



SELF: NARRATIVE, NON NARRATIVE OR BOTH?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand how we experience and represent self. I would elaborate on this by firstly, stating some of the different perspectives on self. I would then primarily locate this discussion by distinguishing two popular ways of experiencing self i.e. EPISODIC and DIACHRONIC and two accounts of self-representation i.e. NARRATIVE and NON-NARRATIVE. Next, I will present arguments explaining why philosophers have favored Narrativist account on one side, and objections raised against Narrativist by Non-Narrativist like Galen Strawson on another. Lastly, In agreement with James L. Battersby's viewpoint in his essay, "Narrativity, Self and Self-Representation", I will discuss the conception of self-experience that is "complicatedly diachronic and episodic, one that also puts special emphasis on the self's elusive, ungraspable, but somehow readily available nature". Thereby, I will defend the way of representation of self which can be both narrative as well as non-narrative.

Keywords: Self, Narrative, Non-Narrative,

1. The question "What is self", has been addressed through various perspectives¹.

IN KANTIAN PRESPECTIVE: Self is understood as the subject. It is subject of experience rather than the object of experience.

IN HERMENUTICAL PRESPECTIVE: Self is not a thing; it is not something fixed and unchangeable, but rather something evolving. The self, here, is assumed to be a construction. And it is constructed in and through the narration.

IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL PRESPECTIVE: According to Dan Zahavi this perspective can be seen as replacement of the first notion of self and as a necessary founding supplement for second notion of self. Self here claimed to possess experiential reality, is taken to be closely linked to the first person-perspective, and is in fact identified with the very first- personal givenness of the experiential phenomenon.

¹ Zahavi, "Subjectivity and selfhood", pp.104-106.

2. Now holding on to different perspective on self, philosophers differ in their ways of addressing the question: How one experiences the self? Some favor the DIACHRONIC way of self-experience according to which self is that which persists over a long stretch of time i.e. that which was there in the past and will be there in the future. And those who favor the EPISODIC way will not agree to the view of self as that which persist in past, present and future as one and same. However, they are perfectly aware that one has long -term continuity as a whole human being.

Galen Strawson in his paper "Against Narrativity" writes: Many who are Diachronic are also Narrative in their outlook on life. And Episodic are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in narrative terms². Narrativity as one of the account of self-representation is favored by many philosophers.

Narrativist holds that “all of us perceive the present in terms of the past, bring to our relationship an effective repertoire we learned earlier. Also, when confronted with the question “who am I?” we will tell a certain story: that which defines who we are, that which we present to others for recognition and approval. This narrative, however, is not merely the way of gaining insight into the nature of an already existing self. On the contrary, the self is first constructed in and through the narration.”³

According to Narrativists, it is natural for us to think of the self in terms of narrative structures. On asking, why is it so? Narrativists like MacIntyre hold that this is so because human activities are enacted narratives and our actions gain intelligibility by having a place in the narrative sequence. We live out narratives in our lives and we understand our own lives in terms of such narratives: “Stories are lived before they are told- except in the case of fiction” (MacIntyre 1985, 212). Now, let us see some important thesis of narrativist account.

a) Psychological thesis: The thesis which says that human being actually experiences their lives in a narrative way. This is a descriptive account of how human beings are constituted.

b) Epistemological thesis: The best way to answer the Socratic question “who I am?” is by attaining an ‘insight into who I am by situating my character traits, the values I endorse, the goals I pursue etc. within life story that traces their origin and development.’ So, according to this account self- knowledge is not merely a self- discovery but consist in an achievement of trying to build up a coherent account of oneself.

² The Episodic/Diachronic distinction is not the same thing as the narrative and non narrative distinction, as will emerge; but there are marked correlations between them.(Strawson, 2004: 430)

³ Zahavi, “*Subjectivity and selfhood*”, p.107

c) The thesis of diachronicity: Narrative self- experience is necessarily diachronic in nature. According to this view, ‘one naturally figures oneself, considered as self, as something that as there in the (further) future. So, the idea of time plays a crucial role in construction of narrative self. According to Alasdair McIntyre a strong narrative, the unity of the self “resides in the unity of narrative which links birth to life to death a narrative beginning to middle to end”

d) The Ethical thesis: Narrative way is the way that human being ought to live. If we are not narrative in the above ways we would cease to be an ethical being our life is bound to be impoverished. So, the narrative account is the best way to understand the self as a human agent or an ethical being.

Social dimension of narrativity: When I write my own story, it is not a story which I alone write in two senses of term: (i) I write it along with others. I cannot ignore the accounts of myself that I hear from others; and (ii) I write this story for others and not merely for myself. In these two senses my story is determined only in part by me. As Husserl pointed out, “I am member of a community that has its tradition and that, for its part, is connected... with the generative subjects, the closest and the most distant ancestors.”

The Psychological thesis and the Ethical thesis are criticized by non-narrativist but I will enter into this discussion in section 3. And, before that I would like to discuss three important features of narrativity:⁴

(A) Form-finding tendency- According to Galen Strawson, narrativity is “some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity-seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally...form finding tendency”.⁵ So, form-finding activity is essential (and, hence, necessary) to narrativity, though it is only “minimally sufficient”.⁶

(B) Story-telling tendency- It is said that one who is narrative, do have story-telling tendency. According to Strawson; “Story-telling is a species of form-finding”.⁷

(C) Revisionary tendency- “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”.⁸ Narrative, “...engage unconsciously in invention, fiction of some sort-falsification, confabulation, revisionism- when it comes to one’s apprehension of one’s own life.”⁹

⁴ Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” pp. 441-443.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 440-441.

⁶ Ibid., p. 442.

⁷ Ibid., p. 442.

⁸ Ibid., p. 443.

⁹ Ibid., p. 443.

Strawson calls it, Revision.

3. At this point it is important to talk about Non-Narrativist account of self- representation which, says Strawson, stands in opposite to the Narrativist account. According to Strawson, we do not necessarily structure our lives narratively, and a good life is not contingent upon such structuring of one's life. In a way Strawson is targeting both the Descriptive "psychological narrativity thesis" (each one of us "construct and lives narrative") and Normative "ethical narrativity thesis" (constructing and living life as narrative is good, something we ought to do). Strawson writes "There are deeply non-narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-narrative".¹⁰ Also, view according to which normative thesis is true and view according to which both descriptive and normative both are true, according to Strawson, "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" (429)¹¹.

This leads us to discuss, the limitations of the Narrative approach as pointed out by Non-Narrativist are:

A. Self which emerges in narrative is nothing but a fiction.

Daniel Dennett explains the above first limitation as he writes¹²,

...biological organism with brain like ours cannot prevent themselves from inventing selves. We are hard wired to become language users, and the moment we make use of language, we begin spinning our stories. The self is produced in this spinning, but, it has no reality. It is merely a fictional centre of narrative gravity. It is the abstract point where various stories about it intersect. Thus on this reading, the narrative account turns out to be variant of the No-Self doctrine.¹³

B. There can never be a one-to-one co-relation between the life that is lived and the life that is narrated. And, therefore, narratives are fallible and thus there may be confabulations. Now, if narrativist thesis is a confabulation and we do say at one point that the life we lead the story we tell may not have one to one correspondence. So, in that case 'Question of Truth' arises via the 'Question of Narrativity' i.e. what ever I am saying, is it true or false? And if it is the case that what I am saying is not necessarily true and

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 429.

¹¹ There are four main combinations of the descriptive thesis and the normative thesis. One may think first thesis is true and second is false. Second, and contrariwise, one may think first one is false and second is true. Third, one may think both are true. Lastly, where both are false (Strawson's position). Strawson in above quote criticise second and third view specifically.

¹² Dennett, 1991: 418.

¹³ Zahavi, "*Subjectivity and selfhood*", p. 110

I can go on constructing a story without taking into consideration the question of truth at all. Now question arises, can that perspective be an ethical perspective. How can somebody lead an ethical life on basis of telling stories which are mere confabulations?

In fact Paul Ricoeur, one of the main proponents of the narrativist approach to the self, also pointed to some of these limitations of this approach. Yet Ricoeur in line with Owen Flanagan and Macintyre still favors the narrativist account and he replies to the above criticism by Dennett by saying that,

“Although there is no substantial self but to declare everything peculiar to human life fictitious simply because it cannot be naturalized or it cannot be grasped by a certain mode of scientific comprehension merely reveals one’s prior commitment to a naïve scientism, according to which (natural) science is the sole arbiter of what there is”.¹⁴

Also, as Flanagan points out, it is undeniable that the self plays a crucial role in our psychological and social life by giving it organization, meaning, and structure so the narrative self might be a construction but that does not make it unreal¹⁵.

4. Now, moving on to Strawson’s critique of narrativist account, James L. Battersby in his essay, “Narrativity, Self and Self Representation” says,

Strawson makes it crystal clear that he believes that the Episodic is not only a viable alternative to the Diachronic mode of self-experience and self- representation but also a vastly superior one intellectually and ethically. For instance, Strawson says, that “the aspiration of explicit Narrative self- articulation... almost always does more harm than good...the narrative tendency to look for a story or narrative coherence in one’s life is, in general a gross hindrance to self-understanding”.¹⁶

After discussing limitations of narrativist account and its critique by Strawson, one can also raise question on Strawson’s episodic account which he doesn’t bother to answer. Question like:

“when we are told that the episodic “does not figure(herself),considered as self, as something that was there in the (further) past or will be there in the(further) future” (430), we are allowed to believe (or not prevented from believing) that she may figure herself as

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁵ Flanagan, 1992: 205-210.

¹⁶ Battersby, “*Narrativity, Self, and Self-Representation*,” p. 36

being there in the nearer or nearest past and there in the nearer or nearest future; otherwise the episodic would be episodic-less".¹⁷

5. This brings us to the question I wish to examine in this paper keeping in mind the above analyses - Are we only Episodic or Diachronic in experiencing self?

Narrative account of self-representation seems completely convincing as one experiences oneself in Diachronic i.e. I do experience self which persist over and stretches of past time and extends imaginatively into future time. But the problem is that even the Non-Narrativist account seems equally convincing that one represents oneself in Episodic i.e. I do experience a self which is now- oriented and does not consider itself as something that resides in the past or will take up occupancy in the future.

Although convincing, both these positions seem incomplete due to respective limitations. The answer seem to lie in James L. Battersby's conception of self- experience which he elaborates upon in his essay, "Narrativity, Self and Self-Representation" where he remarks that self is "complicatedly Diachronic and Episodic, one that also puts special emphasis on the self's elusive, ungraspable, but somehow readily available nature".¹⁸ He further continues

there is you, yourself, who some few days after looking at the book you once wrote or the picture of you in long hair, realize upon reflection that while you have changed your views on this or that quite radically, no longer believing in what you once fervently supported, and been changed in many subtle ways by emergent events. You are in some fundamental sense still the same person, the same self, when it's right down to it you get. In short, you recognize that, well, yet, you are in some fundamental sense the same self, and this recognition is powerfully buttressed by your sure knowledge that there is a continuous 'you' that you have awakened to find every day of you life.¹⁹

I agree with Battersby that in life's long journey we scrap much stuff along the way and take on some other new stuff, and over the long years we continue both same old selves, and we continue to be recognized by others, despite the wrinkles and gray hair , as the same old sailors. We are, then, both Diachronic and Episodic, evanescent and enduring, both other and the same and as Battersby says there is no reason to suppose that the "same human being" is anyone but our enduring "self" that continues to provide accommodation for many emergent "selves". One must eliminate in the process any concern about aligning oneself on one side or the other of the Diachronic/Episodic divide. We are Diachronic

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 31

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 28

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

and Episodic, Narrative and Non-Narrative in our exposition.

We can certainly narrativize or treat in a narrative manner virtually any discrete segment of a life, however, long or short or however unsusceptible to narrativizing it may initially appear. Of course, we are equally free to focus on conditions that are persistent without being coherent, characteristic without being related, resonant without being harmonious and so forth.²⁰

Conclusion: In the end, I would like to say we can have different layers of self. In certain context first person givenness of our experience or non-narrative is said to be important and, in another context Narrative. So, self is not sought of one which is purely narrative or purely non-narrative. Moreover, it is not purely narrative or purely non-narrative account of self which can alone capture the notion of self. And if one wants to capture the notion of self in its completeness than multiple perspectives of the self has to be taken into consideration. In that context I would say, our narrativity and non-narrativity must complement each other. This is the position which Dan Zahavi also upholds.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 43.