

# Narrative Identity

PHIL 375, UBC

Philosophy and Literature

May 15, 2018

## Gay Science, 124

We have left the land and have gone aboard ship! We have broken down the bridge behind us, nay, more, the land behind us! Well, little ship! Look out! Beside you is the ocean; it is true it does not always roar, and sometimes it spreads out like silk and gold and a gentle reverie. But times will come when you will feel that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more frightful than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt itself free and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Alas, if homesickness for the land should attack you, as if there had been more freedom there, and there is no “land” any longer!

# The Role of Narrative

Which of these adjective apply to the role of narrative in a person's life?

- necessary
- inescapable
- immutable
- flexible
- justificatory

What is the relationship of narrative to these other concepts in its conceptual neighbourhood?

- power
- violence
- silence
- memory
- coherence

## Human, All Too Human, 255

The superstition of the simultaneous. Simultaneous things hold together, it is said. A relative dies far away, and at the same time we dream about him, Consequently! But countless relatives die and we do not dream about them. It is like shipwrecked people who make vows; afterwards, in the temples, we do not see the votive tablets of those who perished.

## Human, All Too Human, 255

A man dies, an owl hoots, a clock stops, all at one hour of the night, must there not be some connection? Such an intimacy with nature as this supposition implies is flattering to mankind. This species of superstition is found again in a refined form in historians and delineators of culture, who usually have a kind of hydrophobic horror of all that senseless mixture in which individual and national life is so rich.

# 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             |



Strawson claims (429) that the narrativity thesis in its two forms

- hinders self-understanding
- closes down important avenues of thought
- impoverishes our grasp of ethical possibilities
- needlessly and wrongly distresses those who do not fit the model
- is potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts

**diachronic** one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the past and will be there in the future

**episodic** one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the past and will be there in the future

Diachronicity is necessary (but not sufficient) for narrativity.

# 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?

*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)*



# 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.

## Gay Science, 277

For now the thought of a personal Providence first presents itself before us with its most persuasive force, and has the best of advocates, apparentness, in its favour, now when it is obvious that all and everything that happens to us always turns out for the best. The life of every day and of every hour seems to be anxious for nothing else but always to prove this proposition anew; let it be what it will, bad or good weather, the loss of a friend, a sickness, a calumny, the non receipt of a letter, the spraining of one's foot, a glance into a shop window, a counter argument, the opening of a book, a dream, a deception: it shows itself immediately, or very soon afterwards, as something "not permitted to be absent," it is full of profound significance and utility precisely for us!

## Gay Science, 277

Is there a more dangerous temptation to rid ourselves of the belief in the Gods of Epicurus, those careless, unknown Gods, and believe in some anxious and mean Divinity, who knows personally every little hair on our heads, and feels no disgust in rendering the most wretched services? Well I mean in spite of all this! We want to leave the Gods alone (and the serviceable genii likewise), and wish to content ourselves with the assumption that our own practical and theoretical skilfulness in explaining and suitably arranging events has now reached its highest point.

## Gay Science, 277

We do not want either to think too highly of this dexterity of our wisdom, when the wonderful harmony which results from playing on our instrument sometimes surprises us too much: a harmony which sounds too well for us to dare to ascribe it to ourselves. In fact, now and then there is one who plays with us beloved Chance: he leads our hand occasionally, and even the all wisest Providence could not devise any finer music than that of which our foolish hand is then capable.

# 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

Hume, "Of Personal Identity" in *A Treatise of Human Nature*

In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts.

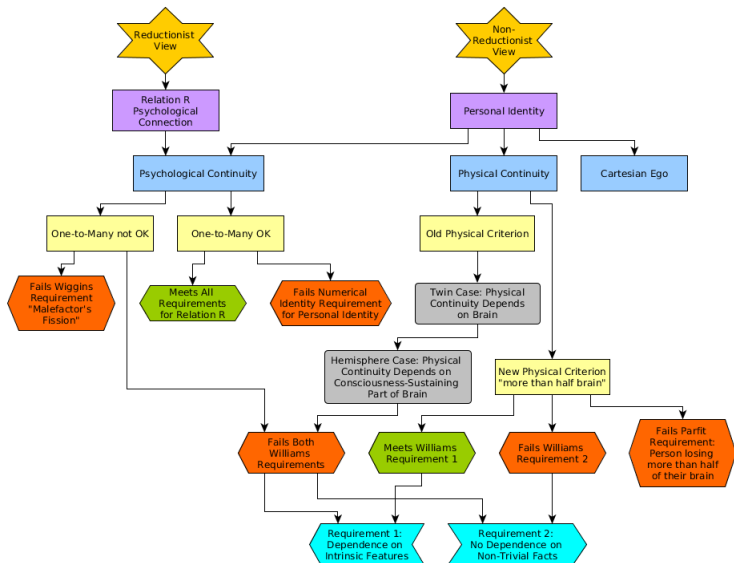
# Where Am I, Or What?

## 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)*

## Mill, *Utilitarianism*

In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which, if perfect, would make him never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included.

- 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?
- Do you agree with Nagel that with the expectation to be reset to an earlier state, you should summon your courage and prepare to die (compare the Hollywood movie *Edge of Tomorrow*)?

# 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.