

Teleology, Narrative, and Death

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1.

Consider the fission problem: a single human being, *A*, is divided into two such humans, *B* and *C*, through teleportation, divine intervention, or some other mythical power. Both *B* and *C* are psychologically continuous with *A*. As the established account of personal identity would have it, psychological continuity is sufficient for personal identity.¹ But if fission is conceptually possible, the psychological continuity view of personal identity faces a problem: since both *B* and *C* are psychologically continuous and thus identical with *A*, given the transitivity of identity it must follow that *B* and *C* are identical with each other. And yet clearly they cannot be; not only are they two distinct bodies, but they are not psychologically continuous with each other! One way to attempt to circumvent this problem is by positing a teleological conception of personal identity. On such a conception, *B* and *C* are different individuals in part because, having diverged, they have different ends. Thus, *B* is identical with *A* insofar as both *A* and *B* are the same whole, whose end is the end of *B*. *C* is identical with *A* for the same reason. But *B* and *C* need not be identical on this account, because the identity does not hold between *A* and *B* and *A* and *C* as an identity of part to part, but rather as an

¹ Neo-Lockean psychological continuity theories may no longer be the default position on personal identity, but they continue to exercise a strong influence, and they typically present the primary positions attacked by proponents of alternative theories.

identity of whole to whole in time. Similarly, my College has a single basement which serves two buildings, and thus the basement is part of each building in space without the two buildings being identical.

It may thus seem that the best way to address the problem is by switching to what is often taken as the teleological extension of the psychological continuity view—a narrative theory of identity. Such a view aims to preserve what is right about psychological continuity, its reliance on psychological rather than physical features of human beings to explain their continuity through time, while denying that persons are *reducible* to causal chains of psychological states, on the grounds that those states themselves have a meaning only within the wider whole that is the self. We can also extract a teleological theory from Heidegger's view of the self as *Da-sein*, a being defined by its possibility or, as I want to put it, a being that is an *anticipatory whole*. On this view, we have our whole self as the *telos* of our existence. In a sense, however, this is precisely what the narrative view seems to claim, and Heidegger is consequently often lumped together with narrative theorists. Here I want to argue that this is a mistake—Heidegger's account is not a narrative account, but rather provides an alternative view of identity along with the material for a reconfiguration of the role of narrative. After arguing that narrative is neither constitutive of identity, nor supported by Heidegger's view, however, I will argue that this need not mean narrative is dispensable; it serves a crucial role in the expression of identity in action, even if it is not necessarily constitutive of that identity. It may seem, however, that *any* teleological account must be a narrative one. I thus want to begin with a counter-indication.

2.

Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, may be read as a profoundly anti-narrative work. While Augustine certainly does lay out the details of his

youthful sin and consequent conversion in narrative fashion, in Book 11 his discussion of time concludes with a prayer that,

I may be gathered up from my old way of life to follow that One and to forget that which is behind, no longer stretched out but now pulled together again—stretching forth not to what shall be and shall pass away but to those things that are before me (Augustine 2002, 237).

Augustine's aim, in other words, is to cast off the narrative he has so far laid out; and it is precisely the 'stretching out' of his self in time to which he objects. As he makes clear a few sentences later,

I have been torn between the times, the order of which I do not know, and my thoughts, even the inmost and deepest places of my soul, are mangled by various commotions until I shall flow together into thee, purged and molten in the fire of thy love (Augustine 2002, 237-238).

In other words, Augustine has laid out his previous life as a narrative for two reasons. First, narrativity—where the self is stretched in time, and thus ordered according to past and future, both of which are real only within the soul—belongs to the sinful, fallen condition of humanity. Second, the aim of laying out the narrative is to cast it off, to be unified and purged of the temporal disorder.

We find a similar conception in someone like Kant, for whom the highest good, at least for the individual, is the accomplishment of a holy will (in fact, Kant goes so far as to insist that Christ is an idea of pure practical reason, as the idea of a human being with a holy will). For Kant, as is well known, the moral law is an imperative for us insofar as our inclinations do not of themselves agree with it. Consequently, all human beings are evil in the sense that all human beings can be understood as having chosen to make

occasional exceptions to the moral law when inclinations so demand. The holy will, then, is the ideal of a will whose inclinations are in full agreement with the moral law, such that the agent follows the law willingly. Now for Kant, our fundamental choice of an evil maxim manifests itself through occasional actions either prohibited by or not motivated by the moral law. Thus, overcoming the evil maxim requires making a choice against violating the law. But for Kant, this cannot be a choice we make each time we are faced by a decision—rather, there is only *one* choice, to occasionally violate or to obey the moral law, and this one choice is manifested in many actions. The evil self, then, is always fragmented; it is torn between the moral law, on the one hand, and the multiple contrary incentives to which it is subject in time. It furthermore imposes a guilt on us: since all of us begin in evil, we have always already failed at some point in our lives to live up to the moral law. To overcome the evil maxim—and Kant is not entirely explicit on how that could be done, since “it is less possible to conceive how man, by nature evil, should of himself lay aside evil and raise himself to the ideal of holiness” (Kant 1960, 54, Ak. 6:61)—one must reverse the original choice, in effect choosing a new life for oneself, a life that in a single, unified choice brings together the new self with the old self, subsuming that fragmented self into a non-fragmented whole. While the evil self is ‘stretched’ among its inclinations, the new self is unified by a single law and no longer tempted by the conditions of time.

I introduce these examples only to suggest that a narrative self—a self extended in time—may not be the only option for a teleological theory, even a teleological theory that emphasizes the temporal dimension of selfhood.² For Kant clearly sees the holy will as the *telos* of human life. And while it is commonly held that the central distinction in his work is that between a

² In recent work, Rudd (2012) grants that narrative and teleological aspects of selfhood may come apart on some views, though his own view is that they are inseparable. And he frequently writes as if temporality *implies* narrativity. I argue here that both temporality and teleology are independent of narrative, though narrative may presuppose both.

temporal world and a completely atemporal one, his account suggests precisely the idea of a third, intermediate temporality—a level at which the discrete actions of a human being are brought together into an articulated whole. In Augustine’s case, this is even clearer. In asking to ‘forget that which is behind,’ Augustine is not asking for amnesia; rather, he is asking not to be torn among the different times of his life, to have his sinful past united with his post-conversion self, a union that remains impossible as long as he remains ‘stretched’ in time. He is asking not to have his memories taken away, but to allow them to cease to *be* memories, that is, phantom parts of his self that nevertheless stand in opposition to him.

3.

To bring out the point of these examples, I will introduce a distinction between two sorts of temporal unities, each of which has a claim to being constitutive of selfhood. First, there is the narrative conception of a temporally extended whole. By contrast, the Heideggerian picture as I read it—in accordance with Augustine and Kant—is that of a temporal whole. Both pictures, in other words, involve an ordering, and a unification, of events over time. But the unity so produced differs. On the narrative conception, it is extended. On the Heideggerian conception—or at least the version I want to defend—it is not. On this view, to insist on narrativity is to block off an important sense in which our *telos* is the attainment of a unity, by insisting that the past must remain a burden to be entered into my narrative as something that contributes—through a story—to shaping the overall story of my life. And the Heideggerian view, I believe, aims to overcome this sort of dependence of the temporal unity that constitutes my self on my past stories.

To see what I mean, consider the psychological continuity view. Although ‘psychological continuity’ is now the standard name for a theory of

personal identity, one often still finds references instead to ‘the memory criterion,’ and even those who do speak of ‘psychological continuity’ tend to take memory as the essential component of personal identity. The psychological view assumes that the past cannot be changed, that it consists of fixed events, and that these events causally affect the present. That is, the past is gathered together through accretion, and affects the present through that accretion. Narrative accounts, for the most part, deny this picture of accreting events because the past events—including my actions—derive their meaning from the narrative itself. As Schechtman writes, ‘the most salient feature of narrative form in general is that the individual incidents and episodes in a narrative take their meaning from the broader context of the story in which they occur’ (1996, 96). The notion of context here has several meanings. First, against the psychological continuity view, it means that events do not occur atomistically such that a life can be reduced to causal relations between them—a life is constituted by a unity, not an accretion. Second, my life as a whole is the background against which events are to be understood. Call this response to psychological continuity—that past events affect the present only insofar as their meaning depends on the whole and therefore cannot fully determine identity—the Accretion Objection.

So far, however, narrative seems to inherit some of the problems of the psychological continuity account, at least from a Heideggerian perspective: it makes personal identity depend strongly on the past. It is true, of course, that past events do not simply impact the present and future causally, but rather through intelligible relations with other events in the context of an overall narrative. However, it is clear that a narrative account depends, to a large extent, on the agent’s being able to incorporate her past into a story that leads up to the present and into the future. So past events do place significant constraints on the kind of identity a narrative theory can allow for. In one sense, of course, this is not problematic, but obvious. Our

past clearly places significant constraints on our future possibilities, both in the sense of what we have the ability to do and what we are predisposed to. Action is possible only on the basis of some sort of character, and that character is shaped in large part by past experience. The question, however, is whether character—the sort of character required to make our actions intelligible—is constituted exclusively by a narrative form.

Galen Strawson, for example, rejects this view. He insists that,

the past can be present or alive in the present without being present or alive *as* 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 (2004, 432).

Now, clearly, Strawson cannot mean here literally that the past need not be present as past; what he means is that it need not be present in the sense of explicit experiential memory. And that seems obviously true: I can certainly know how to hammer in a nail, for example, without remembering my initially clumsy attempts at getting such hammering right. Practice, and experience, leave traces on our body and character, and such traces remain to influence future actions and preferences regardless of whether we remember their genetic origins. Knowing how to walk, for example, is an ability I have to perform a basic action that is not dependent on any memory of my first learning how to walk. And as Kieran Setiya has argued, a concert pianist may similarly perform a complex solo as a basic action, one for which she need not remember her practice (2007, 55).

Schechtman has argued, in *The Constitution of Selves*, that narrative can accommodate Strawson's objection here. She illustrates the point with some helpful examples, contrasting the ways in which a life of financial

security or insecurity may affect a person's behaviour even long after a change in their financial fortunes has taken place (she gives the example of people who, as a consequence of having lived through the Depression, continue to save pieces of string or go out of their way to save pennies to this day). The crucial point here being that the past 'is able to affect the future in this global way ... without being mediated through any specific memories,' which we can see from the fact that 'there is no absurdity ... in imagining that such a person could suffer some kind of amnesia in which she forgets all particular episodes of her past and yet retains the traits of thrift and financial conservatism that it has caused' (1996, 111). Strawson's objection—that we can incorporate the past into the present without the mediation of episodic memory—thus misses the point against (at least Schechtman's version of) narrativity, conflating it instead with the memory version of the psychological continuity theory.

Not every bit of my past needs to be capable of articulation in terms of episodic memory in order to be alive in the present—that I have a certain ability, for example, already implicates the past involved in using such an ability. And so the ability is already part of my narrative self-conception insofar as I implicitly know that I have it, meaning that I not only have the ability, but also access to it when needed. This account does, it seems to me, raise some interesting problems. For example, it is not clear how fully implicit abilities—especially ones that play a role in my life not because I remember something about my past or can tell a story, but merely because I have and can exercise them—really fit into a narrative account. It seems rather as if they are part of who I am, and my narrative self-understanding (insofar as I have one) must take that into account. It does not seem, in other words, as if these abilities constitute who I am by virtue of their narrative role; rather, it seems that they have a narrative role in my self-explanation because they constitute who I am by virtue of my being able to exercise them. In any case, we might ask whether the past here isn't largely a matter of

accretion after all—whether the narrative view doesn't here backtrack in some way to the psychological continuity view. In other words, it seems as if my past experience is important not as distinct, articulated experience, at least not primarily, but rather as something that has caused me to have some ability, and it is the ability that matters for my narrative.

4.

Of course it is true that the past isn't *just* a fixed accretion—it is alive in what we do, and it shifts in meaning and resonance. But it does so only in light of the generative self-orientation toward the future, as Heidegger would note. Heidegger's view of the self, then, is not as psychological continuity, which builds by accretion, nor as a narrative, which introduces subjects and proceeds to attribute actions and character traits to them. Heidegger's view of the self is as an anticipatory whole. The whole is anticipatory, on this view, because the site of selfhood—the site where the self *does* something, rather than simply *being* something—is always ahead of it. The past provides the matter of the self, but it cannot be the *essence* of selfhood, because that matter has significance, or practical consequence, only insofar as it involves a continual pressing forth into possibilities. So here we have a first challenge to the narrative account: insofar as narrative gives the past an important role to play in constituting the self, that is, insofar as it approaches the psychological continuity account's emphasis on memory, it seems to that extent to downplay the significance of the self's orientation toward the future.

We can, to some extent, mitigate this problem by noting how narrative takes the future into account. Anthony Rudd, for example, writes that,

grasping my life 'as a whole' ... involves recognising what my life has been up to now, and attempting to direct the trajectory it will take into the future. The future is part of my life as a whole ... not of course as

something already set, but as what I am shaping my narrative towards. And so the significance I see in my past life is in part dependent on what I am aiming to achieve in the future (2007, 544).

In this sense, then, a narrative theory can make the past dependent on the future: what aspects of my past matter, which aspects enter into my narrative and how, depends on my aspirations, on how I aim to incorporate them. And their meaning is revisable insofar as my aspirations and my sense of my future can change. My aim—my *telos*—thus structures my past within a narrative. Following this line of thought, John Fischer has argued that the evil of death (for most human agents, at least, if not for those incapable of narrative understanding) consists primarily in death's power to cut off our ability to revise our narratives and so to improve our pasts by taking them up into the future (Fischer 2009).

Before returning to this point, let's note that one of the primary appeals of narrative theories rests on the fact that we seem to give narrative explanations of our actions. And these narrative explanations, in turn, seem to require further narratives. That is—as we've seen from Schechtman's account—every action ultimately derives its intelligibility from an overarching narrative of the agent's life as a whole. This seems to suggest that my narrative is constantly open to revision—who I am, in both my past and future, is always open—up until the point where I no longer have a future, that is, my death. Thus, Fischer's suggestion, that the evil of death consists in its cutting us off from the ability to revise our past, can receive a rejoinder: death is not an evil, but rather a good, since it alone allows us to really have an identity; at the very least, if death is an evil, it is only through death that the subject of this evil is constituted. Any identity we have until death is merely provisional, open to revision; death is the great conclusion. And since narrative does not *simply* involve the placing of each event within a whole but, additionally, that this whole have a teleological structure—that it

derive its overall meaning from the end at which it aims—death seems to be constitutive of narrative. Not, perhaps, *as* the conclusion (few deaths are themselves projects) but as what allows there to be a conclusion in the first place. Is this narrative view of death, then, what Heidegger has in mind with his claim that ‘Death is constitutive of the being of Da-sein’ (Heidegger 1992, 315)?

5.

If narrative does require that every action rely for its explanation—now in Heideggerian terminology—on its situatedness within a projected possibility into which the agent as Da-sein presses forward, and if, as the narrativist may claim, every such project is itself ultimately intelligible only within a wider project that constitutes the agent's life, then it begins to look as if mortality is an *a priori* necessity for Da-sein. Indeed, a number of Heidegger interpreters have pushed something very much like this line. William Blattner (1994), for example, argues that death is to be understood as a limit to possibility, and as such is encoded in our taking up any possibility as such. Jeff Malpas (1998) has defended a similar reading, arguing that to embark upon a project, to press forward into it, is already to face the possibility of failure. And Bernard Schumacher has attempted to show that, for Heidegger, death is an *a priori* necessity built into Da-sein's existence as possibility. Schumacher (2011, 80-84) correctly responds that this argument cannot go through: from existing as possibility, one cannot know that one is mortal because one cannot know that *all* possibilities must come to an end.

Schumacher is right in his response, I believe, but wrong in the interpretation of Heidegger. Death is not and cannot be simply the failure or breakdown of any possibility whatsoever; it is the breakdown of *all* possibilities. Heidegger's point is not at all that death—existentially understood—is any kind of conclusion. Rather, in addressing death,

Heidegger introduces his all-important conception of temporality. For death, as Heidegger insists, is the possibility of the impossibility of existence.³ It is also, importantly, non-relational. Let's put these points together. Da-sein exists by pressing itself into possibilities, and since it is being-in-the world, it can only *be something* by relating to its environment, by treating other entities in accordance with its projected possibilities. But death is not relational, and thus Da-sein cannot press forward into it. Death is therefore importantly different from all other possibilities. What all other possibilities share is their tendency to be seen as actualized and thus to cease to be possibilities. 'Being out for something possible and taking care of it has the tendency of annihilating the possibility of the possible by making it available' (Heidegger 1996, 261). Death, because it cannot be pressed into, 'gives Da-sein nothing to "be actualized" and nothing which it itself could be as something real' (1996, 262). After all, Da-sein cannot actualize its death since to be dead is no longer to exist as Da-sein.

What death reveals to Da-sein, then, is its existence as pure, non-actualizable possibility. And by projecting this possibility, Da-sein can face the future not in the mode of expectation, of waiting for death as an actualizable event that can befall it, but rather by relating to the future as something purely possible and not to be actualized. By recognizing, that is, that every actuality is made intelligible, ultimately, on the basis of possibility, so that possibility stands 'higher than actuality' (1996, 34). Death, for Heidegger, is thus not an event that bestows meaning on all the actions and events of our lives; it is, instead, what gives Da-sein a relation to those actions and events as essentially unfixed in meaning and thus as determining Da-sein's future only insofar as they are intelligible in light of the openness of that very future. The temporality of the self is not a series of fixed points, but

³ Death is the possibility of the impossibility of existence in that in it, existence—pressing forward into possibilities—is impossible.

of relations such that the past depends for its actualization, its meaning, on a future that is essentially indeterminate. This is also why it is a mistake to interpret Heidegger as arguing that knowledge of our mortality (conceived in the everyday sense) is *a priori* on the grounds that every possibility must come to an end. The point instead is that no possibility we press into is fully determinate in light of death but remains anticipatory: my abilities are abilities to accomplish certain tasks or meet certain challenges, but the full nature of those abilities depends on the tasks and challenges they will meet (or fail to meet) in the future.

Finally, we can recall that Heidegger first introduces his discussion of death as a means of explaining Da-sein's being a whole. And death, following my train of thought here, solves this problem not by allowing for a fixed meaning to be bestowed on Da-sein's life, but precisely by rejecting the idea that Da-sein could be reducible to the events of that life, however unified and coherent. Da-sein exists as a whole in anticipation because it is no longer scattered among possibilities or fragmented among its multiple projects.

Because anticipation of the possibility not-to-be-bypassed also discloses all the possibilities lying before it, this anticipation includes the possibility of taking the whole of Da-sein in advance in an existentiell way, that is, the possibility of existing as a whole potentiality-of-being (1996, 264).

Da-sein's *telos* is death, but not because death gives it a final meaning. Rather, it is because death allows Da-sein to be disclosed as whole *as* possibility as such, not as any concrete possibility or set thereof. And this teleological conception of selfhood is primordial, again, because any concrete possibility or set thereof, such as those stressed by narrativity, is possible only on the basis of Da-sein as pure unactualizable possibility.

Where, then, does this leave us with regard to narrative? As we noted earlier, the narrativist approach can attempt to overcome the objection that

it reduces life to the product of a past as an accretion by pointing out the role of the future in allowing for the revisability of the past. But how is this future understood? Recall, as Rudd points out, that on a narrative view, while the future is not something already set, it is something I shape my narrative toward, or something I am aiming to achieve. If so, then the future is not here taken in the mode of anticipation, but only expectation: it is not, in its meaning-bestowing capacity at least, an open future, but a pre-arranged one by means of which Da-sein attempts to grasp itself as fully actualizable. Far from allowing the future to thus give us a whole on the basis of which the past can be interpreted, this appeal to the future serves to obscure the very source of any possible meaning the past can have. Nor can the narrativist appeal to the future by pointing to death rather than some overarching plan, since death is just what reveals to Da-sein the necessary contingency of any attempt to understand itself in terms of the concrete, existentiell possibilities of its life.⁴

6.

Now we can turn back to narrative's difficulties with the past. On Schechtman's view, self-narrative allows us to constitute ourselves by unifying the features of our lives that matter to us, and thus to take responsibility both for those features of our past and the actions we project on their basis. As she puts it, 'a person's identity ... is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers' (1996, 94). This view has much in common with Harry Frankfurt's argument that we can be responsible for our

⁴ In Heidegger's terminology, an "existential" refers, roughly, to a structural feature of Da-sein's existence; an "existentiell," on the other hand, refers to the way in which the existential is in fact filled out in the course of a given individual's life.

actions insofar as they proceed from desires with which we identify (Frankfurt 1982). Frankfurt's recipe for establishing the unity of our will, or practical identity, is thus to identify with some desires and exclude others as foreign (Frankfurt 1992). But while such a strategy seems to suggest how coherence might be possible, it raises a problem noted by David Velleman (2002): if some of our desires continue to operate but are excluded from our will, this sounds like a recipe for illness of the sort Velleman locates in the case of Freud's Rat Man. Far from being unified, the agent is divided among competing desires, some of which she has lost the ability to reign in because she has ruled them out of her identity. The better strategy for unity, Velleman argues, would surely be to strive for a greater self-understanding and thereby to seek coherence among our motivational states. We can call this the Fragmentation Objection.

Schechtman can avoid its consequences by agreeing with Velleman: the aim should be to attain a greater self-understanding, and one does so precisely by developing a better self-narrative. In fact, Schechtman does insist that the ideal of narrative is perfect intelligibility, 'a life story in which every aspect coheres with every other' (1996, 97). She simply notes that human beings cannot attain this ideal. But I think the Fragmentation Objection goes deeper. One objection to narrativity is the problem of self-deception. Critics like John Lippitt (2007) have argued that since we can be self-deceived in our self-narratives (indeed, Strawson suggests that self-deception is intrinsic to narrative), our identities cannot themselves be constituted by narrative. But it seems narrative can survive this version of the Fragmentation Objection as well. As Anthony Rudd notes, the only way to expose a narrative as a self-deception is to tell a better narrative (2007, 548 n. 8).

But a deeper problem may lurk in the background. Strawson points to it when he invokes Sartre as a critic of narrative, who thought that narrative is both unavoidable and undesirable, that it necessarily involves self-

deception. It involves self-deception necessarily because a narrative self is necessarily fragmented. We can see this by returning to Frankfurt's problem. Insofar as I have conflicting desires, any act of identification, like any unifying narrative, will simply mask the problem and, in fact, exacerbate it. Any life, however, is shaped by a multitude of divergent contingencies. That shape is masked by narrative, but not eliminated. And the solution cannot be to keep looking for a better narrative, because attempting to bring every aspect that has shaped one into a narrative will simply destroy the narrative structure altogether. Unity is necessarily exclusive in a life because it is an abstraction from many events and actions to a smaller number of patterns of facts and actions. The point of the Fragmentation Objection is just this: a concrete life is necessarily fragmented in such a way that it cannot be unified by a narrative without confabulation.⁵

A defender of narrative might try to incorporate this point. Malpas, for example, noting that even the best of us occasionally act irrationally, mistakenly, or out of character, grants that 'every life is but imperfectly integrated and the connections that go to make up a life, any life, always display an element of fragmentation' (1998, 123). But he concludes from this that, since our lives *do* have a unity, all this shows is that the unity is not a fact that precedes our *making* it a fact; that, in other words, the unity of our lives involves a unifying *activity* on our part, the activity of living. In this activity, on his view, we are constructing a narrative, since 'one can also understand the unity and integrity of a life in terms of the unity and integrity

⁵ More recently, Rudd has argued that even if our narratives sometimes falsify, this implies that there is something to falsify, i.e., some truth about our lives. And this truth, he argues, must itself have a narrative structure, such that there is some "ideally truthful narrative" that corresponds to it, regardless of "whether or not this ideal narrative is ever actually told" (2012, 181), although he insists that both our implicit and explicit narratives may sometimes succeed in corresponding to this ideal. But if I am right here, then either there could be no such ideal narrative, or it would be unrecognizably different from other kinds of narratives, because it would have to lack unity. It is also unclear how there *could* be such an ideal narrative, given the revisability of narrative discussed below.

of a particular life-story' (1998, 127). Malpas's claim seems to be that although our narratives are always fragmented, it is still possible for our lives to have unity—that our lives have this unity, in fact, by *virtue* of our imparting a narrative structure on them. But this seems to me the exact wrong conclusion to make, because the conclusion already *presupposes* that the unity of our lives is a narrative unity. But what the fragmentation of narrative shows is quite the opposite: insofar as the narratives of our lives are fragmented, whereas our lives have a unity, our lives *cannot* be essentially constituted by narratives.

Schechtman wrote that the ideal for narrative is a story in which every aspect coheres with every other. But this isn't simply unattainable for human beings. This ideal is unattainable for narrative. Or, rather, it can allow for such coherence only at the expense of falsification. This is, in part, why Heidegger holds that Da-sein cannot be reduced to any set of its possibilities. Its potentiality for being a whole rests not on these concrete possibilities, but on its ultimate independence of them. This is why Augustine asked to be free of his memories: because he could become unified only by subsuming them to himself, rather than subsuming himself to them. A temporally extended unity, in the articulation of its parts, still fails to be a unity. A genuine unity is possible only as possibility: anticipation holds out the potential, never actualized, of a self unified in the fragmentary diversity of its pressing forward into its possibilities.

7.

To retrace the argument: the past is interpreted in light of the future. But the future, on the narrative view, consists of events that are planned for and expected. And so the past interpreted on its basis will likewise be composed only of events, an accretion. A narrative account, then, seems no better than a psychological continuity one, and narrative's contribution to our lives seems

negligible. But we should not reach this conclusion too quickly. What we should conclude is only that narrative, by itself, cannot accomplish what we might want it to accomplish.⁶ It can neither unify the self nor its past. As we have seen, there are some grounds for taking revisability—the fact that the past is interpreted in light of the future—to be a key feature of narrative, and this feature was supposed to explain why the narrative view is superior to psychological continuity: rather than keeping the past an accretion blindly pushing us forward, it allowed for revision of the past, and thus for a unification of the self, in accord with our aims in the future rather than the happenings of the past. But this, as I have been arguing, is precisely what is threatened by the Accretion Objection: once there is a fixed end, the narrative is fixed as well and the meaning of the past now hangs on whether the end can change.

Part of the problem lies in how we understand revisability. Schechtman notes that the meaning of events depends on their place in the whole, but this means primarily that the meaning of *past* events depends on the future events that stem from them. Thus, not only Schechtman, but also Fischer and Velleman (2000) have argued that the meaning of the past is revisable in light of the future, and Arthur Danto (1962) made ‘narrative sentences,’ sentences that describe one event in terms of another temporally removed one, central to a conception of history on which the set of true claims that can be made about any event is in principle unlimited, since it depends on how future historians will characterize it in relation to subsequent events. So unlike psychological continuity views, which naturally

⁶ Again, Rudd now agrees that narrative does not do all this work alone. My claim, however, is that narrative doesn’t unify the self at all. It does unify our agency, as I suggest below, but it does so precisely by *not* simply joining together all the elements of our fragmented lives, but by unifying some and excluding others. Narrative falsifies necessarily, and this is an exceedingly good thing, since it allows us to act.

go along with a conception on which the future is simply an outgrowth of the past, narrative allows the past to be malleable in light of the future.

This means that, for any event that will occur, the narrative of events that led up to it can shift, even if slightly, to make the new occurrence intelligible in light of the previous ones. Thus, the past is revisable up to a point: once no further events occur that the past ones lead up to, it may appear that their meaning is fixed. This is why our aims—concrete events we hope and strive for—seem to give a life a definite shape and also why death, as the limit on future events in a life, may seem to give life a fixed meaning, reducing the elements of the narrative to an accretion. The Accretion Objection, thus, applied to narrative, threatens to reduce it to psychological continuity. On the other hand, when defenders of narrative identity appeal to the claim that narrative adds something to the psychological continuity account by introducing the whole against the background of which the elements in the continuity are to be understood, they run into the Fragmentation Objection: narrative can at best make *some* of the events of a life coherent, but it does not provide the unity in light of which all the elements of the life can fit together. It describes that unity.

A powerful way to respond to the Fragmentation Objection, then, is to accept that narrative does not itself create personal identity. It brings out the elements of that identity by interpreting them in light of a projected whole, though the whole itself is not constituted by narrative. And if we take that whole to be one in which the self is unified as possibility in light of a future that is open, anticipatory, we have the emergence of a picture of personal identity that can ground a view of narrative that is not weighed down by the Accretion Objection. On the psychological continuity view, the future follows causally from the past. But on a view in which the past draws its meaning from the future, if that future remains unfixed, then the past too is never entirely fixed; what we have been depends in part on what we will be, but

what we will be is not in turn determined—though it may be constrained—by the past.

Narrative can thus be seen as helping to adumbrate a metaphysically prior identity and, as I will suggest in a moment, to guide its practical manifestation in the world as agency. The question is which identity underlies narrative. If the base identity is taken as constituted by psychological continuity, narrative works to make *sense* of that identity, to make it not merely a causal story but one that resonates emotionally and makes sense, in which certain events are *meaningful* apart from their role in the causal nexus. And it can help guide agents in the future by reflecting on their meaningful past and understanding how best to accomplish what they would—in light of this past—find meaningful in the future. Peter Goldie (2012, Ch. 4), for example, develops a role for narrative in agency that fits well with continuity theories of identity. In reflecting narratively on their past, agents can discover how they respond to the events of that past and in turn construct narratives that aim to minimize the negative and increase the positive in the future. By in turn responding positively to such narratives and rehearsing them, agents can turn those narratives into intentions, and eventually into settled dispositions of character. On this view, then, narrative can both interpret the causal nexus (or some strain of it) of the agent's past and itself enter causally into that nexus by generating future behavior in light of the agent's response to that past. This picture allows for a certain degree of revisability—how we narratively interpret the past will have an effect on how we respond to it and in turn how we act in light of that response—but how we revise the past, and thus how we act on the revision, will in turn depend on the past.

How would the other model look? Velleman (2006) has proposed one way in which narrative can influence the machinery of agency: we choose our actions on the basis of what makes sense. So in deciding how to act, I might retrace a narrative thread leading up to the present and see what makes the

most sense to do in light of this thread. This model strikes me as too simple, however. On Velleman's picture, we seek to do what makes sense to us. But the problem is that, thanks in part to fragmentation, our actions—especially those that are not habitual but require deliberation—will sometimes fail to perfectly cohere with the past, or they will cohere with some aspects better than others. While we can attempt to mitigate this lack of coherence in the course of deliberation by seeking the most comprehensive narrative, we can also mitigate it retroactively: we can understand the narrative thread leading up to the action in light of the action itself. Just as an action can follow on as the most coherent continuation in a narrative, so the most appropriate narrative of the past can vary with future action; I may choose the calico shirt as making the most sense of my narrative self-understanding as a flamboyant dresser, but if I choose to wear a charcoal sweater instead I may reconsider whether my occasional flamboyance may not be simply a desire to conceal an underlying conservative streak.

So narrative need not simply trace a line to future actions from a past interpreted in light of a fixed end-point. It may also keep the past open on the basis of an important fact about the future: that it presents us with open possibilities that cannot be fixed by the past. In this way, the narratives of a life are different from those of fictional characters, as Bernard Williams noted: they are not presented as wholes (Williams 2009). But this fact need not mean that narratives are not significant (perhaps even essential) to our lives. It suggests only that life narratives differ from fictional ones in an important way: they resist the Accretion Objection. If they can do so, it is because the identity they elaborate in time is not primarily the identity of an underlying causal sequence, but that of a self defined by its openness to the future, essentially unfixed in its identity and thus (at least in principle) always capable of changing its past in light of the future, and thus of shaping its future differently in light of the newly interpreted past.

The shift to a Heideggerian view of identity need not vitiate the psychological continuity account, however. In an important sense, the self remains a continuity of events and processes bound together by causal connections. But just how we are to understand those events and processes, how we are to make them meaningful in understanding agency, depends on the narrative by means of which the elements in that causal chain are interpreted and connected.⁷ And the narrative itself is always open to revision, because this narrative is tracing, in fragmentary fashion, the elements contained within an underlying unity. Just as, at any moment, I can carry with me my skills and character without retaining the memory of their acquisition, so the self may be contained in its future, while the details of that self, the precise connections by which it was formed and continues to form itself, are open to being laid out by narratives and drawn out in time. Perhaps what Augustine and Kant are after, then, is the unity of a self not constrained by its fragmented past, and thus capable of shaping itself in the present on the basis of a past that remains open in light of an anticipated future.⁸

⁷ For more on the implications of this relation between narrative and agency, see Altshuler (2014).

⁸ I would like to thank participants at the conference on Narrative, Identity and the Kierkegaardian Self, and especially Patrick Stokes and John Lippitt for helpful feedback on this chapter. Michael Sigrist was an invaluable conversation partner in working through these issues.

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