

Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View

MARYA SCHECHTMAN

Everyone loves a good story. But does everyone live a good story? It has frequently been asserted by philosophers, psychologists and others interested in understanding the distinctive nature of human existence that our lives do, or should, take a narrative form. Over the last few decades there has been a steady and growing focus on this narrative approach within philosophical discussions of personal identity, resulting in a wide range of narrative identity theories. While the narrative approach has shown great promise as a tool for addressing longstanding and intractable problems of personal identity, it has also given rise to much suspicion. Opponents of this approach charge it with overstating or distorting the structure of actual lives.

I have defended a narrative account of personal identity in the past, and am still inclined to do so. I am, however, also sensitive to the complaints that have been leveled against this approach. In particular, the considerations raised by Galen Strawson in his *Against Narrativity* seem to me challenges that must be met. Strawson points to many real deficiencies in existing narrative approaches. The existence of these deficiencies does not, however, entail that the narrative approach should be rejected outright, as Strawson claims. Rather, it suggests that this approach needs to be clarified and refined. The more hyperbolic assertions must be weeded out, and claims about what work a narrative account of identity can accomplish must be made more modest and specific.

My goal here is to begin this refinement by amending and expanding my own narrative account in response to some of Strawson's challenges. When my view is clarified, it will turn out that Strawson and I disagree on far less than we may seem to at first. Most of my modified narrative view is, though still narrative, immune from the challenges Strawson raises. There is, however, still some disagreement between us, at least at the level of basic sensibility. Clarifying the view I wish to defend, and the points where its disagreements with Strawson are superficial, will be

immensely valuable in finding where the real points of contention lie, and in outlining the genuine challenges for a narrative approach.

In section one I offer a brief review of some of the salient features of Strawson's reading of the narrative approach, and his objections to it. Strawson's argument is against narrative views in general. Although he describes a great many different versions of this approach, he rejects them all. With respect to many of these views I essentially accept Strawson's arguments, and wish only to defend a very particular narrative account. In section two I thus offer a rough taxonomy of narrative accounts of identity, and carve out the space within which I wish to locate my own view. In section three I begin to develop this view in more detail, offering a brief description of the narrative view as I originally presented it and the issues it was developed to address. In section four I explain how Strawson's arguments have made me rethink the details of my view. Strawson's objections help me to see that what I had put forth as a single view is really two distinct strands of insight about identity and narrative, employing somewhat different conceptions of narrative and aiming to answer somewhat different questions. In section five I show that once these strands have been distinguished each can be seen as a narrative view that avoids Strawson's objections. Finally in section six I consider where Strawson would still be likely to object to my newly described narrative view(s). The point of contention will lie in the relation between the two insights I have extracted from my original view. Strawson will, I think, be able to accept both strands so long as they are kept really separate. Implicit in my view, however, is an understanding that the two are intimately interconnected. Further development of my account would involve working out these relations, and it is here where my sensibility about these matters and Strawson's are likely to diverge.

1. A brief review of Strawson's objections

Strawson's case against the narrative approach is very intricate, and I cannot reproduce it in its entirety here. Instead I limit myself to reviewing a few of the points that will be particularly important in what follows. I begin with three distinctions Strawson draws. First, he distinguishes between the '*psychological Narrativity thesis*,' which holds as a 'straightforwardly empirical, descriptive thesis' that ordinary humans experience their lives in narrative form, and the '*ethical Narrativity thesis*,' which holds that it is a good thing to experience one's life as a narrative—'essential to a well-lived life, to

true or full personhood.’¹ As Strawson points out, this distinction leaves us with four positions on narrativity depending on the value ascribed to each thesis. These range from the most strongly narrative views that endorse both the psychological and ethical theses (holding that we do narrate our lives and it is a good thing that we do) to the most strongly anti-narrative (holding that we do not (or at least do not all) narrate our lives, and that it generally is (or at least can be) a good thing not to do so). Strawson tells us that the first of these is the dominant view in the academy; while the latter is the view he wishes to defend.² The psychological Narrativity thesis, he argues, is false, and the ethical Narrativity thesis is not only false, but pernicious.

The next important distinction Strawson draws is between ‘one’s experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole, and one’s experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or ‘self’ of some sort.’³ To illustrate the difference here he provides the example of Henry James claiming that he thinks of one of his earlier works as the work of ‘quite another person than myself.’ Obviously James is aware that he is the human being who authored this earlier work, but he experiences himself as, in Strawson’s terms, another *self*. I will return to this example later. For now what is important is to be clear on Strawson’s distinction between human and self. ‘One of the most important ways in which people tend to think of themselves (quite independently of religious belief) is as things whose persistence conditions are not obviously or automatically the same as the persistence conditions of a human being considered as a whole.’⁴ It is with respect to the *self*—the inner, mental entity whose persistence conditions can differ from those of the human—that Strawson denies the narrativity thesis. To disambiguate pronouns which might apply either to humans or to selves he adopts the convention of asterisking pronouns meant to apply to the self—e.g. I*, me*.

The final important distinction we need to understand is the distinction Strawson draws between Diachronic and Episodic self-experience. In Diachronic self-experience ‘one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in

¹ Strawson, ‘Against Narrativity’, *Ratio XVII*, No. 4, 2004, 428.

² *Ibid.*, 429–430.

³ *Ibid.*, 429.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 430.

the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.’⁵ In Episodic self-experience, by contrast, ‘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.’⁶

With these distinctions in hand, Strawson is able to lay out his case against both the psychological and ethical narrative theses. There are many different understandings of what a narrative is, and hence what it is to have narrative self-experience. Minimally, says Strawson, it would seem that to have a narrative self-conception one’s self-understanding would have to be Diachronic—without this, he thinks, there could be no meaningful sense in which one thought of oneself in narrative terms. In addition Strawson lists three other features that might be added to a Diachronic self-experience to make it a narrative one. One is ‘form-finding,’ the tendency to seek patterns, unity, or coherence. In addition one might (and some narrative theorists do) require that one think of one’s life-trajectory as a story in the sense of taking the form of a standard literary genera, and/or that one revise and edit the past in one’s self-understanding.⁷ To be a narrative view at all Strawson surmises, a view must thus require us to have Diachronic self-experience with form-finding. Different narrative views will then differ depending upon their requirements with respect to having a story-telling tendency and revising the past.

The differences between these different versions of the narrative view are not, however, deeply important to Strawson’s general point. He rejects all versions of the narrative approach—both psychological and ethical—because he denies that it is either necessary or especially desirable for a person to experience himself* diachronically. There are wide variations both in the way that people do experience themselves* and in the ways of experiencing themselves* that will lead to their flourishing. Strawson offers himself as one example of an Episodic who lives a perfectly rich and fulfilling life. He tells us that he has ‘absolutely no sense of [his] life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none.’ And he goes on to add ‘nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.’⁸ As for those who find the episodic life

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 442–444.

⁸ Ibid., 433.

‘chilling, empty, and deficient,’⁹ he suspects that they are simply assuming that what is true for them—they may well be Diachronic by nature or need narrative structure to make their lives meaningful—is true for everyone. Views that demand that everyone strive for a narrative self-experience, he says, ‘close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.’¹⁰ He adds that his guess is that ‘aspiration to explicit, Narrative, self-articulation ...almost always does more harm than good’¹¹, and that his ‘own conviction is that the best lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling ...’¹² He concludes, therefore, that ‘the ethical Narrativity thesis is false, and that the psychological Narrativity thesis is also false in any non-trivial sense.’¹³

2. An initial narrowing of the topic: different kinds of narrative account

Although the distinctions between different types of narrative account are of limited importance for Strawson’s purposes, they will play a role in my support of the narrative approach. My defense is not a defense of narrativity generally, but rather of a specific cluster of narrative views, and I am in substantial agreement with Strawson about many versions of this approach. As a precursor to describing the details of my own view, it will thus be useful to provide a rough sketch of the landscape of narrative approaches and to signal my general position within it. There are three basic questions for a narrative theorist: (1) What counts as a life-narrative? (2) What counts as *having* a narrative? and (3) What are the practical implications of having (or failing to have) a narrative? For each of these questions there is a range of possible answers.

Consider first the question of what constitutes a life-narrative. At one end of the spectrum, a life-narrative can be conceived as nothing more than a sequential listing of the events in one’s history. Here ‘narrative’ would be used in something like the sense in which

⁹ Ibid., 431.

¹⁰ Ibid., 429.

¹¹ Ibid., 447.

¹² Ibid., 437.

¹³ Ibid., 438–439.

it is used in the context of police reports, or in the narrative of a medical procedure. Toward the middle of the spectrum are conceptions of a life-narrative that involve not just a sequential listing of life events, but also an account of the explanatory relations among them—a story of how the events in one's history lead to other events in that history. At the far end of the spectrum is the idea of a life-narrative as an account of a life that approximates as much as possible a story created by a gifted author and edited by a talented editor. On this understanding there should be a unifying theme and direction to a life-narrative, and extraneous material should be left out.

A similar range of possibilities can be found in answers to the question of what it is to have a narrative. At one end of this spectrum is the rather weak requirement that a person's narrative must somehow operate to impact his current experience. According to this understanding a person's narrative need not be in any way accessible to consciousness in order for her to be said to have a self-narrative. In the middle range, having a narrative would require that a person be able, at least sometimes, to become conscious of her narrative and make it explicit. At the extreme end of the spectrum would be the view that in order to have a narrative in the relevant sense a person must actively and consciously undertake to understand and live her life in narrative form.

Finally there is a similar spectrum of answers concerning the implications of having a self-narrative. Here possible answers range from very basic benefits of a narrative self-conception to much higher-order benefits. At the basic end of the spectrum is the claim that having a narrative is necessary to function at all. In the middle is the claim that having a self-narrative is necessary for engaging in certain sorts of complex, person-specific activities—that it is necessary, for instance, for autonomy, moral agency, prudential reasoning or other kinds of higher-order capacities. At the far end is the claim that a narrative self-conception is essential to leading a good or meaningful life.

In theory, a narrative view could combine claims anywhere along these three spectra, but combinations of answers that fall at roughly the same point along the relevant continua are the most natural. To a first approximation, we can thus think of a range of narrative views moving from what I will call the 'weak narrative views' through the 'middle-range narrative views' to the 'strong narrative views.' The weak narrative views hold that someone must be able to organize her life according to a fundamental implicit knowledge of the events in her history, or she will not be able to function well at

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even the most basic level. More concretely, it is the idea that someone with severe cognitive deficits of the sort caused by Korsakoff syndrome or advanced dementia will need some help to get by. The middle-range views will say that someone needs a certain understanding of how the events in her history hang together, an understanding that is mostly implicit but that she can access locally where appropriate, if she is to be able to engage in person-specific activities on which we place great importance. The strong narrative views say that a person must actively and consciously undertake to live and understand her life as a story in the strong sense—with a unified theme and little or no extraneous material—if that life is to be meaningful.

Strawson, I take it, would find the weak narrative views trivial, the middle-range views false, and the strong views dangerous. About the weak and strong views, I am mainly in agreement with him. I am not certain that I think weak narrative views are entirely trivial, but this is not an important point of contention. About the fact that some mechanism for keeping track of and deploying information about one's history is essential to effective functioning there is little disagreement. Likewise, I do not have as clearly developed views as Strawson does on the evils of strong narrative views. I am largely convinced, however, by his discussion of the ways in which the requirements of such views can be repressive, thwarting spontaneity and self-understanding and causing great unhappiness for some individuals. At the very least I agree that this view in its strongest form is false. I see no reason to believe that one must see one's life as a 'quest' or as having an 'overall ethical character' or a grand *telos* or unifying theme to be fully a person. I do not think that all, or even most, people have such a clear sense of the structure or direction of their lives, and I do not think that having one is necessary for life to be meaningful, good, or worth living.

I am therefore happy to concede to Strawson, and to critics of the narrative account more generally, that the strong views are too strong. I think the weak views are true, and interesting, but I am willing to allow that some might find it a stretch to call such views *narrative* views. In any event they do not represent the form of narrative view I will defend. The narrative view I am interested in developing thus lies in the middle ranges. I turn now to a description of that view.

3. The Narrative Self-Constitution View and its successors

I call the narrative view I endorse the ‘narrative self-constitution view.’¹⁴ Its most basic claim is that we constitute ourselves as persons by forming a narrative self-conception according to which we experience and organize our lives. This self-conception and its operations are largely implicit and automatic. As we are socialized into human culture, we are taught to operate with a background conception of ourselves as continuing individuals, leading the lives of persons. What this means more specifically is that we experience the present in the context of a larger life-narrative. In order to have a narrative self-conception in the relevant sense, the experienced past and anticipated future must condition the character and significance of present experiences and actions. When I have a self-constituting narrative, what happens to me is not interpreted as an isolated incident, but as part of an ongoing story.

There are, of course, a great many ways in which the larger narrative context can impact and condition experience. This impact can be seen, for instance, in the difference between the way someone experiences a period of intensely hard work when she knows that once the project is off her desk her promotion is assured and she can leave on vacation, and the way she experiences it if it is part of a life of grindingly difficult labor with no foreseeable relief. It is also seen in the differences between what someone experiences and does walking up to the door of *his* house rather than to the door of *a* house. Or of walking up to the door of his *new* house rather than to the door of the house he has lived in for many years; or to the door of a house in which his loving family waits rather than to the door of an empty house after a bitter breakup—even if it is the same house and the same door in each case. These are, of course, just a few examples of how the present can be understood through the lens of a narrative self-conception, but it should be sufficient to provide the general idea.

The narrative self-constitution view says that in developing and operating with such a narrative one constitutes one’s identity as a person, and that the actions and experiences included in someone’s narrative are, for that reason, her own actions and experiences. This view does, however, place two constraints on an identity-constituting narrative. In order to successfully constitute oneself as a person one’s narrative self-conception must meet what I call the

¹⁴ I develop this view in M. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 93–135.

‘reality constraint’ and the ‘articulation constraint.’ The reality constraint requires that a person’s narrative conform to what we are generally accepted to know about the basic character of reality and about the nature of persons. A narrative must, for instance, respect the fact that, at least given what we know now, physical beings cannot be in two places at one time, that humans do not typically live much more than one hundred years, and similar facts.

The articulation constraint requires that a person be able to articulate her narrative locally when appropriate, or at least to recognize the legitimacy of certain questions. Basically this constraint requires that confronted with questions like ‘how did you come to be in this place?’ or ‘why did you choose that course of action?’ or ‘what is your educational background and how has it helped you in your current job?’ or ‘where do you think you’ll go next?’ a person has something to say. She does not need to have a clearly thought-out plan or an elaborate explanation. Sometimes, even often, the answer to such questions may be ‘because I felt like it’ or ‘it seemed like a good idea at the time, though I can’t recall why now.’ The point is that one should not simply be at a loss, or fail to understand the sense of such questions. The requirement here is thus not that one must have a perfectly worked-out and explicit account of why everything in her life is as it is, but rather that she must recognize a certain kind of explanatory obligation, and be able to meet it for the most part.

The narrative self-constitution view sits in the middle of the range of possible answers to each of the three questions described above, and hence is a middle-range view. The conception of narrative it employs is more than a mere chronology of events in one’s history, but there is no requirement that an identity-constituting narrative have a unifying theme, or represent a quest or have a well-defined plot arc that fits a distinct literary genera. The articulation constraint demands that self-narration be more than the subpersonal, background operation of knowledge about one’s past or projections of one’s future, but constructing a self-narrative is also not conceived as something that must be undertaken as a conscious and active project. This view also sits in the middle range of the spectrum with respect to the question of the implications of having or not having a narrative. It focuses on the way in which possessing a self-constituting narrative supports person-specific capacities. To understand more fully what the view has to say on this issue, and to set up some of the discussion of the next few sections, it will be helpful to provide a bit of background about the context in which the narrative self-constitution view is developed.

This view is, in the first instance, meant to address difficulties encountered in the discussion of philosophical problems about the persistence conditions for persons. For many decades the idea that the identity and persistence of persons should be defined in psychological rather than biological terms has been, if not *the* dominant view on these matters, at least among the most dominant. The main arguments for this position rest on the observation that facts about personal identity carry immense significance, and the claim that this practical significance attaches to psychological rather than biological continuity. I identify four features of personhood in particular that are frequently invoked to support psychological theories of identity. They are: moral responsibility (a person is rightly held responsible for only her own actions), prudential concern (there is a particular kind of concern that we have for only our own future states), compensation (justice demands that the person who makes a sacrifice and the person receiving compensation be the same person), and survival (there is a basic interest a person has in her own survival).

Arguments for psychological accounts of identity typically take the form of thought experiments in which psychological and biological continuation diverge (replication, teleportation, brain transplants and the like). It is assumed that in considering these cases we will judge that the four features follow the psychological rather than the biological life. If, for instance, Mr. Smith's brain, with all of Mr. Smith's memories, beliefs, desires, values and affections, were transplanted into Mr. Jones' body (and Mr. Jones' brain thrown away), it is assumed that the resulting person would be rightly held accountable for Mr. Smith's and not Mr. Jones' prior actions; that he would be rightly compensated for Mr. Smith's labors; that Mr. Smith should take a prudential interest in the well-being of the resulting person but Mr. Jones need not; and that Mr. Smith, but not Mr. Jones, would survive in the relevant sense.

A satisfying psychological account should thus define identity in such a way that the relation that constitutes identity supports the four features. My basic argument for the narrative self-constitution view rests on the claim that standard psychological accounts of identity cannot do so, but my narrative account can. To see the gist of the argument for this claim, it will help to have just a bit more of the history of the psychological approach to personal identity before us. Although it is a bit of a digression, this history will also be useful in the analysis that follows, so it is worth spending a few moments on it.

At the core of the psychological account is a distinction between persons and human beings closely related to Strawson's distinction between *selves* and human beings. The psychological theorist's *person*, like Strawson's *self*, is a psychological entity with persistence conditions distinct from those of human beings. One of the main tasks of the psychological theorist is thus to describe in more detail the psychological continuity that constitutes the persistence of a person. John Locke, considered by many to be the originator of the modern psychological account of identity, defines this continuity in terms of the continuation of *consciousness*. What makes a person at one time the same person as someone at another time is that they have the same consciousness. Locke's argument for this view is essentially the one described above. He offers hypothetical cases and shows that the four features of personhood—moral responsibility, prudential concern, compensation, and survival—follow consciousness rather than either the body or the soul (assuming that this latter can, as seems logically possible, separate from a particular consciousness).¹⁵

While there is something very intuitively appealing about this idea, it is also not immediately evident just what continuity of consciousness consists in. Locke makes it clear that the sort of continuity of consciousness he is imagining can survive interruption.¹⁶ So some account must be given of how consciousness can be unified across hiatuses of this sort to allow for the continuity of a single psychological entity, viz., a single person, who survives sleep and short periods of forgetfulness. The standard reading of Locke is that he proposes memory as the force which unifies consciousness across such breaks, and hence holds a view where memory connections between present and past unify diachronic consciousness into a single person. It becomes clear quite quickly however that a simple memory theory—where some past action or

¹⁵ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, P. H. Niddich (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 338–348.

¹⁶ In arguing that a single consciousness does not always imply a single soul he says '... this consciousness, being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our Lives wherein we have the whole train of all our past Actions before our Eyes in one view [we cannot be assured that the soul remembering an experience is the same soul that had the experience]' (Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 336). These interruptions are not, however, taken to undermine sameness of consciousness. As I shall discuss below, Strawson does not believe that the ontological/metaphysical self can survive such interruptions of consciousness.

experience is mine just because I remember it from a first-person perspective—is untenable for many reasons. There is no clear way to make a non-circular distinction between genuine, identity-creating memories and delusional pseudomemories, and the memory theory threatens to make identity intransitive, to name just a few difficulties.

Neo-Lockean psychological continuity theorists of the past five decades or so have tried to overcome the deficiencies of the memory theory while retaining the basic insight that personal identity consists in the continuity of consciousness. They therefore amend and develop the standard memory theory in a variety of ways. To memory connections they add other psychological connections, such as those between intentions and actions, or the different temporal stages of persisting beliefs, values and desires. In addition, they often require that these connections have some specific cause, usually the continued functioning of the same brain. In the end, the standard psychological continuity theory offers a view where the continuity of consciousness is defined roughly in terms of similarity between contents of consciousness from moment to moment that is appropriately caused.

While this development of Locke's view does solve many of the original problems, it has difficulties of its own. In particular, the picture of personal continuity spelled out in terms of similarity of psychological contents does not seem to yield a deep enough connection between experience at different times to support the four features. It is not because I am *like* someone who took an action or worked some number of hours that I am responsible for that action or entitled to compensation; it is because the experiencing subject suffering the consequences (or enjoying the rewards) is the *same* subject who took the relevant action. It is not because someone in the future will be *like* me that I care in a particular way about her experiences, but because I expect to experience them myself. And survival is not guaranteed by someone quite *like* me having experience in the future; *I* must have experience. The unity of consciousness that sounded so plausible as an account of personal identity in Locke's view is a deep, phenomenological relation between different portions of a life, and the relation psychological continuity theorists offer does not seem deep enough to provide the connection we seek.

This is where the narrative self-constitution view comes in. The connections it provides, I argue, can account for the four features and their role in our lives in a way that ordinary psychological accounts cannot. At its strongest, Locke's view does not read as a

simple memory theory. Rather, he says, we make past actions and experiences ours by *appropriating* them. In my reading of Locke, this requires not just remembering those actions and experiences in the first person, but being affected by them in the way the narrative self-constitution view requires. There must be not only cognitive but affective and practical relations to an action or experience remote in time if it is to be appropriated. In other words, it must be woven into one's narrative.

This detour brings us back to the narrative self-constitution view's stance on the third of the questions a narrative account must answer. The implications of having a narrative, on this view, are that it provides the phenomenological unity of consciousness over time that constitutes personal survival and generates person-specific capacities such as moral agency, the ability to engage in prudential reasoning and in relations of compensation.

4. Revising the Narrative Self-Constitution View

Strawson's objections, at least in his estimation, apply to the narrative self-constitution view. In describing himself as an Episodic he denies having the kind of appropriative connections to his past and future that I say are required for an identity-constituting self-narrative. He says, you will recall, that he does not have any 'great or special' interest in his past or 'a great deal of concern for [his] future.'¹⁷ Expanding on this later he says, 'I'm well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there is a sense in which it has special relevance to me* now. At the same time I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it is obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact.'¹⁸ He makes it clear that being Episodic does not keep him from being responsible to either his past or future; nor does it interfere with his capacity for loyalty, friendship or ethical behavior.¹⁹ In other words, Strawson reports that he possesses the capacities connected to the four features without conceiving of his life as a narrative. This report is completely plausible, and I do not doubt it for a moment. On the surface, however, this seems to imply that a self-narrative is not necessary to provide a basis for the four

¹⁷ Strawson, 'Against Narrativity' op. cit. p. 433.

¹⁸ Ibid., 434.

¹⁹ Ibid., 450.

features, and this in turn implies that the central claim of the narrative self-constitution view is false.

Despite appearances, however, I think that the basic idea behind my view is actually compatible with everything Strawson reports about Episodic existence. There are two ways in which I could respond to Strawson's analysis on behalf of the narrative self-constitution view. One is to say that he has misunderstood what a narrative is on this view. Strawson acknowledges quite a strong relation among the temporal parts of his human life taken as a whole. He recognizes that he* has a special relation to other parts of the life of Galen Strawson, that these are of special emotional significance, and that he has certain responsibilities with respect to them. All that he lacks is an identification of those other parts of Strawson's life as him*. The relations within his human existence, however, contain much of what is involved in having a self-narrative of the sort I have been describing.

A second possibility focuses not on issues concerning the strength of the required narrative, but rather on its duration. Much of Strawson's argument against the narrative view is based on the fact that he does not experience his entire human life in narrative terms—that there are different *selves* within his human existence. Since the narrative self-constitution view is devised as a means of expressing the intuitions behind the psychological approach to identity, however, it does not and should not insist that the duration of an identity-constituting self-narrative must be the same as the duration of a human life. *Persons*, after all, are distinguished from human beings on this view; that is its main impetus. The fact that Strawson does not view his entire human life as a narrative thus does not serve as an objection to the narrative view if each self* is constituted by a narrative internal to it (as I shall suggest in a moment they are).

Both of these responses seem to me promising, and both seem legitimate expressions of the basic ideas behind the narrative self-constitution view. The problem is that they are in some tension with one another. The first response implies that a self-narrative should, under ordinary circumstances, correspond approximately to the chronology of a single human life, and also that a self-narrative does not require that one identify in any deep way with all of the phases of one's life-narrative. The second response, on the other hand, seems to leave it open that a very ordinary form of self-narration would involve narratively created selves of much

shorter duration than a human life, and that strong identification with other phases of the narrative self *is* required for identity-constituting self-narration.

I have come to believe that this tension between the two possible responses to Strawson's objections represents a pre-existing tension in the narrative self-constitution view. There are really two different questions of identity at issue in this view, and each is answered with a slightly different narrative theory. This distinction is obscured in the original view, and the pressure placed on the view by Strawson's challenge reveals this ambiguity. Perhaps the clearest way to get at the basic idea here is to draw a distinction between persons and selves. In discussing the history of the psychological approach I said that the 'persons' that interest philosophers of personal identity are basically the same as Strawson's 'selves.' While this is true to a rough approximation, I am increasingly convinced that the concept of person as used by psychological theorists mixes together two components. One is Strawson's notion of the self; the other is a practical notion that is more intimately connected to social context. On the one hand a person is conceived as the subject of experiences, the 'I' that we experience as a psychological entity with persistence conditions distinct from human beings. On the other hand, a person is conceived as the bearer of certain complex social capacities that carry important practical implications. A person is a moral agent who can be held responsible for her actions, a reasoning creature who can be held to be irrational when she acts against her interests, and a creature capable of a range of complex relationships with other persons.

It is not immediately obvious that the self and the person must be coextensive. Locke thinks that they are. He sees the kind of continuity of experiencing subject that defines the persistence of the self as the precondition for the capacities that make someone a person²⁰, and Lynne Rudder Baker makes a similar claim.²¹ The psychological tradition more broadly tends to use 'person' and 'self' more or less interchangeably, and in the original statement of my narrative self-constitution view I do the same. What the tension between my two proposed responses to Strawson's objections suggests, however, is that the connection between these two concepts may be more complicated than Locke suggests and psychological theorists assume. An account of the persistence

²⁰ Locke, op. cit. note 16, 338–348.

²¹ See, for instance, L. Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies: a Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 147.

conditions for a self and an account of the persistence conditions for a person are not automatically the same. Although both may be distinguished from human beings, they should also be distinguished from each other. Within the narrative self-constitution view is a narrative account of selves and a narrative account of persons, and the question of how strong a narrative is required or how long it must endure will depend, at least to some extent, on which is receiving emphasis. As I will explain later, I think there are important connections between person and self that must be described in a complete account of our identity. To get to the point where such description is possible, however, we need first to look at what the narrative self-constitution view has to say about each, individually.

The tension between the two possible lines of response to Strawson can thus be resolved by distinguishing between a narrative account of persons and a narrative account of selves. The narrative account of *persons* (PN) says that in order to constitute oneself as a person—a being capable of the sorts of interpersonal interactions described above—one must recognize oneself as continuing, see past actions and experiences as having implications for one's current rights and responsibilities, and recognize a future that will be impacted by the past and present. One need not deeply identify with past or future actions and experiences, care about them, or take an interest in them, but one does need to recognize them as relevant to one's options in certain fundamental ways. I need not identify with the self who decided to buy the sports car, but if I signed the loan I need to recognize that it is mine to pay, and that my credit will be impacted if I do not. The strength of a person-constituting narrative is thus the weaker of the two possibilities described above, but the duration is the longer.

What one considers one's own actions and experiences in this weaker sense will have to correspond for the most part to what is in one's human history. The reason for this is simple. Since this kind of self-narrative is supposed to constitute one as fit for certain sorts of social interactions, one's own conception of who one is (in this sense) will need to mostly jibe with others' assessments of who one is. Otherwise the person-defining interactions will be impossible. Since we mostly reidentify each other by reidentifying human bodies, the person that one is will have to be closely connected to the human that one is. The narrative self-constitution view does allow for exceptions to this rule, but they will be, at least in our world, highly unusual.

The narrative account of *selves* (SN) says that one's continuation as a self is constituted by the stronger kind of narrative described above. For an action or experience to belong to *myself* I do need to identify with it or care about or take an interest in it. Temporally remote actions and experiences that are appropriated into one's *self* narrative must impact the present in a more fundamental sense than just constraining options or having caused one's current situation and outlook. These events must condition the quality of present experience in the strongest sense, unifying consciousness over time through affective connections and identification. To include these actions and experiences in my narrative I will need to have what I have elsewhere called 'empathic access' to them.²² In *this* sense of narrative, actions and experiences from which I am alienated, or in which I have none of the interest that I have in my current life, are not part of my narrative.

The narrative self-constitution view can thus be separated into two distinct claims. First is the claim that in order to constitute oneself as a *person*—someone with the capacity for moral responsibility, prudential interest, relations of compensation and related person-specific activities—one must implicitly organize one's experience according to a narrative that recognizes past and future experiences as one's own in the sense that one sees the past as having implications for one's present situation and choices, and the present as having similar implications for the future. Second is the claim that in order to constitute oneself as a *self*, one must have a narrative in which one experiences the past and future as one's own in the strong sense of experiencing the present as part of the whole narrative.

5. Strawson's objections and the Revised Narrative Self-Constitution View

Many of Strawson's objections to the narrative self-constitution view apply only because of the conflation of the account of persons and the account of selves in the original statement of that view. Placing emphasis on the account of persons can make the narrative connections this view requires sound too strong, while placing emphasis on the account of selves can make the duration of narrative it requires sound too long. When these two strands of the

²² M. Schechtman, 'Empathic Access: The Missing Ingredient in Personal Persistence', *Philosophical Explorations* 2, 2001, 94–110.

account are distinguished, however, each builds in a context that makes it, for the most part, compatible with Strawson's reports of the nature of Episodic existence, and so immune from his main objections.

Consider first the narrative account of the persistence of persons described above (PN), which holds that in order to be capable of engaging in person-specific activities one needs to recognize past and future actions as one's own in the sense of acknowledging some level of responsibility for and to them. Strawson's description of his own Episodic existence includes exactly this kind of relation to his own human past and future, and so the existence of Episodics poses no obvious counterexample to this view. Nonetheless, I can imagine two ways in which an anti-narrative challenge in the spirit of Strawson's might be raised against PN. First, it might be argued that the sense of 'narrative' involved is strained or trivial. If all that is required to have a *narrative* self-conception is to recognize one's human history as one's own and accept certain implications of that fact, it might be argued, then this narrative view doesn't say anything very startling. Strawson rejects the narrative view in any 'non-trivial' version. He describes triviality in this context as follows: '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'²³. If the kind of narrative that constitutes the identity of a person on my view is relevantly like a coffee-making narrative Strawson will reject it on the grounds of triviality.

I would argue, however, that there really are significant differences between the narrative of coffee making and a person-constituting narrative as I have defined it, because a person-constituting narrative is genuinely a kind of story we tell ourselves about ourselves, and not just a sequence of events. It is not a story that needs to build to a climax and provide a satisfying resolution of the loose ends; nor does it need to have a moral or a theme. But it is an explanatory account of how actions and events lead to other actions and events, how we come to be in the position we are in and where that position is likely to lead us. Moreover, my narrative view of persons involves the substantive claim that having this kind of story is necessary to engage in certain kinds of distinctive activities and interactions. This part of the view is not

²³ Strawson 'Against Narrativity' op. cit. p. 438–439.

trivial in the way that the claim that one must do things in the proper order to make coffee is. In the case of person-constituting narratives new capacities are claimed to arise as the result of self-narration.

In light of this analysis, however, the critic of PN, the person-narrative view, might charge that in fact the kind of self-narrative required is not necessary for the person-specific capacities. Strawson, after all, makes a point of insisting that the Episodic can be capable of all of the relevant person-specific activities. 'A gift for friendship,' he says, 'does not require any ability to recall past shared experiences in detail, nor any tendency to value them. It is shown in how one is in the present.'²⁴ 'Diachronicity,' he adds, 'is not a necessary condition of a properly moral existence, nor of a proper sense of responsibility.'²⁵ But Strawson's remarks in this regard only deny the need for a stronger sense of narrative, which the separation between the PN and the self-narrative view (SN) allows me to agree is not required for these capacities. A good friend need not have any interest in reminiscing or spending the evening with a stack of old photos. Still, someone who did not take the fact of a lengthy history together as in any way relevant to settling the question of whether he should come to your aid when he does not feel like doing so right at the moment of your need, would not seem a terribly gifted friend. Someone might indeed be a friendly person and generally willing to come to the aid of the people in her life. While this is admirable, it is not the same as being a true and loyal friend to a particular person or set of people. A similar point applies to Strawson's claims about moral responsibility. I agree it is possible to have a sense of responsibility with no clear consciousness of one's entire life unfolding according to a theme. It is considerably less plausible, however, that one could act responsibly without the sense that present options were constrained by past choices and that present choices have implications for the future. PN thus seems compatible with all of Strawson's observations about Episodic life, and hence avoids his objections to the narrative approach.

The relation of Strawson's position to the narrative view of *self* offered above is somewhat more complicated. It depends upon exactly how Strawson is thinking about the episodes that make up an Episodic life. Throughout his work on the self, Strawson distinguishes between the metaphysical/ontological question of

²⁴ Strawson, op. cit. note 1, 450.

²⁵ Ibid.

what actually constitutes a single self, and the phenomenological question of what we experience as self. The self, he argues, is a subject of experience, and the answer to the metaphysical/ontological question is that a self is the subject of a hiatus-free stretch of consciousness. Given our best psychological theory, this means that a single self in fact lasts no more than three seconds. But there is also a phenomenological sense of self, the length of time one* perceives oneself* as enduring.

Since the argument of *Against Narrativity* is about how we do and should experience ourselves, it must be the phenomenological notion of self that is relevant here. Our question, then, becomes the definition and duration of the phenomenological notion of self for Strawson. There seem to me two possibilities. Sometimes he seems to imply that the self lasts as long as a stretch of consciousness that is *experienced as* hiatus-free—for instance when he suggests half an hour as a possible candidate for the typical duration of experience of self.²⁶ More often, however, it seems that the limits of the phenomenological sense of self are set by the extent to which one identifies with temporally removed experiences and takes them to be strongly one's own. This is suggested by the claim that how long an episodic's experience of self endures will depend upon 'what one is thinking about.'²⁷ It is also suggested by the fact that 'there are certain things in the future—such as my death—and equally certain things in the past—such as embarrassment that I can experience—as involving Me*.'²⁸ And that 'there is no reason why some Episodics may not sometimes apprehend some of their past dubious actions as involving their Me*, and accordingly feel remorse or contrition.'²⁹ Here it seems that there can be interruptions of the flow of consciousness that do not undermine the unity of the phenomenological Me*. It is to be expected that there were, for instance, intervals of sleep between the past embarrassing experience and the present experience of embarrassment, and between the present fear of death and death itself.

One understanding of the phenomenological self, then, is that it is defined in very much the same way the self is defined on my narrative view. This understanding seems, moreover, more coherent

²⁶ G. Strawson, 'The Self and the SESMET', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, No.4, 1999, 111.

²⁷ Ibid.; See also G. Strawson, 'The Self', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4, No. 5/6, 1997, 419–421.

²⁸ Strawson, op. cit. note 26, 111.

²⁹ Ibid.

overall with Strawson's discussion of the self in *Against Narrativity*. Consider the example he gives to illustrate the distinction between the self and the human being—Henry James claiming that one of his past works seems to him to have been written by someone else. Clearly what is expressed here is a certain feeling of affective and intellectual distance from the earlier author, not simply an interruption of consciousness. We would not expect James, hard at work on his latest novel, to say the same thing about the pages he wrote the day before or before lunch. What is at issue here is not a break in the stream of consciousness, but rather a sense of alienation or indifference with respect to part of one's human past. So it seems that the sense of self described by Strawson here is precisely about a phenomenological experience of a unity of self across breaks in the stream of consciousness—just the sort of thing Locke was seeking to define. As Strawson describes it, this unity seems to be found in the subject's strong identification with past and future phases of his life, and this is precisely what SN requires. Here, too, there seems to be ultimate compatibility between Strawson's description of Episodic psychology and the narrative view I propose.

When the narrative view of person and the narrative view of self are distinguished from one another and the sense of narrative relevant to each carefully specified, each is compatible with what Strawson describes of the Episodic lifestyle, and his challenges no longer apply. This does not mean, however, that there is no space for disagreement, as we will see in the next and final section.

6. Remaining disagreements

While Strawson might be able to accept my narrative view of the person and my narrative view of the self when each is taken individually, there is likely to be somewhat less agreement when we consider the connection between these two strands of the newly bifurcated narrative self-constitution. In the original statement of the view, the difference in narrative strength that turns into the difference between a person-narrative and a self-narrative was described in terms of degrees of attribution. A person, I noted, will relate to different elements of her narrative in different ways. She will identify more strongly with some than with others, and feel more of an affective connection to them. Those narrative elements that a person more strongly appropriates, I said, are more fully or completely her own than those from which she is more distanced.

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In addition, I strongly implied that it is desirable for a person to be as strongly identified as possible with the whole of her narrative, a tightly woven self-narrative making for a stronger person than a weaker one.

Something of this sentiment remains in my revised theory. Here it turns into the idea that there are advantages to making one's self-narrative coincide as far as possible with one's person-narrative. Person-narratives, we have seen, need to be of fairly long duration if they are to do the work of allowing us to engage in the kinds of complex practical and social activities definitive of personhood. Self-narratives, on the other hand, can be quite short and still produce a phenomenological subject; there can, as Strawson points out, be a succession of many different self-narratives within the life of a single person. I maintain, however, that we can influence the duration of our self-narratives and that there are reasons to try to do so in a way that makes the duration of the self and of the person largely coincide. I do not insist that it is *always* desirable to have an extended self-narrative. There may be circumstances in which it is better for a life to include radical affective breaks within it. Sometimes it can be a good idea to put the past behind us or the future out of play. I do maintain, however, that there are strong *prima facie* advantages to extending the self-narrative that apply independent of personal style.

First let me give an idea of what I mean when I say that we can influence the duration of our self-narrative, focusing in particular on the ways in which such a narrative can be extended. What I have in mind here are the familiar ways in which people seek to re-evoke emotions and interests that no longer occur spontaneously. We look at photographs, go to reunions, take second honeymoons, maintain holiday traditions, listen to oldies stations, re-read our favorite novels, and in various other ways stock up on the madeleines and tea that aid in recovering lost time. These attempts do not always work of course—sometimes there is no way to get a feeling back no matter what one does—and they do not work in the same way for all people—some of us are more susceptible to these cues than others. I am committed, however, to the view that there is value in seeking to maintain affective connection to as much of our (person) lives as we can. This does not mean that we must consciously undertake a project of self-recovery, or that people who keep scrapbooks and listen to nostalgia radio have better lives than those who just get on with the business of enjoying the present. It also does not mean (as I shall explain in a moment) that those who are less successful at extending their narratives necessarily have worse lives. It does

mean, however, that lives that encourage affective and emotional identification with the past and future instead of resting with mere cognitive awareness of what one did and projections of what one might do are often made richer and smoother through this effort. This is something I suspect Strawson would vehemently deny.

I cannot here offer arguments for my claim that it is desirable to try to bring person and self into coincidence, but let me offer two of the guiding ideas behind it. The first has to do with the practical significance of personal identity. The situation of a self depends a great deal on its situation in the life of a person. Rights, responsibilities, options and obligations stem from one's past as a person, and one has particular kinds of responsibilities to one's future as a person. If the connection of the self to its personal past and future is merely a cold acknowledgement of being part of the same person-life, with all the rights and privileges that implies, this seems a recipe for alienation. It is like acknowledging that one's children are one's children, and one is therefore obligated to do certain things for them, but feeling no affection for them or interest in their well-being. The force of this consideration as it stands is admittedly somewhat questionable. It is always open to an Episodic to simply claim that he feels no such alienation, and it does not distress him at all to have obligations and responsibilities that connect to motives and experiences with which he cannot identify—just as someone might say that it does not distress him at all to parent children to whom he has no emotional attachment. If what is at issue is an empirical claim about what makes people unhappy the Episodic's introspective report will surely carry the day. To develop my idea into an argument for the desirability of making person and self coextensive, then, it will be necessary to develop a notion of alienation that is not strictly psychological in the way an introspective report could reveal.

The second consideration in favor of an extended self is linked to the idea that selves are not as tidy and distinct as Strawson would imply. In 'The Self' he designates his view of metaphysical/ontological self the 'Pearl view, because it suggests that many mental selves exist, one at a time, and one after another, like pearls on a string, in the case of something like a human being.'³⁰ It is not entirely clear whether Strawson would urge a similar view of the phenomenological self, but it is hard to make such a picture stand up. Phenomenological selves are more fluid and amorphous than metaphysical selves as Strawson defines them. They can expand

³⁰ Strawson, op. cit. note 27.

and shrink, their duration depending on our state of health, our interests, and 'what we are thinking about.'³¹ What is part of the phenomenological self can shift, the same element being included at one time and not at another. Phenomenological selves are not as neatly successive as pearls on a string, or not usually; we do not often get past one and on to the next, certain that the first is over and done. Instead we find frequently that feelings and identifications we thought long gone reemerge to our great surprise.

This means that it is not always obvious what is really no longer part of the self and what is, in some respect at least, a part of the self that is lying dormant or unexpressed. Selves can plausibly be thought to contain not only the motivations and identifications I am experiencing right now, but those that sit just below the surface, waiting to be reignited by the right context. If this is so, there seems a real value in giving those aspects of the self a chance to flourish and find expression. This also explains the claim I made a bit earlier, that despite the value of encouraging the extension of the self, those in whom the encouragement bears no fruit are not necessarily worse off. If one actively endeavors to reconnect with affect and emotion from time past and cannot do so, that may be evidence that those features are not latent parts of the self but have become truly external. In that case the advantage of giving them expression does not apply, and what advantage there is attaches to the considerations offered above about the practical implications of personal identity. Nonetheless, there is still a reason to encourage these connections since this is the way we discover what is still part of the self.

Both of these considerations need much more clarification and development before they constitute anything like arguments for the desirability of making one's personal narrative and one's self-narrative co-extensive. What I have done here is mostly just express a conviction and describe a plan for the development of the revised narrative self-constitution view. There is much work to be done in producing a satisfying narrative account of our identities. Strawson's challenges have, however, shown what parameters such a view would have to have, and where the real disagreements with anti-narrative theorists lie.

³¹ See note 25.