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Against Narrativity

1

Talk of narrative is intensely fashionable in a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, theology, anthropology, sociology, political theory, literary studies, religious studies, psychotherapy, medicine, and law. There is widespread agreement that human beings typically experience their lives as a narrative or story, or at least as some sort of collection of stories. I am going to call this the *psychological Narrativity thesis*, using the word ‘Narrative’ with a capital letter to denote a specifically psychological property or outlook: if one is Narrative then (as a first approximation)

[N] 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.

As it stands the psychological Narrativity thesis is a straightforwardly descriptive, 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 a normative thesis, which I will call the *ethical Narrativity thesis*, according to which a richly Narrative outlook on one’s life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood.

The descriptive thesis and the normative thesis have four main combinations. One may, to begin, think the descriptive thesis true and the normative one false. One may think that we are indeed deeply Narrative in our thinking and that it’s not a good thing. The protagonist of Sartre’s novel *La nausée* holds something like this view.¹ It is also attributed to the Stoics, especially Marcus Aurelius.

Second, and contrariwise, one may think the descriptive thesis false and the normative one true. One may grant that we are not all naturally Narrative in our thinking but insist that we should be, and need to be, in order to live a good life. There are versions of this view in Plutarch² and a host of present-day writings.

Third, one may think both theses are true: one may think that all normal non-pathological human beings are naturally Narrative and also that Narrativity is crucial to a good life. This is the dominant view in the academy today, followed by the second view. It does not entail that everything is as it should be; it leaves plenty of 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.

¹ Sartre 1938.

² See e.g. 100 CE: 214–17 (473B–474B).

Finally, one may think that both theses are false. This is my view. I think the current widespread acceptance of the third view is regrettable. It's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative. I think the second and third views hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.

2

The first thing I want to put in place is a distinction between one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole, and one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or 'self' of some sort—I'll 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',³ 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. It is this phenomenon of experiencing oneself as a self that concerns me here. One of the most important ways in which people tend to think of themselves (quite independently of religious belief) is as things whose persistence conditions are not obviously or automatically the same as the persistence conditions of a human being considered as a whole. Petrarch, Proust, Parfit, and thousands of others have given this idea vivid expression. I'm going to take its viability for granted and set up another distinction—between 'Episodic' and 'Diachronic' self-experience—in terms of it.

3

The basic form of Diachronic self-experience is that

[D] one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future

something that has relatively long-term diachronic continuity, something that persists over a long stretch of time, perhaps for life. 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 Episodic, by contrast,

[E] one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.

³ 1915: 562–3.

One has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) 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. Episodics are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms.⁴

The Episodic and Diachronic styles of temporal being are radically opposed, but they are not absolute or exceptionless. Predominantly Episodic individuals may sometimes connect to charged events in their pasts in such a way that they feel that those events happened to them—embarrassing memories are a good example—and anticipate events in their futures in such a way that they think that those events are going to happen to them—thoughts of future death can be a good example. So too predominantly Diachronic individuals may sometimes experience an Episodic lack of linkage with well-remembered parts of their past. It may be that the basic Episodic disposition is less common in human beings than the basic Diachronic disposition. I suspect that the fundamentals of temporal temperament are genetically determined, and that we have here to do with a deep ‘individual difference variable’—to put it in the language of experimental psychology. If this is right individual variation in time-style, Episodic or Diachronic, Narrative or non-Narrative, will be found across all cultures, so that the same general spread will be found in a so-called ‘revenge culture’, with its essentially Diachronic emphasis, as in a more happy-go-lucky culture.⁵ Compatibly with that, one’s exact position in the Episodic/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.

Certainly poor memory has nothing to do with Episodicity. In his autobiography John Updike—a man with a powerful memory and a highly consistent character—says of himself ‘I have the persistent sensation, in my life and art, that I am just beginning.’⁶ I have the same sensation, and I think Updike accurately describes how things are for many people when it comes to their experience of being in time and, in particular, their sense of themselves as selves. But he shows by his own memorable case that this experience of always beginning has nothing essentially to do with having a poor autobiographical memory, let alone one that almost never impinges spontaneously on one’s current life.⁷

⁴ The Episodic/Diachronic distinction is not the same thing as the Narrative/non-Narrative distinction, as will emerge; but there are marked correlations between them.

⁵ Although a culture could in theory exert significant selective pressure on a psychological trait. For descriptions of revenge cultures see Blumenfeld 2003.

⁶ 1989: 239. See also the remarkable Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) an extreme Episodic: ‘I always feel as if I’ve just been born/Into an endlessly new world’ (1914: 48).

⁷ The sense of perpetual beginning is not at all a sense of perpetual inchoateness. That which is always launching out may be well or strongly formed and may be felt to be. Updike also talks in a Narrative fashion of our ‘religious . . . persistence, against all the powerful post-Copernican, post-Darwinian evidence that we are insignificant accidents within a vast uncaused churning, in feeling that our life is a story, with a pattern and a moral and an inevitability’ (1989: 216); and although this has no resonance for some, it fulfils a powerful psychological need in many and is common.

In one respect, I think that the sense of being always just beginning is nothing more than an accurate reflection or surfacing in consciousness of the actual nature of all conscious being in time, at least in the human case. I think it may also be an ever-present feature of ordinary everyday experience that is accessible to everyone but rarely attended to.⁸ But this view may simply reflect my own experience. And if there is any respect in which the experience of being always just beginning is universal, then this, at least, cannot be part of what distinguishes Episodics from Diachronics.

It may be said that the sense of perpetual beginning is simply more salient or vivid for Episodics; but it need not be. An Episodic considering the character of her present experience may feel that consciousness is a flowing stream, and have no particular positive experience of perpetual rebeginning, while lacking any significant sense that she was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future. A Diachronic may experience consciousness as something that is always re-engaging or always setting out without feeling that this undercuts his sense that he was there in the past and will be there in the (further) future. Episodics may well have a general tendency to experience things more in one way than the other, and so too Diachronics, but there are perhaps no necessary linkages between the Diachronic and Episodic dispositions and these sorts of phenomenological particularities. The key—defining—difference is simply as stated: it is the difference between those who do and those who do not naturally figure or experience themselves, considered as selves or subjects, as things that were there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.⁹

Diachronics and Episodics are likely to misunderstand one another badly. Diachronics may feel that there is something chilling, empty, and deficient about the Episodic life. They may fear it, although it is no less full or emotionally articulated than the Diachronic life, no less thoughtful or sensitive, no less open to friendship, love, and loyalty. Certainly the two forms of life differ significantly in their ethical and emotional form. But it would be a great mistake to think that the Episodic life is bound to be less vital or in some way less engaged, or less humane, or less humanly fulfilled. If Heideggerians think that Episodics are necessarily ‘inauthentic’ in their experience of being in time, so much the worse for their notion of authenticity.¹⁰ If Episodics are moved to respond by casting aspersions on the Diachronic life—finding it somehow macerated or clogged, say, or excessively self-concerned, inauthentically second-order—they too will be mistaken if they think it an essentially inferior form of human life.

There is one sense in which Episodics are by definition more located in the present than Diachronics, so far as their self-experience is concerned. But it does not follow, and is not true, that Diachronics are less present in the present moment than Episodics, any more than it follows, or is true, that the present is somehow less informed by or responsible to the past in the Episodic life than it is in the Diachronic life. What is true is that the informing and the responsiveness have different

⁸ I hope to discuss this in *Life in Time*. For a sketch, see Strawson 1997: §9.

⁹ As noted, this difference tends to run alongside the difference between Narratives and non-Narratives, but is certainly not coextensive with it.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Heidegger 1927.

characteristics and different experiential consequences in the two cases. Faced with sceptical Diachronics, who insist that Episodics are (essentially) dysfunctional in the way they relate to their own past, Episodics will reply that the past can be present or alive in the present without being present or alive *as* the past. The past can be alive—arguably more genuinely alive—in the present simply in so far as it has helped to shape the way one is in the present, just as musicians’ playing can incorporate and body forth their past practice without being mediated by any explicit memory of it. What goes for musical development goes equally for ethical development, and Rilke’s remarks on poetry and memory, which have a natural application to the ethical case, suggest one way in which the Episodic attitude to the past may have an advantage over the Diachronic: ‘For the sake of a single poem’, he writes, ‘you must have . . . many . . . memories And yet it is not enough to have memories For the memories themselves are not important.’ They give rise to a good poem ‘only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves’.¹¹

Among those whose writings show them to be markedly Episodic I propose Michel de Montaigne, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Laurence Sterne, Coleridge, Stendhal, Hazlitt, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, Jorge-Luis Borges, Fernando Pessoa, Iris Murdoch (a strongly Episodic person who is a natural story teller), Freddie Ayer, Bob Dylan. Proust is another candidate, for all his remembrance (which may be inspired by his Episodicity); also Emily Dickinson. Diachronicity stands out less clearly, because it is I take it the norm (the ‘unmarked position’), but one may begin with Plato, St Augustine, Heidegger, Wordsworth, Dostoevski, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and all the champions of Narrativity in the current ethico-psychological debate. I find it easy to classify my friends, many of whom are intensely Diachronic, unlike my parents, who are on the Episodic side.¹²

4

How do Episodicity and Diachronicity relate to Narrativity? Suppose that being Diachronic is at least necessary for being Narrative. Since it’s true by definition that if you’re Diachronic you’re not Episodic and conversely, it follows that if you’re Episodic you’re not Narrative. But I think that the strongly Episodic life is one normal,

¹¹ 1910: 91.

¹² In an earlier published version of this paper I classified Joseph Conrad as Narrative, and this was cogently questioned by John Attridge in the Letters column of the *Times Literary Supplement* (10 December 2004). In his ‘personal remembrance’ of Conrad, Ford Madox Ford observes that ‘Conrad had very strongly the idea of the Career. A career was for him something a little sacred: any career A frame of mind, a conception of life, according to which a man did not take stock of the results of his actions upon himself, as it were at long range, was something that he had never contemplated’ (1924: 130–5). It seems, though, that this was an effort that Conrad made, something that did not flow from any natural Narrativity, something learnt, like the neatness of sailors, to which Ford compares it. Attridge notes Conrad’s ‘youthful indifference to the overall plot of his existence’, and quotes Conrad’s judgement of his youthful self as ‘not having any notion of life as an enterprise that could be mismanaged’.

non-pathological form of life for human beings, and indeed one good form of life for human beings, one way to flourish. So if Diachronicity is necessary for Narrativity (see §9 below) then I reject both the psychological Narrativity thesis and the normative, ethical Narrativity thesis.

I need to say more about the Episodic life, and since I find myself to be relatively Episodic, I'll use myself as an example. I have a past, like any human being, and I know perfectly well that I have a past. 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 absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.

That's 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. This is more dramatic, but I think it is equally correct, when I am figuring myself as a self. 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 will use 'I*' to represent that which I now experience myself to be when I'm apprehending myself specifically as an inner mental presence or self. 'I*' comes with a large family of cognate forms—'me*', 'my*', 'you*', 'oneself*', 'themselves*', and so on. The metaphysical presumption built into these terms is that they succeed in making genuine reference to an inner mental something that is reasonably called a 'self'. But it doesn't matter whether or not the presumption is correct.¹³

So, it's clear to me that events in my remoter past didn't happen to me*. But what does this amount to? It certainly doesn't mean that I don't have any autobiographical memories of these past experiences. I do. Nor does it mean that my autobiographical memories don't have what philosophers call a 'from-the-inside' character. Some of them do. And they are certainly the experiences of the human being that I am. It does not, however, follow from this that I experience them as having happened to me*, or indeed that they did happen to me*. They certainly do not present as things that happened to me*, and I think I'm strictly, literally correct in thinking that they did not happen to me*.

—That can't be right. If one of my remembered experiences has a from-the-inside character it must—by definition—be experienced as something that happened to me*.

This may seem plausible at first, but it's a mistake: the from-the-inside character of a memory can detach completely from any sense that one is the subject of the remembered experience. My memory of falling out of a boat has an essentially from-the-inside character, visually (the water rushing up to meet me),

¹³ The term 'I*' and its cognates can function in phenomenological contexts to convey the content of a form of experience that incorporates the presumption whether or not the presumption is actually correct. I'll omit the '*' when it's not necessary.

kinaesthetically, proprioceptively, and so on.¹⁴ It certainly does not follow that it carries any feeling or belief that what is remembered happened to me*, to that which I now apprehend myself to be when I am apprehending myself specifically as a self.

This doesn't follow even when emotion figures in the from-the-inside character of the autobiographical memory. The inference from [1] The memory has a from-the-inside character in emotional respects to [2] The memory is experienced as something that happened to me* is simply not valid, although for many people [1] and [2] are often or usually true together.

For me this is a plain fact of experience. I'm well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there's 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. As for my practical concern for my future, which I believe to be within the normal human range (low end), it is 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 I* will be there in the future.

5

So much, briefly, for the Episodic life. What about the Narrative life? And what might it mean to say that human life is 'narrative' in nature? And must you be Diachronic to be Narrative? There are many questions.

One clear statement of the psychological Narrativity thesis is given by Roquentin in Sartre's novel *La nausée*:

a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him *in terms of* these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.¹⁵

Sartre sees the narrative, story-telling impulse as a defect, regrettable. He accepts the psychological Narrativity thesis while rejecting the ethical Narrativity thesis. He thinks human Narrativity is essentially a matter of bad faith, of radical (and typically irremediable) inauthenticity, rather than as something essential for authenticity.

The pro-Narrative majority may concede to Sartre that Narrativity can go wrong while insisting that it's not all bad and that it is necessary for a good life. I'm with Sartre on the ethical issue, but I want now to consider some statements of the psychological Narrativity thesis.

¹⁴ It does not have any sort of 'from-the-outside' character (that would be a bit like my seeing a film of myself falling taken by a third party).

¹⁵ 1938: 64. Sartre is as much concerned with relatively short-term passages of life as with life as a whole.

It is as I've said widely believed. Oliver Sacks, for example, holds that 'each of us constructs and lives a "narrative"'. He says that 'this narrative *is* us, our identities'. The distinguished psychologist Jerry Bruner writes similarly of 'the stories we tell about our lives'. He claims that 'self is a perpetually rewritten story', and that 'in the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives'.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Marya Schechtman goes further, twisting the ethical and the psychological Narrativity theses tightly together in a valuably forthright manner. 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'.¹⁸

Charles Taylor presents it this way: a 'basic condition of making sense of ourselves', he says, 'is that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*' and have an understanding of our lives 'as an unfolding story'. This is not, he thinks, 'an optional extra'; our lives exist 'in a space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer'.¹⁹ He is backed up by Claire in Doug Copeland's novel *Generation X*: 'Claire . . . breaks the silence by saying that it's not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. "Either our lives become stories, or there's no way to get through them"'; but Taylor builds a lot more ethical weight into what's involved in getting through life. It is

because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and hence determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, [that] we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest' [and] must see our lives in story.²⁰

This, he says, is an 'inescapable structural requirement of human agency',²¹ and Paul Ricoeur appears to concur:

How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?²²

Here my main puzzlement is about what it might be to 'give an ethical character to [one's] own life taken as a whole' in some explicit way, and about why on earth, in the middle of the beauty of being, it should be thought to be important to do this. I think that those who think in this way are motivated by a sense of their own importance or significance that is absent in other human beings. Many of

¹⁶ Sacks 1985: 110; Bruner 1987: 11, 15, 12; 1994: 53.

¹⁷ Dennett, D. (1988), *Times Literary Supplement*, 16–22 September.

¹⁸ Schechtman 1997: 93, 119. ¹⁹ 1989: 47, 52.

²⁰ 1989: 51–2. I reject the 'because' and the second 'hence'.

²¹ 1989: 52. ²² 1990: 158.

them, connectedly, have religious commitments. They are wrapped up in forms of religious belief that are—like almost all religious belief—really all about self.²³

Alasdair MacIntyre is perhaps the founding figure in the modern Narrativity camp, and his view is similar to Taylor's. 'The unity of an individual life', he says, 'is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask "What is the good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. . . .' The unity of a human life, he continues,

is the unity of a narrative quest . . . [and] the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria for success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest A quest for what? . . . a quest for the good . . . the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man.²⁴

MacIntyre's claim seems at first non-psychological: a good life is one that has narrative unity. But a good life is one spent seeking the good life, and there is a strong suggestion that seeking the good life requires taking up a Narrative perspective; in which case narrative unity requires Narrativity.

Is any of this true? I don't think so. It seems to me that MacIntyre, Taylor and all other supporters of the ethical Narrativity thesis are really just talking about themselves. It may be that what they are saying is true for them, both psychologically and ethically. This may be the best ethical project that people like themselves can hope to engage in.²⁵ But even if it is true for them it is not true for other types of ethical personality, and many are likely to be thrown right 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 involve this kind of self-telling, and that we have here yet another deep divider of the human race.

When a Narrative like John Campbell claims that 'identity [through time] is central to what we care about in our lives: one thing I care about is what I have made of my life'²⁶ I'm as bewildered as Goronwy Rees when he writes

For as long as I can remember it has always surprised and slightly bewildered me that other people should take it so much for granted that they each possess what is usually called 'a character'; that is to say, a personality [or personality-possessing self] with its own continuous history I have never been able to find anything of that sort in myself How much I admire those writers who are actually able to record the growth of what they call their personality, describe the conditions which determined its birth, lovingly trace the curve of its

²³ Excessive self-concern is much more likely to be the cause of religious belief in someone who has come to religion than in someone who has been born into it. That does not change the fact that religious belief in general, ostensibly self-denying, is one of the fundamental vehicles of human narcissism.

²⁴ 1981: 203–4.

²⁵ One problem with it, and it is a deep problem, is that one is almost certain to get one's 'story' wrong, in some more or less sentimental way—unless, perhaps, one has the help of a truly gifted therapist.

²⁶ 1994: 190.

development For myself it would be quite impossible to tell such a story, because at no time in my life have I had that enviable sensation of constituting a continuous personality As a child this did not worry me, and if indeed I had known at that time of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*The Man without Qualities*, a novel by Robert Musil], the man without qualities, I would have greeted him as my blood brother and rejoiced because I was not alone in the world; as it was, I was content with a private fantasy of my own in which I figured as Mr. Nobody.²⁷

Unlike Rees, I have a perfectly good grasp of myself as having a certain personality, but I'm completely uninterested in the answer to the question 'What has GS made of his life?', or 'What have I made of my life?'. I'm living it, and this sort of thinking about it is no part of it. This does not mean that I am in any way irresponsible. It is just that what I care about, in so far as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now. The way I am now is profoundly shaped by my past, but it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as such. I agree with the Earl of Shaftesbury:

The metaphysicians . . . affirm that if memory be taken away, the self is lost. [But] what matter for memory? What have I to do with that part? If, *whilst I am*, I am as I should be, what do I care more? And thus let me lose *self* every hour, and be twenty successive selves, or new selves, 'tis all one to me: so [long as] I lose not my opinion [i.e. my overall outlook, my character, my moral identity]. If I carry that with me 'tis I; all is well. . . . —The *now*; the *now*. Mind this: in this is all.²⁸

I think, then, that the ethical Narrativity thesis is false, and that the psychological Narrativity thesis is also false in any non-trivial version. What do I mean by non-trivial? Well, if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial.²⁹

Is there some burden on me to explain the popularity of the two theses, given that I think that they're false? Hardly. Theorizing human beings tend to favour false views in matters of this kind. I do, though, think that intellectual fashion is part of the explanation. I also suspect that those who are drawn to write on the subject of 'narrativity' tend to have strongly Diachronic and Narrative outlooks or personalities, and generalize from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else.³⁰

²⁷ 1960: 9–10. Pessoa also experiences himself as not really having or being a specific self at all, and this feature, valued in many religious traditions, may well be positively correlated with Episodicity when it occurs naturally. Pessoa, however, experiences himself as multiply personalitied, and this is quite another matter.

²⁸ Shaftesbury 1698–1712: 136–7; Epictetus is an important influence.

²⁹ Taylor is explicit that it is when I am not 'dealing with such trivial questions as where I shall go in the next five minutes but with the issue of my place relative to the good', that 'making sense of my present action . . . requires a narrative understanding of my life' (1989: 48).

³⁰ I think this may be the greatest single source of unhappiness in human intercourse.

6

—All very interesting, but what exactly is (upper-case) Narrativity? You still haven't addressed the question directly, and you're running out of space.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that being Diachronic doesn't already entail being Narrative. There must be something more to experiencing one's life as a narrative than simply being Diachronic. For one can be Diachronic, naturally experiencing oneself(*) as something existing in the past and future, without any particular sense of one's life as constituting a narrative.

—Fine, but you haven't told me what a (lower-case) narrative is either.

Well, the paradigm of a narrative is a conventional story told in words. I take the term to attribute—at the very least—a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied—lives, parts of lives, pieces of writing. So it doesn't apply to random or radically unconnected sequences of events even when they are sequentially and indeed contiguously temporally ordered, or to purely picaresque or randomly 'cut-up' pieces of writing.³¹

—'This doesn't take us very far, because we still need to know what makes developmental unity or coherence in a life specifically *narrative* in nature. After all, there's a clear sense in which every human life is a developmental unity—a historical-character developmental unity as well as a biological one—just in being the life of a single human being. Putting aside cases of extreme insanity, any human life, even a highly disordered one, can be the subject of an outstanding biography that possesses all the narrative-unity-related virtues of that literary form. But if this sort of developmental unity is sufficient for narrative structure then it's trivially true that all human lives have narrative structure. Actually, even dogs and horses can be the subject of excellent biographies.'

True. And this, I think, is why the distinctive claim of the defenders of the psychological Narrativity thesis is that for a life to be a narrative in the required sense it must be lived Narratively. The person whose life it is must see or feel it as a narrative, construe it as a narrative, live it as a narrative. One could put this roughly by saying that lower-case or 'objective' narrativity requires upper-case or 'subjective' Narrativity.³²

—Now you're using the notion of upper-case psychological Narrativity to characterize the notion of lower-case 'objective' narrativity, and I still don't have a clear sense of what upper-case Narrativity is.

³¹ There are, however, many interesting complications. See *Life in Time*.

³² MacIntyre does not in the passages I have quoted explicitly say that the narrativity of a life requires Narrativity. In *After Virtue* he is particularly concerned with the idea that 'to think of a human life as a narrative unity is to think in a way alien to the dominant individualist and bureaucratic modes of modern culture' (1981: 211), and this remark was principally a criticism—an excellent one—of the social sciences of the time.

Well, it's not easy, but perhaps one can start from the idea of a *construction* in the sense of a construal. The Narrative outlook clearly involves putting some sort of construction—a unifying or form-finding construction—on the events of one's life, or parts of one's life. I don't think this construction need involve any clearly intentional activity, nor any departure from or addition to the facts. But the Narrative attitude must (as we have already agreed) amount to something more than a disposition to grasp one's life as a unity simply in so far as it is the life of a biologically single human being. Nor can it consist just in the ability to give a sequential record of the actual course of one's life—the actual history of one's life—even if one's life does in fact exemplify a classical pattern of narrative development independently of any construction or interpretation. One must in addition engage—to repeat—in some sort of construal of one's life. One must have some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally

[F] *form-finding* tendency

when it comes to one's apprehension of one's life, or relatively large-scale parts of one's life.³³

—But this doesn't even distinguish Narrativity from Diachronicity, for to be Diachronic is already to put a certain construction on one's life—on the life of the human being that one is: it is to apprehend that life through the life-unifying sense that one (*) was there in the past and will be there in the future. And yet you say being Diachronic is not enough for being Narrative.

I'm prepared to allow that to be Diachronic is already to put a certain construction on one's life in the sense you specify. ~~Nevertheless one~~ can be Diachronic without actively conceiving of one's life, consciously or unconsciously, as some sort of ethical-historical-characterological developmental unity, or in terms of a story, a *Bildung* or 'quest'. One can be Diachronic without one's sense of who or what one is having any significant sort of *narrative* structure. And one can be Diachronic without one's apprehension of oneself as something that persists in time having any great importance for one.³⁴

—You've already said that, and the question remains unanswered: what sort of construal is required for Narrativity? When does one cross the line from mere Diachronicity to Narrativity? This is still luminously unclear.

I agree that the proposal that form-finding is a necessary condition of Narrativity is very unspecific, but its lack of specificity may be part of its value, and it seems clear that Diachronicity (D) and form-finding (F) are independent of each other. In practice, no doubt, they often come together, but one can imagine [−D +F] an Episodic person in whom a form-finding tendency is stimulated precisely by lack of a Diachronic outlook, and, conversely, [+D −F] a Diachronic person who lives, by force of circumstance, an intensely picaresque and disjointed life, while having absolutely

³³ From now on I will omit the qualification about 'parts of one's life' and take it as read.

³⁴ 'Discern', 'apprehend', 'find', 'detect' all have non-factive readings.

no tendency to seek unity or narrative-developmental pattern in it. Other Diachronics in similar circumstances may move from [+D -F] to [+D +F], acquiring a form-finding tendency precisely because they become distressed by the 'one damned thing after another'³⁵ character of their lives. The great and radically non-Narrative Stendhal might be judged to be an example of this, in the light of all his chaotic autobiographical projects, although I would be more inclined to classify him as [-D +F].³⁶ Either way, the fact remains that one can be Diachronic while being very unreflective about oneself. One can be inclined to think, of any event in one's past of which one is reminded, that it happened to oneself*, without positively grasping one's life as a unity in any further—say specifically narrative—sense.

I think that the notion of form-finding captures something that is essential to being Narrative and that goes essentially beyond being Diachronic, and one view might be that form-finding is not only necessary for Narrativity, but also minimally sufficient. Against that, it may be said that if one is genuinely Narrative one must also (and of course) have some sort of distinctive

[S] *story-telling* tendency

when it comes to one's apprehension of one's life—where story-telling is understood in such a way that it does not imply any tendency to fabrication, conscious or otherwise, although it does not exclude it either. On this view, one must be disposed to apprehend or think of oneself and one's life as fitting the form of some recognized narrative genre.

Story-telling is a species of form-finding, and the basic model for it, perhaps, is the way in which gifted and impartial journalists or historians report a sequence of events. Obviously they select among the facts, but they do not, we suppose, distort or falsify them, and they do more than merely list them in the correct temporal order, for they also place them in a connected account. In its non-falsifying mode story-telling involves the ability to detect—not invent—developmental coherencies in the manifold of one's life. It is one way in which one may be able to apprehend the deep personal constancies that do in fact exist in the life of every human being—although I believe this can also be done by form-finding without story-telling.

So story-telling entails form-finding, and story-telling in addition to form-finding is surely—trivially—sufficient for Narrativity.

7

A third and more troubling suggestion is that if one is Narrative one will also have a tendency to engage unconsciously in invention, fiction of some sort—falsification,

³⁵ Hubbard 1909: 32.

³⁶ I judge Stendhal to be strongly Episodic but subject to Diachronic flashes. Jack Kerouac is I think a clear case of an Episodic looking for larger form. There are also clear elements of this in Malcolm Lowry. Laurence Sterne makes comedy out of Episodicity. Jerry Fodor cites Anthony Powell, whom I have not read, as a fine example of an Episodic aspiring to Narrativity.

confabulation, revisionism—when it comes to one’s apprehension of one’s own life. I will call this

[R] revision.

According to *the revision thesis* Narrativity always carries with it some sort of tendency to revision, where revision essentially involves more merely than changing one’s view of the facts of one’s life. (One can change one’s view of the facts of one’s life without any falsification, simply by coming to see things more clearly.)

Revision in the present sense is by definition non-conscious. It may sometimes begin consciously, with deliberate lies told to others, for example, and it may have semi-conscious instars, but it is not genuine revision in the present sense unless or until its products are felt to be true in a way that excludes awareness of falsification.³⁷ The conscious/non-conscious border is both murky and porous, but I think the notion of revision is robust for all that. The paradigm cases are clear, and extremely common.

If the revision thesis were true, it would be bad news for the ethical Narrativity thesis, whose supporters cannot want ethical success to depend essentially on some sort of falsification. I have no doubt that almost all human Narrativity is compromised by revision, but I don’t think it must be. It is in any case a vast and complex phenomenon, and I will make just a very few remarks.

It is often said that autobiographical memory is an essentially *constructive* and *reconstructive* phenomenon (in the terms of experimental psychology) rather than a merely *reproductive* one, and there is a clear sense in which this is true.³⁸ Memory deletes, abridges, edits, reorders, italicizes. But even if construction and reconstruction are universal in autobiographical memory, they needn’t involve revision as currently defined, for they may be fabrication-free story-telling or form-finding. Many have proposed that we are all without exception incorrigible self-fabulists, ‘unreliable narrators’ of our own lives,³⁹ and some who hold this view claim greater honesty of outlook for themselves, and see pride, self-blindness, and so on in those who deny it. But other research makes it pretty clear that this is not true. It’s not true of everyone. We have here another deep dimension of human psychological difference. Some people are fabulists all the way down. In others, autobiographical memory is fundamentally non-distorting, whatever automatic processes of remoulding and recasting it may invariably involve.⁴⁰

Some think that revision is always *charged*, as I will say—always motivated by an interconnected core group of moral emotions including pride, self-love, conceit,

³⁷ It’s well known that fully conscious lies can forget their origins and come to be fully believed by their perpetrators.

³⁸ For good discussions, see e.g. Brewer 1988; McCauley 1988.

³⁹ Cf. e.g. Bruner 1987, 1990, 1994. The notion of an ‘unreliable narrator’ derives from literary criticism. In *The Mind’s Past* (1998a) Gazzaniga seems to support a strongly reconstructive view of human memory, but he later says only that personal memory tends to be ‘a bit fictional’ (1998b: 713).

⁴⁰ Brewer (1988) argues that the evidence that supports ‘the reconstructive view of personal memory . . . does not seem very compelling’. See also Wagenaar 1994; Baddeley 1994: 239; Swann 1990. Ross (1989) argues that revision that seems to serve self-esteem may be motivated by nothing more than a concern for consistency.

shame, regret, remorse, and guilt. Some go further, claiming with Nietzsche that we always revise in our own favour: “I have done that”, says my memory. “I cannot have done that”, says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields.⁴¹

It seems, however, that neither of these claims is true. The first, that all revision is charged, is significantly improved by the inclusion of things like modesty or low self-esteem, gratitude or 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. But the claim that revision is always charged remains false even so. Revision may occur simply because one is a natural form-finder but a very forgetful one and instinctively seeks to make a coherent story out of limited materials.⁴² Frustrated story-tellers may fall into revision simply because they can’t find satisfying form in their lives and without being in any way motivated by a wish to preserve or restore self-respect. John Dean’s recall of his conversations with Nixon at the Watergate hearings is another much discussed case of uncharged revision. When the missing tapes were found, his testimony was revealed to be impressively ‘accurate about the individuals’ basic positions’ although it was ‘inaccurate with respect to exactly what was said during a given conversation’. His recall of events involved revision in addition to routine forgetting and morally neutral reconstruction, in so far as it contained positive mistakes, but there is no reason to think that it was significantly charged.⁴³ ‘Flashbulb’ memories (such as the memory of what was one doing when one heard about the shooting of President Kennedy, or about 9/11) can be surprisingly inaccurate—astonishingly so given our certainty that we remember accurately—but once again there seems no reason to think that the revision that they involve must be charged.⁴⁴

Even when revision is charged, the common view that we always revise in our own favour must yield to a mass of everyday evidence that some people are as likely to revise to their own detriment—or simply forget the good things they have done.⁴⁵ When La Rochefoucauld says that self-love is subtler than the subtlest man in the world, there is truth in what he says. And revising to one’s own detriment may be no more attractive than revising to one’s advantage. But La Rochefoucauld is sometimes too clever, or rather ignorant, in his cynicism.⁴⁶

Is a tendency to revise a necessary part of being Narrative? No. In our own frail case, substantial Narrativity may rarely if ever occur without revision, but story-telling is sufficient for Narrativity, and one can be story-telling without being revisionary. So the ethical Narrativity thesis survives the threat posed by the revision thesis. When Bernard Malamud claims that ‘all biography is ultimately fiction’,

⁴¹ 1886: §69.

⁴² Perhaps ‘confabulation’ in patients with Korsakov’s syndrome is an extreme and pathological example of revision. See e.g. Sacks 1985; Gazzaniga 1998.

⁴³ Brewer 1988: 27. Cf. Neisser 1981.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Pillemer 1998: ch. 2.

⁴⁵ For more formal evidence, cf. e.g. Wagenaar 1994, ‘Is memory self-serving?’.

⁴⁶ Even if we did all tend to see our lives in a favourable light, it would not follow that we were all revisers: some will have self-favouring, self-respect-preserving justifications of their actions already in place at the time of action, and so have no need for subsequent revision.

simply on the grounds that ‘there is no life that can be captured wholly, as it was’, there is no implication that it must also be ultimately untrue.⁴⁷

8

I’ve made a number of distinctions, but none of them cut very sharply, and if one asks how Diachronics [D], form-finders [F], story-tellers [S], and revisers [R] relate to each other, the answer, as far as I can see, is that almost anything goes. Story-telling entails form-finding because it is simply one kind of form-finding, but I see no other necessary connections between the four properties. Some think that all normal human beings have all four of these properties. I think that some normal human beings have none of them. Some think that Narrativity necessarily involves all four. I think (as just remarked) that the limiting case of Narrativity involves nothing more than form-finding story-telling (it does not even require one to be Diachronic). If, finally, ‘Narrativity’ is taken simply as a name for *whatever kind of reflective attitude to oneself and one’s life is rightly considered valuable* then I think the limiting case of ‘Narrativity’ involves nothing more than form-finding, and does not involve anything distinctively Narrative at all.

How do the authors I’ve quoted classify under this scheme? Well, Dennett is someone who endorses a full blown [+D +F +S +R] view of what it is to be Narrative, and he seems to place considerable emphasis on revision:

our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams [like spiders and beavers], but telling stories, and more particularly *concocting* and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are.⁴⁸

Bruner, I think, concurs with this emphasis. I take it that Sartre endorses [+F +S +R], and is not particularly concerned with [D] in so far as he is mainly interested in short-term, in-the-present story-telling. Schechtman’s account of Narrativity is [+D +F +S ±R]. It assumes that we are all Diachronic and requires that we be form-finding and story-telling and explicitly so

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 narrative⁴⁹

but it is important, on her view, that there be no significant revision, that one’s self-narrative be essentially accurate.

I take myself to be [−D −F −S −R]. The claim that I don’t revise much is the most vulnerable one, because it is in the nature of the case that one has no sense that one revises when one does. So I may be wrong, but (of course) I don’t think so.

⁴⁷ Malamud 1979.

⁴⁸ 1991a: 418; my emphasis. Dennett takes the story to be primarily about *who* we are, and to that extent it seems that the word ‘account’ would do as well as ‘story’, even though it will refer to particular events in one’s life.

⁴⁹ Schechtman 1997: 96. This is a strong expression of her view, which has usefully weaker forms (cf. e.g. pp. 117, 159).

On the strong form of Schechtman's view, I am not really a person. Some sentient creatures, she says, 'weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which *makes* them persons'; to have an 'identity' as a person is 'to have a narrative self-conception . . . to experience the events in one's life as interpreted through one's sense of one's own life story'. This is in fact a common type of claim, and Schechtman goes further, claiming at one point that 'elements of a person's narrative' that figure only in his 'implicit self-narrative', and that 'he cannot articulate . . . are only partially his—attributable to him to a lesser degree than those aspects of the narrative he can articulate'.⁵⁰

This seems to me to express an ideal of control and self-awareness in human life that is mistaken and potentially pernicious. The aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some—for some, perhaps, it may even be helpful—but in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous. My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good—that the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature. It's well known that 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.⁵¹ The implication is plain: the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you are likely to move away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being. 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, stumblingly, and uncomfortably, and in a way that is somehow essentially and powerfully narrative-resistant. There are, among the non-Narratives, anti-Narratives, those for whom any storying of their life—suppose someone is recounting an incident in your life to a group of friends in your presence—seems to be missing the point, missing the truth, even if all the facts are right.

Certainly Narrativity is not a necessary part of the 'examined life' (nor is Diachronicity), and it is in any case most unclear that the examined life, thought by Socrates to be essential to human existence, is always a good thing. People can develop and deepen in valuable ways without any sort of explicit, specifically Narrative reflection, just as musicians can improve by practice sessions without recalling those sessions. The business of living well is, for many, a completely non-Narrative project. Granted that certain sorts of self-understanding are necessary for a good human life, they need involve nothing more than form-finding, which can exist in the absence of Narrativity; and they may be osmotic, systemic, not staged in consciousness. It may be said that the acquisition of self-understanding in psychotherapy, at least, is an essentially Narrative project, and it's true that therapy standardly involves identifying key causal connections between features of one's early

⁵⁰ 1997: 117.

⁵¹ See McCrone 2003; Debiec, LeDoux and Nader 2002.

life and the way one is at present. But even though the thing one learns is of the form ‘It is because X and Y happened to this child that I am now Z’, there need not be anything distinctively or even remotely Narrative in one’s psychological attitude to the acknowledged causal connections, any more than there need be when one discovers as an adult that a (physical) scar was caused by one’s falling out of a pram. This is not a condition of effective therapy—and one certainly doesn’t have to have any Diachronic sense that the child encountered in therapy was oneself*. Even more certainly, one does not have to have a satisfying narrative ‘forged’ for one by the therapist, or in the process of therapy, in order to live well. Heaven forbid.

9

—I’m sorry, but you really have no idea of the force and reach of the psychological Narrativity thesis. You’re as Narrative as anyone else, and your narratives about yourself determine how you think of yourself even though they are not conscious.

Well, here we have a stand off. I think it’s just not so, and I take it that the disagreement is not just terminological. Self-understanding does not have to take a narrative form, even implicitly. I’m a product of my past, including my very early past, 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, or indeed a historical form. If I am charged to make my self-understanding explicit, I may illustrate my view of myself by reference to things I (GS) have done, but it certainly will not follow that I have a Diachronic outlook, still less a Narrative one.

At this point Heidegger informs us, in a variation on Socrates, that a human being’s existence—‘Dasein’s’ existence—is constituted by the fact that its being is an issue for it. Fine, but it’s not at all clear that being a thing whose being is an issue for it need involve any sort of Narrative outlook. Heidegger takes it that one’s ‘self-understanding is constitutive of [one’s] . . . being what or who [one] is’, and that this self-understanding consists largely in one’s ‘determining oneself as someone by pressing ahead into a possible way to be’.⁵² And here he seems (but I do not understand his notion of temporality) to be insisting on the importance of being Diachronic and indeed Narrative. But if this is his claim then—once again—it seems to me false: false as a universal claim about human life, false as a claim about what it is for human beings to be what or who they are, false as a normative claim about what good or authentic human life must be like, false about what any self-understanding must involve, and false about what self-understanding is at its best. Perhaps Heideggerian authenticity is compatible with the seemingly rival ideal of living in the moment—‘Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take

⁵² Blattner 1999: 32, 41; I substitute ‘one’ for ‘Dasein’. Cf. Heidegger (1927: 344): ‘In the light of the “for-the-sake-of-which” of one’s self-chosen ability-to-be, resolute Dasein frees itself for its world.’

thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof⁵³—but this will not win me over.

10

There is much more to say. Some may still think that the Episodic life must be deprived in some way. But truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound.⁵⁴ Some think that an Episodic cannot really know true friendship, or even be loyal. They are refuted by Michel de Montaigne, a great Episodic, famous for his friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, 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!⁵⁵

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 quite wrong to do so.⁵⁶ A gift for friendship doesn't require any ability to recall past shared experiences in detail, nor any tendency to value them. It is shown in how one is in the present.

But can Episodics be properly moral beings? The question troubles many. Kathy Wilkes thinks not.⁵⁷ So also, perhaps, do Plutarch and many others. But Diachronicity is not a necessary condition of a properly moral existence, nor of a proper sense of responsibility.⁵⁸ As for Narrativity, it is in the sphere of ethics more of an affliction or a bad habit than a prerequisite of a good life. It risks a strange commodification of life and time—of soul, understood in a strictly secular sense. It misses the point. 'We live', as the great short story writer V. S. Pritchett observes, 'beyond any tale that we happen to enact.'⁵⁹

⁵³ *Matthew* vi. 34. This way of being in the present has nothing to do with the 'aesthetic' way of being in the present described and condemned by Kierkegaard.

⁵⁴ Note, though, how Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings* can produce a certain anxiety.

⁵⁵ 1563–92: 32.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 33. 'A second advantage' of poor memory, he goes on to note, 'is that . . . I remember less any insults received'.

⁵⁷ Wilkes 1999. ⁵⁸ I discuss Episodic ethics in Essay 8.

⁵⁹ Pritchett 1979: 47. I am grateful to audiences in Oxford (1999), Rutgers (2000), and Reading (2003) for their comments and to Alan Jenkins at the *Times Literary Supplement*.

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