Whole Life Narratives and the Self

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Abstract: A narrative theory of the self offers explanations of the holistic relationship between a mental content and other mental contents, as well as the relationship between an experience and its subject. For this reason, it offers an attractive alternative to atomistic psychological theories of personal identity, in which a person is defined using memory and other relationships grounded on discrete, impersonal experiences. Narrative theories often require a narrative of the entirety of a person’s life, which is an implausible requirement. My recommendation is that the narrative account be applied only to threads within a person’s life. This leaves us with a notion of a person that does not necessarily require a complete narrative unity, but is a bundle of narrative threads, with links in consciousness and the unconscious. Understanding this can provide a suitable context for engaging with patients with disorders of the self.

Keywords: narrative, self, narrative thread, personal identity.

Introduction

Narrative theory provides an interesting contribution to the rich philosophical literature on the self and personal identity. This links with psychological and psychiatric themes concerning the self, because many cases of disorder involve some kind of loss or fragmentation of the self. What follows is a philosophical inquiry into these narrative theories, which should have some implications for how we should regard subjects with these disorders. My primary philosophical conclusion is that there is an interesting germ of truth in the narrativist position, where it concerns narrative threads within a person, but that we should resist the generalization from this restricted claim to the implausible position that possession of a whole life narrative is a requirement of being a person.

Narrativists about persons or the self are to be found across philosophical traditions, for example, Paul Ricoeur (1992) from the continental, and Daniel Dennett (1992) and Marya Schechtman (1996) from the analytic tradition. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) is a broadly influential figure in this area. In opposition there are various authors, and I shall mention Galen Strawson (2008), John Christman (2004) and Peter Lamarque (2004), who to a greater or lesser extent are skeptical about narrative theory. My own skeptical focus is specifically on whole life narratives.

I should say something briefly about the terminology of ‘the self.’ In this discussion, selves are often taken as equivalent to persons, but such a view is controversial. One persuasive approach to the notion of the self is J. David Velleman’s, in which “the self does not denote any one entity but rather expresses a reflexive guise under which parts or aspects of a person are presented to his own mind” (Velleman 2006, 1). That usage emphasizing reflexivity fits well with work
on self-knowledge by Hector-Neri Castañeda (1968), David Lewis (1979), John Perry (1993), and others but, as Velleman points out, this is at variance with much recent usage. For example, when Dennett talks of the self there is not always that emphasis on a reflexive guise, even though in Dennett’s metaphysics selves are fictions and so it is not quite right to say that ‘self’ denotes an entity, as will be mentioned in due course.

The terminology of the self can be used to draw attention to issues concerning what it is to be the subject of experience and action, which is one part, but not the whole, of what will be considered below. Ricoeur (1992, 2–3, 118) distinguishes between two senses of identity: one identified by the Latin reflexive ‘ipse’ and the other by the Latin term for the same, ‘idem,’ where the first precisely does focus on being the subject of experience and action, whereas the second reflects the notion of being the same person. According to Glas (2003), idem covers both numerical identity, being one and the same thing through time, and qualitative identity, having the same qualities. Ricoeur thinks the concept of personal identity is fashioned by a dialectic between ipse and idem. Both of them will occur in what follows.

**The Concept of a Narrative**

The concept of a narrative is a rich one, which we should be wary of defining in a dogmatic fashion. Even so, it is important to identify some provisional characteristics of narratives, based initially on the traditional home turf of narrative such as novels and biographies. A relatively uncontroversial feature is:

1. Narratives express a sequence in time.

Lamarque (2004, 394) has a minimal interpretation of this when he says that a narrative has to portray at least two events in some relation. Normally, we assume a narrative would involve some longer sequence of events, although not necessarily expressed in temporal order.

More to the heart of the notion is:

2. Narratives contain a theme or plot.

This feature, which goes back to Aristotle (1996), seems to hold in all cases but the explanation of the nature of theme or plot is open to debate. One view of narratives, described by Noël Caroll (2001), is that they involve a sequence of events linked causally. Velleman (2003), in contrast, takes the view that, although narratives often involve causally related events, such relationships are not necessary for events to be connected by a narrative. Two people doing the same thing at different times can form part of a narrative, even if there is no causal influence. Velleman (2003, 7) offers a certain account of the nature of a narrative in terms of an emotional rise and fall, producing in the audience some emotional resolution. The nature of a theme or plot is arguably central to narrative theory, but is not something that we can pursue further here.

Here is a further possible feature of narratives, although a controversial one:

3. A narrative is incomplete, in contrast with a life, which is complete.

Dealing with ordinary works of fiction, Lewis (1978) points out that we can assign truth values to propositions such as that Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street in London, because that is a matter specified in the text. In contrast, the proposition that Holmes had an even number of hairs on his head when he first met Dr. Watson is neither true nor false, because the issue is not addressed in the text. Fictional narratives can be said to be incomplete in virtue of those unspecified truth-values and Feature 3 says the same of narratives more broadly. A real life, in contrast, has no such gaps. This is one way of expressing a point that seems obvious to many, that although a narrative can be about a life, there is a fundamental difference between the narrative and the life it describes.

Perhaps surprisingly, this feature is controversial in the application of the notion of narrative to selves, for some writers, notably MacIntyre, talk of people enacting narratives. He says that in heroic societies, “human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story” (MacIntyre 1984, 123). He brings that into a contemporary context by claiming that human actions in general are enacted narratives (MacIntyre 1984, 210–1). James
Phillips (2003) is one who follows MacIntyre in claiming that lives are lived narratively. Phillips (2003, 314) links Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) to this view when he discusses ‘pre-understanding,’ which relates to the narrative concepts we lift from the natural world. Thinking of enacting narratives leads MacIntyre to talk of whole lives fitting genres corresponding to literary genres. David Carr (1986, 16), who shares MacIntyre’s view on this point, describes MacIntyre’s view as one in which narratives are continuous with life.

The alternative view, which I hold, is that narratives are discontinuous with life in the way made clear by Feature 3. The philosopher of history, Louis Mink (1974, 123), says, “stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles and ends.” It would be a mistake to insist on Feature 3 as part of the definition of the notion of narrative and to rule out on definitional grounds the claim that narratives are continuous with life. The case needs to be made on the basis of the usefulness of the concept of narrative in the current context. We should not think of Feature 3 mainly in terms of narratives being deficient in lacking the richness of reality. Rather, we should see narratives as having the advantage of making a meaningful selection among the full range of details. A biography, for example, makes selections, emphasizes themes, and constructs a connecting thread. This allows narratives to provide a structure through which to interpret particular events. We can understand an action by putting it in a narrative context, which involves selecting out from all that goes on the relevant aspects of setting and short-term intentions and long-term goals, and so forth. This feature of narratives plays a central role in considering narrative theories of the self. The possibility of there being alternative narratives for the same life or episode, which is important in many applications, depends on this feature, for different narratives, being incomplete, can make different selections and create different emphases.

Lamarque (2004, 404) also clearly favors the discontinuity view saying, “Narratives are stories that only exist when they are told. Without narration there is no narrative.” This suggests a further feature of narratives:

4. A narrative is created.

This certainly seems to apply to home turf cases of narratives.

**Creating a Self-Narrative**

Feature 4 is important, because a dominant theme in many narrative theories of the self is the view that, to be persons, or selves, we need to create our own self-narratives. In a way, this is present in MacIntyre’s talk of us being authors of our own lives, but for other thinkers this has a more purely psychological character. The narratives here are simply the stories we create in our own minds about ourselves. Persons need to have such internally represented self-narratives to be persons, on this view. Hardcastle and Flanagan (1999) say, “To be a whole person is to have narrative connectedness over time, connectedness caused by the authorial work of the agent.” We might want to bolster Feature 4 with explicit mention of an author or authors. Here is another formulation: constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and the logic of a story—more specifically, the story of a person’s life—where ‘story’ is understood as a conventional linear narrative. (Schechtman 1996, 96)

Dennett (1992) is another narrative theorist who expresses the view that the psychological process of constructing your own narrative creates yourself when he describes selves as ‘centers of narrative gravity.’ This needs to be understood in the context of Dennett’s (1987) less than fully realist approach to the mental. Centers of gravity, in his view, are abstracta and play a role in the explanation of the behavior of physical objects but, of themselves, are not physical. When he describes selves as ‘centers of narrative gravity,’ he signals that the narrative theory of the self does not give us a fully realist notion of the self. He points out that the unity of a person is something that is not complete and absolute, but is attributed on the basis of the (apparent) coordination in the behavior of the person. We can construct a narrative about another person, and, in doing that, we are constructing a certain abstraction. As well as attributing selves to others, we need to form that abstraction in our own case, too. We need to construct an account of our former
as well as current beliefs and desires to make our own actions make sense, and this is described as the need to create our own narratives. Having a self create a self creates an air of circularity, but Dennett’s lack of realism about selves reduces the problem. The lack of realism also means that the narrative does not have an author in any robust sense, in his view.

Owen Flanagan (1991, 1996) is a narrative theorist who follows Dennett in regarding selves as ‘centers of narrative gravity’ and thinking that identity admits of degrees. In discussing dissociative identity disorder (DID; formerly multiple personality disorder) he refers to Dennett’s norm of ‘one self per customer,’ the norm against which the condition is seen as a disorder. The ‘normal’ case for him, in the spirit of Dennett’s approach, is the multiplex self where a character is:

complex and his plans, projects, and desires are multifarious—and they are, to a certain extent, in tension with one another both synchronically and diachronically. (Flanagan 1996, 66)

See also Hardcastle and Flanagan (1999). DID has provided an obvious source of interest for philosophical enquiry into the self, but the real clinical significance of philosophical theories of the self is likely to be far broader, taking on the full range of conditions that involve in one way or another the breakdown or fragmentation of the self. For example, one of the cases that Lloyd Wells (2003) describes in the context of loss of self is Dr. Jones, the university professor with bipolar disorder. In this case, the 2-day cycle of depressive and manic days divides his life into two compartments, distinguished by the dominant mood. A narrative approach is in principle represent the difference between the compartments, for not only does a narrative identify the continuity in the activities and interactions in the manic days (and similarly in the activities and interactions in the depressive days) but also the narrative can capture the dominant mood. We should not think of a narrative being limited to a dry, factual chronology. Recall that Velleman (2003) ties the theme or plot of a narrative to an emotional pattern, in that case an identifiable pattern over time rather than a constant mood.

Although we have different notions of narrative and different views about how they apply to selves, we must remember that some philosophers deny the correctness of a narrative approach at all. Galen Strawson identifies the psychological narrative thesis we have been discussing as a descriptive thesis, and finds that the description does not apply to himself at all. He says, “I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form” (Strawson 2008, 194). We should note that Strawson’s claims about his own psychological make-up depend on the assumption that a narrative thesis requires awareness of the narrative, which will be addressed in Section 6. He distinguishes the descriptive thesis from what he calls ‘the ethical narrativity thesis’ concerning how it is allegedly a good thing to construct a self-narrative. This fares no better, in his view; he says that narrative self-articulation “almost always does more harm than good” (Strawson 2008, 205).

**Criticisms of Neo-Lockean Memory Theory**

A narrative approach to the self can be seen as a rival to recent analytic theories of personal identity involving psychological criteria, amongst which memory plays a leading role (Lewis 1983; Parfit 1984; Perry 1976; Shoemaker 1963; Williams 1973). Such theories typically refer back to John Locke (1979) as a source of the memory theory; however, see Schechtman (2005) for a rival interpretation of Locke. Ricoeur (1992) describes them as taking a reductionist approach in which persons are reduced to person stages (i.e., momentary stages of a person) and person stages are reduced to events. These events include mental events, such as experiences and actions, as well as physical events. The notion of a continuing person is thought to be definable by complicated relationships among person stages. The events, in this view he is attacking, are taken to be describable without attribution of them to a person.

Ricoeur does not think that such events can provide the basis for a self as a subject of experience. “But can what is one’s own be a particular case of the impersonal?” (Ricoeur 1992, 133). In effect, he
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is claiming that the ownership, the linking to self, is fundamental and required for the description of experience. Unlike the analytic philosopher’s notion of event, “the narrative event is defined by its relation to the very operation of configuration” (Ricoeur 1992, 142). In using narrative theory to articulate the self in this way, he establishes a tight mutual dependency between the self and its experiences. In formulating this point, it is important to have minimal assumptions about the nature of the self. The view that is recommended here, in which it is narrative threads that are tightly connected with experiences, avoids any strong assumptions about the nature and reality of selves.

A complementary point to Ricoeur’s can be found in Carr’s (1986, 21–30) description of a position found in phenomenological work that is in opposition to neo-Lockean theories. He discusses Husserl’s use of the experience of a melody (designed to illuminate our experience of the passage of time) to attack the assumption, arguably implicit in those broadly Lockean memory theories, that experiences are separable and distinct. This would lead to the flawed assumption that hearing someone whistling a tune can be reduced to a series of distinct experiences of him whistling particular notes. But, when we hear a tune, a particular note has a certain significance only in relation to the previous notes. Husserl describes a kind of retention of a previous note that is involved in the experience of the current note. Thus, each experience cannot be regarded as separate and distinct, for the quality of one experience inevitably involves others. The neo-Lockean approach may not have a mechanism to account for that, because it only has the notion of memory in which an earlier experience can be duplicated in current consciousness.

In a way that is reminiscent of the point taken from Husserl, Schechtman (1990) also opposes an atomism of experiences in her discussion of Parfit’s (1984) notion of a q-memory. Parfit attempts to fend off Butler’s (1736/1975) classic objection that memory only serves as an adequate criterion for personal identity if personal identity is presupposed. False memories do not create identity and we can only identify a veridical memory if it is already specified that the person remembering and the person having the experience are the same. Parfit’s well-known technique of avoiding that difficulty is to introduce the notion of q-memory (and q-intentions, etc.); a q-memory is one that is an apparent memory that is causally dependent in some appropriate way on an experience that someone genuinely did have, without presupposing that it is an experience of the same person.

The idea is that, although in reality we are only causally related to experiences in that special way when they are our own experiences, in principle I could have a memory that is causally related to someone else’s experience. A memory could have been surgically inserted, for example. In attacking the coherence of that possibility, Schechtman (1990) describes a case taken from Edward Casey (1987, 25–6) in which the author describes a memory of going to a movie with his family. The nub of the case is that many particular memories from that sequence could not be transferred coherently to anyone else, for those memories link tightly with others. The memory of going to the movie with that particular wife and those particular children would be totally jarring to anyone else. The case supports a kind of holism about memory.

Schechtman (1996) further develops her opposition to the neo-Lockean literature on personal identity. She argues that it conflates two questions: the re-identification question (what it is to be the same person through time) and the characterization question (what the characteristics of a person are). To put it briefly, she argues that the way the re-identification question is pursued, concerning how person stages need to be related to be part of one person, undermine the attempt to capture what is important to us about personal identity, namely four features: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation. The fundamental distinctness of the person stages is such that, however ingenious a unity relation you construct to show they form a person, you do not get the basic intuition of sameness that you require for survival as well as the other features. The reductionist approach, based on the re-identification question, is all wrong, she argues, and we need to ask what the characteristics of one person are both now and at other times to deal with what is important. In this way, Schechtman requires
a close mutual dependency between the self and experiences, much like Ricoeur.

In addressing the characterization question, she develops a narrative theory. Here is one way of seeing how a narrative could serve to express identity through time even while answering the characterization question. The person has the characteristic of possessing a narrative and that narrative itself embodies properties of the subject at different times in such a way as to present them as properties of a continuing subject. My immediate grasp of my self-narrative containing a certain experience can be understood to capture that intimate link between the experience and myself as its owner, which Ricoeur describes.

I want to suggest that contained in these interconnected themes there lies a germ of truth in narrative theory. The atomism that we find in the neo-Lockean theories does not do justice to the holism we find among experiences, nor does it do justice to the way experiences are essentially someone’s experiences. Narrative theory holds promise of overcoming both of those problems.

**Failure to Scale up to a Whole Person**

Supposing we accept that narrative theory has these benefits, what is the scope of the narrative we need to consider? The answer typically provided by narrative theorists, for example MacIntyre (1984, 205), is that we have to consider the narrative of a whole life, which has a beginning, middle, and end. It is this assumption I wish to question. Peter Lamarque comments on this point, saying:

What seriously undermines the narrative theory of personal identity is that only in the rarest of cases—full biographies or autobiographies—do individual narratives offer anything like a comprehensive coverage of whole lives. (Lamarque 2004, 404)

Paul Ricoeur also addresses the whole life issue, saying:

There is nothing in real life that serves as a narrative beginning; memory is lost in the hazes of early childhood. . . . As for my death, it will finally be recounted only in the stories of those who survive me. (Ricoeur 1992, 160)

Owen Flanagan says:

completion, closure, and a good end may well be less necessary for a good life than they are for a good story. (Flanagan 1991, 150)

This is a slightly different point, one connected with the ethical narrativity thesis, because we are not so much talking about the possibility of finishing one’s own story, but rather about a disanalogy between what is required for a good story and a good self-narrative.

I do not wish to use the absence of whole life narratives as a reason for rejecting a narrative approach in general, as Lamarque would have it, for I am impressed with how narrative threads capture a certain kind of holism among mental contents. On the other hand, I am not confident that a suitably qualified or nuanced version of narrative theory, such as that supplied by Hardcastle and Flanagan (1999), captures the whole picture of what it is to be a continuing self. To go down that route is to be in danger of stretching the notion of narrative so far that it can no longer play a substantial explanatory role. Thus, I wish to pursue a frankly mixed account in which narrative theory only plays one part, albeit a very significant part. This is not a position that has been proposed by any of the authors cited.

Within a person’s mental life are some narrative threads, which can be large and small; threads can be intertwined to form larger strands. At the smallest end, as Strawson (2008) scathingly says, there could be a narrative involved in making a cup of coffee. The removal of two coffee spoons from the drawer would be part of the larger process of making coffee and can only really be properly understood as part of that larger process. For Strawson, if making coffee is an example of a narrative, then that makes the claim that life involves narratives trivial. I would prefer to say that this is at one end of a spectrum of narrative threads. We are involved in projects of different sizes, some of which could last virtually a lifetime.

I have already suggested, citing Ricoeur, that narrative theories purport to capture the tight connection between a subject and an experience or action. It might be objected that a mere narrative thread, as opposed to a whole life narrative, fails to
provide us with the appropriate subject. But this, I contend, does not follow from the phenomenology of the situation. When I take two spoons from a drawer I cannot be an actor without what I am doing being integrated into a broader stretch of life in some way, and this provides a sense of a subject of experience and action. Maybe the narrative of making a cup of coffee is an insufficiently broad picture. However, we need not be driven to the other extreme in which the broader picture incorporates an account of where I went to primary school, when I got married, or the fate of my last article submission. Kennett and Matthews (2003) are persuasive in arguing for the importance of unity of agency at a time and through time for achieving the kind of life we value, such as being able to maintain a relationship with one’s child. Their argument does not rule out the possibility that persistent narrative threads can provide sufficient unity of agency to foster long-term goals.

These remarks leave us with a challenge. If we reject a neo-Lockean theory of personal identity, but also want to restrict narrative theory to narrative threads within a person, then we require some further materials to complete a theory of personal identity. The following two sections address that need.

**The Unconscious and Personality Traits**

Both the analytic and continental philosophical traditions relating to the self have discussed the topic primarily in terms of conscious experience, and, understandably, the use of narrative theory in this connection typically involves conscious experience. This could suggest a further feature of a narrative:

5. Narratives are available to consciousness.

This is challenged by Schechtman’s inclusion of what she calls ‘implicit narratives.’ She says that we do not need to have a narrative in an explicit, conscious form, although she does require that it be capable of articulation (Schechtman 1996, 114–9). A repressed past can affect present consciousness and in that way be part of the narrative. She also says that global characteristics of the past can “condition the present” (Schechtman 1996, 110). A person who, without reflecting upon it consciously, feels financially secure (on the basis of a financially secure upbringing) will approach decisions with a different feeling from one who feels financially insecure (on the basis of a different upbringing). However, these different outlooks are not explicable in terms of either occurrent mental states or dispositions to behave. They provide “a backdrop that affects the quality of almost all of one’s day-to-day experience” (Schechtman 1996, 111).

There are two issues that this makes us consider. The first is whether the unconscious is important in determining the unity of the self. The second is whether this unity is appropriately expressed using the concept of a narrative. As to the first issue, Schechtman’s observations about implicit narratives do challenge us to extend beyond the realm of consciousness in seeking the unifying characteristics of a person, because we can see how a structure that is largely unconscious casts a shadow in consciousness. Naturally, a psychodynamic approach to human psychology would lead us to deal with the unconscious in a much more extensive way in thinking about the self (Shafer 1992), but we will not pursue that here.

As to the second issue, it is doubtful whether Schechtman’s considerations need be expressed using the concept of a narrative in a way that is relevant to our current focus. The reality of the earlier upbringing could be important to include in a third-person narrative, for it represents a theory of how the person currently thinks, reacts and behaves the way they do. But that does not imply that these things can be included in the person’s self-narrative. I want to argue that the more useful concept of a narrative in this context is one containing Feature 5. Narrative threads are important to all of us in considering the way our thoughts, moods, reactions, and behavior hang together in coherent patterns. In a psychotherapeutic context, too, those threads may be important for the subject to describe and acknowledge. To extend the notion of a narrative to include something not available to the person tends to undermine the importance of those narrative threads as stories one has created and can tell. To support an understanding of
narrative that rules out implicit narratives in no way denies the importance of what Schechtman describes. It merely requires that it be introduced into the overall picture in a different way, which is what I shall do.

Later, Schechtman (2005) avoids talk of narratives while preserving the importance of the unconscious for personal identity, emphasizing dispositions and repressed memories. What replaces talk of narrative is talk of self-understanding, being intelligible to ourselves. Another who uses self-understanding as a central notion is Christman (2004, 710). The ‘backdrop to experience’ phenomenon provides a challenge not only to narrative theory, but also to such a notion of self-understanding. There seems to be no principled reason why such backdrop phenomena need be available to self-understanding. Maybe an important unifying feature of a person is an unconscious motivating force that they could never come to perceive or articulate.

Persistence of personality traits might, in a similar way, be considered to provide a unifying feature of a person and they surely have a source in the unconscious. Schechtman (2004) discusses the way continuity of personality appears in the work of psychological theorists of personal identity, notably Shoemaker (1984). She argues that continuity of personality is not adequately distinguished from continuity of consciousness in the work of the psychological theorists. She discusses Parfit’s (1984) case of the Russian nobleman who has socialist ideals and wishes to hand over the vast estates he will inherit to the peasants. Concerned that the inheritance will bring about a change in his values, he signs legal documents that put his affairs in the hands of his wife so that she will carry out his original wishes regardless of any later change of heart. In effect, he wishes her to take him not to have survived the change of values, or so the story goes.

Simon Beck (2008) criticizes Schechtman’s use of the example in various ways, being unconvinced that the loss of those values means failure to survive and querying the way she relies on that example, whereas previously she was suspicious of the way that psychological theorists relied so heavily on science fiction and other imaginary cases. Schechtman (2004) wants to draw the conclusion that personality traits are only significant in this context in conjunction with a particular biography so that continuity of personality should be considered in dynamic interaction with continuity of consciousness. That interaction is thought to require the creation of a narrative. Beck is not convinced that she has demonstrated that conclusion.

Schechtman has identified interesting cases where the unconscious fashions the self, but in fact a lot of behavior is infused with cultural influences or family influences that are not recognized by the subject. This could include how loud you talk, how close you stand to someone, or what form of eye contact you make. These things do not form part of an explicit narrative for many subjects, but they may have a role to play in the continuity that constitutes a person. The relationship between the unconscious and the self is a huge topic, but we need to return to the central theme.

The Structure of a Whole Person

The position of this article is that neo-Lockean accounts of the self or personal identity may be flawed in ways that narrative theory may rectify, but that narrative theory should not be assumed to require whole life narratives. This leaves us with work to do to explain the unity of a person. Although I have been suggesting that a narrative thread can be regarded in a narrow way as the author of an action, we also want to be able to attribute the action to the whole person. Here are some comments about the nature of the unity. For some people, the major narrative threads interweave tightly, so that work, family, and leisure activities interact frequently and consistently. In such a case, it is reasonable to assume that those narrative threads do form part of a master narrative. In other cases, work life, family life and leisure activity occur in different locations with different groups of people and generally do not connect in a rich way. Moreover, there can be very different moods and personality characteristics displayed in those different settings. In such a case, there are no strong grounds to assume that those narrative threads do form part of a master narrative. In other cases, work life, family life and leisure activity occur in different locations with different groups of people and generally do not connect in a rich way. Moreover, there can be very different moods and personality characteristics displayed in those different settings. In such a case, there are no strong grounds to assume that there must be a master narrative of any substantial kind. Even so, there will be certain moments, such as leaving-for-work moments, in which one narrative
thread connects up in consciousness with another narrative thread. This conscious linking of narrative threads may be a significant part of what it is to be a unified person, but should not be assumed to be the basis of an overarching narrative in any significant way.

An overarching narrative is not what is required to be a well-functioning person. What is more important is that she can access the appropriate narrative threads to deal with current circumstances. She could meet either a work colleague or a social acquaintance at the market and need to switch from her shopper’s narrative to the appropriate narrative. Although a DID patient will have severe problems in creating a consistent master narrative, we should not assume it is the absence of such a master narrative that is at the root of the disorder. More significant may be the inability to access the appropriate narrative for the situation. For the ‘normal’ person to be able to draw on a narrative appropriate to the circumstance suggests that there is a unity to the person at an unconscious level.

Thus, we have two brief suggestions about how narrative threads connect up to form a unified person: first, different narrative threads co-occur from time to time in consciousness, and second there is an unconscious ability to access the appropriate narrative thread. These brief suggestions clearly do not provide us with a rigorous theory of personal identity. Indeed, such a rigorous theory should not be expected if we do not take a fully realist view of persons. Following Dennett’s lead, we could regard the unity that is present as at best partial, such that talk of a self is a fiction. Where I differ from Dennett is that he provides a consistently narrative approach to selves, whereas I have a mixed picture.

**Psychotherapeutic Relevance**

It is not the purpose of this article to provide an analysis of clinical cases, let alone prescribe psychotherapeutic techniques, but a few words are in order about potential implications. Lloyd Wells’ patient Mary arrives at the conviction that everyone is like her, in the sense that they are not continuous, even though they embrace the fiction that they are (Wells 2003, 302–3). To an extent, I am endorsing Mary’s view, at least if continuity is thought to require the possession of a whole life narrative. It is important that patients with disorders of the self are not encouraged to adopt an idealized and unrealistic model of the level of narrative integration and unity in a healthy person. Incidentally, although the current focus is not on the specific practice of narrative therapy (White and Epston 1990), that practice is explicitly committed to the multiplicity of narratives within a person.

Working with a patient’s narratives and fostering more integrated and appropriate narratives may well be extremely beneficial, provided there is not the assumption, explicit or implicit, that the ultimate goal of treatment is the creation or re-creation of a whole life narrative. In fact, the tool of narrative creation could be effective even where it does not duplicate the state of the healthy person. Where a healthy person intuitively and unconsciously switches narratives to deal with the current setting and situation, the disordered person may need to work at the level of consciousness to link narratives explicitly to achieve the same result.

**Conclusion**

The position in this article is that narrative creation may be a significant feature of the self. We should attend to narrative strands within the self, without assuming that those narrative strands need compose a master narrative or whole life narrative. The narrative threads can be unified by links in consciousness and by unconscious processes, but we need not assume a metaphysically realist view about selves. This model of the self supports an acknowledgement of a multiplicity of narratives within the healthy person, while leaving room for fostering narrative coherence within psychotherapeutic practice.

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