett (1993: 418) takes a very short line indeed with this problem, saying, 'Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.' This involves denying that narratives need to be created by an author. There are materials in Dennett's work that suggest a more nuanced approach, though. Dennett's (1987) anti-realist (or mild realist)

approach to mental contents, such as beliefs and desires, takes them to be as real as the equator or the centre of gravity of an object. Postulating them is not an arbitrary move, for they are useful in practical ways, even though they are not straightforwardly real. Moving along a spectrum from simpler creatures and systems to highly complex ones, Dennett (1987: 32) says there is no 'magic moment' at which they have (genuine) beliefs and desires. There are simply different degrees to which postulating them is well motivated.

In a similar way, he opposes full realism with respect to selves, preferring to describe them as 'centres of narrative gravity', linking the theme of narrative creation with the 'centres of gravity' phrase that suggests (partial) anti-realism. The picture can be filled out with Dennett's (1993: Chapter 5) picture of the mind involving competing themes and processes, without a centre stage where the conscious self is located. This picture is consistent with the notion of a self as a work in progress, which gradually firms up its own metaphysical status, avoiding a vicious circularity.

6. Marya Schechtman's view

In addressing personal identity, Schechtman (1996: 2) distinguishes between the reidentification question and the characterisation question. The reidentification question concerns what it is to be the same person as one identified at a previous time, and thus is to be understood in a metaphysical way, in contrast to the epistemological question of how we come to *know* whether we have the same person as at some previous time (Noonan 1989: 2; Schechtman 1996: 7). The characterisation question concerns which 'psychological features make someone the person she is', the sense of 'personal identity' that applies to identity crises. The reidentification question must relate to numerical identity through time, while the characterisation question might appear to involve qualitative identity. Shechtman identifies four features as 'what matters' in personal identity: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern and compensation. She argues that, while the psychological continuity view was designed to accommodate such features, it fails, because it wrongly seeks to locate these features in an answer to the *reidentification* question.

One aspect of Schechtman's argument concerns the way that, in Parfit's position for example, psychological continuity involves a reduction of persons to person stages, where a person stage is a person at a moment of time, a time-slice of a person. Thus, a full person is a collection of person stages, which

provide it with an extent through the fourth dimension of time. An individual person stage that pulled the trigger is distinct from any later person stage that is arrested (Schechtman 1996: 56). She does not think that the relationship that the psychological continuity theorists consider holds between the stages adequately bears the burden of explaining our intuition that a person should be held responsible for her *own* actions. Her position is that, in order to accommodate what matters, we need to address the characterisation question and develops her narrative self-constitution view in that context. While the characterisation question might appear to concern the characteristics a person has at a time, not so for Schechtman, as she attempts to develop a view of personal identity that addresses the characterisation question and yet satisfies those four features, which precisely concern continuing through time. In her view, a self-narrative provides a *characterisation* of the person that incorporates her extent through time.

Schechtman's framing of the issues around the characterisation question and the reidentification question forces the discussion into an awkward form. The notion of reidentification, for her, takes us straight to the kind of reductionism that she objects to. But reidentification in ordinary usage is not so metaphysically loaded. The traditional discussion of the criteria of personal identity through time gets its life in large part from the everyday practice of taking a person one is dealing with now to be the same person one encountered at some previous time, in short, reidentification. This is something we need to accommodate. But there is a way that we can straightforwardly acknowledge that we are dealing with reidentification and still accommodate Schechtman's main insights.

'What matters' inevitably relates to numerical identity through time, but specifying the extent of something through time cannot be divorced from a consideration of its extent at a time. If I wish to specify what it is to be the same tree through time I need to understand what its physical extent is at its various stages, for it may not be obvious whether I have a single tree in front of me or a clump of them. In dealing with a person, the matter is understandably more complex. I suggested that Locke's understanding of a person in terms of self-awareness provides us with a view of personal identity at a time. But that conception has been challenged by the acceptance of the notion of the unconscious. If we wish to know whether we have the same person we need to know whether the unconscious is part of what we are tracking. Schechtman (1996: 114–9) brings the unconscious into the narrative approach when she discusses 'implicit narratives'. Issues of the extent of a person at a time

become very real in the case of certain disorders. Sacks (1985: Chapter 10) describes a patient with Tourette's Syndrome, which produces a variety of symptoms from purely physical tics to various kinds of higher level behaviour such as humour and was associated, in this particular patient, with highly imaginative and unpredictable drumming. The issue arises as to whether the condition is part of the person or not and, in the view of this patient, it definitely is. He said (p. 93), "Suppose you *could* take away the tics … What would be left? I consist of tics — there'd be nothing left." This consideration about identity at a time clearly has significance for identity through time, as for him, a 'cure' would be death.

There are also reasons to think that identity at a time issues need to take on board identity through time issues. Recall Schechtman's discussion of the reduction of persons to person stages. A momentary person stage does not, in a straightforward way, have the normal characteristics of persons, such as deciding to do something for reasons, remembering what they did or wanting to feel better, for those things have an intrinsic reach through time. The episode of going to a French movie, discussed above, can illustrate the point. The experience of seeing the movie with one's family cannot be detached from the history of experience with that family. Any attempt to specify that particular moment of oneself inevitably takes one to previous moments, so identity at a time leads us inevitably to identity through time. What we should conclude is that, while we can engage in the distinction between identity at a time and through time as a convenient abstraction, we should not be led to the metaphysical category of person stages and reduction of a person to them.

The moral is that dealing with a person requires us to deal with the whole scope of a person, integrating the 'at a time' and 'through time' dimensions. The features that matter, such as survival, need to be considered in relation to that whole scope of a person, and it is natural to think that this is relevant to reidentification, which need not be understood as implying reductionism. We can follow Schechtman's lead in using a narrative construction view to specify that whole scope of a person. It makes sense to use the concept of characterisation when describing that whole scope of a person, but Schechtman distorts the situation by claiming that survival concerns the characterisation question, *in contrast to* the reidentification question. Where there is a narrative that provides the answer to the characterisation question, then there is, in principle, an answer to the reidentification question, not by inspecting the *content* of the characterisation but, rather, by following the narrative object that contains the characterisation.

It is tempting, but wrong, to think we need to consider qualitative identity in this discussion. That is a notion that concerns comparing two numerically different things, two ball-bearings for example, which may share many of their qualities. Schechtman's notion of characterisation does not require that comparative aspect, but merely concerns how the whole scope of a person may be characterised. We need to consider a person holistically, and narrative theory provides an approach to doing that. My claim about the interdependence of identity through time and identity at a time articulates that holism in one particular way. I have shown that our ordinary notion of reidentification fits comfortably into that picture.

7. Conclusion

The hypothesis that the self is composed of a self-narrative provides a productive framework for thinking about selves or persons. It can be seen as overcoming a line of objection to standard forms of the psychological continuity theory by doing justice to the holism that a realistic appreciation of a person requires. I wish to suggest that, on this view, we have the same person where we have the same virtual narrative object, something that is constantly developing. Schechtman's development of the narrative view of personal identity is presented as an answer to the characterisation question rather than the reidentification question. In contrast, I emphasise an ordinary understanding of reidentification questions which I claim cannot be separated from what matters in personal identity. We need to provide an account of the full extent of a person, where we see the interdependence of identity at a time and identity through time, and a narrative approach arguably provides that account.

Note

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