

Andrew Blanchette

PHIL 450

Professor Tubert

May 13, 2022

The Case for Ethical and Normative Narrativity

Personal identity at the forefront may seem obvious. Who am I? I am me of course. This thought process seems both intuitively true on a personal level as well as in society at whole. Our governmental structures are built with the idea of individuals who are independent from each other and have a form of personal responsibilities. We punish those that do bad, tax those who have income, and vote for those who we feel hold values that we believe in. But how exactly does our self exist throughout time? It is easy to see how your self from a couple hours ago is the same as the self you are now. Even yourself from a few years prior may seem strikingly similar. But ff we stretch time far enough, there does seem to be time when it feels as if you are a different person. Drawing from experience, when I was a child I had a certain fundamental understandings of how the world worked, what kinds of expectations I had, and made completely different decisions then that I would never consider doing now. If I were to compare myself side by side to a child version, sure I may share certain physical and linguistic features but it would not be strange to say that that is not me, I am not that person. Why do we feel this and how can we understand this question? In this paper I will be defending a certain view of understanding personal identity, this view is the Narrative Self-Constitution View.. This

view is refuted by Galen Strawson in his paper *Against Narrativity*, I will be responding to his arguments by using an alternative conception of Narrativity, Implicit Narrativity.

Before too much is discussed, it is important to add some clarity to the work ahead. I will be using the word Narrative in many senses so to begin, I will attempt to help clarify what I mean when I use Narrative and narrative differently. When Narrativity is used I am referring to the Narrative Self-Constitution View. On the other hand when narrative is used I am referring to a general sense of a narrative. In this way narrative refers to a story-like structure. I will also use both Explicit Narrativity and Implicit Narrativity further along in the paper, both of these terms will be explored in detail later on.

Predominantly, there are two main views which dictate how one has personhood. The first of these views which tends to be more common is the Narrative Self-Constitution View of the self. Marya Schechtman, a prominent defender of the Narrative Self-Constitution View and current professor at university of Chicago, describes the Narrative Self-Constitution View as that “constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and the logic of a story- more specifically, the story of a person’s life where the “story” is understood as a conventional, linear narrative”(96, Schechtman). These self narratives are easily thought of as stories, which we tell ourselves as we decide which actions to take in momentary instances. In this way, these tend to be explicitly told to ourselves. An example of this would be the conscious thought of why one is pursuing some action. As an example, actively thinking I am saving this money so that I can buy a house would be a form of Narrativity.

Notably though, for these narratives to be actually self constituting, they first must conform to some intelligible form of action. What is meant by this is how exactly a narrative has been constructed. If a narrative is unintelligible, meaning that there is no clear connection to why exactly a certain action occurs after another, then that narrative is not self-constituting. The requirement of intelligibility is not black and white, rather it is an idealized conception which is sought after. It is also entirely possible for a narrative to contain unintelligible actions. As an example, in Lord of the Rings Frodo's aim is to destroy the one ring and prevent the world from being cast into darkness. He makes many efforts along his journey that all link back to this central narrative. But, when Frodo arrives at the peak peering into the fire pits, he almost decides against tossing the ring. If we consider a scenario where Frodo ends up not tossing the ring, it could seem as unintelligible. Even so, this does not make his narrative as a whole unintelligible. This is because we are still able to draw a narrative from his journey. If on the other hand, Frodo had made so many of these types of decisions, actions like going mordor to toss the ring but in the end choosing against it. This would then cause Frodo's narrative to fail the intelligibility requirement and cause Frodo's narrative to not be self-constituting.]

The second requirement for Narrativity is the necessity for internal coherence of the narrative. This requires narratives to be self-supporting in nature and thus a narrative cannot hold radically opposing views. One cannot believe that green is their favorite color while also believing that green is not their favorite color. This requirement is more or less an extension of the first as a more coherent narrative is innately supporting the intelligibility requirement.

The second view, defended by Derek Parfit an influential British philosopher, focuses on what is termed to be psychological continuity. In this view we are not concerned about narratives or anything necessarily physical. Instead what rather matters in personal identity is through any psychological relation. On this claim Parfit says “what matters is Relation R: psychological connectedness and/or continuity with the right kind of cause” further he adds that “The right kind of cause could be any cause”(Parfit, 214). In this sense, what Parfit argues is important to identity is a psychological connectedness of thought.

To really understand what is meant by this, we need to isolate exactly what matters when we think of the self at different stages in time. If we consider the example of the ship of Theseus, we can see how relying on any kind of physical continuity to define identity can lead to some unintuitive claims. How do we know the ship of Theseus is the ship of Theseus? We may initially point to all the particular placements of specific planks and say that they are the reason that this is the ship of Theseus. But if over time the ship receives damage and some planks need to be replaced, it seems wrong to say that this is not the same ship. Sure a few planks got swapped out but the ship itself is still there, it is still the ship of Theseus. If we continue to do this until all the ship's planks have been swapped and none of the original remains, it would still seem strange to say that it is not the ship of Theseus. This is where Parfit's view of identity plays a role. What we have found ourselves arguing for in what constitutes the ship is not connected to anything physical, but rather a particular idea of the ship that is innately not physical.

Using these two views we can begin to understand what is meant through Strawson's criticisms of the Narrative Self-Constitution View. Galen Strawson, who I will

be arguing against, takes a different approach to the Narrative Self-Constitution View. He does this by focusing more on forms of self-experience. In this way Strawson divides forms of self-experience to be constructed from a couple different categorizations. The ones we most care about for this paper are the Diachronic form of self-experience and the Episodic form of self-experience. From this Strawson argues that a Narrative form of self-constitution is just one of many different combinations which are formulated from different forms of self-experience. Strawson creates this distinction to respond to two theses; the Psychological Narrative thesis, and the Normative Narrative thesis(428, Strawson). The Psychological Narrativity thesis argues a descriptive claim that people fundamentally experience the world in a Narrative fashion. On the other hand, the Normative Narrative thesis argues that constituting one's life in a Narrative fashion is a good thing. While Strawson argues against both of these claims using the distinction of self-experience, I argue that the introduction of Implicit Narrativity undermines Strawson's argument. I will defend this claim later on when we introduce Implicit Narrativity

First, I will expand upon Strawson's view. Focusing on the Episodic view, it is described to be as “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”(430, Strawson). Episodics view their life as whole in separate slices of self. If we remember Frodo's journey, if Frodo held an Episodic view of self-experience, then the Frodo who started the journey would have no mental self connection to the Frodo who ended the journey. This is not to say that Frodo would lose his memories but rather that the Frodo who tosses the One Ring would have no relation of his inner mental self to the inner mental self at the

beginning of the journey. In this case, Frodo the Episodic is not denying the physical continuity of his form over time, but only denying that the inner mental entity at the end is not relational to the inner mental entity at the start. This is not to say that Episodics only experience life fleetingly. Episodics experience the past through the consistent consequences that affect the present. From choosing what direction to turn at a light to when to get up in the morning, each momentary choice cascades into the future. In fact, rarely do we make choices where this is not the case. The Episodic does not deny the past outright, but rather only denies its participation in its choices, as well as its responsibility of past actions, and dispositions as part of their current mental self.

The Diachronic view is definitionally the opposite, as it is seen as “one does figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future”(430, Strawson). Important to note is the distinction between Narrativity and Diachronic views of self-experience. Under Strawson's view it is entirely possible to be a Diachronic without viewing one's life as a Narrative as well as be Narrative without Diachronic, although they tend to go together.

Strawson argues against the Normative Narrativity thesis predominantly through questioning the importance of self-constitution. Strawson sees those like Shechtman as being unnecessarily religious towards the self, with self-constitution being as its aim(437, Strawson). Views like Schechtman are regarded by Strawson to be only one side of the story. Because of this, we have fundamentally misplaced what is important in viewing the self. Since those who support the ethical Narrativity thesis are, assumedly, themselves Narrative they require that their own interpretation of the self is the only ethically acceptable one.

To see where the issue with Strawson's view arises, an understanding of what is meant by Narrativity needs to be clarified. Strawson's understanding of Narrativity focuses predominantly on the classical claim seen to be an explicitly autobiographical or story-like structure which is explicit in the mind of the individual. This conception of Narrativity in terms of the Psychological Narrativity thesis does seem innately flawed to Strawson's criticisms. Even so it would be a mistake to take this as the only form that Narrativity can take. With this an alternative to this conception of Narrativity termed Implicit Narrativity shows its worth.

Implicit Narrativity, supported by Jongepier an assistant professor at Radboud University, argues for an underlying, embodied account of the self. This claim of Implicit Narrativity stands on the central idea that “the subjective experience of ourselves as selves is intimately bound up with the objective existence of our bodies tracing a path through time and space”(Jongepier,8). This claim is one that focuses upon the fundamental requirement that is necessary to presuppose to begin having self experiences at all. Consider that while I write this essay, each keystroke causes physical sensations through my body, allowing each finger to feel a unique sensation dependent upon the force and speed of each key pressed. More so, each of these keys are pressed in such a way that they form words upon a virtual page which describes the thoughts that I am now expressing. What is important to take from this is how the body is necessary in not only having these experiences, but linking them together as well.

- *I can buy that it is necessary for a physical entity to exist to have any-form of self experience, but why does it necessarily have to be Narrative? Why can't we leave*

the body at being Diachronically connected to the past without taking the final step?

This can be explained by how exactly the body's past is constructed. If we consider how a Diachronic interpretation of Implicit Narrativity would occur, let's call it Implicit Diachronicity, then it becomes apparent how it fails to fully capture what an image of the self requires. Implicit Diachronicity would only suffice in linking the same entity of the past to the same mental entity of the present and future, but this is not enough to fully capture a self. A self not only requires Diachronicity, but also a coherent understanding of the special relevance towards all aspects social, linguistic, emotional, etc. To take as an example, if some farmer were to consider himself a self in the Implicitly Diachronistic sense, he would only understand that the mental entity in the past is the same self as the current self as well as that he is in the same body. What this does not capture is the holistic view of the self at that moment relationarily to the self in the present. To be more explicit, the farmer may remember that it was him who went to some location which led him to traveling to another location again and again until he arrives in the present. This is a very different conception than if we only understood the farmer Diachronistically. The farmer doesn't simply walk to location A to then go to location B and finally location C. An Implicitly Narrative conception of self-experience would include not just its relationary aspect, but also he would remember that he in fact went to a school with his friends whom he has known for years. After that school, he decided to buy his own farm and venture out to become independent. Implicit Narrativity allows the self to be captured in a full sense, allowing for true self experience, which is unavailable from Implicit

Diachronicity. Furthermore, it is not simply that these things happened in such an order simply because they were in these locations, but rather these things happened because they are matter of factly connected to each other. This is what is meant by Implicit Narrativity.

- *Going down this route may avoid the direct critiques that Strawson makes. It seems though, that rather than actually countering the issue, it would still fall to the critique of Triviality. So now we are back where we started.*

While it might seem like this, this isn't actually the case. To show how, we must remember how exactly Implicit Narrativity is Different from Explicit Narrativity. Explicit Narrativity being the view of Narrativity Strawson is critiquing. The reason why Explicit Narrativity falls to the critique of Triviality is because of what it requires of the self. Explicit Narrativity requires an internal narrative or story to be explicitly told to oneself. Remembering Frodo on quest, Frodo is Explicitly Narrative if, while on his journey, he sees his past, present, and future actions as being connected to one another through narrative and is constantly conscious of it. This falls to the critique of Triviality because, in Strawson words, “Well, if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial”(Strawson, 439). Furthermore, the critique of Triviality argues that if Explicit Narrativity is within all things, then it matters not. It also seems ridiculous to suppose in a

realistic sense. To live Explicitly Narrative for every action seems unreasonable to assume as something self actually do.

This reasoning is exactly how Implicit Narrativity avoids this critique. Since it does not require any internal explication of a narrative, ie: a narrative is not necessary to be explicitly told to define every action taken, the self does not need to create an Explicit Narrative. Instead, it is a passive narrative that incorporates all relevant things into a cohesive, intelligible narrative that exists outside of the self.

- *But what about a defense of the Normative Narrativity thesis? So far we have only used Implicit Narrativity in terms of defending the Psychological Narrativity thesis.*

Initially I claimed that not only is Implicit Narrativity required to presuppose any form of self-experience but also that living in accordance with one's Implicit Narrative is ethically good. I will begin to address this defense of the Normative Narrative Thesis. For the sake of this argument, I am presupposing that Self-Constituting oneself is a good thing. Assuming this we can start reconciling with Strawsons arguments.

Strawson's claims to different forms of self-experience are powerful and I agree with the distinctions that are made. While I myself do not view my personal self-experience in an Episodic fashion, I do agree that it is chauvinistic to assume that everyone views self-experience the same way. Especially when there are those who clearly feel that this is not the case for them like Strawson. But what exactly makes one form of self-experience better than another? Strawson rightly shows that yes, there are

different forms of self-experience and that yes it may be better for one to experience life in a certain way as opposed to another. This becomes clear if we pursue an example. If a deeply non-Diachronic individual is pushed into viewing self-experience in a Diachronic fashion, they will struggle to fully self-constitute themselves compared to if they were to view self-experience in an Episodic way. This is because more fully self-constituting oneself, using Schechtman's reasoning, results in one being more of a person. What is different between Schechtman's argument and mine is how exactly this is achieved. Since we are accepting Strawson's claim to multiple forms of self-experience I argue that there is a normative reason to experience one's self-experience in a particular way over another. Strawson's argument relies on individuals having arbitrary biases towards a certain form of self-experience. I argue that these biases are not arbitrary, but rather are causally related to one's Implicit Narrative.

- *I'm not sure how exactly you are drawing a connection between forms of self-experience and ones Implicit Narrative. Even if we accept that we must presuppose Implicit Narrativity to have self-experience, this does not mean that one form of self-experience is necessarily better than any other.*

To explain this, we must remember how exactly we are trying to self-constitute ourselves. Since we are presupposing Implicit Narrativity to have self-experience at all, this means that we have already unified the self-through this Implicit Narrative. In this sense the self will exist regardless of what form of self-experience is chosen. But, when we are self-constituting we are making sense of ourselves in a coherent fashion. To this, we are making sense of our Implicit Narrative. To do this we must have some form of

self-experience. Each form of self-experience is biased towards a particular Implicit Narrative. This is how these biases arise, and how we can explain why some individuals feel more connected to a certain form of self-experience over another.

To show in an example, consider a child named John who changes schools consistently because his parents are freelance workers. Whenever John changes schools, he feels as if he loses all the progress he's made in developing friendships, the understanding of the local area, and whatever adjustments his body and mind had made to a particular climate. John is currently viewing himself in a Diachronic fashion, he sees the effort he put in at one school to be from the same person who put effort into social relations at another. Because of this each time he moves he is forced to reconcile with this fact and suffers because of it. If he were to change his view of self-experience to be more in line with what his Implicit Narrative is drawing for him, he would have a better life. In the same way, he would be more of the particular person he is.

I do reconcile that this may lead to some counterintuitive claims. Since I argue that what form of self-experience is what is most in line with one's Implicit Narrative, it is possible that whatever that form of self-experience is may not be the form of self-experience that they want it to be. If, for example, in the case of John imagine he adamantly despised the Episodic view of self-experience. Regardless, what is drawn for him from his Implicit Narrative that is most beneficial happens to be an Episodic view of self-experience. Then it would be the case that what is best is what John most opposes. I believe that in this case John is simply wrong about what his dispositions are. He should in fact strive to have self-experience in an Episodic fashion.

From this, I have defended both the Psychological Narrativity thesis as well as the Normative Narrativity Thesis. This was done through the Implementation of alternative conception of Narrativity as the arguments against Explicit Narrativity I take to be true. Implicit Narrativity on the other hand is able to dodge these critiques by the nature of how Implicit Narrative functions. It supports the Psychological Narrativity thesis by presupposing a form of Narrativity to have self-experience at all. It also supports the Normative Narrativity thesis by having what is best be what is most in line with one's Implicit Narrative. While there are certain unintuitive claims that may arise from this form of Narrativity being accepted. I believe what is gained through this view is beneficial enough that these side effects are acceptable. If this view is accepted, then we are able to continue usage of the Narrative theses which are incredibly powerful.

Works Consulted

Clark, Samuel. "Narrative, Self-Realization, and the Shape of a Life. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice" 21 (2):371-385, 2018.

Grace, Hibshman, "Narrative, Second-person Experience, and Self-perception: A Reason it is Good to Conceive of One's Life Narratively", The Philosophical Quarterly, 2021.

Jongepier, Fleur, "Towards a constitutive account of implicit narrativity", Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 15 (1):51-66, 2016 .

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984.

Schechtman, Marya, *The Constitution of Selves*. Cornell University Press, 1996.

Strawson, G., "Against Narrativity", 17: 428-452, 2004.