

**Making Sense of Ourselves:**

**Self-Narratives and Personal Identity**

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We persons have a keen (if not universal) desire to make sense of ourselves. One common way to do this is to construct stories about our lives and the connections between what we have done and what has happened to us. These self-narratives are autobiographies that we—perhaps without any intention on our part—use to give meaning and coherence to the events of our lives.

I aim to investigate the relation between self-narratives and a more metaphysical account of personal identity over time. I shall argue that self-narrative views cannot stand alone as accounts of personal identity, but self-narratives can fruitfully supplement metaphysical accounts of personal identity.

Following Marya Schechtman, I shall distinguish two questions that may be asked about personal identity. The first is a straightforward metaphysical question:

- (1) Under what conditions is a person considered at time  $t$  the same person as a person considered at time  $t'$ ?

This is the standard question of personal identity, and I'll call it 'the numerical-identity question.'<sup>1</sup> I'll follow Schechtman and call the second question 'the characterization question':

(2) Under what conditions are "actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on (hereafter abbreviated 'characteristics') to be attributed to a given [human being]?" (Schechtman 1996, 73)

The numeral-identity question concerns "logical relations of identity" and the characterization question concerns "identity in the sense of what is generally called, following Erikson, an 'identity crisis'. (Schechtman 1996, 2) I think that self-narratives generally aim to answer the characterization question, and not the numerical-identity question.

I'm going to argue that the answer to the characterization question presupposes an answer to the numerical-identity question. But first I want to consider Dennett's self-narrative view, which I think has not had the critical attention that it deserves. Then I'll argue that, regardless of the merits of self-narrative views, they need to be augmented by a theory (or at least by assumptions) about numerical identity. Finally, I'll present my own numerical-identity view and suggest that my view can fruitfully be supplemented by self-narrative views.

### **Dennett on Fictional Selves**

Dennett's view of selves as fictional may be construed as an answer to the characterization question: We can ascribe "actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires,

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<sup>1</sup> Schechtman calls (1) the 'reidentification question', but (1) does not concern *how we know* that a person considered at t is the same person as a person considered at t' time, but rather concerns what makes it the case that the person considered at t is the same person as the person considered at t'. (1) is a metaphysical and not an epistemological question. So, I name it differently from Schechtman.

character traits, and so on” (Schechtman 1996, 73) to a given human being when that person can be interpreted as having a self. Interpreting somebody as having a self does not imply that there are any selves. Indeed, on Dennett’s view, selves are illusory products of the brain.

The common assumption is that in a self-narrative, the author and the protagonist are one and the same. On Dennett’s intriguing view, the author and the protagonist come apart: the author is the brain, and the protagonist—the self—is a fictional character constructed by the brain. Dennett uses the idea that we make sense of our lives by telling stories about ourselves to argue that there are no selves.

“Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control and self-definition,” Dennett says, “is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourself—about who we are.” “Our tales,” Dennett goes on, “are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source.” (Dennett 1991, 418) Words “are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate..., weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective streams of narrative....[T]hey tend to take over, creating us out of the raw materials they find in our brains.” (D. C. Dennett 1991, 417) These streams of narrative issue forth as if there were a unified agent “whose words they are, about whom they are: in short...a center of narrative gravity.” But a center of narrative gravity, says Dennett, is just an abstraction. It’s a category mistake, Dennett says, to look for a self in the brain.

Dennett offers a striking analogy. He asks: When Herman Melville begins *Moby Dick* with the famous words, “Call me Ishmael,” who is the reader being invited to call

Ishmael? It is a fictional character. Similarly, when Dennett says, “Call me Dan,” he invites his listeners not to call his body Dan, but to call him Dan—in his words—“the theorists’ fiction created by...well, not by me but by my brain....” (D. C. Dennett 1991, 429) Dan is a narrative self, spun from a brain. The brain is the spinner, the author of the narrative. But the brain is not a self; the self is a totally fictional character that emerges from the story produced by component modules in the brain. The self—or the subject of experience—is an illusion.

Let’s consider this view more closely. On Dennett’s view, all that is really going on is neural activity. As we all know, the brain trades in neurotransmitters, not in stories—much less in stories about a particular fictional character. How, then, does Dennett think that the brain is the author of self-narratives? The answer is that we use the intentional stance. The intentional stance, is a strategy of interpretation: something is an intentional system if its behavior can be predicted and explained in terms of intentional states—e.g., beliefs and desires.<sup>2</sup> There is no narrative without interpretation from the intentional stance. We interpret the brain as being the author of a narrative, whose protagonist is a fictional self.

The beauty of the intentional stance is that, since it carries no ontological commitment, it can be used for anything—for brains as well as for human beings. Dennett says, “The theory of content I espouse for the whole person [i.e., intentional systems theory] I espouse all the way in....[T]he very same principles of interpretation are used to endow subpersonal parts with contents as are used to endow whole persons.” (D.

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<sup>2</sup> From the intentional stance, we “treat the noise-emitter as an agent, indeed a rational agent, who harbors beliefs and desires and other mental states that exhibit intentionality or ‘aboutness’, and whose actions can be explained (or predicted) on the basis of the content of these states.” (D. C. Dennett 1991, 76)

Dennett 1994, 527–8) So, we may apply intentional-system theory to interpret the component modules in the brain as writing a story, with a fictional protagonist.

The brain itself cannot produce any character—fictional or not—unless the brain is interpreted as an author (from the intentional stance). With no constraints on interpretation of the brain as author, the narrative could just as well be interpreted as having a real protagonist as a fictional one. If so, how would any genuine project of interpretation get off the ground?

One idea is to try to map what someone says onto her brain. However, Dennett (rightly, I think) is pessimistic about this strategy. He says, “Brain events seem too different from phenomenological items to be the real referents of the beliefs we express in our introspective reports.” (D. C. Dennett 1991, 85) I fully agree with Dennett that it is unclear (to say the least) how brain events could be the “real referents of the beliefs we express in our introspective reports.” But, Dennett says, intentional system theory is extremely flexible and may be used “all the way in”—to show how a brain can produce a fictional character.

Even so, how does an interpretation get attached to certain neural activity? (My brain is whirring. How does a particular story get attached to that whirring?) It would be a nonstarter to say that the brain is self-interpreting. An interpretation can be made only from the intentional stance, and brains do not take up the intentional stance. People do. Moreover, the way that Dennett develops his theory (that he calls ‘heterophenomenology’) is top-down. He begins with what a subject says about her own mental state in her own words, and then looks for an interpretation of neural events which correlate with what the subject says. But no one is ever in a position to interpret

her own brain as producing a narrative with a fictional protagonist. So, I'll put aside the alternative of saying that the brain is self-interpreting.

Perhaps the question of attaching an interpretation to neural activity can be answered by appeal to a third-party, such as a theorist. According to Dennett, interpretation is a third-personal enterprise. That's how Dennett maintains the scientific cast of his theory. A theorist may provide a narrative interpretation of the neural activity of the subject. But what neural activity? This procedure of beginning with neural activity (from the physical stance) is the opposite of Dennett's heterophenomenology. Suppose that a theorist had a detailed video of the neural events going on in a particular brain. How would the theorist (who does not even know *when* the brain is producing a narrative) be able to identify the neural activity to be interpreted as producing a narrative with a fictional self—not to mention how a theorist would know what story was being produced?

Moreover, for the theorist to interpret neural events, on Dennett's third-personal view, is just for the theorist to be *interpreted* as interpreting neural events. So, we need another interpreter. And yet another without end. This succession raises the specter of a regress of interpreters.

Someone may object: Hey, there's no problem about how a fictional character can be the product of neural activity; the neural activity of human authors of novels produces fictional characters all the time. I reply: Right, but that is only because (i) there is a tangible output—e.g., speech or written words—for us to interpret as a story with a protagonist. And (ii) there are hearers and readers to interpret the marks and sounds as a

story. Although we human beings are adept at interpreting language, we have no idea about how to interpret brain activity as the production of a self.

The inadequacy of Dennett's view is masked by his ambiguous use of 'us' sometimes to mean 'human beings' and sometimes to mean 'self or 'fictional character.' This is a problem because human organisms are real, but selves or fictional characters are not. Here is an example of 'us' used both ways in the same context: Dennett says: Words "are potent elements of our environment that *we* [human beings] readily incorporate.... [T]hey tend to take over, creating *us* [selves, fictional characters] out of the raw materials they find in our (human beings') brains." (D. C. Dennett 1991, 417) To incorporate words, we must already exist; to be created by words, we cannot already exist. So, the 'we' who incorporate words cannot be same as the 'us', the fictional characters, whom the words create. This ambiguity—or equivocation—obscures the problem of the interpretation.

In short, there is no narrative or fictional character without interpretation, and there is no interpretation unless there is something tangible (like speech-using people) to interpret and someone to interpret it. Dennett seems to slide a bit between the neural activity of the physical brain and the story-telling activity of the brain interpreted as an author. The brain creates narratives only from the intentional stance. I think that Dennett should have continued his past policy of not trying to coordinate the intentional with the physical, the authorial with the organic. In any case, it remains a mystery as to why anyone should interpret any neural activity as the production of a fictional self.

So, I think that Dennett's view of fictional selves is inadequate on its own terms. However, if it were adequate on its own terms, it would still have to presuppose some

kind of an answer to the numerical-identity question inasmuch people can have many of the traits that we ascribe—honesty, generosity—only over time. I presume that Dennett would answer the numerical-identity question much as he answers the characterization question—as a matter of interpretation. I myself recoil from such an anti-realist view of ourselves. In any case, I hope to have shown that Dennett’s view of fictional selves is inadequate.

### **Persons Created by Self-Narratives?**

Some philosophers take self-narratives to create persons, at least in the sense of answering the characterization question. In *The Constitution of Selves*, Marya Schechtman says, “[A] person’s identity is created by a self-conception that is narrative in form.” (Schechtman 1996, 96) A narrative self-conception hangs together; it has a plot; it “interprets individual episodes in terms of their place in the unfolding story.” (p. 97) Persons are “self-creating,” and specifically they create themselves through their self-conceptions.” (p. 97) says Schechtman, “The narrative self-constitution view can hold that personhood is created by the creation of a narrative self-conception and that individuals with nonnarrative senses of self are not persons.” (p. 101) Being a person thus depends on having a certain narrative self-conception. “[A] self-conception sufficiently unlike a traditional linear narrative excludes personhood.” (p. 100)

### **The Priority of Numerical Identity Over Personality**

What Schechtman has in mind is that self-narratives answer the characterization question, the question of which “actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on” can be ascribed to a person. The characterization question concerns

identity in the sense of personality. I think that there is a prior question, a question that concerns identity in the sense of the existence of a person. The question of the conditions for the existence of a person at a time is intimately connected with the numerical-identity question, the question of the conditions for the existence of a person at two times.

There must be a person in order to have a personality. There must be someone to create a self-narrative. Who? Surely, persons create narratives. Schechtman says: “Personhood and personal identity rely crucially on an individual’s inner life...” (Schechtman 1996, 95) But how could one have an inner life before one was a person, had personhood or personal identity? If one must be a person in order to produce a self-narrative, then it is incoherent to suppose that being a person depends on already having produced a self-narrative.

However: Schechtman says, “[A] sentient individual must think about herself and her life in a certain way in order to bear the relation to [what] we have taken to be definitive of personhood.” (p.99) If a narrative self-conception is definitive of personhood, what about human infants? Shouldn’t human infants be included among persons? (Many would think so.) And what about people like Galen Strawson, who says that his life is a series of episodes without narrative connections? (Strawson 2009) He’s a philosopher; how could he not be a person? But if self-narratives are what create persons, we would have to deny that babies or people with episodic lives are persons.

Finally, taking persons to be defined in terms of their self-narratives risks the well-known “duplication problem.” It is logically possible—though highly unlikely—that two individuals could have exactly the same self-narratives—they could be identical twins brought up in indiscernible environments; but it is not logically possible for two

individuals to be the same person. It is logically possible that there be qualitatively identical self-narratives and that the only thing that would distinguish them is that they are about different people. So, I do not think that persons can be identified with self-narratives. Persons come first. Now let's turn to my more metaphysical view.

### **The First-Person Perspective: Persons and Personal Identity**

A human person, on my view, is an entity that (1) is embodied essentially, and (2) has a first-person perspective essentially. Let me speak of embodiment first. (As my husband put it, "Ain't got no body, ain't nobody.") The relation between you and your body is constitution, not identity. A person is constituted by a body at all moments of her existence, but is not identical to the body that constitutes her at any given time.

Biotechnology gives us a grip on the idea that we persons can come to be constituted by a nonorganic (or largely nonorganic) body. In order to constitute you, a body—however many nonorganic silicon parts it may have—must be able to support your first-person perspective. What makes me a person is that I have a first-person perspective essentially. My exemplification of a first-person perspective is different from anyone else's exemplification of a first-person perspective and not subject to fission; so there is no threat of a duplication problem.

Here is my view personal identity over time: A person is an entity with a first-person perspective essentially, who persists as long as her first-person perspective is exemplified. To allow for the possibility that persons are temporally gappy, I should say: A person exists when and only when her first-person perspective is exemplified. A human person is a person who is necessarily embodied and is born constituted by a human body. Granted, this provides no informative criteria of personal identity over

time. If, as I believe, personhood is a basic property, it is not susceptible to a nonpersonal or subpersonal account. Hence, on my view, there are no informative conditions of personal identity.

There are two stages of a first-person perspective, rudimentary and robust. When a human fetus (or perhaps a neonate) acquires the capacity for consciousness and intentionality, it comes to constitute a person—a new entity with a rudimentary first-person perspective. Higher nonhuman animals (like pigs, dogs and nonhuman primates) also have rudimentary first-person perspectives, but they have first-person perspectives only contingently. A fetal lion is still a lion, a member of the species *leo Panthera*, before developing a brain and before acquiring a rudimentary first-person perspective; a fetal human animal is still a human animal, a member of the species *homo Sapiens*, before developing a brain and before being able to support a rudimentary first-person perspective; but before having the ability to support a first-person perspective, such a human animal does not yet constitute a person. When the human animal can support a first-person perspective, the animal comes to constitute a person, who has the first-person perspective essentially.

The rudimentary stage of a first-person perspective connects human beings (i.e., human persons) to the nonhuman animal kingdom, but there are two differences between a rudimentary first-person perspective of a person and a rudimentary first-person perspective of a nonhuman animal: (1) For a person, a rudimentary first-person perspective is only a preliminary to a robust first-person perspective; but for a nonhuman animal, a rudimentary first-person perspective is the top of the line. (2) For a person, a first-person perspective, rudimentary or robust, is an essential property; for a nonhuman

animal, it is only a contingent property. So, when a fetal human organism can support a rudimentary first-person perspective, a new entity—a person—comes into existence, and the person has a first-person perspective essentially.

What is important about persons is that, unlike nonpersons, their rudimentary first-person perspectives typically develop into robust first-person perspectives. It is the robust stage that distinguishes persons from all other entities. A robust first-person perspective is the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, from the first-person. With a robust first-person perspective, one can think of oneself as a subject of experience, and as an agent. A robust first-person perspective makes possible an inner life. Persons begin to acquire robust first-person perspectives as toddlers when they learn a natural language that gives them the resources to conceive of themselves as themselves in the first-person.

A robust first-person perspective is often manifested by a reflexive use of pronouns: ‘I (myself)’ (or ‘he (himself)’) embedded in sentences whose main verbs are linguistic or psychological verbs—e.g., “I protested that I was overcharged,” or “I wonder how I will die.” If I protest that I was overcharged or I wonder how I will die, then I am thinking of myself as myself; I am not thinking of myself in any third-person way (e.g., not as Lynne Baker, nor as the person who is thinking a certain thought, nor as a woman in the front of the room) at all. It is the robust first-person perspective that enables us to have inner lives—to consider possibilities and to be aware of what we are thinking.

To sum up: What distinguishes persons from all other entities is that they essentially have first-person perspectives and typically develop robust first-person perspectives. The robust first-person perspective is the capacity to conceive of oneself as

oneself in the first-person. My metaphysical (numerical-personal-identity) view of persons is a formal view that takes persons to be distinguished, not by souls or by psychological or physical continuity, but by first-person capacities.

Any realist self-narrative view presupposes that the self-narrator has a robust first-person perspective—the conceptual ability to think of oneself as oneself from the first-person. No entity who is unable to think of herself as herself\* in the first person can produce a first-personal narrative, a *self*-narrative. So, the narrative self-constitution view cannot be fundamental to one’s identity as a person. Numerical personal identity is logically prior to any self-narrative conception of a person.

Nevertheless, I see that my account does not answer all the questions we have about persons. Although it provides an account of personal identity as numerical identity, it says nothing about what Marya Schechtman calls “the set of characteristics each person has that make her the person she is.” (Schechtman 1996, 74) My view of personal identity—which gives no hint about the qualitative differences among people—might usefully be supplemented by an appeal to self-narratives.

### **A Place for Self-Narratives**

When we care about who we are, I think, we care about two distinct things: our personal (numerical) identity, and our psychological unity. In my opinion, these are different concerns. I have given my answer to the personal numerical-identity question. The answer to the psychological-unity question may be given by an appeal to self-narratives as what unifies all the “actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on” that we attribute to a given person. I agree that self-narratives can provide psychological unity.

First, self-narratives can put flesh on the bare bones of an account (like mine) of numerical personal identity. My metaphysical view leaves out what self-narratives provide: a qualitative view of a person—say, you—stories of your life, what it’s like to be you. A theory of numerical personal identity does not provide any substantive conception of oneself. A self-narrative does. If  $x$  and  $y$  are different persons, they almost certainly have different self-narratives. It is not a logical necessity (as we have seen), but only a practical near-necessity, that they differ in the stories that they tell about themselves. Self-narratives give first-person content to the ways that we differ from each other. Supplementing my account with an appeal to self-narratives that differ from person to person aims at self-understanding. I would not expect self-understanding to emerge from metaphysics alone.

Second, consider the self of a self-narrative. On my view, the self of a self-narrative is a character, a flesh and blood person—and not, say, an inner locus of agency. Indeed, on my view, there are no selves as distinct from persons—whole embodied persons embedded in social and linguistic environments.

When I deny that there are selves, what I deny is that the bearers of psychological properties are proper parts of persons or animals. I am not denying that we are subjects of experience or unified agents. So, I want to distinguish my view from the views of “no-self” philosophers like Dennett, who denies that there are in reality subjects of experience or unified agents or entities with irreducible first-person properties. Where I differ from those who appeal to selves is that I do not believe that we need to posit anything other than persons (whole enduring persons) to account for our inner lives, or our being self-aware subjects of experience or our being unified agents. My constitution view prevents

reducing phenomena at the personal level to any subpersonal or impersonal level. But that's a story for another day.

### Conclusion

My conclusion is that self-narratives cannot stand alone in accounting for personal identity; they presuppose the existence of persons, who essentially have first-person perspectives. And this presupposition is closely tied to an answer to the numerical identity question. Even so, narratives play an important role in making sense of our lives. If we think of our lives as stories, with a narrative arc, we can connect the events that we bring about and live through in a way that makes them intelligible. Self-narratives can convey understanding in a way that is not just as well conveyed in non-narrative form. (Velleman 2003, 3) Theories of numerical personal identity (like mine) are necessary for understanding personal identity, but they are surely not sufficient for making sense of ourselves. We also need self-narratives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> After finishing this paper, I discovered that Dennett had used the title "Making Sense of Ourselves" for a chapter in Dennett 1987.