

Identity Problems for Narrative Selves

A significant number of philosophers as well as scholars in other disciplines hold *the narrative conception of the self* (hereafter NCS).¹ As Fireman, McVay, and Flanagan summarize, “[n]arrative does not merely capture aspects of the self for description, communication, and examination; *narrative constructs the self*.”² In this paper, I argue that NCS is untenable for a fairly elementary reason which has gone unnoticed in the literature: just as there are problems accounting for the identity of genuine actual selves which motivate the move towards NCS, there are problems accounting for the identity of characters in narratives.

§1. The Narrative Conception of the Self

Let me begin with a basic explication of NCS. Since, as I shall discuss momentarily, I do not wish to address certain complicated worries about NCS, a short summary will suffice. On the NCS, there are no genuine unified selves in the real world as they are normally conceived (such as in a Cartesian way). Daniel Dennett³ approvingly cites the work of David Hume and Michael Gazzaniga in demonstrating this. However, despite the absence of real-world selves, we may still say that there are selves insofar as there are life-stories which cohere around a character – what Daniel Dennett calls the “center of narrative gravity”. Dennett writes: “We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography.”⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre’s view is very similar. He writes: “The unity of his or her life about which each human being thus enquires is the unity of a dramatic narrative.”⁵ David Velleman largely agrees: “we really are the characters whom we invent.”⁶

¹ In addition to the thinkers cited below, proponents of NCS are Taylor, 1989, Kerby, 1993, Bruner, 1998, and DeGrazia, 2005, among many others.

² Fireman, McVay, Jr., and Flanagan, 2003, p. 5, italics added.

³ In Dennett, 1992.

⁴ Dennett, 1992, p. 114.

⁵ MacIntyre, 1998, p. 141.

⁶ Velleman, 2006, pp. 205-206. One initial concern about NCS is how there can be a narrative told without a prior

[⁷There are three objections to NCS which should be distinguished from the objection I shall be making. First, Peter Lamarque⁸ and Galen Strawson⁹ have both raised empirical worries about NCS. Both deny that human beings in fact narrate their lives in ways which suffice for the construction of a narrative self. However, my suspicion is that advocates of NCS can explicate an account of a cross-temporal narrative which escapes Lamarque's and Strawson's objections. Lamarque, for example, denies that normal humans ever sit down and provide narratives of their lives. However, proponents of NCS need not rely on such an explicit narrative process, and so Lamarque's claim seems to be beside the point.

Second, Strawson argues that the narrative conception of the self is not one that is normatively *good*. He would rather not be a narrative self. I am unsure how strong an objection this is to NCS, and for this paper, I will grant to proponents of NCS that there are no normative problems with the view. Insofar as NCS succeeds as a description of what it is to be a self, it is a perfectly good normative view of what it is to be a self. Or, even if NCS bodes poorly for the ethics of selves, one shouldn't let one's normative views influence one's metaphysical views.

Third, Richard Menary argues that there must be an ontology underlying NCS which is incompatible with NCS. Menary argues that NCS requires the prior real existence of a self which is the embodied locus of the narrative. He writes:

self telling it. One might be inclined to argue as follows: I narrate. Therefore, I exist. These may be the words of the narrator in a story, but they also seem to be the words of the writer of the story. And thus, if there is a narrative, there is an actual self. However, I shall grant that this Cartesian inference does not hold; or, at least, does not demonstrate that the writer exists as a self. Dennett anticipates this type of objection (p. 107) and I shall concede the point. Relatedly, there is a paradoxical ring to Velleman's claim that "we really are the characters whom we invent". If it is true that I invent my own character, then, oddly, part of the very narrative of the character would have to be the character's own self-invention. But it is not an assumed feature of NCS that, within a narrative, the narrator self-invent. It seems like a category mistake to say that I am the character that I invent. Perhaps proponents of NCS should simply say that I am the character that gets invented in the narrative.

⁷ Since the recommended guidelines for submissions for the NWPC are for papers to be less than 3500 words, the following three paragraphs and the first sentence of the one following may be omitted for purposes of space.

⁸ In Lamarque, 2002.

⁹ In Strawson, 2004.

[On the narrative conception,] when I tell the story of how the cricket ball that hit me on the left fore-arm last Saturday ‘bloody well hurt!’ I am ascribing the pain in the forearm to a collection of narratives. This sounds wrong. I feel pain after being struck on the arm by a hard cricket ball propelled at me at 85 miles per hour. That is what the narrative is about, the narrative is about a subject who feels pain, and that subject who feels *is* me.¹⁰

For Menary, there has to be a prior embodied human self that the narrative is about in order for the narrative to be metaphysically feasible. However, Menary overstates the case. Although I agree that no proponent has fully worked out the deep ontological issues underlying NCS, there may be possible routes to do so. For example, on Amie Thomasson’s account of the metaphysics of fictional characters, characters in narratives are actual but abstract entities, capable of feeling pain and living out lives that ordinary humans do.¹¹ Although Thomasson does not discuss NCS, her view may be adopted for its purposes.

However, I do not wish to take a position in this deep metaphysical debate. Rather,] I am concerned with a very minimal but fundamental claim which all forms of NCS share. I will call this the *minimal narrative identity claim*. It is the claim that we may speak truly about a self insofar as there is a narrative which coheres around a unified character. In other words, truth conditions for statements about selves are reducible to facts about narratives. So even if there are no real narrative-independent selves, one can still make true claims using the notion of a “self”. Since it is supposed that there are no deep ontological worries about physical facts about narratives, the minimal narrative identity claim is, seemingly, ontologically benign (in addition to skirting the empirical and normative worries raised by Lamarque and Strawson), and is itself neutral about the metaphysics of how a narrative may be said to “create” or “construct” the self. I do agree with Menary that proponents of NCS ought to give more detail about the metaphysics of the nature of the relationship between characters in narratives and human beings in the actual

¹⁰ Menary, 2008, p. 73.

¹¹ In Thomasson, 1999.

world. My argument, however, comes prior to that worry. It is that even the minimal narrative identity claim fails.

§2. What is it for a narrative to cohere around a single character?

Consider the following structure for a novel. In the first half, there is the development of a certain character named “Eve”. We learn some things about her upbringing on a farm, her escape to the city for her education, her travels abroad after graduating from college. However, in the second half of the book, “Eve” comes apart. Not in a strange metaphysical sense, or in a tragic sense where Eve’s life-plans fail. Rather, it becomes apparent in the second half of the book that the first half of the book is an elaborate trick on the reader: “Eve” does not name one person, but two fully distinct human individuals.¹² Perhaps, in a stirring final act, they meet, and have to work together, or against each other.

Or consider another book. It seems to follow the exploits of a character named “Derek” and some of his friends. But in an afterword, the author says the following:

You, the reader, may have believed that this book is a novel about a certain character named “Derek”. But you are wrong. In fact, this is a book of short stories, where each “chapter” is in fact a story about an individual who is completely independent from the individuals in other “chapters”, who happen to share the same name as the individual from the other “chapters”.

What these two possible books highlight is that sameness of character *name* within a book is not sufficient for sameness of character. In the first story, it turns out within the story that there was not one character but two. The worry based on this problem is that it might turn out, as one is seemingly narrating one’s own life, that there was not a unified character in the narration. Since it is always possible that a narrative will turn out this way, at no point, in an ongoing

¹² We can imagine the author developing dramatic tension by having the two Eves do different, conflicting things in the second half of the book, thus revealing the narrative device. They each, at certain points, also recall certain memories from their upbringings, which aids the reader in figuring out which earlier portions of the book were about which Eve.

narrative, is it determinate whether there has been a coherent character in the narrative. The second case isn't as much a problem as finding identity conditions for a character within a narrative. It is a problem of finding identity conditions *for* a narrative.

Consider a third type of case. The movie "I'm Not There" is supposedly a biopic of Bob Dylan. In the movie, Dylan is played by six different actors (one of whom is a young African-American boy, another of whom is a woman) and has six different names (none of which is either "Bob Dylan" or "Robert Zimmerman", Dylan's original name). The movie does not cohere around a single character – a viewer who does not know that the movie is supposed to be about Bob Dylan might not realize that it was intended to be a story about a single person. The two stories above cast doubt about whether a seemingly coherent narrative is *sufficient* for a unified character; "I'm Not There" raises doubts about the *necessity* of having a unified narrative account of a single self.

§3. On reidentifying the same individual in a narrative

The problem raised by the examples given in §2 is that it is neither necessary nor sufficient that for a narrative (or, more broadly speaking, a text) to be about a single character, the same name (in the case of a written, spoken, or cognized narrative) or the same actor (in the case of a movie or play) is used in the narrative/text. This problem is not dependent on any deep Humean or Parfitian concerns about personal identity. Rather, it is a basic problem of reidentifying the same character in a text, and is a problem even though no one is disputing the identity conditions of sameness-of-human-being. It is more a problem of how extended narratives/texts represent the same individual in multiple instances. Because of this, one might think that the problem I am raising is a mere skeptical-type worry which any general account of texts must deal with (or, perhaps, may properly ignore entirely). What I'd like to show in this

section is that the worry is not merely a skeptical worry. What I shall argue is not that that problem of providing identity conditions for characters in narratives is intractable, but rather that the most plausible solution to the problem undermines the point of having a narrative conception of the self.

There is an easy way to show that when a narrative says “The sun rose again today” in different chapters, it is about the same supposed object. The phrase “the sun” in a narrative gets its reference in a familiar Kripkean way – there is an actual physical object out there which is the causal basis of uses of the phrase “the sun”, and the phrase gets its reference because of the physical object.¹³ So we can say that names in narratives get their repeated co-reference built-in because of the actual thing.

This answer obviously will not help the narrative theorist. It will help show that names may refer to the same human being in different instances within a text, as we may assume that there are real human beings causally responsible for human beings in stories, but to say that it refers to the same *character* is to beg the question. For Dennett’s (and others’) very motivation for NCS is that there are no real characters, no real selves.

There is a further reason why an analysis of the semantic of names in a narrative is troubling for a proponent of NCS. Kripke himself notes that one may use the same word to refer to multiple things: one may like the name “Napoleon” and so use it to refer to a pet aardvark.¹⁴ Kripke’s own view is that for a term to refer to an object, the person using the term must intend to use it to refer to that object. Although much of Kripke’s work has faced scrutiny, this point is not one which is much disputed. In the philosophical literature on fictional characters, the

¹³ Here I am assuming that “the sun” is a proper name and not a definite description as its syntactic form might suggest.

¹⁴ Kripke, 1980, p. 96.

dominant view is that fictional characters get their identity at least in part from the intentions of their creators,¹⁵ and this view seemingly ought to apply to narratives.

So it appears that for a narrative to be about a single individual, it is a necessary condition that there be intent by the author that the narrative be about a single individual. Now, I shall grant that in normal instances, authors, given the proper intention, may use the same term throughout a narrative, with the same intended meaning. I shall even grant that this holds true for names such as “Pegasus” which do not have a causal chain back to a baptism of an actual thing. So my view is not a skeptical worry about narratives.

Although above in §1 I grant that there may be authorship of a narrative despite the lack of a self, it is dubious that a non-self can have the right kind of intention to refer to the same character throughout a story. Dennett even says of Gilbert, the “clanky computer” whom Dennett imagines prints out a narrative text, that “[i]t doesn’t even know that it’s creating a fictional character.”¹⁶ Even if we don’t pin Dennett to this analogy of a rudimentary computer as a selfless author, the narrative conception of the self must rely on there being an intention not had by an individual self. However, the most intuitive reason to think that any narrative can be about a coherent character is that we suppose that the author has in mind a coherent self and then tells the story of the self. But that answer is not available to the proponent of NCS. So it is unclear how a non-self author can refer to a self in a narrative. Even if we grant that a non-self can have the proper intentional structure to be able to continuously refer to an individual thing (like the sun or a human being) that exists, it is hard to see how a non-self author can continuously refer to a self, since, by NCS’s own lights, there are no such things, and the non-self-author, not being one or

¹⁵ See Lamarque, 2003, for a helpful summary.

¹⁶ Dennett, 1992, p. 108.

ever having met one, would have to intentionally create such a mystical being. But this is it quite unclear how this might happen.

§4. A revised NCS?

It might be claimed that I am asking too much of NCS. In particular, NCS may simply claim that as long as a narrative is about a single human being (and not necessarily a “coherent character”), that is enough to make the claim of minimal narrative identity for a self. In other words, the narrative need not assume that it is the story of a *self*, over and above being about a single human, in order for NCS to succeed. And since I grant that narratives may include stories of continuous objects like human beings which are no more problematic than narrative about the sun, then narratives can be about continuous humans. And so we may revise the minimal narrative identity claim to be:

There is a self insofar as there is a narrative which coheres around a human being.

But this won't work, since some narratives are about human beings who explicitly are not unified characters, such as in *The Three Faces of Eve*. So merely reidentifying the same human being within a narrative is not sufficient. The character in the narrative does indeed have to be a self, and not just a continuous human being.

What if, in response, proponents of NCS then add a psychological continuity criterion to the human in the narrative? Let me restate the minimal narrative identity claim thus:

There is a self insofar as there is a narrative which coheres around a human being who meets certain psychological conditions.

The obvious worry now is that the narrative conception is made useless on this account: why not simply have a psychological account of real selves in the real world, to wit:

There is a self insofar as there is a human being who meets certain psychological conditions.

However, proponents of NCS do indeed believe that there is a difference between humans described in narratives and real humans: the individuals that narratives are about do lead psychologically coherent lives, and are not psychologically fractured in the way that real humans are. I believe that this, at last, is where NCS gets its greatest traction. We may say that there are identity conditions for selves, which in principle apply to narrative characters as well as to real humans, and the issue is that the former normally do meet the conditions whereas the latter do not. This is why there are no real selves but there are narrative selves. And then we can build truth conditions for selves out of facts about narrative characters.

There are three serious problems, however, if this is the actual NCS view. First, note that “I’m Not There” is still a problem for this revised view. In particular, the six human characters in “I’m Not There” have less psychological unity than typical normal humans do – they are all brash and artistic, but do have different psychological characteristics from each other.

The second problem for this version of NCS is even more formidable. It arises from a point made by David Lewis, which Dennett himself discusses (in making a different point):

[C]onsider the following question (borrowed from David Lewis’s “Truth and Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1978, 15, pp.37-46). Did Sherlock Holmes have three nostrils? The answer of course is no, but not because Conan Doyle ever says that he doesn’t, or that he has two, but because we’re entitled to make that extrapolation. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Sherlock Holmes’ nose can be supposed to be normal.

Lewis’s idea is that since narratives cannot be explicit about everything, we may assume certain things about characters. But now the worry for the revised NCS is that, just as we may assume that Sherlock Holmes has two nostrils, we may also assume that the human beings in life-narratives have the same quirks that real humans have – the same quirks that make real humans fail to meet whatever psychological conditions required for identity! Unless there is some explicit statement in the life-narrative that the human in the narrative is indeed a coherent self,

we may simply assume that the human in the narrative has all the same identity problems as a real human being. So proponents of NCS are back to square one in showing why appealing to narratives helps in providing truth conditions for claims involving the existence of selves.

There is one last related worry about NCS. It is that, in literary theory, one of the fundamental issues is the very question of identity conditions for a character in a text. Is the cowardly teenager we meet in the first chapter of a novel indeed the same person as the hero in the last? Is the story about the person becoming a better person, or is it a story about a new person, a braver person, rising out of the ashes of a weaker person? So even if there is no doubt that the narrative is about the same human being (as my first two examples in §2 raise), for any narrative with the richness of a typical human life, the very same question of identity of character arises for the character in the narrative as for any real self. In fact, recent trends in literary theory are quite disparaging of any attempt to base the unity of the self on the unity of a character in a narrative. For, as Lamarque summarizes, “[u]nder the literary gaze fictional characters – or those with literary stature – assume an increasingly fragile constitution. They come to look more and more like the postmodernist version of the self. Indeterminate, deeply implicated in textual and narrative strategies, the product of interpretation at nearly every level...”¹⁷ If literary critics are correct about characters in narratives have the same identity problems as alleged real selves, then there is no salvaging NCS. Just as the previous point from Lewis also purports to show, if there are no real, unified, coherent, selves, there are no unified, coherent characters in narratives.

§5. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me speculate what I think is really going on in motivating people to accepting NCS. It is true that humans tell narratives about themselves, and often this provides much enrichment. I am not denying the value in psychologists and others in studying the way in

¹⁷ Lamarque, 2003, p. 49.

which humans use self-narrative to understand themselves and the world. But philosophers, in claiming that selves may be created through such narratives (or, at least, that truth conditions for claims using the notion of a “self” are made true because of narratives, as in the minimal identity claim), are load narratives with a metaphysical problems which turns out to be as difficult as the problems which beset claims that there are genuine selves.

My first argument was that for there to be a coherent character or self in a text requires certain authorial intention, and it is implausible that a non-genuine-self author could have that proper intention. If we revise NCS to require only that the non-genuine-self author tell a story about a human being, this is not sufficient to do the work that NCS requires since we can still presume that, even if not described in the narrative, that the character has the same problems in having a unified identity as any typical human. Last, I note the fact that, as Lamarque puts it, literary theorists “have come to see human beings as more like fictional characters: diffuse, uncentered, lacking unity...”¹⁸ Ironically, the critique of the self from literary theorists, which with proponents of NCS presumably are sympathetic, is expressed using the very claim that real selves are no better off than characters in narratives.

Thus proponents of NCS hold a fairly radical view of the nature real selves while holding a quite naïve view about characters in narratives. My suspicion is that when ordinary people (including philosophers) hear a narrative, we naturally assume that it is about a self, and this gives philosophical proponents of NCS hope that we can account for the truth of claims about real selves in terms of claims about characters in narratives. But I suspect that this very assumption about the unity of a character in a narrative is made only because we do indeed have a prior understanding of what it is to be a self from our own first-person case, and we project that onto the character. If this is so, then we should simply allow that what it is to be a unified

¹⁸ Op. cit., p. 45.

character applies to our (real) selves who are telling and hearing these narratives. Regardless of whether or not this positive proposal can ultimately withstand critiques such as those from Hume, Parfit, and Gazzaniga, proponents of NCS who genuinely maintain that there are no real selves ought to give up on the idea that we can base claims of the self on claims of a coherent character in a narrative.

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