

Narrative Self-Constitution

PHIL 375, UBC

Philosophy and Literature

May 23, 2017

iClicker Question

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

iClicker Question

On the Non-Reductionist view, according to Derek Parfit in the reading for today,

- A ▶ moral choices cannot be reduced to calculations about consequences
- B ▶ a person is a separately existing entity, distinct from brain, body, and experience
- C ▶ moral questions cannot be reduced to scientific questions
- D ▶ Buddha's message and the Judaeo-Christian message cannot be reduced to each other

iClicker Question

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

iClicker Question

What is Hume's comparison for the soul?

- A ▶ a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination
- B ▶ a prisoner of war, always treated with a respect suitable to his condition
- C ▶ a commander in charge of a ship, communicating with the several parts of a vessel
- D ▶ a soup, in which the ingredients are now united though they were once asunder

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

iClicker Question

What game did Hume play to distract himself from the depressing conclusions of his philosophical thought?

- A ▶ chess
- B ▶ bridge
- C ▶ backgammon
- D ▶ tennis

Two Claims

- psychological thesis** this is a descriptive, empirical claim about the nature of ordinary human experience, where a lack of narrativity is pathological with respect to how ordinary that experience is
- ethical thesis** this is a normative, ethical claim that a narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood

Combinations of the Two Claims

	psychological thesis	ethical thesis
Sartre/Stoics	yes	no
Plutarch	no	yes
Schechtman/Taylor/MacIntyre	yes	yes
Strawson	no	no

Relevant Questions

- What are persistence conditions?
- What is the difference between a human being and a subjectively experienced self?
- What is true about these intuitions: the chilling, empty deficiency of the Episodic life versus the macerated, clogged, excessively self-concerned, inauthentically second-order qualities of the Diachronic life?
- Does it make a difference to be explicitly or implicitly narrativizing?

Against Narrativity, page 433

I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.

More Relevant Questions

- How is it that the from-the-inside quality of a memory can be detached from any sense that one is the subject of the remembered experience (434)?
- Does Strawson give a satisfying answer to what it is to have or be a self? Is there an abolition of selfhood lurking in the background? Who am I, and if so, how many? (Richard David Precht) See also *The Ego Tunnel* by Thomas Metzinger or *The Architecture of the Mind* by Peter Carruthers. What are the metaphysics of selfhood?
- How do you assess Strawson's argument that the ethical narrativity claim is associated with self-importance, religion, and narcissism (436f)?

More Relevant Questions

- Does the making coffee narrative scale up to larger narratives and propagate to higher levels; or is Strawson correct to call the narrativity claim about short-term plans trivial?
- Has Strawson addressed the problem that narrativists have with an invasive scientific anthropology? (See footnote 27.)
- How can a narrative be defined stringently? Note Strawson's emphasis on developmental, temporal unity and coherence.
- What does a personal relationship with an Episodic look like?

Conditions of Narrativity

- diachronicity** I identify myself (the one who is the receiver of my subjective experiences) with the human being that I was in the past and that I will be in the future
- form-finding** I seek for coherence, unity, and pattern in the temporal sequence events in my life
- story-telling** I think of my life in recognizable literary genres
 - revision** I distort facts about my life so that they fit the kind of story that I want to tell about myself (444)

There is a marked shift on page 447 to a negative evaluation of narrativity. There appears to be some inconsistency between the pre-447 Strawson and the post-447 Strawson.

Lanzmann versus Spielberg

Compare the following two film previews.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXsgUnLG4CY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdRGC-w9syA>

The Four Features

Sentient beings and persons are distinguished by

- moral agency
- compensation
- self-interested concern
- survival

Individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future.

Articulation Form and logic of a conventional, linear narrative. Constituents (characters, events) do not have a meaning on their own. Meaning comes from the configuration, from the plot. Time-slices are not fully intelligible.

Reality Self-constitution requires both an internal life and a proper connection to the social world.
Self-conception must be in sync with that of others.

Mitigation of the “no personhood without narrative” claim: (i) other forms of existence are valuable; (ii) there is a wide diversity of qualifying narratives.

Parfit's Satori-Like Dissolution of the Self

Parfit concludes from the superficiality of psychological continuity that the self is a fiction. MS claims, however, that a Parfitian live-for-the-moment, sever-the-bonds-with-the-past-and-the-future life produces individuals who

- don't make plans
- don't engage in long-term commitments
- don't take responsibility for the past, and, in any case,
- don't embrace the concept of personhood

MS and DP only disagree on whether personhood is achievable without superficiality.

A possible Marxist critique: the narrative self-constitution view is an insistence on conformity to the worldview of a dominant group. In response, Schechtman points out how much similarity there is between a revolutionary and a reactionary narrative compared to the contrast between a revolutionary narrative and the incoherence of a psychotic.

John Locke's Account of Personal Identity

Sameness of consciousness, not sameness of substance (Kafka's *Metamorphosis*). The problem with a pure memory account of personal identity is that memories are by definition remembered, while consciousness can be affected more globally and partly subconsciously. Example: financial security.

Confabulation and Self-Blindness

Schechtman claims that to the extent to which we confabulate and deceive ourselves, our personhood is compromised. Umbrella episode with Dr. Bernheim. Heidegger/Habermas debate: does mysticism and ineffability enhance or reduce personhood?

Loss of personhood can also originate in not inhabiting the same world as one's fellows. MS puts much greater emphasis here on coherence of facts rather than coherence of interpretation (what about the first secular atheist, the psychopath, or the depressive?).

Schechtman also claims that the narrative self-constitution view can mediate between two opposing views on continuity, the bodily vs the psychological continuity view. While the narrative self-constitution view is broadly supportive of the psychological view, it also underlines that the congress of body and person is not accidental.

Epicurus' argument that death does no harm.

- ① “Look back at time . . . our birth. In this way nature holds before our eyes the mirror of our future after death. Is this so grim, so gloomy?” (Lucretius)
- ② “Death . . . the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.” (Letter to Menoeceus)

Strawson's argument is not psychological, but philosophical.

Relevant Questions

- What are things that can be taken away from us? (Our country, our human rights, . . .)
- Can retributive justice be squared with Strawson's NOF? Is Strawson's view consistent with his father's view that reactive attitudes are independent of metaphysical justifications or entitlements and cannot be in contradiction to determinism?
- Does Strawson succeed in explaining regret? See Thomas Nagel's paper "Death" (1970). Keats (24) and Tolstoy (82).
- Is Strawson's account of depression believable, that the condition's referent is the present, not the future? Is it true that a depressed person's desire is the cessation of the present rather than the future?

The Problem with Science

- impersonal information
 - disembodied (Cartesian, see page 36)
 - digital vs analog
 - quantitative vs qualitative
- maintenance of civil society
- maintenance of historical memory (rather than annals)

The Problem with Postmodernism

- dissolution of *les grands récits* (Lyotard)
- Baudrillard's "mediatized culture of depthless simulation which abandons reference to historical reality" (irreference)
- purveyors of prejudice
- fractured discursive practices about truth, identity, and the good

Ricoeur's Synthesis of the Heterogeneous

Ethics, according to Ricoeur, is the link between happiness and virtue. A strictly scientific, de-narrativized view leads to collapse. Compare personal identity to an episode of romantic love.

- the other must have intrinsic value
- there must be a beginning, a middle, and an end
- there must be a poetic element, something to elevate it above the mundane
- a long-term romantic relationship integrates widely different tasks, such as family relations, business, child-rearing, sexuality, meaning → synthesis of the heterogeneous

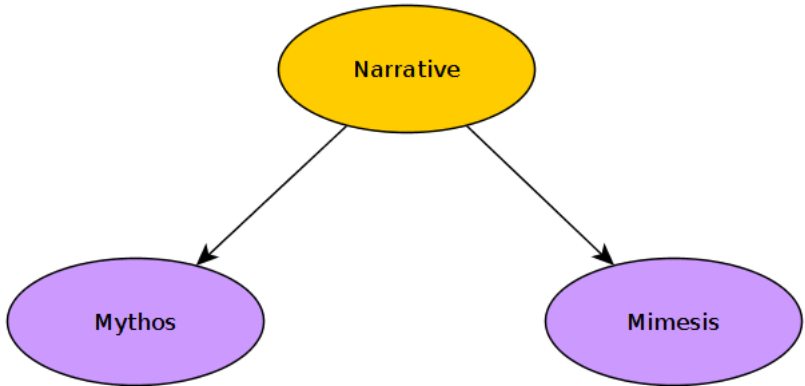
The Economy of Romance

... after Katya broke up with him. He'd wanted to marry her and have a child. She needed someone more reliable, she said; he barely made enough to support a single frugal man skimpily and she also wanted to see what her value was on the social marketplace, as she put it ... (Stephen Dixon, Old Friends, 17)

The bourgeoisie ... has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation. (Communist Manifesto, cf. the Marxist concept of reification)

See the work of Marina Adshade (entertainingly packaged in a TED Talk).

Aristotle's Ethics Sandbox



Kearney claims that Kant's account of moral responsibility relies on narrative as much as Aristotle's. Hannah Arendt, a well-known Kantian, emphasizes the communicative nature of narrative where someone says something to someone about something → contrast to Roland Barthes with the death of the author. A Kantian view of moral responsibility needs a *sensus communis*, where I can imagine myself in the other and the other in myself. Ricoeur's *moi* (self-same self) is transformed to *soi* (self-for-others).

Kearney's Narrative Ethics View

Richard Kearney, page 35

Narrative, understood from both an Aristotelian and Kantian perspective, can serve an indispensable function of ethical *responsibility*. By recounting the story of one's life in response to the other's question—who are you?—the narrative self constitutes itself as a perduring identity over time, capable of sustaining commitments and pledges, that is, of keeping one's promises to the other.

One cannot be faithful to one's word, unless one has a minimal grasp—through some form of narrative—of who one is (38).
Ricoeur's two examples: the talking cure (psychoanalysis) and Biblical Israel. The hermeneutical circle (self-constitution) makes possible the co-existence of constancy and flexibility.
Fundamentalism/nationalism: where the founding narrative is concealed.

Note here Jürgen Habermas' critique of ideology. A hermeneutic of affirmation/trust must be accompanied by a hermeneutics of suspicion. The three masters of suspicion:

- Nietzsche: narrative is the masking of will-to-power
- Marx: see Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony
- Freud: narratives are often misleading signals of a rich subconscious life (amnesia of ontogenesis)

The Historiography Debate

Ricoeur vs Hempel. Narrative vs generalizable laws and statistical data (the DN, deductive-nomological, and IS, inductive-statistical, model). Phronesis of singular narratives vs theoria of historical laws and facts.

I understand that the question of the marriage vows was, this morning, considered interesting by some of you, the “yes” to the marriage, the performative “yes” – “I do”, “I do”. This “yes” has to be repeated differently each time. If it’s simply a record saying “I do” “I do” “I do” there is no fidelity. For this “I do” to be a renewed promise it has to be different each time, the same one and different. In order to follow the “I do” today (before the priest), the “idea” of tomorrow should be the same and different . . .

... They must follow one another and confirm themselves but, at the same time, be different. That's what the counter-signature is. Of course, even if I say to the same person "I do" tomorrow and after tomorrow, the fact that this "I do" is different, to some extent, means at the same time fidelity and betrayal. Indeed, it's a kind of perjury to say "I do" to someone. So that may be the paradox in the twin concepts of acoluthia and anacoluthon. You have to betray in order to be truthful. (Life After Theory, 10f)

Reproaches Against Existentialism

- quietism (communists) intellectual contemplation leads to just another bourgeois worldview
- privileging the solitary over solidarity, forgetting the “smile of the infant” (Catholics)
- the seriousness of human affairs and moral responsibility (Christians)

JPS: They call us gloomy, when they say (dismal proverbs),
“charity begins at home”

In the 18th century, the idea of the artisan-designer for human beings was sidelined, but the quest for a human essence remained. The paper knife.

- “man surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards”
- man differs from a scientific object because he is nothing until he makes something of himself
- in choosing for himself he chooses for all men (Christian trade union, monogamy)
- man is condemned to be free

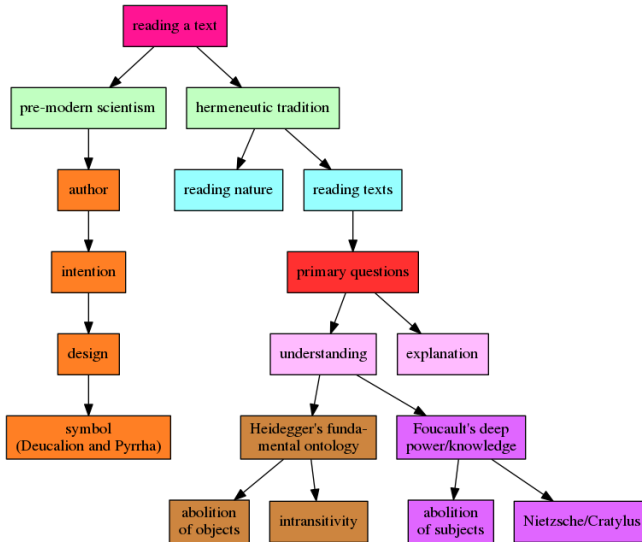
Open Questions

- How typical is the Free French example for a moral dilemma?
- Man fashions both the signs and their interpretation → the importance of hermeneutics for ethics (Jesuit priest)
- Sartre's reliance on Kant ("one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing," 292) and Descartes ("the starting point for truth is one's immediate sense of self", 302)
- Contrast human nature with the human condition to understand what Sartre means by cowardice. "Those who hide from total freedom, in a guise of solemnity or with deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards" (308). The story of Carlos Flores and the subway accident.
- How appropriate is it to demand strict authenticity from humans? Don't we need an essence for authenticity, for "being who we are"? Michel Foucault's criticism.

Hermeneutic and Scientific Method

understanding	vs.	explaining
narrative	vs.	model
inter-textuality	vs.	experiment
coherence	vs.	falsifiability
hypostatic	vs.	hypothetical
texts	vs.	nature
integration	vs.	differentiation
dialectic	vs.	monism

The Hermeneutic Tradition



Structuralism

	Pre-Structuralism	Structuralism	Post-Structuralism
unit of meaning	word	sentence	text/discourse
"it is raining outside"	stating the fact	stating the fact in contrast to other facts	starting point for a multiplicity of perhaps incoherent facts
meaning	content	form	self-reference
semiotics	design	difference	sign
truth	correspondence	coherence	multiplicity
hermeneutics	trust	comparison	suspicion
grammar	semantics	syntax	polysemy
explanation	construction	reduction	deconstruction
authorship	intent	system	death
location	centre	structure	decentring

Frankfurt's Second-Order Desires

- first-order and second-order desires
- qualitative and quantitative evaluation of desires
- weak and strong evaluation (the defining feature for strong evaluation is to have a qualitative distinction of the worth of the motivations)

Utilitarianism fails on two counts:

- ① weak evaluation is not reducible to calculation
- ② moral evaluation is not reducible to weak evaluation

Criteria for Distinction

- contingency strong evaluation dilemmas cannot be resolved by appeal to contingencies
- contrast strong evaluation proceeds on the basis of contrasts (courage is meaningless without cowardice and vice versa)

The Problem with Second-Order Desires

- the practical vs the moral approach to raising children
- consider a law that makes something morally repugnant (abortion, drug consumption, corruption, sex with children) more legal and less frequent → would you assent to it?
- are the moral notions at the basis of strong evaluation only a front to legitimize moral/social/economic pressure on others? (Mandeville)
- the drug that allows you to eat cake and be healthy as well (deflated descriptions vs moral reality)
- CT resolves this later by appealing to re-evaluation

Charles Taylor: “honour, dignity, integrity are *simply* other pleasurable states to which we give *high-sounding* names” (23). Why does reducibility in principle imply undue simplicity? Why is the “simple weigher” inferior to the “strong evaluator”? Monism can be maintained even in the face of certain kinds of emergence.

Charles Taylor

thus the strong evaluator has articulacy and depth which the simple weigher lacks

Really? Isn't it the monist who makes progress? Perhaps the monist does not succeed with the reduction, but many productive (rather than successful) scientific programs originate in a desire to perform a reduction (alchemy).

The Importance of Articulation

First-order choices are inarticulable. Second-order choices flow from the use of language and articulated coherence. Note the following analogy:

- Descartes' JE PENSE solves an epistemological problem (skepticism); as a consequence, we perceive ourselves primarily and dominantly as thinking beings
- Taylor's JE PARLE solves an ethical problem (what characterizes moral responsibility); as a consequence, we perceive ourselves primarily and dominantly as talking/interpreting/story-telling beings

The story of my great-grandparents.

Responsibility and Radical Choice

The problem with radical choice (Free French, Nepal) is that it solves the dilemma by rendering the force of the losing side inoperative (this is a problem that Bernard Williams has addressed with respect to utilitarianism and Kantian moral theory in articles such as “Consequentialism and Integrity” and “Ethical Consistency” – see his concept of “regret”).

This is the core claim: agents of radical choice are simple weighers. Taylor wasn't after the utilitarians, he was after the existentialists, undermining their position by putting them in the same boat as the utilitarians. The Meursault/Rieux incoherence problem and what is the object of moral evaluation (in Taylor's case: the way in which an agent successfully articulates coherence in their life; in the existentialist's case: the way in which an agent accepts the human condition).

Charles Taylor

This is what is impossible in the theory of radical choice. The agent of radical choice would at the moment of choice have *ex hypothesi* no horizon of evaluation. He would be utterly without identity. He would be a kind of extensionless point, a pure leap into the void. But such a thing is an impossibility, or rather could only be the description of the most terrible mental alienation. The subject of radical choice is another avatar of that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own, and choose in radical freedom. But this promised total self-possession would in fact be the most total self-loss. (35)

Where Does the Buck Stop?

Where does the buck stop? Not at radical choice (this would be a sort of foundationalism), but at articulations (hermeneutic circle). At the core are not calculations, but interpretations. There is a hermeneutic circle from self-interpretations that are constitutive of experience to evaluations of these self-interpretations. Radical re-evaluation: Quine's web of beliefs and Neurath's boat.

David Hume: Of Personal Identity

Hume's empiricism implies his (Parfit's term) reductionist view of the self. Since there are no simple and constant impressions of the self, there also can be no such idea.

David Hume

He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me. But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement . . . the mind is a kind of theatre (165)

Like Strawson, Hume distinguishes between identity as it regards our thought and imagination (Strawson's "I*") and identity as it regards our passions and concerns (Strawson's "I").

David Hume: Of Personal Identity

Cratylus and Heraclitus (see Hume's river metaphor on page 168): "something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts, beside their relation" (166). At the foundation is Hume's empiricist psychology of ideas and impressions (percept and concept; perception and cognition; monism about these contrasts).

- contiguity (body-mind problem)
- resemblance (sympathy)
- causation (commonwealth or republic)

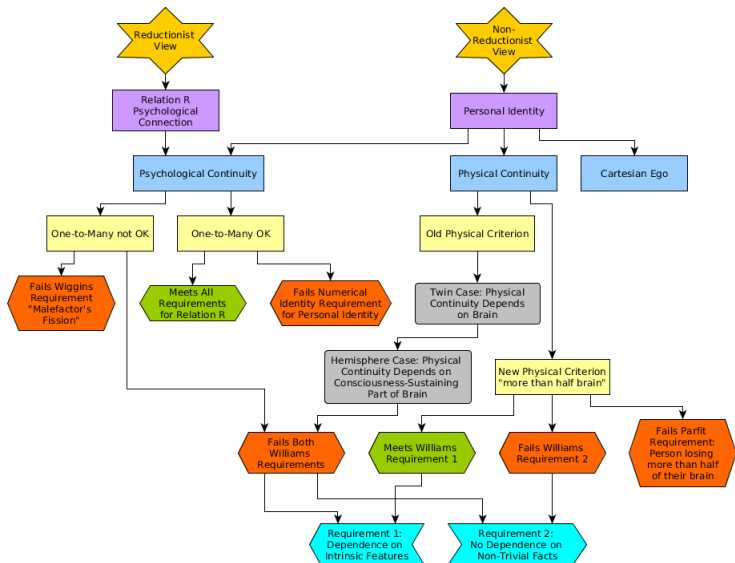
"The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one" (169). Hume thinks that the self as a philosophical concept is inert, and its controversies belong to grammar.

Where Am I, Or What?

David Hume

Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have, I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, invironed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty. (175)

Why Personal Identity Isn't What Matters



When I believed that my existence was a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. (Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons, 281)

- Is Nagel's view correct that it is psychologically impossible to believe the Reductionist View? Is Parfit's view correct that we can believe the truth about ourselves (280)?
- Do you agree with Wittgenstein that counterfactuals do not elucidate concepts? ("Multiverse Ethics")
- What are the psychological and moral effects of the Reductionist View on you?