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**One Self per Customer?**

**From Disunified Agency to Disunified Self**

**Abstract**

The notion of an agent and the notion of a self are connected, for agency is one role played by the self. Millgram argues for a disunity thesis of agency on the basis of extreme incommensurability across some major life events. We propose a similar negative thesis about the self, that it is composed of relatively independent threads as people play different roles and have different mind-sets in different aspects of their lives. Our understanding of those threads is based on theories of the narrative construction of the self. Our disunity thesis is that there need be no overarching narrative that unifies those narrative threads. We also make some positive claims about how the narrative threads can interrelate and thus hang together sufficiently for coherent action: (1) we normally switch smoothly and unconsciously from one narrative thread to another as circumstances require, (2) within one narrative thread there is likely to be acknowledgment of other narrative threads, (3) some situations require a temporary blending of narrative threads, and (4) some plans and policies reach across different narrative threads and contribute to a degree of coordination among them. Our account of a self provides an account of agency that has merits in comparison to Millgram’s. Our narrative approach allows an explanation of action that is richer than mere rational deliberation.

Keywords: self, practical reasoning, agency, narrative, Elijah Millgram

A working assumption about the nature of agency is that there is exactly one agent per human and that agency is unified. A similar assumption can be made with regard to the unity of the self. Daniel Dennett (1989) captures that assumption well by referring to the rule of ‘one self per customer’. Recently, among others, Elijah Millgram (2014, 2015) has advanced an interesting and challenging thesis of the disunity of agency. Given the close connection between agency and selfhood, we wish to propose an equally challenging view about selfhood, which is also a thesis of disunity. But we shall be making some claims that describe a form of unity within the disunity. Our claims about the nature of self have relevance for our understanding of agency.

The self is the subject of experience and the author of action. Thus, what it is to be a self involves being an agent as one crucial part. The study of agency can involve many things including the ability to act intentionally, which itself leads to issues of moral responsibility but it requires postulating an agent, which could be identified with the self. Thus a study of the self has the potential to illuminate some issues connected with agency while neglecting others. Indeed, our focus on the intersection of selfhood and agency will leave to one side many issues, for example those raised in debates over ‘group’ or ‘shared’ agency (cf. Bratman, 1992, 1993, 1997a, 1997b).

The history of philosophy is replete with material relating to the nature of the self but, in this work, our *starting point* is the narrative self-constitution approach to selfhood. Once we have summarized Millgram’s disunity thesis of segmented agency in §1, we turn in §2 to our thesis of disunity of the self. It will be presented as the view that a person is composed of myriad narrative threads that may fail to be unified by a singular, monolithic, and overarching narrative. A narrative thread brings together into a coherent structure a series of world events in terms of their rational, experiential, and emotional character. As we employ the narrative self-constitution approach only *within* each narrative thread and *not* to the whole self we are subverting the normal goal of narrative self-constitution. In §3, we distinguish Millgram’s segmented agency from our thesis of the disunity of the self and then go on to show in §4 how a *form* of unity may be understood in the context of our more liberal disunity thesis. In §5 we consider the implications of our view for the metaphysics of the self. Finally, in §6, we contend with four challenges our view faces. We conclude that, while the various narrative threads within us typically interact in ways that produce an adequate level of coordination, they need not be unified by any monolithic and overarching narrative.

1. **Millgram’s Thesis of Segmented Agency**

Millgram wishes to argue against what he regards as the “conventional approach” to agency. This broadly conventional approach tends to accept an agent as unified when agents act as they do within certain constraints.[[1]](#footnote-1) Millgram takes Bratman’s articulation of that approach to be the best reasoned and most fair-minded that is available and thus takes it as his foil. In brief, Bratman explains agency on the basis of actions flowing from plans and policies that remain steadfast over time. For Bratman, figuring out what to do consists of designing, selecting, and deploying plans (Bratman 1987, 1999, 2001, 2007, 2014).[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, one requirement of the conventional approach is the unity of the agent’s so-called “psychic spine,” something relatively stable, well structured, and action guiding. Millgram is unconvinced that humans have the kind of coherence of plans and actions that this picture claims. As we shall see, he thinks the kind of coherence provided by a psychic spine only holds within a single *segment* of a human.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Millgram points us to moments when circumstances change so radically and are so impossible to anticipate that those original (Bratmanian) plans and policies have to be overthrown. He describes those circumstances as ones where one needs to accept that one’s previous attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs were wrong ‘all the way down’ (Millgram 2015: 253).[[4]](#footnote-4) He offers the example of a Jewish Philosophy Professor in Nazi Germany whose ‘Doktorvater’ had recommended adopting two policies: ‘not making life decisions based upon rumors’ and ‘not letting politics impinge on career decisions’ (Millgram 2015: ch. 10 *passim*). But, with the rise of the National Socialist Party, the previous reality has disappeared and so all prior assumptions, expectations, and hopes and ambitions have to be discarded. Instead of a Bratmanian planning view, which focuses on agents attempting to fashion the world through action, Millgram’s approach accepts that some of our actions will be guided by world-events. He compares the kind of radical shift in this example with a Kuhnian scientific revolution. The old world-view and the new are incommensurable (see Kuhn 1962, Millgram 1997).

The silver lining in this situation, according to Millgram, is that evolutionary selection pressures have prepared humans for such radical eventualities. Humans, he says, are *serial hyperspecializers*. That is, we are prepared to function in ‘stints’, to use Millgram’s term, in which we develop specialized functioning in a specific environment, which is typically a social environment. But then we can switch our specialized functioning to suit a new environment, and do so repeatedly, which makes us serial hyperspecializers. This gives us his notion of segmented agency, for humans are divided up into segments corresponding to those stints and each such segment is a discrete agent. ‘Segmented agents are a psychological adaptation to a life consisting of stints (both longer and shorter) in ecological niches that typically are also social roles’ (Millgram 2015: 251). The idea is that *within* each segment we can attribute actions to plans and policies, but the move *between* segments is not guided by any plans or policies. The talk of stints and the notion of *serial* hyperspecialization strongly support the notion that the segments are simply temporal sections of a person. Millgram (2015: 251) tentatively suggests ‘as a placeholder’ that the only thing that links segments is that they inhere in a common substrate: they are ‘embedded in one temporally extended person’. We shall have some things to say about linking parts of a different kind after we develop our broadly parallel view of the self.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. **Narrative Threads**

Millgram’s thesis of disunified human agency already suggests a thesis of disunified self, for we could regard the human agent that comprises each segment as a self. Our version of this thesis will be a little different. We shall be utilizing, and repurposing, a certain kind of narrative approach to the self. There is a rich history of the use of narrative to articulate a notion of selfhood. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), who was highly influential, proposes that one can *live* a narrative. Closer to our concerns is the work of Daniel Dennett (1989, 1991, 1992) and Marya Schechtman (1990, 1996) who speak of narrative self-constitution. That is, the internal narrative that one constructs *is constitutive of* the self. Naturally, the approach has its critics, for example: Peter Lamarque (2004), Galen Strawson (2008), and Simon Beck (2013).

The notion of a narrative has been employed in many contexts and there are many attempts at defining it. For example, Noël Carroll (2001, 2007) holds that a causal connection between events is required for there to be a narrative connection between them, even though the earlier event may not be casually *sufficient* for the later one. In contrast, David Velleman (2003) argues that causality is not required for narrativity and instead proposes that it is the emotional cadence in the audience associated with the series of events that is crucial for the structure of a narrative, as this is what makes those events intelligible. He says, “The cadence that makes for a story is that of the arousal and resolution of affect, a pattern that is biologically programmed” (Velleman 2009, 13). Both authors acknowledge that a whole text may not have a narrative structure while containing significant narrative elements. We shall not pursue any further purely definitional issues concerning the notion of narrative in general and indeed there may be no single definition that does justice to all common uses. It is plausible that both causal relationships and emotional cadence contribute significantly to the structure of a *self*-narrative and we shall proceed to focus on the particular case of self-narratives.

One advantage that a narrative approach has is that it captures the holism among the experiences of a person. As should be becoming clear, the holism that we rely on will not be at the level of the whole person. A memory of a certain experience or action is not, unless in rather exceptional circumstances, a discrete item that can be specified completely in isolation. A useful image that can clarify the appeal of holism can be found in David Carr’s (1986: 21-30) discussion of Husserl’s example of a melody. Hearing someone whistling a tune cannot be reduced to a series of distinct experiences of him whistling particular notes, for each note has the significance it has only in relation to the surrounding notes. In a parallel way, one memory is inextricably bound up with knowledge about other events, people, and places, and indeed the emotional value of the memory depends on just such linkages. What lies behind the appeal to the notion of a narrative in talking about the self is some sense that a narrative provides a structure into which experiences and actions fit, as the analogy with a melody suggests. But it is no trivial matter to specify the nature of that structure, as the dispute between Carroll and Velleman makes clear.

One concern with identifying the self with the self-narrative is the danger that the self-narrative could be totally fictional. Couldn’t one’s self conception be totally at odds with how one really is? This kind of worry lies behind Marya Schechtman’s (1996: 119 ff) introduction of a ‘reality constraint’ into her narrative self-constitution view. In practice, your self-narrative is *not* constructed as a complete work of fiction but has a form that borrows from themes prevalent in the society and others’ narratives of you and is based on real world interactions. While that is so, if the self-narrative is what genuinely is employed to interpret events and guide action, then maybe it is correct to identify it with the self even if it contains serious delusions.

The central theme of this paper is that a person’s life will typically lack the kind of coherence that a single narrative would be expected to provide. An extreme illustration of this is provided by *Six Days of the Condor*’s Ronald Malcolm, a CIA agent who merely ‘reads books’ as a part of his clandestine services. Codenamed “Condor”, Malcolm returns one fateful day from lunch to find everyone in his office assassinated. Subsequently, he contacts headquarters to report that his office has been hit and discovers that he cannot trust anyone in the organization.[[6]](#footnote-6) One minute, Malcolm is enjoying pastrami on rye and the next, he is fighting to remain alive. At numerous points, Malcolm himself has difficulty reconciling the life he led before the ‘hit’ with the life he leads following the hit. While this fictional example is an extreme one, we shall also be dealing with narratives involved with more mundane lives, though the moral will not be fundamentally different.

Our thesis of the disunity of the self, expressed in narrative terms, is that there may be no single narrative that unifies the whole life of a person, as, for many of us, there are various relatively discrete roles that we play in different settings, which are captured by different narratives. There need be no monolithic and overarching narrative that draws together the person’s myriad component narratives. When we are at university lecturing to a crowd of one hundred or more students, our disposition and how we interact with them is distinct from how we behave at an intimate dinner with our partner. We can say that within the person there are different stories running in the two situations, where each story provides not only a distinct history of events but also a distinct set of themes, vocabularies, descriptions, values and associated emotional color. The different patterns of behavior follow from those different stories. We call each such story a ‘narrative thread’ (cf. Lumsden 2013).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The lecturing situation is part of a narrative thread that includes the history of employment by the institution, professional obligations, which include something about expectations of how to behave in that situation, expectations of students, and a history of teaching experience, which provides guidance as to how to read situations and react to them. Thus, the behavior of a student who completely fails to grasp a new concept and becomes exasperated can be understood as part of a familiar pattern, and the narrative thread can provide the basis for a calm and tactful response.

In contrast, private moments with a partner are embedded in a narrative that does not relate to professional obligations but to a personal common history and emotional ties or conflicts. The interaction is guided by that background. So we can consider that each aspect of a person’s life is handled by a narrative that not only describes the events in that part of their life but also provides an appropriate interpretive lens for what is going on and thus assists in guiding action.

The contrast between the two narrative threads just discussed rested on two different environments, but it would be a mistake to think that the environment completely determines the narrative. The subjective position and interpretive lens matter for how the narrative unfolds. This is evident when we consider how the very same moment and state-of-affairs could be interpreted differently by distinct people who approach the situation on the basis of different narratives. It is well known that different witnesses provide very different accounts of events such as traffic accidents or barroom brawls. To provide a somewhat stylized example, consider the lawyer, the auto body repairer, and the novelist who each witness a traffic accident. While there is likely to be some commonality of description among the three, each might attend to different aspects of what is going on: the lawyer attending to the issue of fault, the auto body repairer attending to the damage to the vehicles, and the novelist attending to how that moment fits into the lives of the people concerned. For each of them, that one incident fits into a pattern of events that is captured in a narrative that they, but not the others, possess. This shows how different narratives can be brought to the same situation, though in that case those different narratives are themselves grounded in the different situations that comprise the working lives of the three different observers.

Putting the focus on narratives provides a perspective on agency that is a lot broader than merely plans and policies. To take a narrative approach to the self locates unity and disunity within a richer set of materials than those found in either Bratman’s or Millgram’s account of agency. A narrative of the kind that concerns us here involves a history of events incorporating a stream of experiences replete with an emotional charge, a set of values and indicative of certain character traits. Thus, each narrative thread will have its own unique flavor or perspective. The irritated commuter, let us suppose, has experienced a long series of adverse commuting incidents over months or years: delays, misinformation, overcrowding, and inadequate heating or cooling. The emotional reaction and pattern of response to these, whether of frustration, resentment, or anger, provides the source of the commuter’s action in the current circumstances, such as accusing an employee of incompetence.

While the example of the irritated commuter highlighted emotional reactions, rational thought and plans and policies are very likely part of the narrative too. The commuter’s memory of previous attempts to respond to a train cancellation can lead to a new strategy to reach the destination. The use of narratives can help explain how actions flow from a rich structure that includes, but is not limited to, the formal character of practical reasoning. This is in line with Peter Goldie’s (2009) cautious discussion of the way that our employment of narrative in planning future actions incorporates character, personality traits and emotional dispositions. He opposes Bratman’s (2007) view that rests fundamentally on higher-order self-governing policies.

Recall that we began by considering how Bratman’s planning theory of agency as constitutive of the self was opposed by Millgram on the basis that the unity this provides only applies within *segments* of a human being. We shifted focus from a unity that is provided by plans and policies to a unity provided by narrative. Our view is that such unity only holds *within* each narrative thread. Even so, we fully acknowledge connections and coordination among narrative threads, which can ensure they do not interfere with each other and do allow the person to function in the world. Might plans and policies, our starting point, provide that sort of connection? Indeed plans and policies may provide some connections between narrative threads, but we should not assume there is a unitary form of connection or that they add up to the kind of full unity that Bratman expects.

1. **Disunified Agency and Disunified Self**

Millgram introduces his thesis of the disunity of agency on the basis of moments in a person’s life when a radical change of circumstances requires a complete replacement of previous assumptions and modes of living, as described above. He has an ecological approach to how different settings are linked to different agency segments. Here is how Millgram employs that ecological approach to describe the segments and their different psychic spines, while allowing there may not always be a psychic spine:

(People) can spend extended periods of time outside of the constrained environments that serve as niches (in which case, they take on the ecological appearance of weedy species like rats or cockroaches and may fail to have Bratmanian spines at all). To say that each segment will normally have its *own* psychic spine is to say that these backbone segments are not normally connected one to the other in the way that their components are connected to one another: that is, one segment’s spine is not joined to another by plans or by policies. (Millgram 2015: 251)

There is no denying that radical changes in one’s life can take place and Millgram can use these in his account of the difference between segments, but these radical changes are relatively uncommon, while not extremely rare. Cohabitating for the first time with others who are not members of one’s own family is a radical change that alters the way one engages not only with roommates but also with members of one’s own family. The election of a narcissist as a national leader will tend to alter the socio-political outlook of many citizens and, in turn, change some of their travel plans, with a holiday turning into emigration. Clearly, there will be such radical shifts for some people at some times and any theory of the self will need to take account of that possibility.

*Our* thesis of the disunity of the *self* does not take its lead from such moments, though; rather, it is a thesis that applies perfectly comfortably to more mundane lives and the humdrum events that occur in them. We say that even apparently unremarkable lives may have a richness and diversity that is aptly described in terms of multiple narrative threads. Moreover, we find that the switch between threads is typically smooth and unconscious, even though the threads can be genuinely different. The strong and controlling boss at work is a gentle and caring parent at home, for example. The thoughts, feelings and patterns of behavior are very different, but it does not mean that the shifting of gears is experienced as one of conflict. This appears to be a point of difference with Millgram’s view about agency. Millgram’s notion that one has to accept that one’s previous attitudes were wrong ‘all the way down’ does not have an analogue in our model of the disunified self, except as a relatively rare circumstance.

Our approach can take some comfort from William James’ comments about the social self.

(W)e may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his ' tough ' young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. (James 1890, 294)

James’ notion of the social self is one aspect, but by no means the only aspect, of our notion of narrative threads. We emphasize the internal structure that links memories into a coherent whole and provides an interpretive framework for events.

As explained, Millgram’s model is based on the notion of segments of a person’s life and these segments are temporal stretches of that life. Nevertheless, he allows that a single segment may have “a foot in more than one niche” (§10.5). To say that the psychic spines of the segments are not normally joined by plans or policies bears an analogy with our claim that the narrative threads are not joined by a monolithic and overarching narrative but the notion of a narrative thread in our theory of disunified self does not completely line up with the notion of a segment in Millgram’s account of agency. A narrative thread may persist in a person, sometimes for an extended period, even most of a life. The image is of the whole rope of a person’s life through time being composed of threads that interweave with others along the rope. Millgram’s notion of a segment, in contrast, is a temporal chunk. What brings the two images closer together is when we consider that, at a given moment, one narrative thread is largely in control. So the person at work, governed by the work narrative thread, can be regarded as an agency segment, which persists until circumstances lead to the introduction of another narrative thread or the re-emergence of a previous narrative thread. In any event, we recommend the use of the narrative thread image as it captures the continuity between the different periods of a work life and different periods of home life and so forth. Moreover, it prompts us to think about how, while one narrative is largely in control, another is waiting in the wings to take over when required.

There are indeed various moments when Millgram’s view sounds more complex than a simple description of a series of segments would suggest. He says (p. 262) that the disunity will be both synchronic and diachronic. So, we do not have merely a disunity among segments, but we also have a disunity within segments. It is a benefit of our theory of narrative threads that it allows us to easily describe the way that different threads are present at any one moment, often with one dominant but others close to the surface.

1. **Unity within Disunity**

Millgram emphasizes the distinctness between agency segments and only grudgingly allows for any form of connection between them. Recall the way he talks, tentatively, of them only being connected by inhering in a common substrate, a temporally extended person. To recommend that there is no articulation among agency segments seems implausible, particularly if we allow that ordinary lives consist of segments. One agent segment and another agent segment would be, under such circumstances, completely independent, which prevents an explanation of how we make choices as we move through different situations in our lives. Completely disentangling the two segments would lead to serious coordination problems. So, the segments must in some way join, even if, as Millgram claims, they are not joined by way of there being overarching plans and policies that unify them.

Now let us consider the parallel issue with regard to narrative threads. Our view of the whole self or whole person is, in the first instance, a *negative thesis*: that there need be no fundamental narrative unity to it, but we do hold to a *positive thesis*: that there is a form of unity that allows the person to function effectively in the world.  This is not provided by any one overarching principle but is a reflection of various facts.

First, we normally switch smoothly from one narrative thread to another as circumstances require. This is typically something done unconsciously.  The doting father leaves home for work at quarter-past eight becoming the celebrated skillful entrepreneur only after a short stint as the easily irritated and quick-to-judge commuter riding the tube. It is part of what it is to be a fully functioning human being that one can leave the concerns of one narrative thread to one side and bring to the fore all the knowledge, values, behavioral style, and feelings that belong to another narrative thread.

Second, there is some unity at the level of narrative self-awareness in that within one narrative thread there is acknowledgement of other narrative threads.  If we wish to stay with a literary metaphor, we could describe this as ‘intertextuality’ (cf. Kristeva 1980).  The skillful entrepreneur narrative thread may contain reference to the doting father narrative thread, for that work orientated narrative might identify him as one of those in the workplace with family loyalties and commitments. Or, similarly, the work-oriented narrative is likely to contain reference to the irritated commuter narrative, as this is a subject of discussion with work mates. In this way, there is a bundle of narrative threads that are operating not in complete isolation but such that there are links of mutual acknowledgement. Even so, it would be incorrect to think that there always need be a monolithic and overarching narrative thread that collects together each member of the bundle.

Third, there are situations that force a blending of narrative threads. Think of the after-hours office party where an employee’s spouse is invited to have a social interaction with her partner’s colleagues and supervisor. Suppose that the spouse’s values emphasise artistic creativity and social liberalism, while the office culture is distinctly conservative.  The fear is that the spouse will fail to jibe well with other party-goers, including the supervisor. The employee would otherwise support his spouse’s interests and values, but the narrative thread governing work-life brings pressure to put them at a distance. For the employee, the two narrative threads are not only co-present but are brought together in some, perhaps temporary, blend.  Even so, we argue that those links of cross-thread acknowledgement do not, or need not, amount to an overarching narrative.

Finally, some plans and policies reach across different narrative threads and contribute to a degree of coordination among them. Think of the decision to leave work for home, or vice versa. One’s ‘home life’ and ‘work life’ threads interconnect in such a way that the person must coordinate *when* they leave for work or for home. In planning to leave home and all of the domestic responsibilities that life entails, we have to consider that we need to arrive at work at a specific time. The planning that a work life demands reaches into the home life narrative. In admitting as much, we are not suggesting that the level of coordination needs to add up to the kind of overarching unity that Bratman assumes provides the fundamental essence of a person. In reality, different people are governed to different extents by plans and policies so that they are unified to different degrees. Our model of a person needs to be sufficiently versatile to accommodate a broad spectrum of cases.

We think that the language of narrative threads rather than Millgram’s talk of segments is much more apt for the complexities that arise when one narrative bleeds into another. One segment in the life may not simply blur into the next, for there may be one ongoing theme that contributes to the behavior largely controlled by another ongoing theme. Consider that case of the skillful entrepreneur who interpenetrates with the irritated commuter. The manner and behavior of a manager become displayed, albeit in irritated form, in handling a dispute with a transport employee during a commuting hold-up.

The switching between threads may not always work completely smoothly and appropriately. The office manager who treats her children like employees has got something wrong: when she disciplines them for their tardiness using a tone appropriate to giving an employee a formal warning or expects a younger child to behave towards the older sibling as if he or she were a line manager, her narrative threads have become crossed, possibly damaging the loving relationship she has with her children. It is not part of the thesis of multiple narrative threads that we always get right how to behave in a situation. The theory needs to accommodate not only the ideal situation, where the threads interrelate harmoniously and appropriately, but also the situation where behavior is being governed by the wrong narrative thread.

Brent (forthcoming) raises a good question in relation to Millgram’s account of segments being tied to one niche. He asks, “When you exit one niche and move to another can this be a rational self-governed action?” We can pose a parallel question of our account of how one narrative thread takes over from another. It does seem that rational decision making can be involved, for a person at work can decide it is time to leave for home and thus enter the domestic sphere. But that does not mean that narrative switching occurs all at a rational level. Rather, a consequence of the rational decision is that there is a change of setting such that the different narrative thread takes control in a seamless way, with the process being largely unconscious. It is a common feature of human life that conscious thought, including rational thought, operates with a substructure of intuitive, unconscious processes. It should be no surprise that this characteristic applies in the complex area of narrative switching.

A useful point of comparison for our disunity view of the self is provided by Owen Flanagan’s (1991, 1996) account of multiplex selves. He takes a narrative approach to personal identity but emphasizes the psychological complexity that exists within a person, especially with respect to moods. We should not think of a person as one simple narrative but as a complex combination of narrative threads. Yet, we need to distinguish the way a normal person is a multiplex self in this sense from the way that some people appear to suffer from what was once called ‘multiple personality disorder’ and is now called ‘dissociative identity disorder’ (Hardcastle and Flanagan 1999). While this disorder is controversial, even its possibility demands our attention in this context. Thus, Flanagan finds a difference between the multiplex, which is suggestive of the kind of disunity that we are interested in, and the multiple, which involves a disorder.

We believe that it is correct to acknowledge Flanagan’s distinction, even if it may turn out to be a matter of degree, and that is not the only psychological disorder of interest to us. Consider bipolar disorder with manic and depressive phases where the manic phases are linked to one narrative thread, as we would put it, and similarly the depressive phases are linked to another thread (Wells 2003; Potter 2013). We want to draw a contrast between these people and people without bipolar disorder, as we presume Flanagan would. In both cases, with or without the disorder, we say that there are multiple narratives, which are not united by an overarching narrative. A difference between the two is evident in the way that the different narratives are sensitive to the requirements of the context. It is the mark of the person without bipolar disorder that there is smooth and appropriate switching between different narrative threads. In contrast, bipolar patients of the kind described have a mood that is determined more or less irrespective of the situation. We have previously acknowledged that mood can be tightly integrated into a narrative. This is doubly so for these people as their inability to switch mood appropriately amounts to an inability to switch narrative thread appropriately. Clearly this is not going to be the whole story about bipolar disorder, though.

Our position can be contrasted with that of Jeanette Kennett and Steve Matthews. They have endorsed a unity of agency thesis such that ‘effective agency …requires a unity of purpose both at a time and over time. … It is also a fundamental condition of social life that persons within society fulfill a range of longitudinal roles’ (Kennett and Matthews 2003: 305). They base this on the work of contemporary Kantians, and cite especially Korsgaard (1989), and also Velleman (1997). The Kantian approach is one committed to a strong form of unity as the basis for being an autonomous person. Kennett and Matthews discuss how the dissociative identity disorder patient Mary described in Wells (2003), someone with multiple personality disorder in earlier terminology, is unable to sustain social life in crucial ways. While we do not disagree with that account of Mary, we challenge the assumption that unity of purpose within a person is required for effective functioning. Our claim is that a typical person with multiple narrative threads is capable of maintaining her social roles precisely because of how the different narrative threads are deployed. We could say there is a unity of purpose within each thread. This supports a continuity of interpersonal relationships within the work environment and similarly a continuity of social relationships with family members in the home environment. As someone leaves one environment and enters another they can move easily into a different narrative thread because it lies in wait in the background. The largely unconscious ability to foreground the appropriate narrative thread is what allows us to respond to the requirements of the current situation and thus maintain continuity of relationships in the different settings.

1. **Metaphysical implications[[8]](#footnote-8)**

Our investigation into the self uses an account of agency as its springboard, and indeed we have focused on the self as agent. Without losing that focus, we should point out that our account of the self as an interrelated bundle of narrative threads does occupy a certain metaphysical position. It opposes any position that requires the self to be primitive and unanalyzable or to be uniform and monolithic. Further, it opposes any view that requires it to be neatly and completely reducible. It is reminiscent of Hume’s conception of the self as a bundle of perceptions and, like Hume, we have things to say about how the component parts, narrative threads in our case, are interrelated (Hume 1973, 252).

The literature on the narrative conception of the self is replete with its share of arguments favoring a metaphysical view differing in kind from the view we espouse here. Various of these metaphysical views find their origin in an examination of the autobiographical comments by Søren Kierkegaard. For example, Anthony Rudd (2012) argues for a Kierkegaardian view of the self that focuses on its narrative, evaluative, self-constitutive and teleological nature (“NEST”). The self has certain aims constituted and evaluated by itself through its own narrative terms. While the self may manifest complexities, Rudd’s strategy to overcome them is to identify the components of NEST as jointly unifying the self.[[9]](#footnote-9) Our view that the self is a bundle of narrative threads is opposed to the unified view that people such as Rudd seem to endorse.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Dennett’s (1992) phrase to describe the self: ‘a center of narrative gravity’ conveys our position, in that the phrase in the context of his work points to a certain position with respect to the reality of the self. A center of gravity is not a pure fiction, for its utility is shown by the way it can play a role in precise calculations about, for example, when a certain body will fall over. In that way he is a ‘mild realist’ about selves in much the same way as he is about intentional states (Dennett 1987). They are useful fictions whose utility is shown in they way they can be used to make predictions.

1. **Potential Criticisms**

Here are four potential challenges from critics who think we have not made our case against the view that the self is uniform. Addressing these will allow us to clarify the nature of the disunity we claim as well as the degree of unity we allow.

First, a critic might suggest that our remarks about how narrative threads bear linkages of various kinds with each other and smoothly switch from one to another will lead inevitably to some form of monolithic and overarching narrative. It is indeed true that we see a form of unity within the disunity of the different narrative threads, but our position is that it need not be a *narrative* unity. But why not? Why does the narrativizing principle stop there? Evolutionary considerations behind the relevant cognitive structures provide an answer. *Any* narrative by its very nature is not fully comprehensive, for a narrative provides a lens or a perspective that filters out the significant details from the insignificant ones. A narrative helps guide our actions by way of its ability to focus us on the important stuff. Of course what is important from the perspective of one narrative may be unimportant from the perspective of another. The unique lens could be construed as bias. Leaving that to one side, the issue here is whether the different narrative themes within our lives need to be bound together in an overarching narrative unity.

Our biological construction permits us to focus only upon the most important aspects of our environment to ensure our continued survival (see Sober (1993) and Sterelny (2003)). But that imperative tends to apply to what is important in the immediate situation. It is costly to construct an overarching narrative of a whole life that covers the full range of situations. It is sufficient if a narrative thread is in charge that is appropriate to the moment.

The first criticism might be supported by an observation that we could regard as a second criticism. Surely, in principle, an autobiography can always be constructed of a person’s life and, if the autobiographer is honest, it will cover all the narrative threads in such a way as to produce an overarching narrative. Indeed, many people take the trouble to create autobiographies when they, or others, think they are important enough to warrant it (see Churchill (1996), Meir (1975), Richards (2002)). But it does not follow that such a narrative functions in an internal way to regulate the person’s life. In fact, there is reason to think it will not, a point that complements the response to the first objection. Such an autobiography is likely to be too large and clumsy to be deployed in real-time to interpret one’s experience and guide one’s action. Putting the two responses together, we could say that evolutionary considerations point to the likelihood of there being specialization within our narrativizing, which both saves the cognitive load of constructing an overarching narrative and produces manageable narrative chunks that are easy to deploy in a particular type of situation.

A third criticism points to a supposed overarching narrative in a rather different way: consider someone who consciously and deliberately attempts to fashion their whole life on the basis of a religious ideal. For example, a Christian might strive to become like Jesus in all aspects of their life. If this were sufficiently successful to infuse all of life with this theme, even without achieving that standard of moral perfection, then would not this constitute an overarching narrative? We should not attempt to rule out such a possibility in principle but merely caution that in this, as in many things, there is the risk of self-deception. Our main claim is that an overarching narrative is not *required* for human functioning. We should distinguish between this possibility and the more limited practice of attempting to make decisions of all kinds on the basis of a decision procedure based, for example, on asking ‘What would Jesus do?’ That by itself, without the moral example of Jesus being deeply embedded in all aspects of life, is too thin to provide an overarching narrative.

A fourth criticism contends that, in some instances, the different threads in one’s life come into tension, so that the tension itself is a major theme in one’s life. Consider the mother who is pursuing a career and frequently feels the conflict between the demands of home and the demands of her career. This is different from the earlier example of the entrepreneur shifting gears between work and home, either well or badly, as, in this new case, the tension becomes a central focus in its own right. This case of conflict could be regarded as an example of blending of narrative threads, as discussed in section 4, but taken a step further. We can allow that different narrative threads can become intertwined to a greater or lesser degree and that conflict can in effect create a new thread. Further, there is no standard degree of separation between different narrative threads and, indeed, the situation can change. If your ballroom dance partner gets a job in the same office as you, then two previously separate threads will become more firmly intertwined. This is a more straightforward example of blending of narrative threads. It is right to acknowledge the variation of cases, all of which are consistent with our view that we need have no singular overarching narrative by which we live our lives.

1. **Conclusion**

We have been arguing for a disunity thesis for the self that, in broad terms, is analogous to Millgram’s disunity thesis for agents. Millgram’s argument for segments as agents rested on the claim that segments were not unified in terms of plans and policies. Our disunity thesis in relation to narrative threads is that there need be no monolithic and overarching narrative unifying the threads.

While there is that broad parallel, there are three salient ways in which our view differs from his. One point of difference is that we do not make temporal segments of persons foundational in the way he does. Millgram’s view about segments reflects his view that *the world* may be guiding action in a fundamental way. We accept that it is important to see how the world can guide action, but do not believe that segments best capture the way that different situations in the world leave their different shadows in our mind (Millgram 2015: 258). In our view, it is narrative threads that best describe these shadows of the world and it is the dynamic interaction of these narrative threads that constitute a person. Providing a structure of interwoven narrative threads better accommodates both the way themes in our lives persist, even while only being active from time to time, and the way that one thread can bleed into another.

Another point of difference is that, while Millgram emphasizes moments of radical discontinuity between segments, for which there are correspondingly different mind-sets, our emphasis is on how humdrum lives involve different narrative threads. These threads are both adaptive to their settings, while also providing an interpretive lens that can be applied beyond the immediate setting.

On the basis of that difference, we believe that our view better accommodates the way there is a degree of unity, or at least *de facto* coordination, among the parts of a person. What connects narrative threads, such that they comprise a full person, involves the ability to switch between threads appropriately, the way one narrative thread can include mention of another, the way narrative threads can become blended in some situations and the way plans and policies can, from time to time, reach out from one narrative thread to another. Avoiding Millgram’s emphasis on radical shifts and focusing more on the way ordinary lives involve different narrative threads that may smoothly interact with other narrative threads allows us to understand better how these kinds of connections are at the heart of being a well-functioning, continuing person.

Finally, taking a narrative approach to the self as the source of action makes way for a broader account of what leads to an action than a conventional one that is based narrowly on plans and policies as the rational source of action. The notion of a narrative permits the inclusion of the emotional color of the informational content as well as values, character traits and other behavioral patterns. This holds prospects for a more credible and comprehensive account of the source of actions.

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1. Millgram lists about eight criteria of a unified agent, but we shall assume a narrower focus in the course of this paper. For a more robust sense of unified agency, we cite here the same sources Millgram does: Frankfurt (1988), Korsgaard (1996a, 1996b, 2008), Velleman (2000a), and Williams (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bratman may have been the first to articulate *explicitly* the planning theory of practical reasoning, but, e.g., Harman’s (1976) and Davidson’s (1963, 1971, 1978) views on intentions had some influence over Bratman’s theory and Velleman (1989) has discussed ‘self-fulfilling predictions’, which tend to be something approaching Bratmanian policies. Bratmanian plans have three distinctive characteristics. Plans are *stable*, *incomplete*, and *restrictive*. First, plans ought to be followed unless special circumstances arise preventing the agent from carrying them out. Second, agents tend to fill-in plans ‘on the fly’, as it were. For example, while a plan to fly from Auckland to London will involve a trans-oceanic flight, flying through San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dubai, or Singapore will not be determined from the start. Third, agents should restrict courses of action to those compatible with the plans they have made. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An interesting resolution of the disunity of self arises in Korsgaard’s response to Parfit’s Russian nobleman example. Her view follows Kant’s by suggesting that the husband and wife share in a *unity of will*, whereby the Russian’s wife is duty-bound to have her husband fulfill his obligation to distribute a large portion of his inheritance to peasants. We believe that Korsgaard’s resolution, while interesting in its own right, introduces a concept of ‘will’ that we would rather not address in this paper. Just as we remain silent on other aspects of agency, we will steer clear of the will, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bratman has his own response to the problem of governing plans and policies in the face of unstable and unforeseen circumstances. ‘(I)f you are rationally self-governed and faced with such a fundamental change in the world—change that was “impossible-to-anticipate”—you would normally draw on certain more-or-less methodological policies’ … ‘Once we take seriously the potential roles of such methodological policies, we should be sceptical about Millgram’s claim that “you can’t have a policy for handling the unanticipated”’ (Bratman 2014: 325). In Bratman’s view, there are ‘methodological policies’ that are composed of other more specific plans and policies; these methodological policies are similar to the singular, monolithic and overarching narratives that we discuss below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While agency is one focus in this project, we are not considering all aspects of agency, as already indicated. Rather, it is the thesis of disunity that is central, and we leave it to others to draw connections between agency and moral responsibility. Recent discussions of moral responsibility and the nature of agency are quite interesting. We are thinking here especially of Christine Korsgaard (2008, 2009), Michael McKenna (2012), and Manuel Vargas (2013), just to name a few. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James Grady, *Six Days of the Condor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It has been drawn to our attention that our disunified self view is reminiscent of the sociologist Irving Goffman’s (1956) *dramaturgic* disunity thesis of the social self. He employs theatrical performance as a perspective from which social life can be studied. He considers the way that people present themselves differently to different audiences in different contexts, either unconsciously or deliberately. He discusses (p. 12) the way a person can come to identify with a ‘self’ that is at first intended as deception. In following the narrative self-constitution view, we are emphasising the internal nature of the self as well as the way we present ourselves to others. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We have produced this additional section in response to a referee’s concern over the metaphysical implications that one might infer from our view. We are grateful for being prompted to situate our view in a broader context. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Patrick Stokes (2015) also acknowledges the apparent complexities of the self. He proposes to escape this 'metaphysical thicket' by recognizing a fundamental distinction between our phenomenal sense of self and our awareness of being a particular person. Only through the adoption of something that amounts to an ‘authentic self’, in the Kierkegaardian sense, do we construct a singular and monolithic self. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here, we should note that a closely related philosophically relevant point one could make with regards to our bundled view is how it is connected with the shape of a life in well-being. Compare the works of Fischer (2009) and Velleman (2000b). We do not address this point here, but rather we steer the reader to Altshuler’s pertinent work on these issues, especially his (2012) and (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)