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**Two senses of narrative unification**

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In this paper I seek to clarify the role of narrative in personal unity. Examining the narrative self-constitution view developed by Marya Schechtman, I use a case of radical personal change to identify a tension in the account. The tension arises because a narrative can be regarded either to capture a continuing agent with a loosely coherent, consistent self-conception – or to unify over change and inconsistency. Two possible ways of responding, by distinguishing senses of identity or distinguishing identity and autonomy, are examined, but I argue that neither precisely maps this tension. I then develop a distinction between two ways in which narrative can unify: through ‘bottom-up’ processes related to the connection between agency and self-conception; and ‘top-down’ processes related to self-interpretative activity. The account provides ways to resolve some criticisms of narrative theories of identity, in particular in better accounting for the role of repudiated characteristics in narrative identity.

**Keywords**: narrative identity, narrative unity, self-constitution, repudiation

The notion of narrative has been put to some very different uses in understanding personal identity. It has been used to resolve metaphysical difficulties (Dennett 1991); to capture nuances in the processes of constructing a self-conception and its impacts on experience and action (Velleman 2005c); and to capture a practical sense of identity apt for practical ethical analysis (DeGrazia 2005). Narrative theories differ on such questions as whether theses about narrative identity have metaphysical implications; whether the appeal to narrative is necessary, or merely one way of talking about matters that might be articulated otherwise; and exactly what sense of identity narrative theories aim to analyse.

Some of the stronger claims made about narrative identity relate to its role in personal unity (e.g. MacIntyre 1981; Ricoeur 1992; Schechtman 1996). There are different views available on what narrative unity consists in, its role as a condition for personhood, and its normative import. Some who use the notion of narrative to explicate some aspects of identity stop short of making any claims about unity (Velleman 2005c, 72-3). And several authors have argued against the view that ‘narrative unity’ is necessary or sufficient for personal unity or personhood (e.g. see Christman 2004; Lumsden 2013).

Narrative theories of identity have also been subject to considerable misunderstanding.1 While this is likely exacerbated by the considerable variety amongst the claims and purposes of narrative theorists, I think it also reflects some lack of clarity within the approaches themselves. In this paper, I will not aim to counter arguments against narrative unity as a condition of personhood, or its role in flourishing lives. My aim is rather to contribute to clarifying how narrative might be involved in personal unity. In particular, I develop a distinction between two ways that narrative is implicated in personal unity.

I begin with the narrative self-constitution view developed by Schechtman (1996), as it is one of the most well-developed accounts which makes claims about personal unity. The view is outlined in section 1. In section 2, I introduce a case of radical personal change which reveals a tension within the narrative self-constitution view relating to narrative unity. In section 3, I examine two critiques of the self-constitution view, from Galen Strawson (2004) and Catriona Mackenzie and Jacqui Poltera (Mackenzie 2009; Mackenzie and Poltera 2010). Each critique introduces a distinction related to personal unity, that is a possible candidate for explaining the tension revealed by the case of radical personal change. I argue that neither distinction precisely explains this tension, but examining these critiques helps to isolate the senses of personal unification relevant to it. In section 4, I offer an alternative way to frame the tension by distinguishing between two senses of narrative unification, drawing on Paul Ricoeur (1992). In section 5, I show how recognising this distinction allows for a revision to the narrative self-constitution view that overcomes Strawson’s critique, and helps to resolve that of Mackenzie and Poltera. It also clarifies the senses in which narrative may be implicated in personal unity, in particular, by better accounting for the role of characteristics which the person repudiates, is estranged or alienated from, or is not autonomous with respect to, in narrative identity.

## 1. Narrative self-constitution

The narrative self-constitution view begins from the Lockean intuition that consciousness and/or psychological life is central to personhood, and so to personal identity over time (Schechtman 1996, 94).2 Schechtman argues that this intuition reflects our interest in a sense of identity that has great practical importance for us. Questions about personal identity underwrite moral judgements and practical questions: how responsibility is attributed, how we organise social practices of reward and compensation, and so on (see also Schechtman 1994).

Schechtman (1996) develops the narrative self-constitution view in contrast to psychological continuity theories, which she argues have failed to capture these motivating intuitions. Such theories are forced away from their motivating intuitions because, as the work of Parfit in particular shows, the relation between a person at different times in terms of their consciousness or psychological life does not have the logical form of an identity relation. It may be one-many rather than one-one (Parfit 1984 253-61; Schechtman 1996, 27-42); is not necessarily transitive (Lewis 1976; Parfit 1984, 204-7; Reid 2008; Schechtman 1996, 27-42); and may be a matter of degree (Parfit 1984, 236-244; Schechtman 1996 42-6).

Schechtman distinguishes two kinds of question we may ask about identity, about reidentification and characterisation. While an answer to the reidentification question will have the logical form of an identity relation, an answer to a question about characterisation may not. Reidentification is at issue when, for example, asking whether the prisoner in the dock is the same person as the one who helped robbed the bank, or whether it was someone else. Characterisation is at issue when asking whether prisoner in the dock is culpable for the robbery, given that (say) although it was him in the reidentification sense, the robbers had brainwashed him into helping them. It is the characterisation sense of identity that is relevant to our moral and practical concerns. This implies that to analyse the practically important sense of identity, we need to drop the assumption that it will have the logical form of an identity relation.

The narrative self-constitution view aims to analyse ‘characterisation identity’. There are several reasons that narrative is proposed to be a helpful notion for this purpose. First, to understand such matters as self-interested concern and moral responsibility, we need to examine not only the relation between persons at different times, but the relation between a person and their actions, experiences, beliefs, character traits, values, reasons for action, desires, and so on (henceforth ‘characteristics’). For instance, to judge whether the prisoner is morally responsible for helping the robbers, we would need to know something about his reasons for his actions, and what action he took himself to be undertaking. If he was brainwashed into thinking he was not so much robbing a bank as engaging in an important act of civil disobedience, or if he was experiencing a psychotic break and did not know what he was doing, this would diminish his responsibility. Conversely if he did consider himself to be robbing a bank and had taken a leading role in recruiting other robbers and planning the robbery, this would affect how we regard his responsibility for the action in a different way. These differing understandings of his reasons for the action also give us information about his characterisation identity.

What characteristics someone has, then, inform the practical sense of identity, but how they inform it depends on the relation between the person and the characteristic. We can call the relation ‘attribution’, since the characteristic is attributed to the agent. An attribution can be more or less strong: a particular characteristic can be very important to someone's characterisation identity, or be more peripheral. Schechtman states that we can think of strongly attributable characteristics as more fully our own, and weakly attributable characteristics as ours only in a ‘gross and literal’ sense (Schechtman 1996, 76). For instance, if a person is coerced into an action, or is judged to have been temporarily insane when they performed it, we might say that the action is not 'fully their own'. We would attribute the action to them in a very weak sense – and so consider them less responsible (Schechtman 1996, 80-81). This is consistent with the idea that characterisation identity may be a matter of degree.

There are many ways that a relation of attribution might be weakened such that a characteristic is less fully attributable to the person, other than coercion or mental illness: a person can hold a belief in a half-hearted or unexamined way, or have a desire without being strongly driven by it, and so on (Schechtman 1996, 76-77). All of someone’s characteristics are relevant to their identity – but their impact on identity differs according to the person’s relations towards them. Given the range and complexity of factors that can affect the strength of an attribution, the most straightforward way to examine attribution relations is to examine the role of a characteristic in the person’s history, that is, the kind of information we would find in a narrative of their life (1996, 77).

This point reveals the first link between characterisation identity and the notion of narrative. A narrative is a sequence of events that are connected together such that each event makes sense in light of other events, and gets it meaning from the way it is related to them. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice* Lizzie’s initial refusal to dance with Darcy at the ball at Netherfield is intelligible – and takes on the particular meanings it has – because of the way it connects to other events, its role in the overarching narrative. We understand it as a response to her having overheard his refusal to ask her dance at a previous ball; and as part of a series of interactions which alter Lizzie and Darcy’s perceptions of each other.3 As Schechtman puts it, ‘individual incidents and episodes in a narrative take their meaning from the broader context of the story in which they occur’ (1996, 96). In a similar way, particular episodes of a life, and characteristics of a person, make sense to us and take on the particular meanings they do in virtue of their role in the biography in which they occur. The characterisation sense of identity can thus be regarded as a sense of *identity* even though it does not have the logical form of an identity relation between person-X-at-different-times. A person’s life continues through different events and changes to character, but these can be considered parts of a unified whole in the same way that elements of a narrative can be considered parts of a unified whole.

So far, the notion of narrative plays a kind of analogical role in explicating characterisation identity. Narrative provides a way of conceiving of identity that allows for difference over time, and a model for thinking about how the different parts of the whole hang together. But the account does not only regard narrative as a way to understand characterisation identity third-personally. Rather, the idea is that people typically draw on such narratively structured thinking in their self-understanding. As such, narrative is implicated in our self-conceptions, and the character of first-personal experience. A crucial element of the narrative self-constitution view is the claim that being a person requires taking up our culture’s concept of a person and applying it to ourselves (Schechtman 1996, 94-5). This concept involves a set of expectations and assumptions about how our lives will go, including that they will unfold in certain ways which can be narratively understood over time. In virtue of the way this knowledge informs our self-understanding, and the follow on effects this has for action and decision-making, we come to constitute ourselves as persons. Thus, ‘[t]he sense of one's life as unfolding according to the logic of a narrative is not just an *idea* we have, it is an organizing principle of our lives. It is the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions’ (Schechtman 1996, 113).

To have a narrative self-conception – that is, to apply to oneself a concept of personhood which regards the lives of persons are narratively structured – thus involves having a certain kind of subjectivity. Taking memory as an example, Schechtman states that ‘whenever someone is, at present, tortured by guilt or warmed by happy memories, or when she measures her current successes by comparison with past ones, past experiences are affecting her present well-being’ (1996, 109). Another example is a person who grew up in poverty who continues to be financially cautious throughout their life, even though they do not call their poor childhood to mind often. In such ways, particular characteristics influence the nature of our experience in a global sense, without explicit awareness of those characteristics. A person’s narrative provides not just information about his or her past, but a backdrop that affects the quality of subjective experience (1996, 113-4).

Our concept of personhood has some further implications for the way identity is constituted that will be relevant for the following discussion. Two of these are constraints on what sorts of narratives count as person-constituting. First, the articulation constraint says that to count as a person, one must be capable of some minimal kinds of self-articulation (1996, 114). Having a narrative self-conception does not mean telling an explicit narrative to others, nor internally; it refers to subjective processes that often remain implicit. The minimal self-articulation required by this constraint is to be able, at least, to understand the force of the demand for reasons for our actions from others.

A characteristic that cannot be minimally articulated is thus not as strongly attributable to a person (1996, 117). Schechtman discusses an example of a self-deceived man who has a deep-seated hostility towards his brother, which he cannot acknowledge. He sometimes snaps at this brother, forgets his birthday, and so on. But he rationalises these behaviours as accidents or attempted jokes, remaining blind to his real motives (1996, 116). The hostile brother cannot articulate his real reasons because of some resistance to reflectively acknowledging them, so while the hostility is part of his characterisation identity, it is ‘his’ to a reduced degree.

Second, ‘the reality constraint’ says that one’s self-conception must broadly cohere with the basic contours of reality. This constraint prevents the narrative self-constitution view from implying, for instance, that people with delusions about themselves could make those delusions true by the mechanisms of self-constitution (Schechtman 1996, 119-122).

Finally, personhood involves the requirement that our characters will be loosely internally consistent (1996, 97).4 This follows from aspects of this concept relating to agential needs to organise one’s goals, values, and desires in order to act. These needs mean that we will generally try to integrate our characteristics so that they hang together in certain ways. This implies a further link between narrative and personal unity: having a narrative self-conception will cause us to try to make ourselves coherent, to integrate our various characteristics. On the narrative self-constitution view, a person's self-narrative is considered integrated insofar as their characteristics are part of the same narrative. Characteristics are part of the same narrative when they are mutually influential and interdependent, each contributing to the context through which others are interpreted. Insofar as a person's narrative is an integrated whole, we can consider the person to be an integrated whole (Schechtman 1996, 142-149). This helps to explain why an unacknowledged characteristic is less fully attributable to a person, even though self-deceptions such as that of the hostile brother might strongly characterise a person (as Schechtman acknowledges; 1996, 117). Although the hostility affects the man’s approach to the world, actions, and experiences, it cannot itself be affected by his other actions and experiences. The man is unable to reflect on or alter the hostility, and it can only affect his actions and self-conception in a ‘rigid and automatic’ way (Schechtman 1996, 118). That is, it cannot be integrated with his other characteristics.

## 2. Radical personal change

The tension I wish to investigate in the narrative self-constitution view can be demonstrated with a case of dramatic personal change. Take a case in which a person undergoes a sudden religious conversion. This occasions significant alterations to her traits, goals, plans of action, moral orientation, and self-conception. The conversion precipitates changes in the convert’s characteristics, and the relations she takes up toward them. These effect alterations in her approach to the world and how she organises her experience. She re-interprets her past, and her expectations for her future, developing a 'new narrative' about herself. Different features of her experience become salient to her, and her behaviour alters in ways that reflect this. As she enacts her new self-understanding, she constitutes herself as a different person in the characterisation sense, from the point of conversion onwards.

Applying the narrative self-constitution view, one way of understanding such a case is to say that, although the convert is reidentifiable as the pre-conversion person, she is no longer the same person in the characterisation sense of identity. Her ‘new narrative’ reflects a different way of integrating her characteristics, making her a different self post-conversion. The pre- and post-conversion sections of her life are not in the same narrative, and so are not integrated with each other in the way the narrative self-constitution view requires.

Although this reading of the case follows from some of the claims of the narrative self-constitution view, it ignores other elements of the view. The ‘new narrative’ the convert develops is not 'new' in the sense that it begins from scratch at the moment of conversion. Rather, it will include a different interpretation of the pre-conversion life. In this new interpretation, the convert would consider the past described in the new narrative to be her own, and take up a relation towards her former characteristics, even if the interpretation involves distancing herself from her past and repudiating those characteristics. For instance, perhaps she previously interpreted her atheism as part of her intellectual maturity and with pride, but now interprets it as arrogant. But even though her relation to her past atheism is now one of repudiation, this relation nonetheless requires recognising the characteristic as her own, attributing it to her (past) self. Thus the narrative the convert uses to make sense of the change – however dramatic the change – will include her former characteristics, and we can regard the person's new narrative as unifying the present person with her past (see Schechtman 1996, 112-114).

This indicates that the convert’s repudiation of her past characteristics is pivotal to understanding not only the change she has undergone, but her current self. The convert’s new beliefs and values are significant to her in the ways they are, and take on the meanings they do, partly because of their difference from those she previously held. Insofar as the conversion has occasioned significant enough change to motivate the first reading of the case, the post-conversion identity relies for its meaning on the pre-conversion identity. As such, there is a sense in which the convert’s pre- and post-conversion characteristics *are* mutually influential and interdependent: the post-conversion characteristics influence how the pre-conversion ones are interpreted, and the reverse is also true. And so we have a second reading of the case, which undercuts the first.

The narrative self-constitution view thus leads to conflicting readings of a case of radical personal change. It is not clear whether it will imply that the convert has a new characterisation identity, or provide a way to understand how her characterisation identity is unified over change. Below I will suggest that this can be explained by recognising two senses of narrative unification. Before doing so I want to examine two critiques of the narrative self-constitution view, each of which introduces a distinction that may have been conflated within the narrative self-constitution view. Although, as I will argue, these do not precisely map onto the distinction necessary to resolve the tension revealed in the case of radical personal change, they help to clarify it, and identify what elements of the narrative self-constitution view are implicated in its resolution.

## 3. Two critiques

The first critique I examine is from Strawson (2004).5 Strawson claims that while some people, whom he calls ‘diachronics’, may experience themselves narratively, others, called ‘episodics’, do not. Strawson takes himself to be an episodic, and claims that the self with which he identifies is one that exists for a much shorter space of time than a human life (or person). He talks of the self as an inner mental entity with which we identify phenomenologically (2004, 429), and reports that in episodic self-experience, one ‘does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future’ (2004, 430). Strawson points to the way that we sometimes feel distant or alienated from our own past experiences, even though we recognise that those experiences are ours: ‘it seems clear to me, when I am experiencing or apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future in question is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS the human being’ (2004, 433).

Episodics, then, have cognitive connections to their past and future experiences, recognising them as their experiences in some sense. Strawson also indicates that episodics recognise practical connections to temporally remote selves: an episodic remains married, even though it was a different self who went through the ceremony; and needs to pay off the credit card debt his former selves amassed (2004, 432). However, episodics lack a strong sense of identification with, strong interest in, or great care about temporally remote selves (2004, 431-2).

In response, Schechtman (2007) concedes that the initial elaboration of the narrative self-constitution view contains a tension regarding whether or not strong identification is required for narrative unity over time (Schechtman 2007, 169). She agrees that if this is required for narrative personhood, this would make the narrative self shorter-lived than a human life, while if it is not required, the narrative self may extend further over time. Schechtman considers both of these options to capture some of the intuitions behind the narrative view, although they are inconsistent (Schechtman 2007, 168-9).

To resolve this, Schechtman proposes using ‘self’ to refer to a unity which does involve connections of strong identification, and ‘person’ to refer to a unity which does not. Shorter-lived unities, selves, exist within a longer-lived unity, the person. Both can be narratively described, but they involve different conditions for narrative unity. Particular individuals may have self-narratives, which exclude ‘actions and experiences from which I am alienated, or in which I have none of the interest that I have in my current life’ (2007, 171) – although they would still recognise these actions and experiences as belonging to their personal history and having practical implications for them (2007, 170). Some may also have a person-narrative, which describes something longer-lived and merely requires that one recognises characteristics, actions or experiences as ‘having implications for one's current rights and responsibilities’ (2007, 170).

Attempting to apply this distinction to the conversion case shows that it does not precisely map onto the tension I have identified, but is also instructive. Could we say that the convert is a new self but not a new person, in these senses? This would be to say that the convert would recognise that her pre-conversion self’s characteristics constrain her current and future options in various ways. She is still married to the same person and has to repay the pre-conversion person’s credit-card debt. But she is a different self to the pre-conversion self, lacking strong identification with her past selves. This could be plausible, since the qualitative change to her identity might undermine having a strong sense of identification with them.

However, this partly mis-describes the conversion case. In understanding the radical change occasioned by the conversion as being a matter of an absent sense of identification with the former self, it omits alterations in the convert’s values and moral orientation, changes in the way she organises and interprets her experience (her ongoing experience as well as her past), and the patterns of action to which she will be inclined. Nor does it seem necessarily the case that this kind of change would occasion a lack of strong identification with temporally remote selves. Further, this understanding mis-identifies the reasons for considering the pre-conversion characteristics to be incorporated into the convert’s post-conversion identity, namely, that their repudiation characterises her. It seems rather to imply that while the repudiated characteristic is excluded from the post-conversion self due to lack of strong identification, it is included in the person only because strong identification is irrelevant to understanding the person. That is, it omits that the repudiated characteristics continue to play a central role in her character, post-conversion, and that they do so in a way that reflects how she relates to them, i.e., the relation of repudiation. As such, Schechtman’s response to Strawson actually contributes to the tension identified by the conversion case, in that it further encourages the omission of repudiated, alienated, or simply distant characteristics as relevant to characterisation identity.

This helps to clarify what is at stake in the tension identified by the conversion case. What we need is a way to understand the role of repudiated characteristics in characterisation identity. It is obvious that relations of attribution which repudiate a characteristic may be quite strong, despite being ‘negative’ in character. The same goes for other ‘negative’ relations of attribution, such as alienation or estrangement. The distinction developed in section 4 will provide a way to acknowledge this, and in section 5 I argue that Shechtman’s concessions to Strawson constitute a move away from using the notion of narrative to understand personal unity.

Before turning to those arguments, examination of a second critique, from Mackenzie and Poltera, will help further refine the tension at issue in the conversion case. Mackenzie (2009) accepts many aspects of the narrative self-constitution view, but argues that it conflates autonomy and identity. In relation to the hostile brother case, Mackenzie argues that the man’s unacknowledged hostility should be considered part of his characterisation identity, since it explains many of his actions. On the narrative self-constitution view, the man’s hostility is considered only weakly attributable because it is not intelligible to him, and can’t be integrated into the rest of his narrative. But what this shows, Mackenzie points out, is that the hostile brother is less autonomous with respect to this characteristic, not that it does not characterise him. Mackenzie and Poltera (2010) provide a further argument for this point, drawing on the autobiography of Elyn Saks, who suffers from schizophrenia. Saks reports that during psychotic episodes, she experiences the delusion that she can kill people with her thoughts, and is already responsible for killing thousands of people in this way. Mackenzie and Poltera point out that, although the self-constitution view is correct that Saks cannot constitute herself as a mass murderer by accepting and enacting her delusional beliefs, that she suffers such delusions at some points in her life does play a role in characterising her. As they put it, characterisation identity should include the ‘fact’ but not the ‘content’ of the delusions (Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, 45). Again, suffering from delusions reduces autonomy, but this does not make them irrelevant to identity.

The distinction between autonomy and identity does not exactly map the tension identified in the conversion case either, but adds to our understanding of it.6 Mackenzie and Poltera seem right regarding the role of self-deceived and delusional beliefs in a self-conception. But the issue in the conversion case is not that the convert lacks autonomy with regard to her former characteristics: in radically altering her characterisation identity, the convert might not either lose or gain autonomy (although of course, in particular cases of radical personal change, this might also occur). What has changed is her relation to those characteristics, such that she formerly endorsed characteristics she now repudiates. Thus, I agree that the narrative self-constitution view suffers from having drawn on intuitions about autonomy as being about identity, but take this to be part of a more general problem. The narrative self-constitution view is ambiguous about the role of characteristics a person is not autonomous with respect to, in characterisation identity. But it is *also* ambiguous with regard to characteristics a person repudiates, disavows, becomes estranged from, and so on, whether or not the processes involved in doing so make the person more autonomous. To resolve the tension generated by this case of radical personal change, then, we again need to acknowledge that there are different *kinds* of attribution, some of which are ‘negative’ in character.

In the following section, I distinguish between two ways that narrative can ‘unify’, which helps to resolve the tension in the conversion case, and points to a more comprehensive notion of attribution.

## 4. Two senses of narrative unification

In overviewing the narrative self-constitution view, section 1 noted two particular links between and personal unity. First, understanding both narratives and selves involves understanding particular parts or episodes in the context of a broader whole that is unitary. Second, the narrative self-conception which informs our interpretation of experience and shapes decision-making and action is unitary in the sense that it is loosely internally consistent and coherent. The sense of unity indicated by each link is somewhat different: the first would extend to the boundaries of the ‘whole’ person’s life, however this whole is conceived; the second seems to be something more circumscribed, a psychological or agential unity. I will argue that these reflect two ways that we may think of narrative self-understanding as unifying, which I call top-down and bottom-up unification respectively.7 I draw here on Ricoeur’s discussion of narrative identity (1992).

‘Bottom-up’ unification occurs because we tend to act in ways that are consistent with our existing self-conception. This is part of the claim about self-constitution described above: our self-conception shapes our actions and decision-making, as well as how we understand what our choices are. As a result, our actions tend to form patterns over time, to the extent that our self-conceptions retain some similarity over time; and will have coherence with each other, to the extent that our self-conception is internally consistent. Ricoeur explains this connection by arguing that the domain of action involves hierarchical relations (1992, 154). Lower-order or 'basic' actions nest within higher-order actions, such as pursuing a particular profession, art, or longer-term goal. Pursuing a particular profession, for example, involves undertaking patterns of actions, such that the higher-order action structures and directs lower-order actions. As a result, our actions tend to form patterns, coordinate with each other, and make sense in light of each other. This makes them amenable to narrative description, and means that particular sequences or domains of action are unified, that is, are parts of these higher-order actions.

This sense of narrative unification occurs from the bottom up in the sense that it is one's self-conception, encapsulating one's various characteristics, which directs one towards particular practices and patterns of action. The first reading of the conversion case, in which we consider the convert to have altered her characterisation identity, depends on bottom-up unification. The conversion constitutes a break across which the bottom-up sense of unification does not hold, as the convert’s characteristics, including her values, goals and reasons for action, alter substantially enough to change what higher-order actions she pursues, and what patterns her actions form.

However, the unity resulting from bottom-up processes will be limited. Even without sudden, dramatic change, people’s lives do not, in general, revolve around any one – or even any several – higher-order actions or goals. These change over time with usual drift as well as sudden change. Further, our lives are often importantly shaped by contingent, external events that have nothing to do with the bottom-up sense of unification.8

But here top-down unification can step in. The resources for developing the notion of top-down unification come from Ricoeur's discussion of ‘emplotment’. Emplotment refers to the arrangement of different events into a narrative whole, or the imposition of narrative form onto events. Ricoeur describes emplotment as configuring diverse elements into a unity, as a ‘synthesis of the heterogeneous’ (Ricoeur 1992, 141). This synthesis occurs because a plot arranges events in such a way that each element makes sense in light of the others, and in light of its role within the whole (Ricoeur 1992, 142-143). But this does not necessarily mean that the elements must be consistent with each other; the elements may be unified while remaining heterogeneous. Narrative can unify diverse elements because of its capacity to represent time and different perspectives. That is, one can be attributed a belief that X *and* a belief that not-X, if the attribution relations include the information that the belief that X was strongly held 20 years ago but has now given way to the belief that not-X. Or one might have both a character trait of being organised *and* one of being disorganised, where the attribution relations specify that one is organised in one context and disorganised in some other context. And a person’s identity may be informed by a characteristic one is resistant to reflectively acknowledging, repudiates, or sometimes delusionally believes, because the attribution relation includes the information about *how* the characteristic relates to the person. Where a narrative provides this kind of information about a person, the diverse elements are ‘unified’ in virtue of being part of the same narrative, while retaining their diversity.9

To clarify, consider an example. Sometimes, contingent events can be integrated into a person’s self-narrative by coming to be interpreted as expressing some feature of his or her character or life. Genevieve Lloyd (2008) provides a detailed discussion of how Spinoza’s expulsion from the Jewish faith, though imposed on him externally, could nonetheless be interpreted as consistent with his characteristics, as a reflection of (and resulting from) his philosophical departures from orthodox Judaism. Other contingent events – such as natural disasters, being the victim of a crime, or falling ill – cannot be incorporated into one’s narrative in this way; there is no sense in which these could be regarded as expressions of one’s characteristics. But we can still integrate them into our narratives, as we work through how they are going to affect our lives, and make decisions about how to respond to them. People sometimes find meaning in a traumatic experience by talking to or helping others who have undergone similar experiences, for example. More mundanely, if I lose many of my belongings after a home robbery, I might respond by thinking about what is most important to me and letting this inform my decisions about how to spend the insurance money, thereby incorporating the event into my history. In all of these cases of responding to contingent events – whether or not there is some sense in which the person’s character can be considered to be expressed in the continuity - we can consider a person unified over change, because interpretations of change play a role in the person’s ongoing self-understanding, and so in actions and decisions. That is, top-down unification does not depend on a person retaining the same self-conception over time, but rather, on the person's self-interpretative practices.10

Thus, recognising the two senses of personal unification related to narrative, we can endorse both readings of the conversion case: there is a sense of narrative unity that makes sense of each reading. The convert is somewhat disunified with her pre-conversion self in the sense that her self-conception, patterns of action, and ways of experiencing the world have altered. But she is unified with her pre-conversion self in the sense that her self-interpretation, in making sense of the changes she has undergone, enables her to understand the pre- and post-conversion self-conceptions in light of each other.

## 5. Narrative and personal unity

The distinction between bottom-up and top-down unification provides clarification of exactly what the notion of narrative contributes to understanding personal unity. In this section, I show how this clarification enables an alternative response to Strawson’s critique, pinpointing what is omitted by the response of distinguishing self- and person-narratives; and helps to resolve the conflation identified by Mackenzie and Poltera. The discussion will also show that the two senses of unification interact with each other in creating a personal subjectivity that is narratively structured.

Strawson’s critique was that some people do not strongly identify with their temporally remote selves (although they recognise them as such). Schechtman’s response confirms that strong identification is relevant to one sense of narrative identity, although not to another. However, strong identification does not obviously relate to either sense of narrative unification. It is not clear how a unity that includes only those selves one strongly identifies with would be amenable to narrative description, or would be related to narrative in some other particular way. Schechtman’s statements about this unity, the ‘self’, indicate that it would include only characteristics towards which the person has strong, positive attribution relations (2007, 170). Such a unity is certainly more circumscribed than one containing disparate elements, that count as parts of a unified whole in virtue of top-down unification. But it also seems to be more circumscribed than a unity implicated by bottom-up identification: the coherent patterns of action resulting from a loosely consistent character, since negatively, or less strongly attributable characteristics can play a role in such a character. The way in which such characteristics characterise these individuals can be understood by noting the nature of the relevant attribution relations, i.e. repudiation, self-blindness, or temporary delusional states. That is, negative attribution relations can be understood via their role in the person’s history: their narrative.

As such, both the top-down and bottom-up senses of unification implicate something broader that ‘selves with which we strongly identify’. And there does not seem to be any notion of narrative that would imply that a narrative of a person should include only characteristics with which the person strongly identifies. This implies that the kind of self-identification Strawson describes is simply not relevant to the sense of personhood thought to be analysable using the notion of narrative. In fact, his descriptions of strong identification seem to indicate something more like first-personal phenomenological access along with affective connections (perhaps something like Schechtman’s (2001) ‘empathic access’). The view of narrative unification developed here implies that, while this sense of ‘self’ and its phenomenology is no doubt important for various debates, it is not specially related to narrative. As both Strawson and Schechtman acknowledge, it is not the sense of person that underpins our person-directed practices and concerns.11

Closer consideration of how the two senses of unification apply to a repudiated characteristic also helps to resolve the conflation identified by Mackenzie and Poltera. In the conversion case, the post-conversion person’s characteristic of former atheism can be unified with the rest of her identity in two different ways. Before and after the conversion, the convert has a character that is loosely internally consistent, and the conversion represents that these are different loosely consistent unities. Post-conversion, her loosely internally consistent character includes a repudiation of former atheism, and this characteristic is integrated with the various other characteristics in the post-conversion character. The repudiated characteristic thus plays a role in action and decision-making, and in interpreting experience: it is part of the processes that enable her life to be unified in the bottom-up sense, post-conversion. Top-down unification may also occur, as she seeks to make sense of the differences the conversion has occasioned in her life and her self. In virtue of top-down unification processes, she can also identify with the pre-conversion person, recognising that she had different, even conflicting characteristics then. The pre- and post-conversion characters form parts of a whole, which make sense in light of each other. Thus a narrative view which recognises the two senses of narrative unification can do justice to the fact that the repudiated characteristic is important to the convert’s characterisation identity, which is what was omitted by utilising the self/person distinction. And notably, it does this simply by remaining tied to the idea that, given the complexity of attribution relations, a suitable way to understand them is to consider the role of a characteristic in the person’s history, that is, in their narrative.

Similar points apply to cases where some characteristic towards which the person is not autonomous play a role in their characterisation identity. For example, in Saks’ case, the delusional beliefs are later acknowledged during reflection, as she seeks to make the best possible sense of her experience in self-interpretation. This interpretation can include the information that this false belief was held temporarily and as a result of a mental illness. The richer notion of attribution implied by recognising different senses of unification provides a way of allowing that Saks’ self-narrative can include the ‘fact but not the content’ of her delusional beliefs. Further, while the belief itself is not enacted, the characteristic, along with this information about *how* it can be attributed to her, may play a role in her loosely consistent character (when not delusional, at least), and so play a role in bottom-up processes of unification. In the case of the hostile brother, the hostility is not reflexively recognised, and so is not acknowledged in the man’s self-interpretation. It thus does not play a role in top-down unification directly (though it might do so indirectly, say, causing the man to introduce other explanations for his behaviour that are really false rationalisations). This can be understood as a failure of self-knowledge. However, the characteristic is still ‘part of his narrative’ because it impacts on bottom-up processes in a range of ways, affecting his actions and decisions, and his affective responses to certain kinds of situations. As such, the characteristic plays a role in the ‘lens’ through which he filters his experiences and plans for action.

Thus, recognition of the two senses of unification clarifies the role of characteristics towards which one is not autonomous, but also shows that the ambiguous role of these in the narrative self-constitution view is part of a broader issue, about negatively attributed characteristics. The characteristics play a complex role in relation to a person’s characterisation identity, reflecting the complexity of the attribution relations, but they do impact on characterisation identity, and are unified with the person’s other characteristics, in different senses that are narratively describable.

This discussion also indicates a final point that is worth emphasising. We should consider the top-down/bottom-up distinction to be between senses of unification, not between different narratives, or different unities that are narrated. While narrative is suitable for describing the loosely coherent pattern of action resulting from bottom-up processes, such a description is not separable from, but rather implicates a larger narrative of which it is a part. For instance, a narrative description of the convert post-conversion would reference such things as repudiated characteristics, in explaining her current patterns of action. In doing so, it would implicate a narrative explanation of her characteristics that extends to her past, and that involves the top-down sense unification. Thus we should not think of the convert as having distinct narratives which describe her life before and after conversion, and another narrative which includes both sections (and requires a looser or weaker notion of narrative). Rather, the narrative descriptions all contribute to one narrative, the parts of which help to make sense of each other. And what this reflects is that the convert’s ongoing subjectivity incorporates both her current characteristics and their attribution relations, and a past where she had different characteristics, and related to those in different ways.

As such, the different senses of unification interact with each other, and impact on each other. This implies that the similarities between self-experience and narrative implicated in top-down and bottom-up processes should be regarded as senses of unification, which relate to a single unity. It is a strength of narrative approaches to personhood that they provide a way of recognising that different times within and domains of our lives can be connected to each other more strongly, or with different sorts of connections, yet remain interconnected, as a result of the way that they can acknowledge attribution relations in all their complexity.12

## 6. Conclusion

The distinction between the two senses of narrative unification provides several clarifications regarding using the notion of narrative to understand identity. It enables us to identify two different senses in which narrative is implicated in personal unity through time and change. Narratives can articulate the unity arising from having a loosely coherent, consistent character and the connection between action and self-conception; and can synthesise change and contingency into a whole which includes disparate parts, due to processes of self-interpretation. It also provides ways to respond to and resolve some of the critiques made of narrative theories of identity. In particular, recognising this distinction provides a way of thinking about how negatively attributed characteristics – such as those a person has repudiated, those from which a person is alienated or estranged, or those towards which a person is not autonomous – that allows a broader understanding of their role in characterisation identity.

Finally, the discussion demonstrates that the debates about narrative identity and narrative self-constitution still lack clarity on exactly how narrative may be involved in (or in explaining) personal unity. This suggests that some lack of clarity in, and misunderstandings of the narrative view have resulted in some of the strengths of these views having been overlooked.

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**Notes**

1. This has led some to back away from using the notion at all, notably Marya Schechtman (2014, 108). While I will not engage directly with the question of whether the term is necessary for capturing the thoughts unpacked by narrative approaches to identity, one motivation for my discussion is that some of the insights of the approach have, I think, been overlooked as a result.

2. Given my focus on clarifying what narrative, in particular, could have to do with personal unity, I do not engage with Schechtman’s more recent work which avoids this term (2014).

3. Exactly what sorts of connections between events are necessary for narrative has been the subject of debate (see, e.g., Carroll 2001; Currie 2007; Velleman 2003). While I cannot provide a full discussion here, the basic similarity between narrative and characterisation identity seems to require of narrative only that it is a way of connecting events such that they make sense in light of each other (see Velleman 2003).

4. This is not explicitly noted as a constraint in Schechtman (1996), but it plays a role in her discussion of the articulation constraint and reformulation of the notion of ‘co-consciousness’.

5. I will not engage with all aspects of Strawson’s critique of narrativity. For a discussion see Mackenzie and Poltera (2010, 34-9).

6. In saying this I am not disagreeing with Mackenzie and Poltera’s analysis. Rather, in applying it to the conversion case I seek to identify some modifications that could usefully be made to the narrative view, which I take to be consistent with and to build on their suggestions.

7. The reason to consider these two kinds of unification that can apply to one ‘unity’, rather than distinct unitary things, is discussed in section 5.

8. This point is sometimes presented as a critique of the narrative view (e.g., Christman 2004; Vice 2003). Once the two senses of unification are acknowledged, it should be clear why this is not problematic for a narrative approach to identity.

9. Recognising this kind of unification as distinct could also provide a response to Christman’s critique that the notion of narrative does not really add to our understanding of personal unity if ‘narrative unity’ is merely a way of referring to the capacity for self-interpretation (Christman 2004, 702) or ‘patterns of action and habit that make sense of a person’s character’ (2004, 709). While Christman does refer to each of these as involved in narrative unity, he does not explicitly recognise the difference between them, apparently taking them to have one ‘organizing principle’ (2004, 709). See also Lamarque (2004).

10. A potential problem for the account is the implication that someone who fails to engage in sufficient reflection and self-interpretation is thereby not unified. It is important to distinguish here between a lack of self-interpretation and an explicit claim along the lines of ‘I am no longer the same person’. Such explicit claims, I would argue, are themselves part of self-interpretative practices. In making such a claim a person is implicitly referencing their former self, indicating that it is part of their history. The claim should be taken as utilising a metaphorical sense of personhood to explain disunity – within personhood. If the claim is instead that a person may simply stop thinking about their former characteristics and not undertake self-interpretation that unifies them over change, this could be taken to mean that the person is less unified than they might be. It is unlikely, perhaps impossible, that any real person (that is, barring science-fiction scenarios) with a continuing body and ongoing interactions with others in the world could achieve enough of a break with their past to become a truly different person in this sense. A narrative account with such commitments is, however, open to another of Strawson’s (2004) critiques: that they rely on normative claims about the value of self-unification. However, I shall not attempt to deal with this here.

11. Perhaps the sense of self Strawson describes is not unrelated to the sense or senses that are narratively analysable. The narrative self-constitution view proposed that narrative provides a way to understand how a person relates to their various characteristics, such that those characteristics, and how they hang together, form a ‘lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions’ (Schechtman 1996, 113). This ‘lens’ represents the idea that narrative form is implicated in the nature and quality of subjective experience, such that present experience can be globally affected by our characteristics even when these are not explicitly called to mind. This is actually of a piece with Strawson’s statement that in episodic self-experience, ‘the past can be present or alive in the present without being present or alive *as* the past. The past can be alive […] in the present simply in so far as it has helped to shape the way one is in the present’ (2004, 432). If the notion of narrative helps us understand how the past informs present experience, an experience of strong identification with a particular temporally distinct self might be understood to result from specific features of one’s subjective perspective at those different moments, and the narrative form of the connections between them – even though the phenomenological unity indicated in these experiences is not itself narrative in form.

12. For discussion of different senses of ‘self’ and how narrative can help understand their interconnections, while avoiding conflations, see Velleman (2005a; 2005b); Mackenzie (2007). Pluralistic understanding of the reference of this term is also discussed by Schechtman (2014), though without using the notion of narrative.

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