

In Defense of Narrativity

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July 16, 2018

1 Introduction

Marya Schechtman identifies four features crucial to personal identity: survival, moral responsibility, compensation, and self-interest.¹ We have a special kind of interest in knowing under what conditions we continue to exist, when someone is praise- or blame-worthy, compensating the right people (or knowing that we'll be compensated when we make a sacrifice), and having a subject for egoistic concerns. These four features are interrelated with each other and the identities of persons. Schechtman sees these as essential for personal existence. Any theory of the self must explain the role of these features.

The traditional accounts of personal identity ask what Schechtman calls the reidentification question: when you see someone at two different times, how do you tell whether it's the same person? The most popular answers to the reidentification question have used identities of souls, identities of bodies, and identities of minds as criteria for personal identity. Each of these theories has proven insufficient to explain the four features.² As a result, some investigation has turned to the characterization question: which characteristics are to be attributed to a given person?³ Focus on this question has led to theories of personal identity that claim persons or personal identities are somehow fundamentally constituted by narratives. These theories range from the metaphysical to the psychological, and the boundaries are difficult

1. Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 2.

2. At least on some accounts. Schechtman argues at length for their insufficiencies in *The Constitution of Selves*, and the theories are widely believed today.

3. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 73.

to draw.

Schechtman calls her response to the characterization question the narrative self-constitution view, “according to which a person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life.”⁴ We might put this more explicitly as follows:

Narrative Self-Constitution View: A personal identity is an autobiographical narrative.

Because she is advancing an alternative to the more plainly metaphysical approaches to personal identity, her theory appears to be making a metaphysical claim, that who someone is depends on her part in a narrative. This stems from her argument really answering to two questions: One, which question is the fundamental question of personal identity? Answer, the characterization question. Two, which answer to the characterization question is right? Answer, the narrative self-constitution view. The reidentification question seems to only seek metaphysical answers while the characterization question makes room for other kinds of answers.

Her theory also makes claims on what kind of psychology is required for personhood. Because it puts a psychological condition on the answer to a metaphysical question, it straddles the boundary between metaphysical and psychological theories.

Additionally, all four of the four features have some evident connection to ethics, most prominently moral responsibility. Galen Strawson pushes the discussion further toward the psychological and ethical domains. In his essay “Against Narrativity,” Strawson explicitly focuses on what he calls the psychological Narrativity⁵ thesis: “one sees or lives or experiences one’s life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories.”⁶ This thesis is clearly psychological. It is basically the narrative self-constitution view with an

4. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 93.

5. Strawson capitalizes “Narrativity” to refer to the psychological property or outlook. The lowercase “narrativity” refers to the more general class. I preserve his capitalization when directly referencing his position, but elsewhere use “narrative psychology”.

6. Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” in *Narrative, Philosophy, and Life*, ed. Allen Speight (Springer, 2015 (2004)), 11.

explicit focus on personal psychological identity. That is, one thinks that one is who one is because one constructs a narrative that tells one who one is.

Strawson complements the psychological Narrativity thesis with what he calls the ethical Narrativity thesis, that a narrative psychology is required to live well or even to be a full person.⁷ That Narrativity is a condition of living well is clearly an ethical claim, but if we consider whether it's a condition of being a person, then we're back into the same metaphysics Schechtman is doing. However, this might only be if we take being a person to be a normatively neutral thing. He criticizes Schechtman for saying bad things about human beings without a narrative psychology.⁸ This criticism only makes sense if calling them non-persons is somehow insulting. Of course, that's uncontroversial—saying some human beings are not persons is almost always a statement of some kind of (lack of) value. So, the ethical and metaphysical questions come together, and the answer on the table is psychological.

Strawson argues that both the psychological Narrativity thesis and the ethical Narrativity thesis are false. Schechtman takes the opposite view; anyone (or anything) without a narrative psychology is not a person. That is, anyone or anything without a narrative psychology has no personal identity. Schechtman's argument for the narrative self-constitution view relies both on attention to how people get along in the world and to providing explanatory answers to questions about the four features. Strawson relies on the empirically-evident existence of normal human beings who do not have a narrative psychology. These two views are, strictly speaking, compatible. If someone defending the narrative self-constitution view were convinced that many normal human beings do not have a narrative psychology, then she could in theory conclude that many normal human beings are not persons. However, this comes at a massive expense to common sense. Additionally, by "being a person" we mean something like whatever it is about human beings in general that is relevant to survival, responsibility, compensation, and self-interest. So, any theory that denies the personhood of a large population of humans must be wrong. So, either the narrative self-constitution view

7. Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 11.

8. *Ibid.*

is basically wrong or else no normal human beings lack a narrative psychology in the sense relevant to the narrative self-constitution view.

In this paper, I argue that no normal human beings lack a narrative psychology in the relevant sense. To explain how I will do so, I will first lay out the roughest outline of Schechtman and Strawson's arguments. Schechtman's argument is as follows:

- (MS1) Any adequate account of personal identity must explain the four features.
- (MS2) Only the narrative self-constitution view explains the four features.
- (MS3) So, only the narrative self-constitution view is an adequate account of personal identity.

Strawson argues for the opposite conclusion as follows:

- (GS1) Any adequate account of personal identity must include all normal human beings as persons.
- (GS2) The narrative self-constitution view does not include all normal human beings as persons.
- (GS3) So, the narrative self-constitution view is not an adequate account of personal identity.

In this paper, I defend MS3 against Strawson's argument to the contrary. To do so, I focus on denying GS2. I do so as follows:

- (NS1) All normal human beings have the four features.
- (NS2) If all normal human beings have the four features, then any account of personal identity that explains the four features must include all normal human beings as persons.
- (NS3) The narrative self-constitution view explains the four features. (Corollary of MS2)
- (NS4) The narrative self-constitution view includes all normal human beings as persons. (Negation of GS2)

Thus, the following sections will defend NS1, NS2, and NS3 in turn. To defend NS1, I will return to many of the arguments Schechtman uses to establish the importance of the four features in the first place. I will go into greater detail on what each of the four are, and then defend their importance for all normal human beings. To defend NS2, I will consider its negation and show it to be absurd. To defend NS3, I will again return to Schechtman to

reuse her arguments for MS2. Obviously if only the narrative self-constitution view explains the four features, it must explain the four features. Because this argument is to defend MS3, I will conclude by considering Strawson’s examples of people with putatively non-narrative psychologies. I will show that they actually do have a narrative psychology in the ways that Schechtman finds important. While some people’s psychologies have non-narrative features, everyone still has a self-conception in which “the incidents and experiences that make up his life are not viewed in isolation, but interpreted as part of the ongoing story that gives them their significance”⁹ sufficiently to fulfill a notion of personal identity that answers to the four features.

2 All normal human beings have the four features.

The four features—survival, moral responsibility, compensation, and self-interest—constitute the heart of Schechtman’s argument for her narrative self-constitution view. Traditional arguments also tend to rely on these since they are what motivate questions of personal identity in the first place. While the question of personal identity can run off into abstract metaphysics, it is ultimately grounded in practical questions. But who are these practical questions about? Well, they’re about normal human beings. Accounts of personal identity need some archetypal cases of persons to work with. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty identifies four rather than two questions that span the personal identity controversies: how to distinguish persons from non-persons, how to distinguish one person from two persons, how to reidentify persons, and how to identify the essential characteristics of a person such that changing them would result in a different person.¹⁰ I direct us to Rorty’s expansion of the questions because the first question makes my point about needing archetypal cases very clear.¹¹ “What

9. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 97.

10. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “Introduction,” in *The Identities of Persons*, Revised, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, Topics in Philosophy (University of California Press, 1976), 1–2.

11. While I will not be explicitly returning to the other three questions Rorty poses, the third is just the Reidentification Question. The second is interesting but mostly beyond the scope of this paper. It is in some significant ways similar to the Characterization Question. To ask whether there is one person or two could

distinguishes the class of persons from their nearest neighbors, from baboons, robots, human corpses, corporations?”¹² Notice that in order to ask this question, we have to already have some idea of what persons are. And that archetype is normal human beings. Notice, too, that she considers *human* corpses to be a close neighbor of persons.

I do not mean here to diminish the difficulty of the question. Perhaps baboons, robots, corpses, and corporations could be persons. Arguments are made for all of them. If we instead look to narrowing the class of persons, we find arguments that certain classes of human beings are not persons. This highlights a preliminary question for this section: What is a *normal* human being? A simple answer is just any human being that is noncontroversially a person. Unfortunately, nobody qualifies since eliminativism about persons is a held view.¹³ Appealing to the four features would be question-begging. If we still take there to be some sort of value claim involved here, then perhaps we’re looking for what’s important to the value of human lives. Raymond Frey says that the value of a life is in effect a function of its richness. The ability to enjoy love, music, books, pictures, satisfaction in our work, and so on is central to the value of our lives. Anything that is unable to enjoy some level of richness fails to meet the mark of a normal human being, since normal human beings have the value of a rich life, or at least the ability to have one.¹⁴ This approach, and others, leaves us with most adult humans. Humans who lack agency, lack the ability to enjoy richness, or some other major kind of lack are the primary candidates for exclusion.

For brevity, I will assume that any human being with agency and basic emotional and epistemic capacities is normal. Perhaps the window is narrower, but since I am claiming that everything in this category has the four features, everything in any subset must also have the four features. So now I will turn to each of the four features. I will elaborate upon

be a way of asking what distinctly characterizes each person, which could be a characteristic. The fourth also answers to this—whatever makes you essentially you is a characteristic.

12. Rorty, “Introduction,” 1.

13. Jim Stone, “Why There Still Are No People,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70, no. 1 (2005): 174–191.

14. Raymond G. Frey, “The Significance of Agency and Marginal Cases,” *Philosophica* 39, no. 1 (1987): 39–46.

the kinds of questions involved in the four features. These questions all bear directly on our lives, and so they have an intuitive appeal. In each subsection, I will argue that all normal beings are invested in the feature in question.

2.1 Survival

A variety of questions motivate the problem of survival. A very clear, though unrealistic, question involves a teleporter. We can imagine a machine that completely analyses a person's material makeup and organization. It does this analysis, creates a replica in the destination location, and at once destroys the original. Then we seem to have a functional teleporter. The worry is that the teleporter killed someone and then created someone else. To fuel this worry, we can consider what happens if the teleporter doesn't destroy the "original." Then we have an original and a copy, and our intuitions say that there are two people. But if that's right, then teleportation is killing someone to make a new-but-similar person. Thus, if you step into the teleporter, you do not survive.

If we look at different accounts of personal identity, we can end up with similar worries about mundane things. If you think that someone is identical to herself because she has the same body, then the ongoing cycle of cellular growth is a concern. If you think that someone is identical to herself because she has the same psychological state, then the fact that our psychologies change over time is a concern. Sleep is a prominent destroyer of thoughts and continuity of thought. We have a general understanding that cellular growth, changing thoughts, and sleeping don't kill us, yet a theory of personal identity has to answer to this.

Why, then, is survival important? Threats of obvious death tend to make this apparent. If someone puts a gun to your head, then you're very likely to comply outside of extreme circumstances. We might wonder whether there's some pain involved. But there are methods of painless execution. Well, then we might wonder if the cessation of pleasure is the problem. But when any individual dies, there is still pleasure in the world. What comes to an end is *your* pleasure. Anything along the lines of diachronic self-interest requires an account of

survival.

But self-interest isn't the end of the story. We also have rather similar interests in other people surviving. A lot of medicine is devoted to keeping humans alive. The importance of this comes from the importance of personal survival. To divorce the two seems odd. On some accounts of personal identity, it's possible. For illustration, a (disembodied) soul-based account is clearest. Say a human (the body, the brain, the animal, whatever¹⁵) receives a life-saving surgery. However, during the surgery, the soul leaves the body, and a brand new soul enters. Then the person who wakes up has a different soul in control of the body. The original soul either didn't survive or is now elsewhere. Regardless, if the soul were the important thing to keep around, then the surgery failed on that account. Whether the human body survived is distinct.

But then, given this distinction, are all normal human beings concerned with survival? Or, rather, is survival a concern for all normal human beings, even other normal human beings? There are two ways out of this: the cessation of normalcy and the destruction of the being. For the cessation of normalcy, we have to ask whether quality of life and autonomy are indeed concerns for all normal human beings. They certainly seem to be. The threat of losing most of one's cognition is a very serious threat. Losing the ability to act is a serious loss. The idea of quality of life makes cannot be abstracted from its being bad to lose as quality is just choiceworthiness. For the destruction of the being, we can just turn back to the cessation of normalcy. Humans who are destroyed lose everything lost in the cessation of normalcy. So, yes, all normal human beings are concerned with survival.

The other way we should consider survival is cases in which we want to end it. Some people have an an end the cessation of some other normal human being. While cases like war and self-defense might be tricky, the death penalty is explicitly an attempt to end someone's life. There have been many normal human beings executed before. The success condition of the execution is the human not surviving. Likewise, the difference between homicide and

15. One may wonder if "human being" applies here. Whether a human being is a soul plus body or just the body is another debate that I will not pursue here.

attempted homicide just is the survival of the victim.

We have established that whether a normal human being survives is an important question. Perhaps it might be more simply understood as important because in order to be a normal human being, one must be, i.e. exist. But via this extended treatment we can also see how the survival interests of normal human beings line up with those of persons. In a discussion of survival Schechtman acknowledges that there may be kinds of nonpersonal existence that are not inferior to existence as a person. However, part of being a person is having some desires, values, etc. within the sphere of personhood.¹⁶ To value one kind of existence over another would require not being a person, so any value one has as a person or normal human being must require continuing to be a person or normal human being. There are arguments against the importance of survival. One may object that we are wrong to think that survival matters. However, having established that normal human beings and persons are concerned with survival in basically the same way, I will shelve this until §4 in which I explain how the narrative self-constitution view shows that, yes, survival is important.

2.2 Self-Interest

We have already seen one instance of self-interest, namely survival. In this subsection i will expand to other kinds of self-interest. [more to come]

2.3 Moral Responsibility

[more to come]

2.4 Compensation

[more to come]

16. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 152.

3 If all normal human beings have the four features, then any account of personal identity that explains the four features must include all normal human beings as persons.

To argue for the truth of the conditional “If all normal human beings have the four features, then any account of personal identity that explains the four features must include all normal human beings as persons,” I will argue that its negation is absurd. Its negation is “All normal human beings have the four features, and some account of personal identity that explains the four features does not include all normal human beings as persons.” The question then is, what would an account of personal identity that explains the four features without including all normal human beings as persons look like? It must exclude some normal human beings for some reason other than the four features. [more to come]

4 The narrative self-constitution view explains the four features.

[more to come]

5 Conclusion

Given the truth of NS1–NS3, NS4 follows. That is the narrative self-constitution view includes all normal human beings as persons. If this is true, then Strawson’s argument against the narrative self-constitution view fails.

In light of this we can see why his counterexamples don’t work. [more to come]

References

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