Narrative self-constitution as embodied practice

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Abstract

Narrative views of the self argue that we constitute our self in self-narratives. Embodied views hold that our self is shaped through embodied experiences. In that case, what is the relation between embodiment and narrativity in the process of self-constitution? The question demands a clear definition of embodiment, but existing studies remains unclear on this point (section 2). We offer a correction to this situation by drawing on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body that highlights its *habituality*. On this account, the body has an inherent tendency to cultivate an organisation of habits through its history of engagement with the world (section 3). Next, we explore its role in narrative self-constitution by distinguishing between two aspects of the narrative self, the *narrated I* and the *narrating I* (section 4). We argue on phenomenological grounds that self-narratives are informed by bodily perspectives in both respects. Furthermore, a focus on the habituality of the body allows for a better explanation of self-constitution than those based on implicit self-narratives (section 5). For these phenomenological and theoretical reasons, we conclude that narrative self-constitution is an embodied and embedded practice (section 6).

1. Introduction

In contrast to the Cartesian conception of the ego as an immaterial and timeless entity, current theories of the self consider it to be something that emerges and develops over time through a subject's active engagement with the world (Bermúdez et al., 1998; Fuchs et al., 2010; Gallagher, 2011; Siderits et al., 2011). This raises a problem. How should we understand the process through which the self emerges and develops over time? That is, how do we explain the *constitution of the self*?

Two kinds of explanations prevail in the extant literature. One comes from what are known as *narrative views of the self* (e.g., Bruner, 2004; Ricoeur, 1990/1992; Schechtman,

1996; see Schechtman, 2011 for an overview). On this view, selves are narrative entities. We actively construct our selfhood and become who we are by developing self-narratives, that is, by telling stories about ourselves. The other kind of explanation focuses on the role of *embodied actions*. Several authors suggest that we develop our self-identity as an embodied subject through bodily interactions with the world (e.g., Bermúdez et al., 1998; Cassam, 2011; Gallagher, 2000). These two kinds of explanations are not incompatible. In fact, an intuitively appealing view emerges when they are put together: we construct our selfhood as if we are characters in a story, but we are also embodied subjects embedded in the material world (Newen, 2018).

But then how do these two aspects work together to constitute a seemingly unified self? Some authors have argued that an embodied sense of self is a precondition for developing a narrative self-conception (e.g., Menary, 2008; Thornton, 2004; Zahavi, 2014). Others argue that the body interacts dynamically with our self-narrative to shape our self-identity over time (e.g., Brandon, 2016; Dings, 2019; Mackenzie, 2014). However, these studies leave the precise nature of embodiment or the body largely underspecified. This is unfortunate because we would certainly not achieve a clear understanding of the relation between embodiment and narrativity in self-constitution without a clear understanding of embodiment.

In this paper, we will offer a correction to this situation by highlighting the *habituality* of the body. By this, we mean the inherent tendency of the body to cultivate *habits* through its history of interaction with the world. We shall draw on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to explain what this entails and argue based on it that *narrative self-constitution is an embodied practice.*

Our account will not exhaust the whole story about the relationship between embodiment and narrativity in self-constitution. We shall claim that cultivated habits play a crucial role in the constitution of the narrative self, but there also ways in which the body contribute to self-narratives that are not clearly related to its habitual character. For example, traumatic experiences, which are far from habitual, can forcefully lend themselves to self-narratives (Køster 2017a). We should make it clear from the outset that our aim in this paper is not so much to fully illuminate the embodiment-narrative nexus as to show that we can better

understand a key aspect of this complex structure by getting clear about the nature of embodiment.[1]

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we overview recent accounts that focus on the coordination between embodiment and narrativity in the constitution of the self. Many appreciate the role of embodiment in the constitution of the narrative self, but these accounts, we suggest, remain suggestive and require further elaboration. We then proceed to develop a more embodied conception of narrative self-constitution in the next two sections. The first step is to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of embodiment or the body. To this end, in section 3, we introduce Merleau-Ponty's account of the habituality of the body. Based on this conception the body, in section 4, we elaborate on its contribution in the process of narrative self-constitution. We do so by drawing an important distinction between two aspects of the narrative self: the *narrated I* and the *narrating I*. In section 5, we augment our thesis by discussing its theoretical advantages over prominent views that emphasise the role of *implicit narratives* in the constitution of the self.

2. Embodiment and narrative in self-constitution

There are several proposals on how narrative self-conception and embodiment contribute to the constitution of the self. Following Priscilla Brandon (2016), we can divide them broadly into two groups: *unidirectional* and *interactive* accounts (see also Dings, 2019).

According to *unidirectional accounts*, narrative self-constitution depends on embodied experiences, but not the other way round. Consider Shaun Gallagher's (2000) influential distinction between "minimal self" and "narrative self". With this distinction, Gallagher contrasts between the role of embodiment and self-narratives in relation to the temporal

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[1] Recently developed pattern theories of self hold that multiple factors such as bodily processes, pre-reflective self-awareness, behavioral habits and skills, social and intersubjective factors, cognitive factors, self-narratives, ecological relations, and normative factors, also contribute to the constitution of our selves (Gallagher, 2013, forthcoming; Newen, 2018). On these accounts, self is not so much a static configuration of these multiple factors as a "dynamical gestalt" (Gallagher, forthcoming) that emerges from complicated interactions among them. Our exploration into the embodiment-narrativity nexus highlighting the habituality of the body can be seen as articulating one dimension of this dynamic configuration of self-patterns.

character of the self. The minimal self refers to the "immediate subject of experience, *unextended in time*" (Gallagher, 2000, p. 15, emphasis added). It is already present in and shaped through pre-reflective embodied engagements with the world. In contrast, the narrative self is "the more or less coherent self (or self-image) that is *constituted with a past and a future* in the various stories that we and others tell about ourselves" (Gallagher, 2000, p. 15, emphasis added). We come to conceive of ourselves as temporally persistent beings by producing a coherent story out of our embodied experiences. Thus, embodiment forms a prerequisite for the construction of narrative self-conceptions.

Richard Menary (2008) advances a similar unidirectional proposal (see also Thornton, 2003; Zahavi, 2014). In contrast to Gallagher, Menary claims that embodied experiences, like perception and action, already have some degree of temporal structure (viz., "minimal embodied narratives") (Menary, 2008, p. 79). Since perception and action unfold over time, the subject of these experiences is not strictly speaking "unextended in time". We experience ourselves pre-reflectively as subjects that retain their identity over the process. But this does not suffice to base our self-conception as a subject that persists over a longer stretch of time comprising multiple episodes of perceptions and actions. For Menary, this self-conception is produced through narrative self-constitution. We gain it upon reflection by "find[ing] a meaningful form or structure in [the] sequence of experiences" (Menary, 2008, p. 76). By the same token, the narrative self requires embodiment insofar as self-narratives "are constructed out of a sequence of embodied experiences and perceptions" (Menary, 2008, p. 83).

Interactive accounts paint a more dynamic picture of the relationship between embodied experiences and narrative self-conceptions (e.g., Brandon, 2016; Dings, 2019; Jongepier, 2016; Mackenzie, 2014). For example, Roy Dings thinks of the interrelation between embodied experiences and narrative self-conceptions in two ways. First, narrative self-conceptions do not just draw on embodied experiences as "building blocks" for a self-narrative, but they also shape our bodily responsiveness to the world. Dings calls this process "narrative self-programming" (2019, p. 194). Second, embodied experiences also inform our narrative self-understanding. In particular, our bodily experiences can affect our narrative self by motivating us to reflect on our narrative self-conceptions (Dings, 2019, pp. 196–197). Thus, narrative self-conceptions are not simply constructed out of embodied experiences. Rather, "we need to take a diachronic approach and acknowledge that narrative affects embodiment which *in turn* affects narrative which *in turn* affects embodiment and so on" (Dings, 2019, p. 203, emphasis in original). Embodiment and self-narrative exhibit a "dynamic and recursive interplay" (Dings, 2019, p. 203).

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For the interactionists, embodiment and narrativity are not simply two co-existing aspects of the self. Rather, they are deeply interwoven such that the body plays a fundamental role in the constitution of the narrative self. However, their account of the role of the body is strikingly underdeveloped. For example, Dings (2019) rightly indicates that the body can nudge subjects to reflect upon their narrative self-understanding. However, it remains unclear whether and how the body might be involved in the constitution of a narrative self-understanding in the first place.

Some accounts are more attentive to the role of the body (Butler and Gallagher, 2018; Køster 2017b; 2017c; Mackenzie, 2009; Meyers 2014). Self-narratives appear to play a key role in the development of a self-conception that represents oneself as a subject that persist over time, a temporal being (Gallagher, 2000). However, as some suggest, this does not mean that our self-conception as a temporal being is constituted exclusively in self-narratives. For example, Allan Køster (2017c) challenges the conventional conception of "personal history" that identifies it with the subject's self-narrative. Denying that narrative is "the only conceivable mode of temporal structuring of experience" (Køster, 2017c, p. 176), he argues that we each constitute ourselves as a "temporal being" both reflectively by making sense of our past experiences and pre-reflectively through our history of bodily engagements with the world (see also Mackenzie, 2009).

Køster presses the point by drawing on the phenomenological notion of *sedimentation*. Sedimentation designates the "structuring principle" under which stable structures emerge out of contingent, temporal, historical processes (Køster, 2017c, p. 176). For instance, we develop a sense of familiarity with places and people after engaging with them repeatedly. This sense of familiarity does not arise out of a reflective comparison between the present and the past. Rather, we usually come to feel familiar simply through spending enough time in certain places and with certain people. If so, our pre-reflective experience of the world is not strictly constrained to the present. Instead, it already bears a meaningful relationship with the past even when we are not explicitly aware of it. Put differently, the self is already implicated in the experience as a temporal being prior to any narrative reflection. It bears a historical perspective formed (or sedimented) through its embodied engagement with the world. According to Køster, there is a dimension of "embodied selfhood that is prior to narrative configuration, but nonetheless concretely individuated through personal history" (2017c, p. 173).

However, further elaboration is necessary to better understand the coordination between embodiment and self-narrative in the constitution of the self. It seems that we can distinguish between "two senses of self, one as an embodied experiencer of and actor in the world and the

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other as a narrator of those experiences and actions [...] from a first-person point of view" (Menary 2008, p. 66). But then how should we understand their relationship in the context of narrative self-constitution? Køster proposes that we develop a narrative self-conception "through a process of *narrating the narratable*" (2017b, p. 905, emphasis in original) among our embodied experiences. In our view, however, this answer remains too schematic. It does not tell us much about the concrete ways in which narrative self-constitution is constrained and informed by the subject's embodiment.

In the following, we attempt to advance our understanding of the role of embodiment in narrative self-constitution precisely by offering a concrete story in this respect. Philosophical research on this topic intensively debates the relation between embodiment and narrativity. However, it has left it largely underspecified what embodiment exactly means. This is problematic. How could we achieve a theoretical understanding of the role of embodiment without being clear about the nature of embodiment or the body in the first place? We need to better understand the nature of the body to explain its intricate relationship with self-narratives.

We think that the key notion here is *habituality*. The body has an inherent tendency to develop habits through its history of engagement with the world. Accordingly, embodied agents do not simply live in the here and now. Their experience always already involves meaningful temporal relationships with the past and future. This conception of the body will allow us to clarify the effects of embodiment on the narrative self and the practice of self-narration. Fleshing out these claims will be the task of the next two sections.

3. Habit and habituality of the body

Historically, habits have often been recognised as playing a significant role in the formation of character and selfhood (Carlisle 2014). This is why Køster (2017c) highlights the habituality of the body in the constitution of the historical self, the self that exceeds a personal history contained in self-narratives. However, the relation between the habituality of the body and the narrative self remains obscure. Do habits simply form a basic layer of the self that exceeds the narrative self? Or do they have a positive role to play in the constitution of a narrative self? And, if so, what kind of role might this be? Answering these questions will grant a clearer understanding of the relationship between embodiment and self-narratives in the constitution of the self.

In this section, we therefore clarify what we mean by habits and by the habituality of the body. We argue that habits constitute our general relationship with the world. Furthermore,

the habituality of the body—the body's inherent tendency to develop an organisation of habits––implies that the body is capable of constituting a general perspective on the world. We explore how this "bodily perspective" (Mackenzie 2009) contributes to the constitution of the narrative self in the next section.[2]

Let us begin by considering habits in relation to actions. There is broad consensus in the literature that habits are structures that generate embodied actions. Yet, as Bill Pollard notes, habits are also "acquired through the repetition of a certain kind of action in certain characteristic circumstances" (2006, p. 77). Clare Carlisle captures the circular relationship between habits and actions nicely:

> [H]abit can be either a source or a result of actions. We sometimes say that we act 'out of habit', implying that habit is a cause; but we can also recognize that habits are themselves brought into being through the repetition of an action or experience. Indeed, habit can be both the source and the result of action, so that it is self-perpetuating. (Carlisle, 2014, p. 7; see also Carlisle, 2006, p. 77)

There is also a broad agreement that actions performed out of habit are largely non-deliberative and non-reflective. Suppose you move to a foreign country where the custom is to take off your shoes when entering someone's home. In the beginning, you will need to remind yourself to take off your shoes every time you enter someone's home. However, once you are habituated to the practice, you will do so without thinking much about it. Behaviours that once required careful deliberation or reflective attention can thus develop into habits. As Pollard puts it, "once habituation is complete, [...] [n]o deliberation, decision, choice or monitoring need take place" (2006, p. 78).

However, beyond this abstract level of agreement, different authors specify the concept of habit in different ways. Xabier Barandiaran and Ezequiel Di Paolo (2014) identify two types of accounts in the history of philosophy. On the one hand, there are *associationist views*, which regard habit as a mechanical structure that associates two simple elements: sensory stimulus and motor response. As Susana Ramírez-Vizcaya and Tom Froese put it, these accounts tie habits with "rigid patterns of behavior that are automatically activated by context cues to which

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[2] Mackenzie (2009) defines the bodily perspective as an "integrated experience of the body" (2009, p. 116). We will use the term in a slightly different sense. For us, it refers to our perspective on the world grounded in the organization of habits cultivated in our body. We explain this in more detail in the rest of this section.

they have become mentally associated as a result of having been frequently repeated in the past in a stable context" (2019, p. 2).

On the other hand, there are *organicist views*, which conceive of habits as self-organising teleological structures characteristic of living creatures. Habits do not 'blindly' associate sensory stimuli with motor responses. Instead, habits allow living creatures to adapt to their environment intelligently without laborious deliberation (Miyahara and Robertson, 2020). As Daniel Hutto and Ian Robertson put it, habits are "special adaptive tendencies that make [living things] disposed—unlike purely mechanical and physical systems—to sensitively adjust in characteristic ways to the particularities of their situated circumstances" (2020, p. 207).

Merleau-Ponty's account of the habituality of the body elaborates the organicist view from a phenomenological perspective. As in other organicist views, Merleau-Ponty denies that habits consist in automatic processes that associate sensory stimulus with motor action. He states that

> what links elementary movements, reactions, and "stimuli" together in habit is not an external association. Every mechanical theory runs into the fact that learning process is systematic: the subject does not weld individual movements to individual stimuli, but rather acquires *the power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation.* (1945/2012, p. 143, emphasis added)

Consider again the habit of taking off your shoes when entering someone's home. The way in which you take off your shoes will vary depending on the context of the situation. These kinds of observations motivate Merleau-Ponty's view that habits do not consist in external associations between sensations and movements. Instead, habits enable us to adapt flexibly to situations without engaging in laborious deliberations. They consist in general dispositions to generate patterns of responses to patterns of situations. For Merleau-Ponty, as Diana Meyers (2014) puts it, "habit has an agentic dynamic of its own […] thus making improvisation possible" (p. 145).

However, habits are not reducible to behavioural dispositions on Merleau-Ponty's account. Habits are also perceptual and affective in nature because embodied actions are intertwined with perceptual and affective experiences of some concrete situation. Habitual responses are possible only because we perceive the immediate situation as presenting a previously encountered pattern. And perceiving the situation in light of a pattern is not an intellectual operation. For Merleau-Ponty, it is rather what he calls the "motor grasping of a motor signification" (1945/2012, p. 144). Once habituated to an action, we come to perceive

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certain situations as calling forth a relevant embodied action—one that we have previously performed in a similar situation. To borrow terminology from ecological psychology, habits involve sensorimotor dispositions to detect and exploit environmental information that specify the presence of certain *affordances* (Miyahara et al., 2020).

Moreover, the perception of the situation is affective in nature. We identify a patterned situation, not by constructing an objective mental representation of the scene, but by encountering "a typical or familiar physiognomy" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 145). Habitual actions thus presuppose our knowledge of the significance of the situation. Mostly, this is not a matter of obtaining propositional knowledge. Rather, it is a matter of having "a knowledge in our hands" or "a knowledge of familiarity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 145). We can respond to situations adequately out of our habit thanks to our awareness of what is demanded by the situation that is built into our perceptual and affective experience.

In short, perception, action, and affect are only conceptually separable. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 145). That is, rather than reducing to behavioural dispositions, habits ground our general perspective on and ongoing embeddedness in the world. As Butler and Gallagher (2018) also points out, Merleau-Ponty thinks that to acquire a habit is "for our bodies to assimilate a new meaningful frame of reference" (p. 53).

Another important idea identifiable in Merleau-Ponty's account is that habits are also involved in the generation of speech and thought. Speech and thought are commonly considered to be external to each other. We create thoughts in our mind and then use speech to communicate those thoughts. Merleau-Ponty argues, however, that speech is not an external translation of "a ready-made thought", but rather that "speech accomplishes thought" (1945/2012, p. 183). When you spot an insect and remark "there's a dragonfly", you do not first identify the insect as a dragonfly (in thought), and *then* proceed to make the remark (in speech). Speech itself can ~~form~~ an act of recognition. This is why we sometimes mumble to ourselves when there is no one around with whom we intend to communicate our thoughts.[3]

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[3] This is not to deny the possibility of identifying objects without overt speech. Surely, most adults can identify a dragonfly without saying "there's a dragonfly". Yet, even in such cases, we often perform the identification by generating covert inner speech. Moreover, even if it is possible to identify objects without inner speech, non-linguistic thoughts need not be involved in every linguistic expression to make their "ready-made" contents.

For Merleau-Ponty, speech is "a genuine gesture" (1945/2012, p. 189). It is an embodied act performed in response to a situation. "There's a dragonfly" is typically uttered in a specific context (such as when spotting a dragonfly hovering above a pond). Like sensorimotor actions performed out of habit, speech consists in "a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 143). More specifically, Merleau-Ponty holds that "the intention to speak can only be found in an open experience" (1945/2012, p. 202). In other words, we do not use speech to respond to a situation with a speech when we are tightly coupled with it in sensorimotor terms. You will, for example, simply walk along in silence if nothing remarkable happens when you stroll through a park. The intention to speak arises when something significant outside the scope of current sensorimotor engagement happens.

Merleau-Ponty thus considers language acquisition to be a form of habit acquisition. It is a matter of developing a habit of responding to situations by thinking and speaking. It is developed in our history of engagement with not only the so-called natural world, but also with others and their use of what Merleau-Ponty calls "available significations" already established in language (1945/2012, p. 189). Merleau-Ponty famously dubbed this pre-established repertoire of significations "spoken speech" (1945/2012, p. 202). Language acquisition thus consists in developing a linguistic habit through familiarisation with spoken speech. It is a special case of "enculturation" into a cognitive practice (Fabry, 2018; Menary and Gillett, 2022; see also Di Paolo et al., 2018).

This is not to say that speech reduces to the mindless production of a predetermined set of expressions (associated with a predetermined set of situations). As noted, habits enable us to improvise flexible responses to situations without engaging in deliberations. Linguistic habits also allow us to improvise thought and speech that is original to the speaking subject. A "new meaningful intention" is flexibly created in response to the relevant situation (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 189). Merleau-Ponty calls speech based on the creative application of linguistic habits to some situation "speaking speech", which he distinguishes from the pre-established repertoire of "spoken speech" (1945/2012, p. 202). An important consequence is that, while being a decidedly linguistic practice, self-narrative is also an embodied practice grounded in the habituality of the body.

In sum, on Merleau-Ponty's account, the body shapes our general relationship with the world. It generates a general perspective on the world that constrains our ongoing embeddedness in it. It affects our experience with respect to behaviour, perception, affect, and, moreover, thinking and language. It does so based on its inherent habituality, that is, its nature

to develop an organisation of habits through its history of engagement with the world. Drawing on this conception of the habituality of the body, in the next section, we will undertake a fine-grained phenomenological exploration into the role of embodiment in narrative self-constitution.

4. Habituality and the constitution of the narrative self

How does the bodily perspective founded on the habituality of the body contribute to the constitution of the narrative self? We approach this question by first distinguishing between two aspects of the narrative self. The narrative self is usually understood as the self-conception we construct by telling stories about ourselves, a self-conception that features oneself as the protagonist of a self-narrative. However, this does not exhaust our relation to our self-narrative. Self-narratives are self-referential (Smith and Watson, 2010; Fabry, 2023). They are stories about a subject who also produces those stories. Therefore, the narrative self can also be understood as the subject who engages in the practice of self-narration.

As Schechtman (2011) put it, we can take different roles with respect to self-narratives, such as being a character and being the author (pp. 412–413). Likewise, Hutto and Gallagher (2017) distinguishes between two aspects of the narrative self, "the self who is narrated" and "the self who narrates" (p. 165).[4] Narratological studies talk about a similar distinction between the *narrated I* and the *narrating I* (Smith and Watson, 2010). In the following, we shall follow this latter terminology and discuss the role of the bodily perspective in the constitution of the *narrated I* (narrative self-conception, section 4.1) and the *narrating I* (the subject of self-narration, section 4.2) in this order.

4.1 *Habituality and the* narrated I

Stories represent characters as temporal beings that persist over time. It is therefore common to emphasise the role of self-narratives when explaining the nature of our self-conception as

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[4] Both Schechtman (2011) and Hutto and Gallagher (2016) also point out that we can also take a critical stance on our self-narrative. It is an important question that lies beyond the scope of this paper to explore what this entails for the relationship between embodiment and narrativity in self-constitution.

temporal beings (Gallagher, 2000). The idea is that self-narratives establish a meaningful link between past experiences and the present. They thereby enable us to identify our current self with the subjects of past experiences. However, stories also represent characters as individuals invested with personal character traits. To borrow terminology from the narrative therapy literature, our narrative self-conceptions involve "identity conclusions" (White, 2007) that (sometimes misleadingly) describe our nature and character. The *narrated I* has both *temporality* and *personality* as central features.

This is consistent with the distinction Marya Schechtman (1996) draws between two questions regarding the constitution of personal identity: the *reidentification question* and *characterisation question*. The reidentification question asks how we can identify subjects existing at two or more points in time as aspects of the same person. The characterisation question concerns the material content of the self. It asks how a person develops a personal character definitive of their identity, *viz*. "the set of characteristics each person has that make her the person she is" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 74). The answer, according to Schechtman, is that personal characters are constituted in self-narratives.

What role might the body play in this context? Sometimes, Schechtman appears to advance a radical thesis that personal character is constituted *exclusively* in self-narratives, a position Menary (2008) dubs the abstract narrative view (we shall discuss Schechtman's view further in the next section). By contrast, we would like to defend a more modest thesis that grants self-narrative a significant yet limited role: With respect to both temporality and personality, the narrative self (qua the *narrated I*) is informed by the organisation of the habits that shape our general relationship with the world. As such, the *narrated I* is not just constituted in self-narrative. It is also grounded in the habituality of the body.

We can offer two arguments in defence of this claim. First, consider the constitution of the *narrated I* as a temporal being. We do not accomplish this by recollecting a random set of past experiences, and then establishing a meaningful link between them to form a coherent story that features a subject that persists over time. Rather, there is typically a pre-existing habitual pattern to our embodied experiences. When telling a story, this naturally motivates us to consider ourselves as temporal beings. For example, consider a child with a morning routine. Every morning, she wakes up, has breakfast, dresses up, packs her backpack, and finally walks to school. This sequence of events will be so familiar to her that she will usually not even recognize it as such. Yet she has an implicit sense of familiarity with it, which will come to the forefront of her awareness (due to its absence) when she is compelled to do things differently. For example, she will vividly notice it when her parent is sick and cannot execute the routine

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as usual. This implicit sense of familiarity is pervasive in our regular life replete with repeated patterns of experiences and actions. As we saw in section 2, it is an affective experience that typically comes along with the development of stable patterns of interactions with the world. And it has a feature that deserves special attention for our purpose. That is, it entails that our experiences usually involve an implicit reference to the past because we can feel something to be familiar only in relation to past experiences and actions that have some similarities with it.

Accordingly, when producing self-narratives, we do not need to construct a self-conception as a subject that persists over time *ex nihilo*, that is, by gluing together a collection of disparate episodes. Rather, the temporal continuity of the self is already implicit in our experience thanks to the sense of familiarity and the pre-existing habits that ground them. The body cultivates stable patterns of interactions through its history of engagement with the world. The temporal continuity of these patterns confers our experience with a sense of familiarity, and this motivates us to represent ourselves as temporal subjects upon reflection. In short, the *narrated I* is usually constituted as a temporal being precisely because it reflects a temporal continuity that is already implicit in our experience thanks to the habituality of the body.

Second, consider the constitution of the *narrated I* as someone invested with a personal character. Again, we do not come to represent ourselves as someone with a personal character by making a coherent narrative out of a random set of singular experiences. Rather, the habitual pattern of embodied experience also constrains and informs the material content of our self-narratives in certain directions. For instance, suppose you have a habit of overpacking for trips. You will then find this act to be familiar, something you always do, when you prepare for a trip. This sense of familiarity will incline you to describe yourself as someone who *tends to* overpack. This reflective thought can make you think of your other habits by association, for example, that you tend to over-plan your lectures, overstock your refrigerator, and so on, and eventually lead you to conclude that you are an anxious person.[5] You can do this without necessary listing singular episodes from the past because as Fuchs (2017) points out, "the habitual body always forms an extract of one's personal history" (p. 308). In such ways, self-narratives about personal characters are often constrained and informed by the contents of our habits.

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[5] The habitual pattern that underlies a narrative self-conception (or an identity conclusion) is often opaque for the subject. Unravelling this hidden background is considered a crucial step in narrative therapy (White, 2007, pp. 26–27).

However, this is not to say that our narrative self-conceptions are automatically determined by the habits we have. You are not necessarily an anxious person just because you tend to overpack. Narrative self-conceptions are constrained and informed by habitual patterns of our day-to-day lives but are not determined unequivocally by them. Accordingly, there is always the possibility of revising or "re-authoring" (White, 2007) our narrative self-conceptions, which is particularly useful in cases where they have harmful effects on our lives. Yet, in considering the role of embodiment in narrative self-constitution, neither should we overlook the fact that narrative self-conceptions are usually strongly constrained and informed by habitual patterns of life shaped through our history of embodied engagement with the world.

Note that by talking about *pre-existing* habits, we are not suggesting that habits are always shaped prior to and independent of self-narratives. The process of habit formation is often mediated by self-narratives (Dings, 2019; Wagner, 2021). Your habit to overpack may have resulted from this process in the past given that you purposefully aspired to be more organised when younger. Yet, it can also *pre-exist* your attempt to produce a self-narrative.

This might be when a specific instance of self-narration occurred after you developed the overpacking habit. This is compatible with the observation that there is a "dynamic interplay" (Dings, 2019, pp. 203–205) between embodiment and narrativity on a larger time scale. Self-narratives can give direction to our patterns of embodied engagement with the world, and hence shape our habits over time. These habits can, in turn, guide our self-narratives in certain directions, thereby shaping our narrative self-conceptions. As such, habits and self-narratives conjointly make and remake the *narrated I* over time.

4.2 *Habituality and the* narrating I

The body also contributes to the constitution of the narrative self by shaping the *subjective perspective* of the *narrating I*. To understand what this means, it is important to stress that self-narratives are not objective records of everything that has happened in a specific subject's experiential life. Rather, they represent past events selectively and subjectively to form a coherent story (see Bruner, 2004; Heersmink, 2018; Kind, 2015). This means that self-narratives are open to revision if only within certain limits. This is crucial in the context of narrative therapy, where the therapist often encourages patients to re-author their self-narrative to change their relationship with problems in their life in a way that is more conducive to their well-being (cf. White, 2007). This is possible only because self-narratives are made in relation

to the subjective perspective of the narrating subject (i.e., the *narrating I*) that is itself subject to change.

But how does embodiment relate to this process of authoring and re-authoring a self-narrative? We can start to uncover its effect by exploring the nature of the subjective perspective. The subjective perspective of the *narrating I* has two distinguishable aspects.

First, it is shaped by self-narratives. In constructing a self-narrative, we tend to select past experiences and make sense of them in line with the story we regularly tell about ourselves. If you think of yourself as an anxious person, you will be inclined to select those experiences that are readily associated with anxiety. There is a certain circularity involved in the process of self-narration. We construct stories about ourselves by recollecting past experiences, but those stories, in turn, influence the way we recollect and interpret past experiences to construct stories about ourselves. As Anthony Rudd (2007) puts it, the existence of a narrative self-conception "is what gives meaning to what I am doing now, and is the basis for my capacity to formulate explicit narratives about myself when I do so" (p. 63; see also Heersmink, 2018, p. 1833).

Second, the subjective perspective of the *narrating I* is also embodied in nature. As Mackenzie (2009) indicates, the subjective perspective consists of a "bodily perspective": "subjectivity is actively constituted against the background of, and in relation to, the life of the body, which provides the implicit frame of reference for one's sense of self" (p. 117). In the current context, it is especially important to notice that self-narration is itself an embodied and embedded practice. In self-narration, we reflect on past experiences and construct a coherent story out of them. One might then think that self-narration consists in a purely mental act detached from the first-order flow of experiences. However, this is not necessarily the case when we consider the actual practice of self-narrating. Suppose you visit a park with your partner. At the park, you suddenly remember that you came here before with him/her, and you start to talk about that memory. In such ways, we often perform self-narration in response to an experienced situation. It is not necessarily a detached mental act, but it can also take place in the form of a "genuine gesture" to use Merleau-Ponty's terminology from section 3.

The bodily dimension of the *narrating I* shapes the way in which we recollect and synthesise past experiences in response to a situation. You talk about the past visit to the park because talking about a shared memory is a pattern of behaviour you have developed through your history of interactions with your partner (and with other people). You select a specific episode from the past and you meaningfully relate it to the present, because you have the *habit* of recollecting and talking about shared memories with your partner. Self-narration is the manifestation of a specific kind of linguistic habit—a *narrative habit*—that involves

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responding to situations by talking and thinking about the relevant past. This is analogous to how utterances in general can be regarded as manifestations of shared linguistic habits (see section 3). In other words, self-narration is also a cognitive practice in which we learn to participate through the process of enculturation (Fabry, 2018).[6]

As intimated in section 3, Merleau-Ponty thinks that we respond to a situation with speech when we are not tightly coupled with it in sensorimotor terms—that is, when the situation presents us with an *open experience*. There seems to be a similar structure to self-narration. Situations that are completely familiar or completely novel typically fail to elicit story-telling responses. In the former case, we tend to navigate the situation through habituated patterns of responses. We have no motive to think reflectively about the past. In the latter case, we tend to focus exclusively on finding the right response to the pertinent situation. This leaves little room for concurrently thinking about the past and reflecting on ourselves. In contrast, a memory of the past is elicited, and we are moved to produce a self-narrative, when we sense some degree of familiarity and novelty. To adapt Merleau-Ponty's expression, we are moved to engage in reflective story-telling when a situation presents us with an open experience involving a mix of familiarity and novelty (see also Butler and Gallagher, 2018, pp. 55–56).[7]

Self-narrating acts are thus comparable to other speech acts in being habit-based responses to open experiences. That said, obviously not all speech acts are self-narrating acts. Self-narrating acts are distinctive in their dynamic entanglement with the act of recollection. In some cases, self-narrating can itself be an act of recollection, such as when you recollect your

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[6] We have used an intersubjective example in which you produce a self-narrative by talking with another person. However, self-narratives can also be produced individually. Individual self-narratives are often scaffolded by an ecology of artifacts we construct for ourselves, a memory ecology resulting from "narrative niche construction" (Heersmink, 2018, 2020). Either way, producing a self-narrative is an embodied and embedded practice based on our bodily perspective or habitual patterns of engagement with the world.

[7] The situation does not only trigger story-telling. It also guides its contents in certain directions. Depending on the characteristics of the situation, story-telling develops around similarities and differences between the present and the past. Your conversation with your partner can centre around how life has changed since you last visited together, but also around how some things remain the same.

previous visit to the park by talking about it in response to the situation. In addition, recollections can invite further story-telling. When we recollect past episodes, they can motivate us to extend our current story-telling in a coherent way. When remembering your previous visit to the park, you might remark that you did not have a child back then. This kind of development in story-telling can then motivate further recollections (with their relevant contents). By remarking on it, you might call memories strongly related to the prior absence of the child. You might think about how you visited a bar that evening, and how it is not easy to do so anymore because of the child. In recollection, we are thus often aware of past episodes in terms of affordances for self-narrating acts. When performed, self-narrating acts then invite further recollections that open up a renewed "landscape of affordances" (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014) for additional story-telling. Self-narratives develop dynamically over time driven by the co-evolution of recollection and self-narration.

It is tempting to think that producing a self-narrative is a matter of reviewing the temporal flow of experience and then constructing a story from a detached subjective perspective. However, in practice, self-narrating is an embodied activity embedded in the spatial and temporal unfolding of experience. This practice is informed by the narrative and bodily perspective of the *narrating I*. This is important for our thesis: insofar as the subjective perspective of the *narrating I* is generated through one's history of embodied interaction with the world, the practice of narrative self-constitution is grounded in the habituality of the body.

Let us close this section by considering one well-founded worry. One might respond to our proposal by saying that narrative habit is not so much bodily, but rather a mental habit of the mind, a habit to recollect past episodes relevant to a given situation. In that case, even if it is right to say that narrative self-constitution is a habitual practice, it will not follow that it is an embodied practice grounded in the habituality of the body.

We find this mentalistic conception of narrative habits problematic. It might appear convincing if we frame it exclusively in mental terms as a habit to recollect and interpret the significance of past episodes. However, the practice of self-narrating often involves bodily processes, such as talking or writing about past experiences and actions. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, these bodily processes do not simply accompany purely mental processes of recollection and interpretation but are often constitutive of these mental activities. That said, we are acutely aware that the nature of narrative habits remains underdeveloped in the current discussion. Therefore, our current proposal indicates that if we want to better understand the role of embodiment in narrative self-constitution, further investigation is necessary regarding the nature of narrative habits, their role in self-narrating, and their relation to our embodiment.

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5. Implicit narratives and the habituality of the body

We have proposed understanding the role of the body in the constitution of the narrative self by focusing on its inherent habituality. The body develops organisations of habits through its history of interaction with the world. These habits ground our general relationship—a bodily perspective—towards the world (section 3). This bodily perspective contributes to the narrative self in a twofold manner: (1) it forms the basis of the temporality and personality of the *narrated I* (see section 4.1) and (2) it constitutes the subjective perspective of the *narrating I* that grounds the embodied and embedded practice of self-narration (see section 4.2). Our primary motivation for this view has been phenomenological. Our argument is premised on a close examination of narrative self-constitution from the subjective point of view. In this section, we further motivate this idea by highlighting its theoretical advantage.

A question that naturally arises concerns the reach of narrativity. We appear to develop personal characters without necessarily telling stories about ourselves. You might be an anxious person for a variety of reasons; it is not necessarily because you consider yourself as such in your self-narrative. You might consider yourself an anxious person because you find yourself to be an anxious person upon self-reflection. What should we make of this observation when it comes to the question of determining the respective roles of the body and self-narratives in the constitution of the self?

It is tempting to think that our personal characters initially develop separately from our self-narratives. Self-narratives then play a supplementary role in the constitution of the self. Alternatively, we might think that self-narratives are implicitly operative before we engage in explicit acts of self-narration. Personal characters that appear to be in place when we explicitly reflect on ourselves might be produced by prior implicit self-narrations outside the scope of conscious awareness. This idea is elaborated in the works of Schechtman (1996; 2007; see also Jongepier, 2014; Rudd, 2007). On her influential *narrative self-constitution view*, "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" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 94). Furthermore, self-narratives can be both explicit and implicit. More than "the explicit telling of one's life story [is] involved in having a narrative self-conception" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 113).

Our personal characters involve what Schechtman calls our "general orientation toward the world" (1996, p. 111). This orientation shapes the way we navigate through life in a global manner. It is not something equipped from birth and then fixed for the rest of life. Rather, it is

something that we develop over time through our daily interactions with the world. Furthermore, a general orientation does not originate in explicit self-narratives. It can nonetheless inform our explicit narrative self-conception (Schechtman, 1996, p. 116). Consider a person with an entrenched feeling of financial insecurity. It is not a static feature she was born with. Instead, it is a character developed dynamically through her history of interaction with the world. For example, she has developed it because she spent her childhood in poverty. It then confers a coherent pattern on her experiences and actions across a wide range of situations. Finally, the person can come to conceive of herself as having an entrenched anxiety about financial insecurity by reflecting on her experiences and actions.

Schechtman thinks that a general orientation towards the world results from "implicit self-narratives" (1996, p. 115). An implicit narrative "is understood as the psychological organization from which [one's] experience and actions are actually flowing" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 115). An implicit narrative forms "a dynamic set of organizing principles, a basic orientation through which, with or without conscious awareness, an individual understands himself and his world" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 116). One might think of having an entrenched feeling of insecurity as a pre-narrative personal character, but for Schechtman, it is a character trait constituted by an implicit self-narrative.

There are several considerations that make this account attractive (although defenders of the notion of implicit self-narratives are not always explicit in this respect). To begin with, self-narratives generate coherent self-conceptions (Gallagher, 2000). These self-conceptions allow us to understand and interact with the world in a coherent manner over time. This makes it tempting to suppose that self-narratives underlie our basic orientation toward the world, an orientation that confers a coherent pattern to our interactions with the world. Moreover, the *implicit* character of the self-narrative at issue explains how these basic orientations can be in place prior to explicit narrative self-conceptions. Furthermore, self-narratives develop over time. We update our self-narratives as we accumulate new experiences and develop new relationships with others over time. This coheres with the idea that our basic orientations towards the world is dynamic in nature, something that develops over time in response to our history of interaction with the world.

Consider again the person with the entrenched feeling of financial insecurity. Over time, she might develop a self-narrative that features her as the protagonist (with an entrenched feeling of financial insecurity). This occurs as she interprets past experiences and actions implicitly (without conscious awareness) as affirming her anxiety over financial insecurity. By being incorporated into her implicit narrative self-conception, the entrenched sense of financial

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insecurity shapes the ways in which she experiences herself and the world *in a global manner*. This is not unlike how when we incorporate a social role in our explicit narrative self-conception, this starts to shape our relationship with ourselves, other people, and the world in a global manner. This enables her to further incorporate this trait into her explicit narrative self-conception. She can do so when she articulates and acknowledges it on conscious reflection as one aspect of her basic orientation towards the world.

This is not to say that we constantly take these two steps in building explicit narrative self-conceptions. We seldom engage in self-reflection to articulate our own character in the course of everyday life. Explicit self-narration is rather the exception rather than the norm. This is why Schechtman thinks that self-narratives are mostly implicit. Self-narration is "a largely implicit process that manifests itself mostly in the quality of our experience and the choices that we make" (Schechtman, 2011, p. 407).

These considerations might lead us to conclude that our basic orientation towards the world is first-and-foremost defined by implicit self-narratives. However, Schechtman's account of implicit self-narrative involve two critical problems. The first problem concerns its psychological reality. For Schecthman, our experiences and actions are largely shaped by a mental organization that operates below the level of conscious awareness and has a narrative structure. To establish this view, she would need to provide "a substantive account of these notions, and some credible evidence for believing that such phenomena exist" (Hutto, 2016, p. 38). However, she remains obscure on this score.

The second problem concerns its conceptual cogency. Narratives are first and foremost public entities that we tell ourselves and to each other by using language (Menary, 2008, p. 71). Furthermore, self-narratives are usually understood as a specific form of representation of remembered past events. Fabry (2023) identifies some conceptual requirements for something to be a self-narrative. But she argues the psychological organization Schechtman refers to as "implicit self-narrative" fails to satisfy them. In other words, explicit and implicit self-narratives are widely different in their nature except for the fact that they both play a role in shaping our experience and action. In that case, however, it is questionable whether we should understand the psychological organization that defines our general orientation toward the world as a form of self-narrative at all. As Fabry (2023) puts it, "calling them self-narrative means to operate with a very weak notion of 'self-narrative' to the point that the very idea of self-narrativity becomes otiose" (p. 16).

We suspect that the notion of an implicit narrative is motivated by a false inference. It is tempting to think that the "psychological organizations from which [one's] experiences and

action are actually flowing" (Schechtman, 2011, p. 115) already have narrative forms because they *can* be incorporated into explicit narratives upon reflection. They are *articulable* in narrative form. However, we cannot infer from the fact that something is articulable in one form to the conclusion that it is already in said form prior to articulation. This is so in the same way that we cannot infer from the fact that a statue can be sculpted out of rock that it was already present in the rock before being sculpted out.[8] Our basic orientation to the world can be articulable in narrative form without already bearing that form.

One might think that we need to posit implicit self-narratives because there are no other ways to account for our basic orientation towards the world. We contend that this challenge can be met with recourse to the habituality of the body. We have already seen that the body shapes our general relationship with the world based on its history of interactions with the world in virtue of its inherent tendency to cultivate habits. We can think of the basic orientation towards the world in question as corresponding to the general relationship grounded in the habituality of the body. Moreover, the body cultivates organizations of habits spontaneously without relying on reflective acts. This explains why our basic orientation towards the world is already in place prior to explicit acts of self-narration. Furthermore, habits generally develop dynamically over time. This coheres with the idea that our basic orientation towards the world emerges and develops dynamically over time.

Consider again the person from the previous example who was raised in poverty. She engages in corresponding patterns of interactions in her day-to-day activities in such a way that over time they become entrenched in her habits. Then these habits come to shape the characteristic ways in which she understands and navigates the world. For example, she experiences her financial situation as precarious even when she is relatively well off and make decisions based on that fact. She can further develop an explicit narrative self-conception with a corresponding content on reflection. She then identifies herself as someone with a basic orientation towards the world that is largely defined by an entrenched anxiety about financial

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[8] Meyers (2014) makes a similar claim. Suppose you infer that your "lived bodily experience […] must have had an implicative narrative form" because you could tell a story about it. "But if so", she writes, "saying that the lived body possesses an implicit narrative form amounts to nothing more than saying that lived bodily experience is susceptible to being narrated as a part of the life of a person" (p. 149).

insecurity. However, she does not need to produce a self-narrative beforehand to develop a general relationship with the world.

In response, one might say that this is exactly what Schechtman means by implicit narratives. Her suggestion is not that we implicitly interpret our experiences and actions to develop a general orientation of the world. Rather, one might say, it is precisely this kind of process enabled by the habituality of the body in which we cultivate a general relationship with the world that she is referring to as implicit narratives (cf. Jongepier, 2016). In that case, however, as we saw above, it is unclear what is exactly narrative about implicit narratives. There is also the concern that the label "implicit *narratives*" might obscure the bodily origin of the general relationship with the world that develops prior to explicit self-narration. These worries may not be insurmountable, but at least for now, there are no strong reasons to endorse this conciliatory proposal and preserve the concept of implicit narrative in the theory.

In sum, our personal identity is not solely determined by explicit narrative self-conceptions. Defenders of narrative views of the self, like Schechtman, accommodate this by appealing to implicit narratives. However, as argued, this construct is questionable both in terms of its psychological reality and conceptual cogency. By acknowledging the habituality of the body, we can explain how personal identity is not solely determined by explicit narrative self-conceptions without introducing implicit narratives. This gives us an additional reason to think that narrative self-constitution is a process that is heavily informed by our embodiment.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have claimed that narrative self-constitution is an embodied practice. While many acknowledge that the self is both narrative and embodied, existing accounts remain unclear about the role of embodiment in narrative self-constitution (section 2). We have proposed a concrete account on this issue by clarifying the nature of embodiment drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the habituality of the body and by offering a fine-grained description of narrative self-constitution in practice. For Merleau-Ponty, the body has an inherent tendency to cultivate an organisation of habits through its history of interaction with the world. This grounds our general pre-reflective relationship with the world (section 3). Merleau-Ponty's analysis sheds light on how the effect of embodiment permeates the practice of narrative self-constitution.

We also drew a distinction between two aspects of the narrative self: the *narrated I* and the *narrating I*. The *narrated I* (our self-conception as a protagonist in a self-narrative) is

characterised by its temporality and personality (section 4.1). Narrative views of the self consider both to be constituted in self-narratives. By contrast, we suggest that they are informed and constrained by pre-existing habits emerging from our history of interaction with the world. The *narrating I* refers to the fact that we are also the authors of self-narratives (section 4.2). Self-narratives are generated from the subjective perspective of the *narrating I*, which is informed both by pre-existing self-narratives and by pre-existing organisation of habits. Among them are narrative habits that ground the way we constitute ourselves in self-narratives, which is itself an embodied practice embedded in a situation. The practice of narrative self-constitution is grounded in the habituality of the body in this twofold manner.

We also argued that our embodied practice account of narrative self-constitution has a theoretical advantage over narrative views that advocate for implicit self-narratives (section 5). Implicit narratives purport to account for how personal identity starts to develop before explicit self-narratives are in place. But implicit narratives are questionable both in terms of their psychological reality and conceptual cogency. We have argued that acknowledging the habituality of the body is the appropriate way forwards in this regard. We develop our basic orientation towards the world by developing organizations of habits. Self-narratives, either explicit or implicit, are not required in this process.

For the above phenomenological and theoretical reasons, we conclude that narrative self-constitution is neither detached from nor tenuously related with embodied processes. Instead, narrative self-constitution is an embedded practice pervasively permeated by the effects of embodiment. It is a practice grounded in the habituality of the body.

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