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Winston Meier  
winston9109@gmail.com

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## Identifying Errors in the Ethical Narrativity Thesis

### Abstract

A self-narrative ensures continuity for a conscious subject, in that the subject empathizes with the protagonist of both their remembered past and anticipated future. The ethical narrativity thesis (ENT) posits that such a narrative (or life-story) is requisite for agency and an ordered experience. Opponents of the ENT argue that one can inhabit an episodic (non-narrative) temporal schema and qualify as a rational agent. In this paper, I argue that narrative selfhood encourages cognitive distortions and inhibits a thorough etiological understanding of one's past. I maintain that episodicity is the optimal form of self-constitution for rational, ethical decision-making.

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## Identifying Errors in the Ethical Narrativity Thesis

Winston Meier

*Portland State University*

winston9109@gmail.com

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## Introduction

A popular view in contemporary analytic philosophy posits that having a self-narrative is necessary for agency, unity of experience and subjective well-being.<sup>1</sup> Critics have argued that selfhood cannot be reduced to a narrative, and that narrativity is not necessary for life to be worth living. This paper examines whether narrative selfhood inhibits or empowers one's capacity for the good life.<sup>2</sup> I argue that self-narratives are useful organizing structures for memories and ideas which are particularly emotive and content-laden. However, decoding these mental artifacts through introspection renders the narrative superfluous and obstructive. I posit that a neutral temporal extension is optimal for agency, order and positive affect.

### 1. Explaining Narrativity

If someone asked Michelle Obama, "Who are you?" she would likely point to her recent autobiography *Becoming*. A narrative theorist would say that insofar as the self is temporally extended (e.g. is not reducible to whatever a person is doing presently), she *is* her autobiography. A narrative theorist would argue that our selves have a narrative structure. We experience our lives as a protagonist moving through a story from beginning to end, making constant mental reference to past and future episodes. In this way, our experience of the present is conditioned by our broader life story.

The theory that a subject requires a narrative to live productively, agentively and happily is referred to as the Ethical Narrativity Thesis (ENT). Additionally, the Psychological Narrativity Thesis (PNT) holds that self-constitution *necessarily* assumes a narrative structure.<sup>3</sup> Both the PNT and its rival theory of episodic selfhood are reductionist views of the self. A reductionist holds that personal identity consists in psychological continuity and denies the existence of an independent, persistent Cartesian ego or self-substance. A reductionist argues that the self is an aggregate of phenomena - memories, beliefs, desires, etc., which remain continuous only by degree. Narrative theorists posit that these phenomena necessarily or optimally assume a narrative structure.<sup>4</sup> This narrative is defined by its causal ordering, the emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity." *Ratio*, 17(4), (2004): 428-452.

<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore competing notions of the good life, but I consider agency and positive affect to be common prerequisites.

<sup>3</sup> Strawson, 428

<sup>4</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

consequence of each episode and the psychological continuity of the story's subject (for instance, the same beliefs about God and politics being held across time).

Each theorist I will mention would agree that without a narrative one would feel disorientation and fragmentation that would inhibit meaningful action. However, views regarding the exact composition, expression and function of narrativity vary. The so-called “weak view” claims that any sequential ordering of events qualifies as a narrative, as in Catriona Mackenzie's notion of narratives as “implicit organizing structures.”<sup>5</sup> She claims that without a narrative one remains lodged in the “stagnant present,” devoid of any sense of time's passing or any filter for incoming sensory information.<sup>6</sup> Critics of this view argue that such a definition is too inclusive and is therefore trivial. One's phenomenological representation of past and future does not necessarily take narrative form.<sup>7</sup>

The “strong view,” on the other hand, requires that self-narratives resemble a work of literature.<sup>8</sup> Of this tradition, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that both the coherence and meaning of our actions depend on their being directed towards a common resolution. For MacIntyre, the narrative provides a temporal structure for us to locate this telos - the ends to our means.<sup>9</sup> However, MacIntyre's exclusively instrumental conception of action discounts the virtue or possibility of autotelic activity. Such action is (broadly speaking) inherently rewarding. For instance, ambling for the sake of ambling differs in kind from walking perfunctorily to the post office.<sup>10</sup> What is required

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<sup>5</sup> Marya Schechtman, “Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View.” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 60: (2007): 155-178.

<sup>6</sup> Catriona Mackenzie. (2014). Embodied agents, narrative selves. *Philosophical Explorations*, 17(2), 154-171; Catriona Mackenzie & Jackie Poltera, “Narrative Integration, Fragmented Selves, and Autonomy.” *Hypatia*, 25(1), (2010): 31-54.

<sup>7</sup> Schechtman 2007; Strawson 2004

<sup>8</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*. Eds. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum 1992): 104-105, 114-115

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 215-216

<sup>10</sup> To further illustrate this distinction, which is significant for the discussion in Section 3., Andre Agassi may loath playing tennis but perform for his father's approval. If his father does not approve at the end of a match, the match is devoid of value. Alternatively, Alex Honnold may enjoy rock-climbing without its being directed to a further goal, but still pursue the winning of an award or sponsorship. Here, the “ends” (the moneyed award) is actually a means to finance continued climbing, which is itself value-underived. If he fails to earn a sponsorship, the time he spent climbing is not considered devoid of value.

for an action to qualify as autotelic is that the object of one's action (strolling about) is done primarily for its own sake, (such acts differ from atelic acts which are indefinite in their beginning or end, as in *living morally* or *being social*).<sup>11</sup>

Marya Schechtman locates her Narrative Self-Constitution View (NSCV) between the weak and strong views. Contra Mackenzie, she regards narratives as being explicit and literary, differing in kind from a basic temporal schema. For instance, the NSCV requires that one be capable of articulating their narrative. Akin to this qualification, most narrativists agree that self-narration is integral to self-constitution. For instance, I self-narrate: "I think that interview went well, the board seemed impressed with my answers. If they hire me I will be so relieved. I can pay off my loans and start saving for a house." In this short, internally audible segment, there is a series of events that are causally linked and that have an emotional value for a persistent subject - me. This is a narrative, one that is likely woven into a much longer and more involved narrative. It is something I can articulate internally or to a listener. Critically for the NSCV, in narrative segments of any length one locates their self (as they are now) as the main character throughout their story. In other words, the self achieves continuity through one's ability to identify with the protagonist of each episode. Endorsing the ENT, Schechtman claims that it is beneficial to have an empathic connection with the memories and fantasies of one's temporal extension. Schechtman argues that when one fails to identify with their remembered or anticipated self they will feel alienated in their relationships and lack social responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

Critics of the PNT observe that having a conceptual schema of the past and the future does not require that this schema resemble a story.<sup>13</sup> Galen Strawson, for instance, denies having a self-narrative but acknowledges having a lived past and an anticipated future that is represented mentally to himself. Yet, he does not locate his present self in his past or future frames.<sup>14</sup> Schechtman also agrees that

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<sup>11</sup> Kieran Setiya, "The Midlife Crisis." *Philosophers Imprint* 14, no. 31 (November 2014); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 67-70

<sup>12</sup> Schechtman, (2007): 162-163, 176-178

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Zahavi, "Self and Other: The Limits of Narrative Understanding." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 60, (2007): 191-192

<sup>14</sup> Strawson, 43

inhabiting a temporal extension need not take narrative form.<sup>15</sup> For Strawson and Schechtman, the constituent episodes of a schema must allow for “empathic access” to qualify as a narrative. This is to say, one must be able to sympathize with, and thereby identify with the main character of remembered or anticipated events. Both the values and emotions of the agent must resonate with one’s self as they are presently dispositioned. For instance, my self-narrative may exclude memories of political party affiliations that I have since discarded given a shift in beliefs, but include cultural norms to which I still subscribe. Empathic access, and the type of memories which allow for it, can change the landscape of one’s neutral temporal extension into a vivacious, literary autobiography.<sup>16</sup>

What specific types of phenomena allow for empathic access? In “Against Narrativity,” Strawson argues that even one who does not represent their life to themselves as a narrative can sometimes harbor exceptional memories to which they connect empathically. He states that such individuals “connect to charged events in their pasts in such a way that they feel like those events happened to them [as they are now].”<sup>17</sup> Flashbulb memories are a useful example in that they are vivid, emotive, content-laden and constitutive of one’s social identity (yet given to inaccuracy).<sup>18</sup> Strawson argues that narrative self-constitution requires the further “story-telling” and “form-finding” tendencies, where we ascribe a form resembling a story arc to our assemblage of charged images.<sup>19</sup> We do this in part by deleting neutral episodes that are devoid of empathic access. We can reflect and note that our own self-narratives are devoid of mundane activities like teeth-brushing or paying bills.

Narratives, then, consist of emotional memories and fantasies that resonate with presently held beliefs, attitudes, desires, etc. We forget or exclude episodes that have become emotionally neutral and morally or ideologically discordant. Our temporal ordering of icons then comes to resemble a novel in the making, complete with rising and falling action, twists and turns, climaxes and epilogues.

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<sup>15</sup> Schechtman, (2007): 408-409

<sup>16</sup> Marya Schechtman, “Empathic Access: The Missing Ingredient in Personal Identity.” *Philosophical Explorations* 2, (2001): 103-106

<sup>17</sup> Strawson, 430-431, 445

<sup>18</sup> William Hirst and Elizabeth A. Phelps, “Flashbulb Memories.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25, no. 1 (2016): 36-41

<sup>19</sup> Strawson, 441-442

## 2. Critiquing Narrativity

Narratives are useful for the organization of charged events. Despite this function, I will use the following analogy to argue that a self-narrative should be considered disposable. Consider a crime scene at which the investigator takes dozens of photos that contain clues leading to the identification of the assailant. They must be organized into some coherent pattern so that the information is accessible, so they are arranged into a narrative: photos of the entryway, blood on the stairs, exit-way, abandoned vehicle, home of the suspect, etc. When the assailant is identified, the photos and their narrative structure lose value. They need not occupy space on the investigator's wall when the important information can be synthesized into a single sentence: suspect S is the assailant. As someone involved in the investigation, I learn to avoid S and people like them. Leaving the metaphor, the charged nature of the events in question and the narrative they constitute become obsolete once the vital information is derived.

Self-narratives are similarly useful for arranging discrete, emotive and vivid mental representations to produce etiological insights that guide decision making. The vivid expression of the content attracts our attention, and it is made tolerable and intelligible when it is organized into a story in which we can locate ourselves towards a positive conclusion. However, the value of such expressive imagery diminishes once its underlying content is elucidated. If the emotive quality of an event corresponds with its vivid expression, a thorough understanding of the event could reduce the emotional content and thereby diminish its vividness.<sup>20</sup> A narrative need not persist after the informational content of its constitutive events has been distilled into simple maxims. These episodes then become neutral (in terms of emotional content and expression) markers on someone's timeline and are useful for little more than orientation. They do not require or invite revisitation or rumination, which may be characteristic of self-narratives.

The ENT claims that it is beneficial to conceive of one's life as a narrative and experience life as a protagonist moving through that narrative. Given that the ENT prioritizes the preservation of self-narratives and their constitutive charged episodes, it fails to encourage the reflective and analytic processes that could yield a more in-

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<sup>20</sup> This is an empirical claim, but experience should show that greater etiological understanding seems to lessen the emotional intensity associated with the memory of an event, and thereby reduce the overall intensity belonging to the memory's expression. Spinoza elaborates on this theme in Book 5 of his *Ethics*, for example in Postulation 3: "An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it."



volved self-knowledge.<sup>21</sup> I will now discuss in greater detail what obstacles are posed by a persistent self-narrative to one's capacity to reflect, act and engender positive affect.

### 2A. Daydreams: Reliving Charged Events

Though a critic of the ENT, Strawson argues that those who lack self-narratives are not “more present in the present moment,”<sup>22</sup> meaning they would not be less distracted or more attentive than narrative selves. However, I think that empathic access can motivate revisiting and reliving past events, either as they were or as we would have preferred them to have been. I will briefly discuss in greater detail how empathic access disqualifies one from psychological presence, and the effects this difference can have on our experienced positive affect.

Although the episode as an iconic representation is *itself* something that manifests in the present, its content generally represents a past or a hypothetical event. To become transfixed by the content of such an episode would prevent one from being attentive to exogenous sense data that is characteristic of the present moment.

Colin McGinn discusses this capacity of our attention to become invested in representations (mental or digital) in his “fictional immersion theory.” He likens the ensuing “dream belief” to the same phenomenological shift that takes place while watching a transfixing film. What is necessary is that we lose awareness of percepts that would, by contrast, expose images *as* images rather than organic sense data. We do this by attentionally entering the interiority of an image, focusing on its “outer objects” rather than the image as a whole.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, Schechtman observes that we can enter into the first-person perspective of our memories as though it were a “surrogate,”<sup>24</sup> reliving our episodes as if they were happening presently.<sup>25</sup> We believe

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<sup>21</sup> By “self-knowledge,” I am referring to knowledge of the causal nature of the episodes which would come to constitute a self-narrative. I am not implying there is a self-substance to have knowledge of (I will discuss this point further in Part 3).

<sup>22</sup> Strawson, 432

<sup>23</sup> Colin McGinn, *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 103-106

<sup>24</sup> This “surrogate” inhabitation is what Strawson (433) and others also refer to as taking a “from the inside” perspective of an episode.

<sup>25</sup> Schechtman, (2001): 106

and relive a memory (or fantasy), as if the intentional content were exogenous as opposed to the product of our memory or imagination.

That we can experience the content of thoughts *as if* they were percepts is also suggested by our physiological response to such content. For example, if I remember a dog attacking me when I was a child, my palms sweat and my heart races *as if* the dog in my memory were present in its material form. This capacity allows us to exercise pseudo-agency, where we create the conditions under which we act - something we cannot do (to such an extent) outside our narratives. Indeed, this is what makes daydreaming so seductive. Yet, it renders the consequences of our actions within the dream insignificant as the challenges we face are artificial. Furthermore, daydreaming can become automatic, addictive and disruptive to our everyday experience, as suggested by the aptly named condition “maladaptive daydreaming.”<sup>26</sup>

The immersive apprehension of mental images I have been discussing differs markedly from introspection and mindful self-reflection, wherein one could be deemed “present.” These are exercises where we extrapolate from and study an image as such. When extrapolating, what McGinn refers to as the “frame” or the empty space encompassing an image becomes exposed.<sup>27</sup> An image is therefore revealed as something insulated, individuated and endogenous, as opposed to a unit in a larger field of exogenous sense data. During such exercises we would *not* inhabit the afforded view point of an episode (as though it were a surrogate). Introspection and mindfulness is strictly observational and is a more objectifying (of mental content) form of apprehension. Writers on meditation and introspection also emphasize the non-judgmental character of such attentional apprehension.<sup>28</sup> It is evident that sustaining awareness which is not associated with either the capacity or the motivation to modify conceptual or imagistic content, enables a more thorough and veridical understanding of this content.<sup>29</sup> Such an understanding can inform optimal decision

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<sup>26</sup> Jayne Bigelsen, Jonathan M. Lehrfeld, Daniela S. Jopp, Eli Somer, “Maladaptive daydreaming: Evidence for an under-researched mental health disorder, *Consciousness and Cognition*,” Volume 42, (2016): 564, 569-571

<sup>27</sup> McGinn, 59-60, 175

<sup>28</sup> Sam Harris, *Waking Up* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013); Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (New York: Hyperion Books, 1994), 10, 56

<sup>29</sup> The following analogy may point to an explanation as to why this is the case: when immersed in a film, we are not aware we are watching a movie (as in McGinn’s “Fictional Immersion Thesis”). Thereby, we cannot inquire as to how the images appear on the screen as we are not aware there is a screen. Likewise, when we are unaware of the thoughts as such, we cannot inquire as to the etiology

making and promote effective action. This method of apprehension is an exercise in remaining present.<sup>30</sup>

Some of these observations have close parallels with discoveries in neuroscience. Mindful reflection has shown to be an effective technique for reducing daydreaming tendencies, as well as yielding self-knowledge. Activity in the area of the brain referred to as the default mode network (DMN) decreases during meditation (as well as during flow states, which I discuss in Section 3).<sup>31</sup> The DMN is most active during periods of self-representation and “mind-wandering,” mental activity also described as simply thinking about the past and the future.<sup>32</sup> The simultaneous activity in the DMN during daydreaming (mind-wandering) and self-representation suggest these are symmetrical, if not synonymous processes. If we understand self-representation to be narrative in exposition, we can assume that narrative self-constitution is largely explicit and immersive.

Narratives are useful for providing structure to an assemblage of charged icons. Yet, understanding the etiology of their constitutive episodes can reduce the emotional intensity of an episode, and thereby reduce its empathic access. Mindful and introspective exercises have been shown to produce self-knowledge and etiological insights into one’s history, as well as general information about the world.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, activities that yield self-knowledge diminish activity in the DMN, suggest-

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or genealogy of the thought itself. We cannot ask: Why am I having this thought? What motivates the emotions behind the thought? What motivated the events described by the thought? The capacity to modify may require an attentional absorption in the image that prevents recognizing the image as such.

<sup>30</sup> Even if memories themselves are prone to inaccuracy, especially upon revisitation, understanding the logical structure of events is still useful in yielding principles that guide future decision making. This is evident from any analogy in practical ethics that, while fictional, has a logical structure that (ideally) transfers to real-life scenarios.

<sup>31</sup> Harris: 119-123

<sup>32</sup> Judson A. Brewer, Patrick D. Worhunsky, Jeremy R. Gray, Tang Yi-Yuan, Jochen Weber, Hedy Kober. “Meditation experience is associated with differences in default mode network activity and connectivity.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108 (50) (2011): 20254-20259

<sup>33</sup> Harris, 119-149; S. F. Santorelli, “A qualitative case analysis of mindfulness meditation training in an outpatient stress reduction clinic and its implications for the development of self-knowledge” (Order No. 9233158). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304022127). (1992): 280-281, 306-307; Jack Kornfield. “Intensive Insight Meditation: A Phenomenological Study.” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 11, no. 1 (1979): 44; Stephen M. Kosslyn *Image and Brain*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994): 327-244

ing an inverse relationship between self-knowledge and immersive narrativity. In other words, the more we know about ourselves and our lives the less we seem to self-narrate. The distinction is important, as one study suggests that we spend nearly 50% of our waking lives daydreaming (mind-wandering, thinking about the past or future).<sup>34</sup>

Daydreaming, and the implicit dream belief, is enabled by empathic access. Given that we do not often relive and ruminate over neutral events, I argue that it is primarily emotion which binds our attention to the outer objects contained within an image's frame. As noted, daydreaming has been shown to be addictive and disruptive to our everyday life. Reducing the amount of time we spend daydreaming correlates with boosted positive affect.<sup>35</sup> If we think of daydreaming as an exercise in wish fulfillment, we can recognize that it may prevent us from realizing our desires, or from relinquishing them and apprehending realistic desires. Daydreaming allows for a type of proxy agency, where we determine the conditions of our actions and control the consequences. Given that the environment in which we act (our imagined world) is artificial, so is the reward. Self-narratives enable this artificial reward system, for they both sustain and extend from empathic access.

## *2B. Irrational Narrativity: Change-blindness, Biases and Heuristics*

A virtue ascribed to self-narratives is that they provide a structure for imagining the resolution to an action. The type of action generally discussed here is instrumental, where actions derive their value from the realization of a telos (ends) or an object-of-desire. As noted in Section 1., this differs from *autotelic* action, the value of which is “underived” or inherent to the process itself. Instrumental action, especially the extended “quests” described by MacIntyre, assume a continuity that is both discordant with experience and beyond what empathic access can account for.<sup>36</sup> It assumes that our value systems will not change when we take in new information and that our telos will then still be desirable as we approach its realization. It also requires the continuity or continued realizability of the desire-object (be it a person, place, item, title, etc.), a requirement that becomes harder to meet as time passes.

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<sup>34</sup> M.A. Killingsworth and D.T. Gilbert. 2010. “A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind.” *Science* 330: 932

<sup>35</sup> Harris, 119-122

<sup>36</sup> MacIntyre, 219

It is probable that, as MacIntyre suggests, narrative-selves are characterized by instrumental action.<sup>37</sup> The goals that narrative-selves pursue are animated and substantiated by the charged events of our pasts. Charged events carry an emotive gravity and an empathic access for us as we are now. When we are not reliving them through daydreaming, we seek to replicate these fixations. They constitute a fixed telos to which we direct our actions, the strength of the charge determining both our desire and the degree to which our actions become instrumental. For instance, romantic themed narratives could be inculcated by one intense, positive experience with a person that then drives a “love-sick” pursuit (as psychiatrist Stephen Grosz illustrates in his essay *How love sickness keeps us from love*), or that provokes an attachment to a type of person based on superficial resemblance.<sup>38</sup> We will likewise avoid objects that are reminiscent of painful experiences (regardless of the event’s statistical significance). Such experiences may provoke exclusion or retribution themed narratives that are predicated upon stereotypes. In both cases, the inevitable discontinuity of our environment creates practical issues for these themed narratives.

That our goals (of acquisition or avoidance) are constituted by charged events suggests one’s perceptual range becomes limited in that one is primed to notice sense objects that are consistent with their narrative aims.<sup>39</sup> Consider a professional runner who fails to prepare for a race given an overconfidence bias from having won the previous race. Retaining the charged quality of the memory of winning, through reliving it as a daydream and positioning it in a broader narrative of success, discourages a thorough introspection of the event. The runner fails to recognize that her ease in winning the previous race is reducible to her close competitor having had an injury. She therefore fails to practice sufficiently and loses the second race. Similarly, an athlete may compete beyond her prime, risking injury because of a desire to replicate the positive episodes of her narrative. A celebrity-themed narrative could encourage an overconfidence bias as well as a confirmation bias, as in listening to fans who promote continued competition over trusted coaches who encourage retirement. Decoding a self-narrative enables one to recall information in terms of relevancy as opposed to saliency, reducing the strength of various biases in our decision making.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Setiya, 8; Parfit, 117; Csikszentmihalyi, 67-70

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Grosz, *The Examined Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 109-17.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York City, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 52-58

<sup>40</sup> A similar proneness to heuristics is inherent to narrative-selfhood. Consider an act of terrorism in a

Biases and blindness towards change may correlate positively with increasingly instrumental efforts. Such action redeems its value primarily when the associated telos is realized. Consider a man who performs a series of menial, unenjoyable tasks to obtain a promotion, a pay increase and a bonus - all in order to eventually buy his dream house by the beach. The value of his years spent doing menial tasks and the value of this segment of his narrative is contingent upon purchasing his dream house. This contingency could discourage vigilance to change or an adequate reconfiguration of his aims given change, for instance a growing housing bubble or rising sea levels (e.g. the sunk cost fallacy).<sup>41</sup>

As Charles Perrow writes, “we process the information that fits our expected world and... exclude the information that might contradict it.”<sup>42</sup> Research on “change-blindness” by Roger Rensink and others confirms this human tendency to observe false-continuity, especially when change is gradual and unexpected.<sup>43</sup> I have discussed the ways in which the charged episodes of our life stories provoke biases and a more general blindness to change. Value-derived “quests” are promoted by the charged events of self-narratives. This extended series of instrumental efforts encourages change-blindness. The strength of the charge will determine the strength of the desire as the memory is reorganized into a desire-object. The desire for the ends in question, then, affects the degree to which our actions derive their value from the realization of that ends. In effect, this desire and our attentional allocation to our telos as it is represented mentally to us, promotes a blindness towards change. This blindness is characterized by priming and biases, among other cognitive errors.<sup>44</sup>

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relatively safe country that provokes widespread agoraphobia and garners support for an expensive and intrusive surveillance program. Here, an episode that is fear-provoking but statistically insignificant promotes a retrospectively disproportionate response. Decoding one’s narrative and understanding the etiological structure of this event, reduces (in this case) the strength of both availability and affect heuristics. However, preserving this narrative (with perhaps a victimhood or revenge theme), would prevent such an understanding.

<sup>41</sup> H. R. Arkes and C. Blumer, “The psychology of sunk cost.” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 35(1), (1985): 124-140.

<sup>42</sup> Charles C. Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living With High Risk Technologies* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 214

<sup>43</sup> Daniel J. Simmons and Ronald A. Rensink, “Change Blindness: Past, Present and Future.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 9, (2005): 16-20.

<sup>44</sup> In *Mindsight* (2004), McGinn also observes our proneness to imaginative-seeing, which is typically motivated by emotions such as fear. With imaginative-seeing, we superimpose our idea of something onto the actual object presented to us, given a trigger. We may, in effect, filter the reminiscent

### 3. Episodic Selfhood

It is through introspecting one's narrative that one engenders a neutral temporal extension, which I argue is preferable to narrativity. What does it mean to have a "neutral temporal extension?" Strawson's "episodic self" is one that has a cognitive schema of past and future but does not identify with their former or hypothetical selves. Strawson posits the episodic / narrative division is genetically determined. Yet, I have argued that introspecting constitutive episodes diminishes the charged nature of those events and one's empathic access to them. Such introspection, specifically of the causal mechanics of one's memories, yields what Spinoza called "rules for living," or maxims. With rehearsal, Spinoza argued that such maxims can become available for immediate recall so they could be enacted intuitively and immediately.<sup>45</sup>

What are the benefits of episodic selfhood? For one, there is likely a positive correlation between episodocity and autotelism. According to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the autotelic person does have long-term goals that are often clear and concrete. Yet, they experience more frequent states of *flow*, where one's attention remains sustained on their present activity. One loses consciousness of self and time during flow, and flow states correlate with enhanced performance and increased positive affect. Regardless of the initial goals or incentives, the value of the action by which one enters flow extends from *doing* rather than *attaining*. The realization of an ends is often of secondary importance and can become irrelevant, as in a musician playing beyond the crescendo of a song into an improvised "jam session."<sup>46</sup>

Flow requires sustained attention on the objects one acts upon, as opposed to being "lost in thought" and reliving the content of one's narrative.<sup>47</sup> Flow is often experienced by athletes, artists and musicians, but it could be experienced in myriad activities including those often considered mundane (Jon Kabat-Zinn describes exper-

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material object through our established idea of it. David Hume made similar observations of our tendency to mistake resemblance for sameness in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1.4.3.5, 1.4.6.6-14).

<sup>45</sup> Benedict Spinoza, "The Ethics," *The Ethics and Other Works*. Ed. E. Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 251

<sup>46</sup> J. Nakamura and M. Csikszentmihalyi, "The concept of flow," *Oxford handbook of positive psychology*, ed. C. R. Snyder, and S. J. Lopez (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009): 89 - 105; Csikszentmihalyi, 83-93, 208-213

<sup>47</sup> Harris, 119; Csikszentmihalyi, 86-88



riencing flow while cleaning his oven).<sup>48</sup> Such activities require concentration which I have argued is enhanced once one has decoded their narrative. Csikszentmihalyi explains that the essential trait of an autotelic personality is a lower frequency of self-reference - a lower degree of self-consciousness in general. The excessive self-concern experienced by the narcissist, for instance, denies a person the capacity to become invested in their activity and enter frequent states of flow.<sup>49</sup> Strawson likewise argues that the need to maintain a life story is likely motivated by a narcissistic sense of self-importance.<sup>50</sup> Whether narcissism precedes or follows from narrativity, I suspect that the charged content of one's self-narrative diverts and retains much of one's attention, making flow states infrequent. We can also assume that where one's well-being is contingent upon external conditions matching their narrative, opportunities for inherently rewarding action will be less frequent.<sup>51</sup>

What makes an action rewarding? In part, that we come to excel at our activity though it continues to challenge us, as shown in Csikszentmihalyi's research.<sup>52</sup> I argue that for an action to be rewarding it must also align with an individual's moral constitution. This is to say, an action is rewarding to the extent that it feels justified. Justification for action need not result from its being contextualized within a narrative. As discussed, the memories constitutive of a narrative are subject to error, promote irrationality, encourage daydreaming and have inconsistent empathic access. Instead, justification can be derived from one's "rules for living" that have been produced by introspection. The process of decoding and thereby diminishing one's narrative, yields the maxims that guide one's decision making and that enable justified and rewarding action (be it sculpting, surfing, lecturing, litigating, or cleaning the kitchen). It also releases one's attention from their narrative so it can be redirected to the objects of one's action.<sup>53</sup>

With a broadened scope for incoming sense data we are more aware of opportunities for ethical action. With more involved self-knowledge, given an etiological un-

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<sup>48</sup> Kabat-Zinn, 46, 204-205

<sup>49</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, 84-85, 92-93

<sup>50</sup> 437

<sup>51</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, 92-93

<sup>52</sup> 208-213

<sup>53</sup> Such actions may become intuitive or unconscious, as in a flow state. However, they differ from impulse in that they are substantiated by maxims rather than motivated purely by emotion.



derstanding of the constituent events of our narratives, we can gain a clearer idea of what we value. We can then locate in our present environment possibilities for action that is rewarding, justified and enjoyable, even if it is in some sense instrumental (as in, we also undertake this act for remuneration or respect). We can expect, then, that episodic selves have a tendency towards autotelic action and the resulting states of flow, as well as increased positive affect.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have critiqued narrative views of the self, arguing that self-narratives are largely composed of charged events to which we connect empathically. The systematization of these events into a life-story contrasts with a neutral temporal schema. A neutral temporal schema is sufficient for orientation and navigation in a complex world. A narrative may be a useful intermediary organizing device for particularly emotive episodes, but the optimal form of self-constitution is episodic.

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