

SELF AS ONE AND MANY NARRATIVES

Joseph Ulatowski

University of Waikato, New Zealand

e-mail: julatows@waikato.ac.nz

Abstract:

There are different approaches to the narrative self. I limit myself to one approach that argues narratives have an important role to play in our lives without it being true that a narrative constitutes and creates the self. My own position is broadly sympathetic with that view, but my interest lies with the question of whether there is truth in the claim that to create one's self-narrative is to create oneself. I argue that a self-narrative may be multiply realised by the inner self—impressions and emotions—and the outer self—roles in work and life. I take an optimistic attitude to the idea that narrative provides a metaphor that may stimulate insight into the nature of self if we accept a plurality of narrative selves. This paper mines a vein of research on narratives for insights into selves without being bewitched into accepting implausible conclusions.

Key words: self, narrative self, pluralism, practical reason.

*“I look quiet and consistent, but few know how many women there are in me”
—Anais Nin*

1. Introduction

The concept of self may be put to different uses, depending upon the philosophical area of interest in which it functions. For example, in questions of personal identity through time, we may ask: *If we were able to split one's brain in half and implant*

one-half in another body, would the self be split between the two bodies or would the self be retained in the original body? A philosopher may be compelled to respond that the original self is lost or, following the work of Derek Parfit (1984), that this shows that the question over one's self does not matter. In biomedical ethics, we may ask: *If someone was seriously injured and unable to regain consciousness or to be able to live something like the life she was living before an accident, is the self before the accident retained afterwards?* When we are presented with such issues, we begin to wonder what a self is and we become quite sensitive to the details of what is constitutive of a self.

Discussion of what a self is began in earnest with discussion of self-consciousness. Consider Descartes' assertions in the second of the *Meditations* that, “*I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind*” (Descartes 1641/1998, 80), as well as in his *Discourse* and *Principles*: “*I think, therefore I am*” or “*cogito ergo sum*” (Descartes 1637/1998, 36; Descartes 1644/1998, 162, respectively). For Descartes, the *cogito* is something of which we can be absolutely certain. It is indubitable and can be known non-inferentially, e.g., intuitively. Locke accepts this intuition-based account when he claims, “*we have an intuitive Knowledge of our own Existence, and an internal infallible Perception that we are. In every act of Sensation, Reasoning, or Thinking, we are conscious to ourselves of our own Being*” (Locke 1700/1975, IV.ix.3). Descartes and Locke can be interpreted as accepting the view that there is

an inner perception of the self or “inner self,” but Hume notably disagrees:

[T]here are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self [...] For my part when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. (Hume 1739-40/1973, I.iv.§6)

Whereas Descartes and Locke were firm believers in an inner self, Hume was not, dismissing it because there is no impression, or perception, of oneself.

My contention is that we need to give full recognition to the subtle interplay between inner and outer in the production of a model of a narrative self. Such an interplay could be considered to fall somewhere between Descartes and Locke on the one hand and Hume on the other. In particular, we should avoid jumping to the conclusion that the inner self is the true self and the outer self is merely a reasonable facsimile of an inner self, maybe a behaviouristically interpreted self specially crafted by someone else. Just as wrong is the view that the outer self is the true self. Surely, the accurate picture is likely to be a composite one. This is a theme that will develop in the context of an inquiry into approaches to the self using the concept of a narrative, an approach that some might think would emphasise the inner self.

The notion of a narrative is currently widely employed in explanations and descriptions in a wide variety of domains, and in taking a narrative approach to the self there are a variety of options. In this paper, I narrow my focus to one family of approaches. Peter Goldie (2012) is persuasive in arguing for a certain kind of middle position concerning narratives and persons, namely that narratives have important roles in our lives without it being true that a narrative constitutes and thus creates the self, or that a narrative will determine personal identity in the sense of setting the identity conditions of persons through time. My own position is broadly sympathetic with that view, but my interest lies with the question of whether there is some element of truth in the claim that to create one’s self-narrative *is* to create oneself. I want to take an optimistic attitude to the idea that narrative provides a meta-

phor that may stimulate insight into the nature of self. I should like to mine the vein of research on self-narratives for insights into persons and selves without being bewitched into accepting implausible conclusions.

2. The Inner and the Outer Self

Common in discussions of the self is the distinction between an inner and outer aspect. We typically speak of an inner life as composed of a person’s observations, thoughts, and feelings. The inner life tells us of how things seem to be for that particular person. The inner life is private and accessible only to the person whose experiences they are. There are no means of sharing experiences of our inner life with others except through the expressive nature of language. Still, no matter how expressive we may be with our oral communication about our inner experience, something is missing from such illustrations. It is reasonable to assume that there is a privileged perspective that is ours and ours alone.

By contrast, there is the outer life of a self that consists of one’s action or behaviour. The outer life is publicly available for others to see. The people around us observe what we do, and we observe what others do. Of course, one person’s outer life is going to be represented by those others and thus appear in their own inner lives, modulated by their own interests and perspectives.

Such a distinction between the inner and outer self may be located in a broad variety of philosophical, scientific, and religious discourses, and indeed, we encounter it regularly in our everyday experience of life. Where we were feeling tentative and hesitant, we may learn that others saw us as confident and decisive, or perhaps it was the other way around. Or, we felt we were being witty and amusing when we learn later from others that they found us laboured and tedious.

Different characteristics of persons behave differently in relation to the distinction between the inner and outer self. Some characteristics appear to be defined in terms of their effects on others. Thus, the characteristic of being amusing can be defined as that of creating amusement in others. If others fail to be amused in spite of our best effort to be so, then, alas, we are not amusing precisely because of our failure to create the feeling of amusement in others. Our inability to have an effect on others

suggests that outward manifestations of the inner self sometimes fail.

Even so, paired with the notion that is plausibly defined in terms of external characteristics there is a corresponding internal notion. A person may have a sense of humour (wicked perhaps) and that describes how their thoughts and utterances originate internally even though, not having the right audience, the humour is not appreciated. To take an example that initially goes in the other direction, we might want to say being anxious is definable simply in terms of an inner feeling characteristic of the inner self. We can appear to be calm and behave in ways that are consistent with being confident while feeling anxious, in which case we are inclined to say that the appearance of calm is an illusion (*cf.* DSM of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, 189). But must we understand anxiety in this way?

For psychological purposes we will need to take account of visible signs of anxiety, and not merely reports of inner feelings. The visible signs form part of the criteria for suffering from an anxiety disorder, so we also have a notion of anxiety that is, in significant part, defined from an external perspective. In summary the interplay between inner and outer self is often a subtle matter and we should be alert to this kind of complexity.

Important for our appreciation of the self is the concept of a person, which is central to a broad range of philosophical subdisciplines, especially the philosophy of mind, practical reasoning, action theory, political philosophy, and ethics. A central feature of being a person is the capacity, for typical cases, for most of a life, to have thoughts and feelings, make decisions and to have an internal perspective, which will involve seeing oneself as distinct from others and the surrounding world. Persons engage in theoretical and practical reasoning since they not only have a view of what they ought to believe but how they ought to act. These characteristics are important for the role persons play in the political and moral spheres: being held responsible for actions and having rights and responsibilities and so forth. The notion of autonomous action is a central notion in this picture of things (*cf.* Buss 2012; Mele 1992, 2003; Millgram 2015). What has been briefly described here is most charitably described as an idealisation. The notion of an autonomous, free, responsible person that can play a part in a moral community glosses over the complexities and, generally, the messiness of what it is to be a

person and how we tell a story about ourselves in a variety of circumstances (Goldie 2012).

In virtue of persons typically having thoughts and feelings and so forth, many philosophers speak of ‘the self’ in a way that appears to be synonymous with ‘person’. This may not be the best terminology, but for the moment let me note that the terminology of ‘self’ emphasises the inner aspects of persons.

3. The Narrative Self

I will look at one way that the notion of a narrative is thought to apply to a self. In this section, I first lay out how we should be motivated to think of the self in narrative form. Then, I show how some philosophers have employed such a notion. Once I have completed these two tasks, this puts us in a better position to understand how self-narratives and the inner and outer self are connected.

What we should understand by a narrative is a matter of some debate, but here are a few suggestions. It is standardly thought to involve a sequence in time. If we focus on narratives such as novels or biographies, then we think of the narrative as something that is evident to a conscious mind and it is so in the mind of the author of the narrative. If we think that a narrative in some way constitutes the self, then, at first approach at least, the self is to be the author of the narrative. An important feature of narratives that is easy to gesture at, but hard to explain in any substantial detail, is the way there is a theme, plot, or narrative arc. It does not contain a mere chronology of events, but there is a connecting thread that gives the narrative a shape or structure. Goldie refers to this kind of structure by employing Paul Ricoeur’s (1984) notion of *emplotment*.

I would like to introduce the bold view that to construct one’s narrative is to construct one’s self, so that the self-narrative constitutes the self. While bold, this view has its contemporary adherents, notably Marya Schechtman (1990, 1996), Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), and Daniel Dennett (1989, 1991). A terminological proposal will permit me to describe this view in a neat fashion. Let us speak of that inner story as ‘the self’, which on this view forms the inner core of the person, where persons are embodied (leaving science fiction cases to one side) as a living human being. That is, the internal narrative that one constructs *is constitutive of* the self. Naturally, the approach has its critics, for ex-

ample: Peter Lamarque (2004), Galen Strawson (2008), and Simon Beck (2013). In the context of the view in question, this terminological proposal establishes a tight relationship between a self and person. The self is responsible for the inner aspects of a person, or so it would seem at first sight on this view. The human being is a person in virtue of the presence of the self.

One benefit of this way of talking is to allow that while we have a person in virtue of there being a self we can conveniently describe some morally tricky situations. Consider the person with advanced Alzheimer's disease. We may want to say that there is no longer a self, or at least no longer the self that we previously knew. But we still have a person who is owed respect and has rights on the basis of the fact that previously there had been a self that animated that person. Similarly, where we have a newborn child we wish to grant her many of the rights of personhood even though there is no self as yet. It is that potential self, one built into the potentialities of human beings that allows us to treat the new human as a person.

Another benefit of the adoption of the terminology of self and persons is that it enables an easy distinction between the bold view of the role of narratives and this alternative view. Alasdair McIntyre (2003) developed the view that a person lives a narrative. The whole life has a narrative form. For him, no distinction is made between the person and an inner self that has a narrative form. All of the doings and experiences of the person are part of the narrative. In this kind of view a narrative is said to be continuous with life, where we are speaking of the life of a person. In contrast, the view that is my target holds that narratives are discontinuous with life. We can say that because the narrative selects out details from life in the process of constructing that structure, the narrative is thus, of its very nature, incomplete. That is not to find fault with the narrative. On the contrary, it is that capacity to select and emphasise that provides the shape that a narrative offers us. No doubt there are things that could be said in support of McIntyre's notion, but that is not our focus here. We wish to discuss the view that a narrative constitutes the self and it is the self that provides the unifying core of a person.

Now that we have explored the attraction of a narrative to better appreciate what the self is, more should be said about what that notion of narrativity is that may help define the self. The notion of a narrative has been employed in many contexts and

there are many attempts at defining it. For example, Noël Carroll (2001, 2007) holds that a causal connection between events is required for there to be a narrative connection between them, even though the earlier event may not be causally *sufficient* for the later one. In contrast, David Velleman (2003) argues that causality is not required for narrativity and instead proposes that it is the emotional cadence in the audience associated with the series of events that is crucial for the structure of a narrative, as this is what makes those events intelligible. He says, "The cadence that makes for a story is that of the arousal and resolution of affect, a pattern that is biologically programmed" (Velleman 2009, 13). Both authors acknowledge that a whole text may not have a narrative structure while containing significant narrative elements. No further purely definitional issues concerning the notion of narrative in general will be pursued here; indeed, a working assumption of this paper is that there may be no single definition that does justice to all common uses (*cf.* Lumsden and Ulatowski 2017). It is plausible that both causal relationships and emotional cadence contribute significantly to the structure of a *self*-narrative and this paper shall proceed to focus on the particular case of self-narratives.

One advantage of a narrative approach is that it suggests a form of holism that unifies a series of experiences. As should be becoming clear, the holism relied on will not be at the level of the whole person. A memory of a certain experience or action is not, unless in rather exceptional circumstances, a discrete item that can be specified completely in isolation. A useful image that can clarify the appeal of holism can be found in David Carr's (1986, 21–30) discussion of Husserl's example of a melody. Hearing someone whistling a tune cannot be reduced to a series of distinct experiences of him whistling particular notes, for each note has the significance it has only in relation to the surrounding notes. In a parallel way, one memory is inextricably bound up with knowledge about other events, people, and places, and indeed the emotional value of the memory depends on just such linkages. What lies behind the appeal to the notion of a narrative in talking about the self is some sense that a narrative provides a structure into which experiences and actions fit, as the analogy with a melody suggests. But it is no trivial matter to specify the nature of that structure, as the dispute between Carroll and Velleman makes clear.

One concern with identifying the self with the self-narrative is the danger that the self-narrative could be totally fictional. Couldn't one's self-conception be totally at odds with how one really is? This kind of worry lies behind Marya Schechtman's (1996: 119ff) introduction of a 'reality constraint' into her narrative self-constitution view. In practice, your self-narrative is *not* constructed as a complete work of fiction but has a form that borrows from themes prevalent in the society and others' narratives of you and is based on real world interactions. If the self-narrative is what genuinely is employed to interpret events and guide action, then maybe it is correct to identify it with the self even if it contains serious delusions (Lumsden forthcoming).

The notion of a narrative can be deployed in discussing both inner and outer aspects of the self. The strong view that one's own internal self-narrative defines or even creates the self favours the view that the inner self is the true self. But a narrative approach can be deployed on the other side also. A person's biography, without thinking of an autobiography, will have a narrative form. A biography could scrupulously avoid all mention of the person's inner feelings, at the cost of some sales. I am, of course, thinking here of Douglas Quine's (2020) dryly written biography of his father, Willard Van Orman Quine's life. The biography goes so far as to include places Quine travelled over without landing, or could see from his airplane window. Even in his autobiography, *The Time of My Life* (1985), W.V.O. Quine takes a very sterile view of his life. Again, we should attend to the complexities of the division between inner and outer self. Our self-narratives are, in part, assembled and organised by interaction with others' narrations about us. Any discussion of narrative and the self needs to take on board this feature. The conception of a self-narrative as purely inner is flawed, for we are not purely solipsistic beings.

As already explained, my interest is the bold view that a self-narrative creates the self without being constitutive of it, at least not in a clear cut way. There have been various metaphors for mind, often reflecting the science and the prevailing concerns of the age. For example in the 1990s, the computational mind metaphor was ubiquitous. A narrative notion of the self can be seen in something of the same light, though it is not a notion that comes from science. With any metaphor, for it to be truly useful, it must be taken fairly seriously. For it to earn its intellectual keep, it must not just illus-

trate some obvious features of the target notion but must be the source of further insights; it should prompt the discovery of previously overlooked features of the target notion that reflect features of the metaphor. On the other hand, we need not, and should not, assume that the metaphor is going to provide insight into everything that is going on. We need to be able to judge when we need to discard the metaphor. Any metaphor is only going to be able to take us so far.

In looking at the narrative self, we should on the one hand identify the ways in which this does provide insights into the nature of the self, but perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that the narrative metaphor takes us the whole way in explaining the self. The subdomains of philosophy whose area focuses upon persons, selves, experience, and action forms such a complex and treacherous intellectual landscape that we should be grateful for any insights that a metaphor such as the narrative one can provide but not be disappointed if it is not going to take us the whole way in conceptualising that terrain. Even so, here is a line of thought that may give the view some initial plausibility, by contrasting a narrative approach to personhood with the more traditional psychological continuity approach.

The psychological continuity view is mainly developed in the specific context of personal identity questions, that is, what it is that determines a person at one time is the same person as that at another time (*cf.* Noonan 2003). A key part of the psychological continuity is the person's memory. That I now can remember acting and experiencing in certain ways in the past is important in determining that I am the same person as the actor and experiencer. The details of the memory theory have been well discussed in philosophical literature since Locke, to whom that approach is attributed, and we should not detain the reader here with the details. Other psychological connections can also be thought important. For example, that I have the same character as a person from before can be relevant to considering us to be one and the same person. Another theme that comes into these discussions is the way that the connections are causal: The second experience is deemed a memory of the first one in part because the first is considered to have caused the second.

A natural way of understanding the nature of the psychological connections is to regard experiences as discrete independent items which can be related by memory and other psychological connec-

tions in the way just described. Looked at another way, we could say that this approach to personal identity is reductionist. That is, what it is to be a person reduces to the mental states that stand in the prescribed relationships. But can we rely on such discrete mental states to form the basis of our theory? In many cases the experiences recorded in memory are inextricably connected with other experiences. Suppose I recall going to a dinner party with some friends. That bare memory, or a richer one which incorporates a series of events and conversations that occurred at the dinner party, will not make sense without some kind of backstory about the friends, roughly where they were living at the time and various other supporting details. Thus there is a form of holism about memory. Discrete memories are not plausibly the building blocks of a person. That is not to say there could not be a discrete memory. I might remember attending a dinner party where a guest literally fell asleep in his soup, while that is not supplied with any significant surrounding context. There would need to be some background understanding of dinner parties, soup, and falling asleep, but, in the situation I am supposing, there are no specific connections with individuals or a location. Consider how rare and strange such a memory is. We don't plausibly build a person from such materials as that.

Here is where the notion of a narrative might assist us. A defining feature of narratives is that they have a form or structure into which particular incidents fit. This is one way of capturing a form of holism amongst incidents, which in the context of providing an account of selfhood or personhood expresses a holism amongst experiences in memory. Thus a memory is not free-standing but is the memory it is only in the context of the narrative in which it appears. When Goldie speaks of the process of *emplotment*, he speaks of there being four parts, one of which is the raw material. This might be taken to suggest that Goldie is leaning towards a reductionist approach, where the raw material is composed of discrete experiences. Now there may be an element of truth in that, but, significantly, Goldie insists that the descriptions of persons, actions, events, and objects that comprise the raw material are 'rich', that is they include 'thoughts, feelings, moods and emotions, character traits and personality'. One significant aspect of this richness is the inclusion of the emotional dimension, which is something not mentioned so far. Yes, surely that is important both for narratives in general and for

memories that are part of a person's self. But that is not the only significant aspect of this richness. Note the raw material includes descriptions of persons. Thus in my example of recalling having dinner with friends, the memory of the event is inextricably linked with knowing something about the guests (though of course one might have forgotten exactly who was there). Then we include character traits and personality. Again, this takes us beyond the bare snapshot of the event. That John and Mary argued about a certain topic made sense and thus was memorable on the basis of one's understanding of their respective characters. For these reasons, I see Goldie as explaining, in somewhat different terms, how there is a holism in memories that are significant for being a person.

4. Plurality of Narratives, Plurality of Selves

Here's a subtle truism about the self: *a self typically lacks the kind of coherence that a single narrative would be expected to provide*. This disunity or plurality of the self is exacerbated by an examination of someone's outer self. An extreme illustration of such disunity may be provided by *Six Days of the Condor's* Ronald Malcolm, a CIA agent whose clandestine services include nothing more than 'reading books'. Codenamed "Condor", Malcolm returns one fateful day from lunch to find everyone in his office assassinated. Subsequently, he contacts headquarters to report that his office has been hit but discovers that he cannot trust anyone in the organisation. One minute, Malcolm is enjoying a hoagie, and the next, he is fighting to remain alive. At numerous points, Malcolm himself has difficulty reconciling the life he led before the 'hit' with the life he leads following it. This fictional example is an extreme one, so the focus should be on the variety of narratives that can be involved in a much more mundane life.

The self, expressed in narrative terms, is not unified in a strong sense but disunified such that there may be no single narrative that unifies the whole life of a person, as, for many of us, there are various relatively discrete roles that we play in different settings, which are captured by different narratives. There need be no monolithic and overarching narrative that draws together the person's myriad component narratives. When we are at university lecturing to a crowd of students, our disposition and

how we interact with them is distinct from how we behave at an intimate dinner with our partner. The lecturing situation is part of a narrative thread that includes one's history of employment and professional obligations; the coherence of this thread, in turn, relies on details related to expectations of how an instructor ought to behave in that situation, expectations of the role of students, and a history of teaching experience, all of which provide guidance as to how to read situations and react to them. In contrast, private moments with a partner are embedded in a narrative that does not relate to professional obligations but to a personal common history and emotional ties or conflicts. We can say that within the person there are different narratives running in the two situations, where each story provides not only a distinct history of events but also a distinct set of themes, vocabularies, descriptions, values, and associated emotional colour. The different patterns of behaviour follow from those different stories. Call each story a 'narrative thread' (*cf.* Lumsden 2013; Lumsden and Ulatowski 2017).

The contrast between two narrative threads just discussed rested on two different environments, but it would be a mistake to think that the environment completely determines the narrative. The subjective position and interpretive lens matter for how the narrative unfolds. This is evident when we consider how the very same event could be interpreted differently by distinct people who approach the situation on the basis of different narratives. Compare this with how different witnesses provide very different accounts of events such as traffic accidents or barroom brawls. To provide a somewhat stylised example, consider the lawyer, the mechanic, and the novelist who witness a traffic accident. While there is likely to be some overlap in the descriptions provided by the three, each might attend to different aspects of the accident: The lawyer attends to the issue of fault, the mechanic attends to the vehicles' damage, and the novelist attends to how the accident fits into the lives of the people affected. For each of them, that one incident fits into a pattern of events that is captured in a narrative that they, but not the others, possess. This shows how different narratives can be brought to the same situation, though in that case, those different narratives are themselves grounded in the different situations that comprise the working lives of the three different observers.

To take a narrative approach to the self locates unity and disunity within a rich set of materials. A

narrative of the kind that concerns us here involves a history of events incorporating a stream of experiences replete with an emotional charge and a set of values, and which tend to be indicative of certain character traits. Thus, each narrative thread will have its own unique flavour or perspective. The irritated commuter, let us suppose, has experienced a long series of adverse commuting incidents over months or years: delays, misinformation, overcrowding, and inadequate heating or cooling. The emotional reaction and pattern of response to these, whether of frustration, resentment, or anger, provides the source of the commuter's action in the current circumstances, such as accusing an employee of incompetence.

While the example of the irritated commuter highlights emotional reactions, rational thought and plans and policies are very likely part of the narrative too. The commuter's memory of previous attempts to respond to a train cancellation can lead to a new strategy to reach the destination. The use of narratives can help explain how actions flow from a rich structure that includes, but is not limited to, the formal character of practical reasoning. This is in line with Peter Goldie's (2009) cautious discussion of the way that our employment of narrative in planning future actions incorporates character, personality traits, and emotional dispositions. He opposes Bratman's (2007) view that rests fundamentally on higher-order self-governing policies.

My view is that such a unity of inner self holds only *within* each narrative thread. Even so, we fully acknowledge connections and coordination among different narrative threads, which can ensure they do not interfere with each other and do allow the person to function in the world. Might plans and policies provide that sort of connection? Indeed, plans and policies may provide some connections between narrative threads, but we should not assume there is a singular form of connection.

5. Taking the narrative metaphor too far

The narrative metaphor captures a form of holism amongst different aspects of a person's life, which aggregates to what the self is. While there are component memories and experiences, those things are not discrete items that can be bundled together to form a self. Rather, a narrative explains how each experience, and a memory of an experience, is what it is only in relation to other aspects of one's mental

life. So to take the metaphor to its logical conclusion we might reasonably think that the entirety of a self is a complete narrative. The idea sounds simple.

There is reason to doubt the plausibility of this metaphorical model. It misses the multifaceted character of a life. Suppose we grant that experiences are the composition of a narrative self – need we assume that the different parts of a person’s life be bound together into a neat and tidy narrative form, much as one might come to expect of a novel or biography? There could be a form of narrative cohesiveness amongst the rather disparate events in my work life that may not connect with events in my home life or the events related to my primary hobby, like Malay Zapin Api line dancing. Even that could be too simplistic. Within my work life, for example, there may be different narrative threads, where the personnel are different and the events and emotions are quite disjoint. Add to that my social life, which includes a group of friends from primary school. There could be a number of narrative threads in a person’s life that do not connect in any significant way. There may be no ‘meta-narrative’ thread that binds all these narrative threads together. Few of us have two quite distinct personalities like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but many of us move in different settings that make very different demands on us and prompt different styles of behaviour. It does not follow that the points of contact need be so rich as to provide a meta-narrative thread which sustains a narrative unity.

If this observation is correct, then in defining the self we could echo Hume and say that the self is a bundle of narrative threads. To take this stance is to find a certain role for narrative but not to assume it provides the whole answer. To speak of a ‘bundle’ here could suggest that the group is less than a perfect unity. That indeed may be the best approach to the self. There is a kind of functional unity, because usually one of the threads is centre stage at any one time. We could play along with this image and suggest that other threads may hover at the edge of the stage or be waiting in the wings. The unity of a normally functioning person in normal circumstances consists in the fact that there is a relatively smooth handover from one thread to another. In fact, on occasion a pair may need to operate in tandem, switching control back and forth as the need arises. In this ability for narrative threads to swap control appropriately is the unity of the self, such as it is.

Perhaps this picture sounds a little extreme. It does not seem counterintuitive to suppose that surveying aspects of my life *just is* a matter of contemplating the whole life narrative. Such a thing may be possible, but note how that activity is an unusual and very peculiar activity. The cognitive load it places upon the person to survey not only what aspects of life lay before her now but also how these aspects fit properly into a wider narrative whole is quite large. The normal level of functioning when it comes to identifying and disseminating what the self is is more of the nature of control switching. This view of things can take comfort from Elijah Millgram’s work on action, especially his (2015). There, he emphasizes that it is a critical fact about humans that we are serial hyperspecialisers. It is part of the way we are adapted to the world that we can focus on particular things for reasonably extended periods, and then can move on to something else.

6. Conclusion

Recall the earlier discussion concerning the complex interplay between the inner and outer self. A narrative view might seem to suggest that the real self is a purely inner narrative. This would be a mistake. What has instead been argued here is that a narrative which is constitutive of a self balances the inner self—composed of one’s perceptions, emotions, and impressions—with the outer self—composed of differing narrative threads that find their origin in the roles that a person plays in work and life. Such a view recognises and appreciates the interplay between different aspects of one’s life. One minute we are parents to our children and the next we are on a Zoom call with our colleagues in Nairobi. The narrative autobiography that encapsulates the inner and outer self may be a plurality of disunified selves, but it most accurately captures what is constitutive of the self.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for conversations with David Lumsden, Dan Weijers, and Doug Campbell that led to a draft of this paper, and I am especially thankful for the generous financial support of the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute that provided

me with valuable time and space during a visiting residential fellowship to help complete the project.

References

- Beck S (2013) The Misunderstandings of the Self-Understanding View. *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* 20(1): 33–42.
- Bratman M (2007) *Structures of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buss S (2012) Autonomous Action: Self-Determination in the Passive Mode. *Ethics* 122(4): 647–691.
- Carr D (1986) *Time, Narrative and History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Carroll N (2001) On the narrative connection. In: *Beyond Aesthetics*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll N (2007) Narrative closure. *Philosophical Studies* 135: 1–15.
- Dennett D C (1989) The Origins of Selves. *Cogito* 2: 163–173.
- Dennett D C (1991) The Reality of Selves. In *Consciousness Explained*, Boston: Little Brown and Company: Chapter 13.
- Descartes R (1637/1998) *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*. [In:] *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 20–56.
- Descartes R (1641/1998) *Meditations on First Philosophy*, [In:] *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 73–159.
- Descartes R (1644/1998) *Principles of Philosophy*. [In:] *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 160–212.
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition. (2013) Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.
- Flanagan O (1991) *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Flanagan O (1996) *Self Expressions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frankfurt H (1988) *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldie P (2009) Narrative thinking, emotion, and planning. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67(1): 97–106.
- Hume D (1739–1740/1973) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kripke S (1982) *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lamarque P (2004) On Not Expecting Too Much From Narrative. *Mind and Language* 19: 393–408.
- Locke J (1700/1975) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 4th Edition, ed. Peter H. Niddich. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lumsden D (2013) Whole Life Narratives and the Self. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 20: 1–10.
- Lumsden D (July 2015) Narrative construction of the self and the accuracy problem. In: *Mind, Body and Self*, Proceedings of the Society for Philosophy and Culture Conference, Wellington.
- Lumsden D, Ulatowski J (2017) One Self Per Customer? From Disunified Agency to Disunified Self. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55(3): 314–335.
- MacIntyre A (1984) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edition. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mele A (1992). *Springs of Action: Understanding Intentional Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mele A (2003) *Motivation and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Millgram E (2015) *The Great Endarkenment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Noonan H (2003) *Personal Identity*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge.
- Parfit D (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Quine D B (2020) Willard Van Orman Quine, 1908-2000: Philosopher and Mathematician. <https://www.wvoquine.org>.
- Quine W.V.O (1985) *The Time of My Life*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Schechtman M (1990) Personhood and Personal Identity. *Journal of Philosophy* 87: 71–92.
- Schechtman M (1996) *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Strawson G (2008) *Against Narrativity*. In *Real Materialism and Other Essays*, 180-227. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Velleman J D (2003) Narrative explanation. *Philosophical Review*, 112(1): 1–25.

Velleman J D (2009) *How We Get Along*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.