



Narrativity and non-Narrativity

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I argue against two popular claims. The first is a descriptive, empirical claim about the nature of ordinary human experience which I call the psychological Narrativity thesis (PNT). According to PNT, 'each of us constructs and lives a "narrative" ... this narrative is us, our identities' (Sacks O. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. London: Duckworth; 1985, 110). The second is a normative, ethical claim which I call the ethical Narrativity thesis (ENT). According to ENT, we ought to live our lives narratively, or as a story: a 'basic condition of making sense of ourselves is that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*' and have an understanding of our lives 'as an unfolding story' (Taylor C. *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1989, 47–52). On this view a person 'creates his identity (only) by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life', and must be in possession of a full and 'explicit narrative (of his life) to develop fully as a person' (Schechtman M. *The Constitution of Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 1996, 93. © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. *WIREs Cogn Sci*

Talk of narrative is intensely fashionable in a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, clinical, social and experimental psychology, political theory, medicine, law, anthropology, literary studies, and religious studies. It is widely held that human beings typically experience or conceive of their lives as a narrative or story of some sort. I will call this the psychological Narrativity thesis (PNT), using the word 'Narrative' with a capital letter to denote a specifically psychological property. If one is Narrative

[N] one naturally sees or lives or experiences one's life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories.

To be *non-Narrative* is not to live one's life in this way. One may simply lack any Narrative tendency, or one may have a positively *anti-Narrative* tendency.

PNT is an empirical–psychological thesis about the way ordinary, normal human beings experience their lives: this is how we are, it says, this is our nature. But it is often coupled with an ethical or evaluative thesis, which has become a dogma in our time, and which I will call the ethical Narrativity thesis (ENT). This states that a richly Narrative outlook on one's life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood.

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I want to consider whether PNT and ENT are true. There are four main possibilities:

1. PNT is true, ENT is false. We are indeed deeply Narrative in our thinking, but it is not a good thing. It involves 'bad faith' or 'inauthenticity'. The protagonist of Sartre's novel *La Nausée* holds something like this view.¹ It is also attributed to the Stoics, especially Marcus Aurelius.
2. PNT is false, ENT is true. We are not all naturally Narrative in our thinking, but we should be. We need to be in order to live a good life. There are versions of this view in Plutarch (Ref 2 pp. 214–217) and a host of present-day writings (see e.g., Refs 3–5).
3. Both PNT and ENT are true. All normal, non-pathological human beings are naturally Narrative, and Narrativity is crucial to a good life. This view does not entail that everything is as it should be. It leaves room for the idea that many of us would profit from being more Narrative than we are, and the idea that we can get our self-narratives wrong in one way or another.
4. Both PNT and ENT are false. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative. It is not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time.

Possibility 3 is the dominant view today, followed by 2. I endorse 4: I think the current widespread acceptance of 3 or 2 hinders human self-understanding, closes down crucial avenues of thought, impoverishes our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distresses those who do not fit the PNT/ENT model, and is potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.

The first thing I want to put in place is a distinction between (1) one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself as a human being taken as a whole, and (2) one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself rather as an inner mental entity or 'self' of some sort—I will call this one's 'self-experience'. When Henry James says, of one of his early books, 'I think of ... the masterpiece in question ... as the work of quite another person than myself ... a rich ... relation, say, who ... suffers me still to claim a shy fourth cousinship' (Ref 6, pp. 562–563). He has no doubt that he is the same *human being* as the author of that book, but he does not feel he is the same *self* or *person* as the author of that book. I am going to take the viability of the distinction between (1) and (2) for granted and use it to set up another distinction between two opposed psychological traits, which I will call *Diachronic* and *non-Diachronic*.

DIACHRONIC AND NON-DIACHRONIC

The basic form of Diachronic self-experience is that one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self or person as opposed to a whole human being, as something that was there in the (more or less distant) past and will be there in the (more or less distant) future where 'more or less distant' allows for considerable variation. I take it that many people are naturally Diachronic, and that many who are Diachronic are also Narrative in their outlook on life.

If one is *non-Diachronic* one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (more or less distant) past and will be there in the (more or less distant) future. One has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (more or less distant) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being. (Elsewhere,^{7,8} I use the term 'Episodic' instead of 'non-Diachronic'. I drop it here to cancel any suggestion that non-Diachronics are bound to lead choppy lives, or cannot show great steadiness of purpose and character.)

The non-Diachronic/Diachronic distinction is not the same as the Narrative/non-Narrative distinction, as will emerge, but there are marked correlations between them. Non-Diachronics, e.g., unlike Diachronics, are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms.

The Diachronic and non-Diachronic styles of temporal being are not absolute or exceptionless. Predominantly, non-Diachronic individuals may sometimes connect to charged events in their further pasts in such a way that they feel that those events happened to them—embarrassing memories are a good example. They may anticipate events in their further futures in such a way that they think that those events are going to happen to them—thoughts of death can be a good example. So too predominantly Diachronic individuals may sometimes experience a non-Diachronic lack of linkage with well-remembered parts of their past. I suspect that a human being's basic position on the Diachronic/non-Diachronic spectrum is likely to be a matter of brain chemistry, and that marked differences in 'temporal temperament' will be found across all cultures, with the same general spread in a so-called revenge culture, with its essentially Diachronic emphasis, as in a more happy-go-lucky culture. This is not to say that environmental factors cannot also be very important; one's exact position in Diachronic/non-Diachronic/Narrative/non-Narrative state-space may vary significantly over time according to what one is doing or thinking about, one's state of health, and so on, and it may change markedly with increasing age.

Among those whose writings show them to be markedly non-Diachronic, I propose Montaigne, Shaftesbury, Laurence Sterne, Coleridge, Stendhal, Hazlitt, Emily Dickinson, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, Jorge-Luis Borges, Iris Murdoch (a strongly Diachronic person who is a natural storyteller), Freddie Ayer, and Bob Dylan. Proust is another candidate, for all his remembering (which may be inspired by his non-Diachronic nature). Diachronicity stands out less clearly, because I take it the norm (the 'unmarked position'), but one may perhaps begin with Plato, St. Augustine, Heidegger, Wordsworth, Dostoevsky, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and all the champions of Narrativity in the current ethico-psychological debate.

How does the Diachronic/non-Diachronic distinction relate to the Narrative/non-Narrative distinction? I need to say something more about the non-Diachronic life, and then about Narrativity. I find myself to be relatively non-Diachronic, and strongly anti-Narrative, so I will use myself as an example.

I have a past, like any human being. I have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about it, and

I also remember some of my past experiences ‘from the inside’, as philosophers say. And yet I have no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Neither do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.

That is one way to put it—to speak in terms of limited interest. Another way is to say that it seems clear to me, when I am experiencing or apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future in question is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS, the human being. I have no significant sense that *I*—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past, and it seems clear to me that this is not a failure of feeling. It is, rather, a registration of a fact about what *I* am—about what the thing that is currently considering this problem is. I am well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and fully accept that there is a sense in which it has special relevance to me now, including special emotional and moral relevance. At the same time I have no sense that *I* was there in the past, and think it obvious that *I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact. My practical concern for my future, which I believe to be within the normal human range (low end), appears to be biologically—viscerally—grounded and autonomous in such a way that I can experience it as something immediately felt even though I have no significant sense that it will be me who is there in the future.⁷

NARRATIVITY AND REVISION

Narrativity does not admit of precise definition, but the idea can be sufficiently illustrated by quotation. Oliver Sacks holds that ‘each of us constructs and lives a “narrative”’. He says that ‘this narrative *is* us, our identities’ (Ref 9, p. 110). Jerry Bruner writes of ‘the stories we tell about our lives’. ‘Self’, he says, ‘is a perpetually rewritten story’; ‘in the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives’ (Ref 10, pp. 11, 15, 12, Ref 11, p. 53). Dan Dennett claims that ‘we are all virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behaviour, and we always try to put the best “faces” on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. The chief fictional character at the centre of that autobiography is one’s self’ (Ref 12, p. 1029). Marya Schechtman twists PNT and ENT tightly together. A person, she says, ‘creates his identity [only] by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life’. One must be in possession of a full and ‘explicit

narrative [of one’s life] to develop fully as a person’ (Ref 4, pp. 93, 119). Charles Taylor presents it this way: a ‘basic condition of making sense of ourselves is that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*’ and have an understanding of our lives ‘as an unfolding story’. This is not ‘an optional extra’; our lives exist ‘in a space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer’. We must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest’ [and] must see our lives in story (Ref 5, pp. 47, 51–52; see also Ref 3, pp. 203–204).

Is this true? I do not think so. The supporters of PNT and ENT may be right about themselves. They may even be right about the majority of human beings. I think nevertheless that ENT is false as a general claim, and that many risk being thrown off their own truth by being led to believe that Narrativity is necessary for a good life. My own conviction is that the best lives almost never—perhaps never—involve this kind of self-telling.

One problem for the supporters of Narrativity is the danger of unconscious falsifying revision—fictionalization, confabulation—of one’s ‘self-narrative’. I will call this *Revision* for short. Revision may sometimes begin consciously, with deliberate lies told to others, e.g., and it may have semi-conscious instars, but one has not engaged in genuine Revision in the present sense unless or until one no longer has any awareness of having falsified anything. It is true that the conscious/non-conscious border is murky and porous, but cases of Revision are clear for all that—and extremely common.

Consider now the *Revision Thesis* (RT), which states that Narrativity always involves Revision. If RT is true, this is likely to be bad news for the supporters of ENT: they are unlikely to welcome the idea that ethical success depends essentially on some sort of falsification (although some may accept it on the ground that—in T. S. Eliot’s words—‘human kind cannot bear very much reality’). I do not think RT is true, in fact. For although almost all human Narrativity is doubtless compromised by Revision, it does not seem to be inevitable.

It is well known that autobiographical memory is an essentially *constructive* and *reconstructive* phenomenon rather than a merely *reproductive* one; memory deletes, abridges, edits, reorders, italicizes.^{13–17} This does not, however, inevitably involve Revision as currently defined, for reconstruction may be essentially fabrication-free reordering. Many think we are all incorrigible self-fabulists,^{10,18,19} but it seems pretty clear that this is not universally true. Some people are self-fabulists all the way down. In others, especially those who lack ‘high self-esteem’,

autobiographical memory may be fundamentally non-distorting, whatever automatic processes of remolding and recasting it involves.^{13,20–23}

Some think that Revision is always *charged*, i.e., always motivated by an interconnected core group of moral emotions including pride, self-love, conceit, shame, regret, remorse, and guilt. Some go further, claiming with Nietzsche that we always revise in our own favor: “I have done that”, says my memory. “I cannot have done that”, says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields’ (Ref 24, p. 68). It seems, however, that neither of these claims is true. The claim that all Revision is charged can be greatly improved by the inclusion of things like modesty, low self-esteem, gratitude, and forgiveness in the core group of motivating moods and emotions: some people are just as likely to revise to their own detriment and to others’ advantage as the other way round. Some, though, may fall into Revision simply because they cannot find satisfying narrative form in their lives and in any case without being motivated by a wish to preserve or restore self-respect. John Dean’s recall of his conversations with Nixon at the Watergate hearings is often proposed as a case of uncharged Revision (see e.g., Refs 13,25).

‘Flashbulb’ memories, such as the memory of what was one doing when one heard about 9/11, can be amazingly inaccurate—astonishingly so given our certainty that we remember accurately (see e.g., Ref 26, chapter 2)—but the Revision they involve does not seem to be notably charged, in the present sense. When Bernard Malamud claims that ‘all biography is ultimately fiction’, simply on the grounds that ‘there is no life that can be captured wholly, as it was’,²⁷ there is no implication that it must also be ultimately untrue.

Strictly speaking, then, ENT survives the threat posed by RT, although in practice Revision is almost inevitable. Telling and retelling one’s past leads to changes, smoothings, enhancements, shifts away from the facts, and recent research has shown that this is not just a human psychological foible. It turns out to be an inevitable consequence of the mechanics of the neurophysiological process of laying down memories that every studied conscious recall of past events brings an alteration (see e.g., Ref 15). The more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you are likely to move away from accurate self-understanding. Some are constantly telling their daily experiences to others in a storying way and with great gusto. They are drifting ever further off the truth. Others never do this, and when they are obliged to convey facts about their lives they do it clumsily and uncomfortably, in a way that is somehow essentially and powerfully

narrative-resistant. These are the anti-Narratives, those for whom any storying of their life seems to be missing the point even if the facts are right.

SELF-UNDERSTANDING WITHOUT NARRATIVITY

Suppose Socrates is right that ‘the unexamined life is not a life for a human being’—right that a reflective attitude to oneself and one’s life is a necessary part of almost any good human life. And suppose reflection on one’s own past life is almost always a necessary part of such self-examination. It does not follow that one needs to be specifically *Narrative* in the sense defined, or even *Diachronic*, in order to achieve self-understanding. Narrative self-articulation is natural for some—and perhaps even helpful. In others it is highly unnatural and potentially ruinous. (My suspicion—but this would need considerable argument—is that it is likely to do more harm than good.) Nor is it clear that the examined life is always a good thing. People can develop and deepen in valuable ways without any sort of explicit, specifically Narrative reflection, just as musicians transform their playing by practice sessions without recalling those sessions. The business of living well is, for many, a completely non-Narrative project. Certain sorts of self-understanding may be necessary for a good human life, but they may be osmotic, systemic, not staged in consciousness.

Isn’t the acquisition of self-understanding in psychotherapy, at least, an essentially Narrative project? Well, it is true that therapy standardly involves identifying key *causal connections* between features of one’s early life and the way one is at present. But even when the thing one learns is of the form ‘It’s because X and Y happened to me as a child that I am now Z’, there need not be anything distinctively or even remotely Narrative in one’s psychological attitude to the connections, any more than there need to be when one discovers as an adult that a (physical) scar on one’s arm was caused by one’s falling out of a pram. This is not a condition of effective therapy—and one certainly does not have to have any Diachronic sense of identification with the child encountered in therapy. We are all products of our pasts, including our very early pasts, in many profoundly important respects. But it simply does not follow that self-understanding, or the best kind of self-understanding, must take a narrative form. If I were charged to make my self-understanding explicit, I might illustrate my view of myself by reference to things I (GS) have done, but it certainly would not follow that I had a Diachronic outlook, still less a Narrative one.

Some may still think that the non-Diachronic life must be deprived in some way, but happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound. Some think non-Diachronics cannot really know true friendship, or even be loyal. Montaigne refutes them: a great non-Diachronic famous for friendship, who judged that he was ‘better at friendship than at anything else’ although ‘there is nobody less suited than I am to start talking about memory. I can find hardly a trace of it in myself; I doubt if there is any other memory in the world as grotesquely faulty as mine is!’ (Ref 28, p. 32) Montaigne finds that he is often misjudged and misunderstood, for when he admits he has a very poor memory people assume that he must suffer from ingratitude. ‘They judge my affection by my memory’, he comments, and are of course wrong to do so (Ref 28, p. 33). A gift for friendship does not require any ability to recall past shared experiences in detail, nor any tendency to value them. Friendship reveals itself in how one is in the present.

Can non-Diachronics be properly moral beings? Of course—though the question troubles many (see e.g., Ref 29). Diachronicity is not a necessary condition of a properly moral existence, nor of a proper sense of responsibility (see e.g., Refs 8,30). And Narrativity seems as likely to be an affliction or a bad habit as to be a prerequisite of a good or ethical life. It risks a strange commodification of life and time—of ‘soul’, understood in a strictly secular sense; it risks missing the point. ‘We live beyond any tale that we happen to enact’ (Ref 31, p. 47).

CONCLUSION

I have argued that it is false that all human beings naturally see their lives in narrative terms, and false that they ought to do so. Successful psychotherapy should not be thought to require the elaboration of a narrative of one’s life. Those who do conceive their lives in narrative terms run a considerable risk of falsifying the facts, in a way that is unlikely to be conducive to their flourishing.

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