Opaque Selves: A Ricœurian Response to Galen Strawson's Anti-Narrative Arguments

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Abstract: As narrative conceptions of selfhood have gained more acceptance within various disciplines including philosophy, psychology, and the cognitive sciences, so too have these conceptions been critically appraised. Chief among those who are suspicious of the overall viability of 'narrative identity' is the philosopher, Galen Strawson. In this paper, I develop five arguments underlying Strawson's critique of narrative identity, and respond to each argument from the perspective of the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricœur. Though intuitive, I demonstrate that none of Strawson's arguments are cogent. The confrontation between these two figures highlights a deep conceptual disagreement about our epistemic access to the self, which has thus far gone unrecognized in the Anglo-American discussion, so that it raises a new problem for the metaphysics of personal identity.

Keywords: Narrative Identity, Personal Identity, the Self, Ipseity, Existential, and Phenomenological Hermeneutics.

Résumé: Dans la mesure où les conceptions narratives de l'individu ont été mieux acceptées dans diverses disciplines, notamment la philosophie, la psychologie et les sciences cognitives, ces conceptions ont également fait l'objet d'une évaluation critique. Le philosophe Galen Strawson est le chef de file de ceux qui se méfient de la viabilité globale de "l'identité narrative." Dans cet article, je développe cinq arguments qui sous-tendent la critique de l'identité narrative par Strawson et répond à chacun d'eux du point de vue de la phénoménologie herméneutique de Paul Ricœur. Bien que de nature intuitive, je démontre qu'aucun des arguments de Strawson n'est convaincant. La confrontation entre ces deux figures met en évidence un profond désaccord conceptuel sur notre accès épistémique au soi, qui n'a pas encore été reconnu dans la discussion anglo-américaine, et qui pose un nouveau problème à la métaphysique de l'identité personnelle.

MOTS-CLÉS: Identité narrative, identité personnelle, le moi, l'ipséité, l'herméneutique existentielle et phénoménologique.

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INTRODUCTION

Without question, *Time and Narrative* marked an important philosophical turn in Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology.[1] The task of a hermeneutic philosophical anthropology required moving beyond unlocking the meaning-potential of sentence-level discourse, and towards that of longer chains of sentences—i.e. narratives, minimally construed. Ricœur's 'wager' was singular: not only do the tropes offered by narrative understanding disclose something about human living that goes beyond the confines of descriptive language, narrativity itself reconfigures time, such that human existence within time becomes possible in the first place.[2]

Though Ricœur is known as a philosopher who makes small, careful moves, the conclusion of *Time and Narrative* left several avenues open for future philosophical reflection. One such avenue is the role that narratives have in shaping one's identity, if not fully constituting it. As Ricœur states: "The self of self knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates' phrase in the *Apology*. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture."[3]

Recently, narrative conceptions of identity have come to face greater critical scrutiny. To this end, the work of Galen Strawson has been particularly instructive. From Strawson's perspective, narrative theories of identity are, at best, trivial, and, at worst, pernicious.[4] Given Ricœur's death in 2005, he was never able to critically respond to Strawson's critique. I would like to offer a Ricœurian response to Galen Strawson's anti-narrative arguments. First, I will synthesize five arguments against narrative theories of identity, as laid out by Strawson. Second, I will begin to develop Ricœur's response to the Strawsonian position by indicating the points of discontinuity between Strawson's account of narrativity and Ricœur's. Third, I will develop Ricœur's notion of narrative identity by connecting his account of narrativity to the dialectic of idem- and ipse-identity that he later establishes in *Oneself as Another*. I will conclude, then, by demonstrating how Ricœur's own narrative theory would address each of Strawson's arguments. Ultimately, the confrontation between these two figures highlights a deep conceptual disagreement about our epistemic access to the self, which has thus far gone unrecognized in the Anglo-American discussion.

THE PRIORITY OF EPISODICITY: GALEN STRAWSON'S ANTI-NARRATIVIST POSITION

I will begin by making three moves. First, following Schechtman's lead, I will unpack some of the basic philosophical positions on which Strawson hinges his critique.[5] Second, I will develop his definition of narrativity—i.e. what is it that 'counts' as a narrative theory of identity.

Lastly, I will synthesize five arguments against narrative theories, to which I will later formulate a Ricœurian response.

1. Strawson makes a distinction between two possible theses one can hold with regard to narrativity.[6] On the one hand, there is the "psychological Narrativity thesis," which Strawson takes to arise from an empirical observation on the way human beings naturally experience their own lives.[7] Namely, "human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative story of some sort."[8] On the other hand, there is the "ethical Narrativity thesis," which makes a normative claim on one's relationship to narrativity.[9] Regardless of the psychological thesis's truth-value, a human being ought to conceive of herself narratively; doing so is "essential to a well lived life, to true or full personhood."[10] The relationship between these two theses is nuanced. It is logically possible for someone to affirm the truth of both, to assert that only—and any—one of the two is true, while the other is false, or to maintain that both are false.[11] Maintaining the falsity of both is Strawson's position.

In order to refute both the psychological and ethical theses, Strawson draws upon another distinction: that of diachronicity and episodicity.[12] This distinction rests on the observation that there are two ways in which one can experience oneself. One's self-experience can be diachronic; i.e. "one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future."[13] However, one's self-experience may be episodic in nature, which, at least initially, is simply the negation of diachronic self-experience. As such, "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."[14] At this initial stage, Strawson places the diachronic style and the episodic style on an axis—one can be either more diachronic or more episodic, and one's styling may change over time. Further, the distinction between the two styles is not entirely absolute.[15] It is possible, using Strawson's own examples, for an episodic to identify with, say, a memory of a long past embarrassment, or feel nausea over the (increasingly less temporally distant) reality of death.[16] Likewise, a diachronic may fail to make an apperceptive or appropriative link with a past moment or experience. Here, Strawson offers his oft used example of Henry James, who, while recognizing that he is the same person who wrote a literary masterpiece in the past, simply cannot identify his current self with his past self.[17] We may also refer to John Davenport's example of Morgan Freeman's character, Ellis Boyd, in the *Shawshank Redemption*, who equally cannot recognize himself, the elderly Boyd, with the young man who committed murder.[18]

Earlier, I indicated that the distinction between diachronicity and episodicity would create an opening for Strawson's critique of narrative identity (via the refutation of both the psychological and ethical thesis.) The basis for this lies in his claim that the episodic style is as true as, if not more preferable than, the diachronic style. Here, Strawson lays down his metaphysical position for transient, short-term selves.[19] Strawson's position rests on two positions.[20] First, there is a clear difference between taking oneself as a whole—that is, as a human being who has lived such and such a life, etc.—and taking oneself to be "an inner mental entity, a self that coincides with every conscious lived experience."[21] When talking of the self in the sense of a mental presence (and nothing more,) Strawson employs words like I*, my*, you*, etc. Second, it does not follow that I*, taken only as an inner mental entity, am the *same* entity that was present in the past, or will be the same in the future.[22] In other words, it is metaphysically

possible, according to Strawson, that I*, who am doing whatever I* am doing now, am not identical to the I* who initially wrote this example. In argument form, Strawson's justification might look like this:

> What we call a "self" emerges from conscious lived experience.
> Corresponding to each conscious lived experience is a distinct mental state. (i.e. imagination is different from perception, which is different from memory, etc.)
> If the self emerges from conscious lived experience, and each experience has a distinct mental state, then there is not one self, but many—one for each distinct experience.
> Therefore, episodicity is true.
> If cogent, this demonstrates that an episodic life is as viable as a diachronic one. Further, it may even be preferable to a diachronic one, since living this way is closer to the metaphysical truth.

2. If we have followed Strawson up to this point, we have reason to favor episodicity over diachronicity. But what about narrative identity? What about the psychological and ethical theses? One question at a time. According to Strawson, narrative identity arises from a combination of certain features—four in total. First is diachronicity.[23] By itself, however, this is not enough to establish narrative identity; one could be a diachronic without supporting the psychological thesis. One could very well be, say, a substance dualist, and thus the diachronic nature of one's self-experience would be due to a soul-like substance—however philosophically problematic this position is.

It is when we combine diachronicity with another feature—a "form-finding tendency" in one's life—which narrative identity emerges.[24] According to Strawson, this tendency is largely a constructive process; that is, in attempting to find coherency in the myriad of experiences one has lived through, one construes, constructs, "a pattern of narrative development" in one's life.[25] The form-finding tendency allows for a smooth transition into the third possible feature, a "story-telling" tendency; i.e. beyond seeking patterns in one's life, one begins to select events and connect them into "the form of some recognized narrative genre."[26] Lastly, the combination of the form-finding and storytelling tendency leaves narrative identity open to one more feature—one that may be particularly problematic—revision.[27] By revision, Strawson does not mean simply changing one's views on one's past (e.g. coming to appreciate the significance of what were once-dreaded yearly family vacations.) Revision entails the conscious or non-conscious falsification of events in one's life-story. Strawson concedes that revision need not be a feature of narrative identity—in fact, episodics can also be victims of revision, insofar as revision entails not just a falsification of one's life story, but of one's episodic memories. However, when it *is* present in narrative identity, it can surely undermine its integrity.

3. All the pieces are now in place to lay out Strawson's arguments against narrative identity. All of Strawson's arguments will follow either from his episodic metaphysics, or from his definition of narrative identity. As such, the first argument was already developed above, i.e. the argument for multiple selves. If the self is an inner mental entity that emerges from experience, and if the self that coincides with experience is distinct according to each experience, then episodicity is true. The self of one experience is not necessarily the self of another experience.

The second argument sets out to refute the psychological narrativity thesis. Let us call it the argument from episodicity. If Strawson's transient, multiple self theory is true, then the diachronic style of self-understanding rests on a mistake in judgment. If the diachronic style is an error in judgment, then we ought to be episodic. As Strawson says, "if you're episodic, you're not narrative."[28] Therefore, the psychological narrativity thesis does not follow.

We can identify the third argument as the argument from narrative egoism. Narrative identity theorists tend to make the claim that it is not possible to live a full or (morally) flourishing life without adopting a narrative framework of self-understanding. Here, Strawson even quotes Ricœur:

> How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not precisely, in the form of a narrative?[29]

But is this view truly one that would enable us to lead a fully moral life, or is it actually, as Strawson suggests, "motivated by a sense of [one's] own importance… that is absent in other human beings?"[30] Indeed, in a more recent publication,[31] Strawson makes the following observation:

> [We] have a rich way of talking about [unattractive self-concerned emotions]—as when we say that people are self-satisfied, smug, self-righteous, complacent and holier-than-thou… Our model of morally good people seems to require that they be somehow ignorant of the fact that they are morally good, on pain of corruption.[32]

The gesture here is straightforward: the form-finding features of narrative identity entails an exclusive concern for one's self, and this can diminish, rather than enable, ethical action.

The fourth argument is one that Davenport calls the artifact argument.[33] One's identity will never be fully reducible to a narrative or a set of narratives, for the story-telling component of narrative identity *requires* that certain experience, details, or facts of the matter be omitted from the narrative on the basis that doing so helps create cohesion. As Strawson claims, quoting V.S. Pritchett, "We live… beyond any tale that we happen to enact."[34] If this is true, so much for the psychological thesis.

The final argument is the revision argument. As its name suggests, it stems from the tendency to revise one's life story, in terms of distortion or falsification, or perhaps even, complete fabrication. If "retelling one's past leads to changes, smoothings, enhancements, [and] shifts away from the facts," then "the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding."[35] Rather than being a means toward self-understanding, narrative identity hinders it. In sum, if the episodic style has metaphysical precedence over the diachronic one, and if Strawson's characterization of narrative identity is true, then neither the psychological nor ethical theses are true.

THE DESCRIPTIVE INESCAPABILITY OF EXPERIENCE: FROM STRAWSON'S THESES TO RICŒUR'S HERMENEUTICS

In order to create a path for which Ricœur's account of narrative identity can emerge, two possible moves can be made. 1) We may directly argue against Strawson's account of episodicity, reaffirming the diachronic style, and thus continue operating within Strawson's conceptual framework. 2) We may question the basic presupposition that Strawson implicitly relies upon in order to make the distinction between diachronicity and episodicity in the first place. Following the second path will highlight the gulf between Strawson's framework and Ricœur's. If we are interested in developing Ricœur's hermeneutic account of narrative identity as a viable alternative to Strawson's account, then I think making the second move is the more advantageous option.

Much of Strawson's critique rests on his favoring of episodic selfhood. If episodicity is true, then any priority granted to narrative accounts of identity risk (mis)leading the subject away from the 'true' nature of what it means to be a self. A narrative account of oneself is a varnish that is added to reality, but it is nevertheless unreal. It conceals the episodic truth. Any recourse to narrative is to make an unnecessary philosophical move.

Yet it seems that Strawson's argument for episodicity rests on a presupposition that Ricœur would regard with suspicion. As much as Strawson would most likely deny that he is a part of this tradition, it seems that he relies upon a philosophical move set that belongs firmly in what Ricœur would classify as "reflexive philosophy."[36] Strawson's argument for episodicity, in other words, presupposes that the self of self-knowledge—whether it is a singular, unified self, a Cartesian *cogito*, or whether it consists in having a Strawsonian account of multiple, transient selves—is graspable, knowable, through direct intuition. One has privileged—non-linguistic—access to oneself "from the inside," as Strawson himself has stated.

The question now must be raised: is it the case that one has—or can have—direct, privileged, 'from-the-inside' access to the nature of one's own self? Ricœur would deny this. Let me be clear. It is not that Ricœur would deny the intentional structure of consciousness. It is not that he would deny that every conscious experience of something also implies a subject of experience by which the object earns its sense of 'givenness'. However, what he would suggest is that taking the 'return path', by way of reflection—from the object of experience to the subject of experience—is one that will be marked by an infinite process whereby "active syntheses continually refer to ever more radical passive syntheses."[37] To use Husserl's terminology, there is no direct philosophical route that one can take when analyzing the intentional structure of an experience that would allow the reflecting subject to effortlessly move from the noematic content of an intentional act to its noetic content. Each step in this reflective path is tasked with clarifying a dense, tightly knit network of phenomenological concepts (e.g. pretension, retention, affectivity) that continually refer to other concepts (e.g. hyletic data, internal time consciousness, etc.)

If Ricœur is correct, there is no hope for direct self-knowledge; it is forever out of reach. Immediately, this means two things. First, we cannot assess the truth-value of the central claims of Strawson's argument for multiple selves; the grounds from which he made it have dissolved.

Second, and perhaps more interesting, we can begin to understand the model of subjectivity to which Ricœur's account of narrative identity will respond. For Ricœur, at the heart of our subjectivity is a temporal fission. I never fully coincide with myself. This fault line that is forever etched onto the structure of my identity means that *who* I am is first and foremost a question that *demands* to be answered.[38]

How can one begin to answer the question of selfhood? If, as Ricœur contends, a direct path is closed off, then the only avenue left open is an *indirect* path. The subject of experience can only come to any sort of self-understanding through the interpretation of the symbolic network to which it belongs. "There is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts; in the last resort, understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms."[39] Even the most basic perceptual experience of something, Ricœur would contend, is always already permeated with a symbolic structure that could only become meaningful via interpretation. Thus, when Strawson[40] wonders why one would, "while in the beauty of being," seek to understand an experience with greater clarity via narrative, Ricœur would respond:

> Experience in all its fullness… has an expressibility [disibilité] in principle. Experience can be said, it demands41 to be said. To bring it to language is not to change it into something else, but in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself.[42]

Indeed, Ricœur would contend that we have arrived at the central question to which narrative is an answer. If time constitutes one of the fundamental problems of human existence—if it is at the heart of the structure of personal identity—then it is through narrative that we can begin to unravel it.

My basic hypothesis, in this regard, is the following: the common feature of human experience, that which is marked, organized, and clarified by the act of storytelling in all its forms, is its *temporal character*. Everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally, and what unfolds in time can be recounted. Perhaps, indeed, every temporal process is recognized as such only to the extent that it can, in one way or another, be recounted.[43]

Thus, while Strawson would maintain that the recourse to narrative is an unnecessary move for adequate self-knowledge, Ricœur would respond that it is the best move we can make, if we seriously consider 1) that we have no direct access to ourselves; and 2) that self-knowledge only comes as the fruit of an interpretive process.

To put it into the perspective of the maturation of Ricœur's own thought, this is why Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy moved away from being a strict phenomenology of consciousness, and started to reconfigure itself as a philosophical anthropology, where both discourse and action were the central starting points. The same is true of Ricœur's concept of narrative. Narrativity—and by extension, narrative identity—is not, first and foremost, a psychological phenomenon, as Strawson posits it, but a cultural one, conditioned by the dialectic at root at the historical tradition to which one belongs.

THE DIALECTIC OF SELFHOOD: PERSONAL IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Within Ricœur's hermeneutics, narrative identity performs a specific task: it poetically resolves the "aporia" of personal identity, which Ricœur dubs the problem of permanence in time.[44] More recently, others have identified this as the problem of diachronic unity.[45] If time is a central issue for human existence, what can guarantee that *I* am the same person who has continued over several gaps in time? As is the case with many of his contemporaries, Ricœur did not believe that the answer to this question comes from a recapitulation of substance dualism. But neither is it the case that one should deny any or all continuity of one's identity, or one's 'self'. The choice between substantialism and non-self is, in Ricœur's work, a false dichotomy. There is another avenue to pursue: establish a non-substantialist account of selfhood. As Ricœur admits, this is not without its difficulties. The self—understood non-substantially—is a fragile phenomenon. Philosophically, it is fragile because it rests on a twofold dialectic: that between what Ricœur calls idem (identity understood as 'sameness') and ipse (identity understood as 'selfhood' and *within* this dialectic, that of narrativity itself.) It is not without great care, then, that one can bring out how selfhood is constituted within Ricœur's hermeneutics.

There is another way in which selfhood presents itself as a fragile phenomenon: the process of living itself. With the absence of the substantialist placebo—of a 'true' or 'ideal' self that will always resist time's scars—the model of selfhood Ricœur will adopt is one that is forever exposed to the traumas of existence: aging, violence, mortality. As we will see, Ricœur's non-substantial self is not immutable, but neither is it powerless. With that, this section will unfold in two steps. First, we will look at the dialectic of idem and ipse. From there, we will develop, finally, narrative identity in Ricœur's hermeneutics.

1. Ricœur's original contribution to the problem of personal identity resides in the dialectical relationship between idem and ipse. According to Ricœur, the history of philosophy has been preoccupied with understanding identity—and therefore with attempting to resolve the problem of diachronic unity—solely through the aegis of idem-identity; that is, identity understood simply as 'sameness'.[46] Here, the paradigmatic question of selfhood is a matter of "what"—i.e., "what *is* the self?" There is another way to understand identity. It is possible to investigate it through the aegis of ipse-identity, where the paradigmatic question is one of "who"—i.e. "who *is* the self; who *am* I?" Fittingly, Ricœur does not wish to have idem and ipse oppose each other. Rather, in order to better understand identity, we must think through their complicated relationship. Let us proceed, then, as Ricœur does. First with idem, followed by its relationship with ipse, and finally, ipse itself.

The history of philosophy has dealt almost exclusively with identity as it is understood through the rubric of sameness. With such a vast history, Ricœur notes the polysemy of the notion of sameness. In terms of identity, sameness can signify four different meanings. It is the fourth meaning that is most relevant to personal identity, and it is also this meaning that instantiated substantialist notions of selfhood. Since the fourth meaning of 'sameness' is the most philosophically relevant, I will focus solely on it.[47]

The final understanding of sameness is that of *permanence* in time. Here, Ricœur notes that this notion has been read in terms of a permanence of *structure*.[48] Despite all the life-changing events one may go through, one remains the same through the *structure* of their

identity. Historically, this structure has been interpreted as something that is over, above, and beyond the event itself. Here, we arrive at the birth of the notion of substance. Yet, has it not been the case that the history of philosophy has shown that substantialist understandings of self are simply too good to be true? Does the notion of sameness taken as permanence in time necessarily lead to having to posit the self as a substantialist, ontologically distinct entity apart from experience? Is it possible for there to be a "form of permanence in time which can be connected to the question 'who' inasmuch as it is irreducible to any question of 'what'? Is there a form of permanence in time that is a reply to the question 'who am I'?"[49] According to Ricœur, it is possible to interpret the notion of permanence in time, without falling into the perils of substantialism. But this will require exploring the relationship between idem and ipse.

The goal that Ricœur has in mind is that of finding the point of unification between the "what" of sameness (idem) and the "who" of selfhood (ipse.) At the nucleus of this relationship is the intermediary concept of 'character'. Ricœur's conclusion is going to be that, in terms of personal identity, one's character is the "what" that also announces the "who" that one is.[50] Before we get to this, however, we must ask what Ricœur means by character. Within the confines of *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur states that one's character consists of a set of lasting, though not necessarily immutable, dispositions that permit one to be recognized.[51]

The formation of the dispositions of one's character stems from a twofold dialectical process: 1) the dialectic of innovation and sedimentation involved in the acquisition of one's habits; and 2) the dialectic of otherness and internalization involved in what Ricœur calls "acquired identifications."[52] Of particular importance to the dialectic of innovation and sedimentation is the role of embodiment. Of note is the reading of the body as a site of conflict for the development of a new habit. Sedimented in one's ways, the initial moment of innovative activity is most often met with resistance by the body. Think of the guitarist who struggles, not with the instrument, but with her own fingers, to make a chord progression. Think of a martial artist struggling with her sense of equilibrium, as she maintains the posture required of her art. Nevertheless, after much practice or repetition, what was once resisted can become internalized, to the point of being second nature.[53] In becoming second nature, the acquired habit contributes to the overall lasting dispositions that shape one's character. With the formation of a new habit added to one's embodied being, so too, is there now a mark with which one can be identified and re-identified.[54] Thus, the "what" of one's character habits grants access to the "who" of whom one is speaking.

While the acquisition of a new habit hinges upon the *internal* dialectic of innovation and sedimentation—"internal" because it deals solely with the body's struggle with itself—the dialectic of acquired identifications is *external*—for it implies the subject's relationship with culture. Here, we can refer back to what was established earlier in this paper: according to Ricœur, the 'shortest' route towards self-understanding is the indirect one by which one interprets oneself according to the vast symbolic structures of one's culture. "To a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person… is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes in which the person… recognizes [him- or herself]."[55] For example, in recognizing my own struggle *in* the trials and tribulations of, say, Peter Parker, I begin to recognize these struggles *by* those of Peter Parker. My understanding of myself is made possible by metaphorically seeing myself *as* Peter Parker. The otherness inherent in this cultural icon—

because we all know that I am not *really* Peter Parker—is internalized and annulled. Of course, let us not get too lost in the charm of utilizing pop culture as a means towards better self-understanding. There is a larger point here. Namely, in the process by which one learns to recognize oneself in, through, and by a cultural icon, value, or ideal, one also starts to establish a sense of integrity, a sense of who one is.[56] To be true to oneself, then, is to be true to the cultural icons that constitute oneself. What would Peter Parker do?

This is why behavior that does not correspond to dispositions of this sort makes us say that it is not in the character of the individual in question, that this person is not herself or even that the person is acting completely out of character.[57]

Again, we arrive at the same position, this time perhaps more profoundly: the "what" of one's character leads us to better understand the "who" that one is. Through the intermediary role of character, we acquire a form of permanence in time that is not reducible to substantialism.

Yet, the totality of one's identity is not fully reducible to the paradigm of idem, as well as its relationship with ipse. In a very real sense, understanding oneself requires exploring the significance of one's ipseity. According to Ricœur, while idem and ipse do not mutually exclude each other to the point of making any mediation between the two impossible, there still exists a gap between idem and ipse.[58] Whereas Ricœur's study concerning the dialectic of character reveals a sense of permanence in time that is attributable to the *continuity*—i.e. unbroken or consistent nature—of one's dispositions, habits, and acquired identifications, his understanding of ipse-identity hinges on a sense of *constancy*. Here, constancy denotes a faithfulness or dependability that rests not on one's character, but on one's commitment. "The continuity of character is one thing, the constancy of friendship is quite another."[59]

What Ricœur is trying to get at with ipse, is a dimension of identity that is primordially *active*. This could be one of the reasons why the act of making—and keeping—a promise is his preferred example when attempting to illustrate the significance of ipse-identity. If time is an agent of change, if character is about continuity in time, then keeping a promise is to stand in defiance of time. In keeping a promise, one commits oneself to someone or something, *despite* whatever any change might occur between the moment the promise was made, and the moment it is fulfilled. "In this respect, keeping one's promise… does indeed appear to stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change: even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or inclination, 'I will hold firm'."[60] We should read ipse-identity existentially. It pertains to the *active* horizon of one's identity, wherein one (authentically) makes a commitment to someone or something beyond oneself, and holds oneself to that choice.

2. It is within the dialectic between idem and ipse that Ricœur proposes his own account of narrative identity. As stated at the beginning of this section, Ricœur is making a technical move. In order to establish narrative identity, he is philosophically jury-rigging two dialectics: that of idem and ipse, and that of the threefold mimetic structure of narrative, which he developed in *Time and Narrative*.[61] The proposed goal of Ricœur's hermeneutic gambit is to poetically resolve the problem of permanence in time. By virtue of appropriating key aspects of narrative's threefold mimetic structure, one is able to weave unity and stability out of the diversity, variability, and discontinuity of lived experience.[62] As stated earlier in this paper, it is not that we 'naturally' or spontaneously view ourselves as belonging to a story—as Strawson's

psychological thesis suggests—it is that the tools that narrative understanding equips us with enables us to more deeply explore and express our subjectivity—both in terms of idem and ipse.

As we saw earlier, understanding idem-identity required exploring the notion of character in Ricœur's philosophy. One's character hinges upon the habits that arise out of the dialectic of innovation and sedimentation, as well as that of one's acquired identifications. According to Ricœur, the model of emplotment (Mimesis2)—when grafted onto the dialectic of innovation and sedimentation—serves as a privileged way to bring out the rich history surrounding the development of one's character.[63] As Ricœur argues, left by itself, sedimentation tends to obscure the creativity involved in the initial moment of innovation—not to mention the struggle of establishing a habit. Creating a narrative about the history of one's character development—about the journey one embarked upon, and the struggle one found—brings out layers of meaning that would otherwise be forgotten. Perhaps the crafted story is used to take stock of one's life—to appreciate how far one has truly come, and how far one still needs to go. Perhaps it is told to console someone else, who is now facing a similar situation. Think of the philosophy student who is endeavoring to understand Kantian deontology, but who is unsure of her own intellectual potential. What is the appropriate response to the student's struggle? Ricœur's proposal: a story of our shared experience.

If the structure of narrative was only capable of disclosing the history of one's habit formations, then it would be an inherently backwards looking phenomenon. According to Ricœur, this is not the case. Narrative identity is not just limited to disclosing one's past; it is also capable of orienting one towards the future, toward "the global project of an existence."[64] The idea here is that it is through the means of emplotment that one is able to create, refine, or revise a life plan—the "practical units" that make up one's professional, personal, and family life.[65] Life plans are not static blue prints; they are flexible plans of action that emerge from one's habits—or practices—and the "mobile" ideals one adopts through the process of acquired identifications.[66] Between the relationship of one's habits and one's ideals exists a hermeneutic circle—i.e. one's habits help shape one's ideals, and one's ideals help orient and establish new habits. According to Ricœur, by adhering to one's life plan, one is able to establish, borrowing from MacIntyre,[67] narrative unity of life—a form of concordance that holds discordance at its epicenter: discordant concordance.[68]

Narrativity does not simply bring out deeper textures implied by idem-identity. According to Ricœur, there is also an important sense in which the mimetic structure of narrative mediates with ipse-identity: it discloses the insight that human living is always already ethical in nature.[69] Whereas the fundamental polemic concerning idem-identity revolved around the continuity of one's character, that of ipse was uniquely concerned with one's self-constancy. Whereas, idem was concerned with of *what* one is made, ipse is concerned with *who* one is. According to Ricœur, the notion of self-constancy central to ipse-identity *fundamentally* entails our relationships with other human beings.[70]

Ipse-identity is primarily intersubjective in nature. The 'call' or demand for self-constancy prefigures a relationship with others, so that others may count on us. That is, if self-constancy is an issue concerning my being-in-the-world—concerning my very identity—then it is an issue placed upon me by the other. It is an issue of being trustworthy, and being held *accountable* for my actions. The desire for self-constancy discloses one's responsibility to others.[71]

Ricœur, perhaps in his most Levinasian moment, maintains that there is an ambiguous double meaning to one's responsibility.[72] To be responsible means both to be *counted* on by another, and to be *accountable* for oneself.

Where does narrative feature? If it is true that ipse-identity is always already intersubjective in nature, then it must also be the case that the 'who' question—so central to ipse—is also intersubjective. It is only in other words, through, by, and with my relationship with others that 'who' I am becomes an issue for me. It is only through, by, and with others that I am asked, and can begin to ask myself, "who am I?" If human existence was not intersubjective in nature, then the question of identity would have never become a philosophical problem. If it is the other who first and foremost asks of me the question "who am I?" and who obliges me to respond, then it is through narrative means that I can begin to address myself to the other. The "who" that I am is not substantialist in nature. It is only accessible via the story that I tell to the other, and conditioned—i.e. limited—by the scene of address, to borrow from Butler, in which we found ourselves.[73]

In being asked to give an account of myself, I am rendered accountable by the other. In responding to the other, I accept responsibility for my past actions, and for the intended outcome of my life plan. Yet, there is fragility here. If Ricœur is correct, then I never fully know 'who' I am until I am confronted with this question. Despite this, we are all tasked to respond to this fragility with assertiveness and with a commitment that goes beyond all doubt: Who am I? Here I am.[74]

OPAQUE SELVES: A RICŒURIAN RESPONSE TO STRAWSON

We have taken many detours to reach this point. The time has come now to fully develop and lay out a Ricœurian response to Strawson's anti-narrativist argument. Let us proceed by responding to each argument in the order of its appearance.

The first argument that merits a response is not necessarily one of Strawson's anti-narrativist arguments, but rather, his argument in favor of episodicity over diachronicity. If it can be shown that there is a reason to doubt this argument, then there will be reason to doubt all of Strawson's anti-narrativist arguments which implicitly or explicitly rely on the truth of episodicity over diachronicity. As a refresher, here is the argument, as presented earlier.

What we call a "self" emerges from conscious lived experience.

Corresponding to each conscious lived experience is a distinct mental state (e.g. imagination is different from perception, which is different from memory, etc.)

If the self emerges from conscious lived experience, and each experience has a distinct mental state, then there is not one self, but many—one for each distinct experience.

Therefore, episodicity is true.

In actuality, the response to this argument was earlier laid out: it seems that Strawson relies upon direct intuition in order to assert the truth of the premises. However, it is this very methodology which Ricœur's hermeneutics calls into doubt. I shall develop this further below. First, I would like to point out an additional problem with premise two. While we would all readily admit that certain mental states are distinct from each other—e.g. *imagining* a hike

through the Rocky Mountains is certainly distinct from *remembering* what it was actually like to go on such a hike—it does not follow that there is no *overlap* between certain mental states. Indeed—to further use memory and imagination—while each may have certain unique phenomenological characteristics, there is still a great deal that they do share. Both memory and imagination entail the phenomenology of perception, the intentional structure of consciousness, embodiment, the first person perspective, etc. While it is possible, and fruitful, to indicate what makes each clear and distinct, let us not forget that this comes at the cost of bracketing what they share. Further, if there is overlap, and if the self emerges from these experiences, can we truly go as far as Strawson wishes to go with episodicity?

That was only the smaller version of the problem with Strawson's argument. The larger issue comes from the intuitive nature by which Strawson wishes to assert the truth of his premises. That is, it is by attending to the nature of experience, and the mental states that arise from experience, that we can intuitively verify the episodic nature of the self. The truth of this is verified by the clear and distinct nature of intuition itself; it is so basic that it needs no further justification. It is evidential on its own. Yet, Ricœur would offer the very same objection that Menary has recently made of intuition as a method of verification.[75] Strawson rests on a Cartesian model by which direct intuition can be taken as a reliable access to truth. By intuition of the nature of the mental processes/states that correlate with lived experience, Strawson concludes that episodicity is true. However, can we truly rely on intuition? What if it is the case that what we think is intuitive is, rather and at best, inferential--and thus, fallible--in nature? As Menary argues, if we had the capacity to distinguish between inferential and intuitive mental states, then there would not be any question as to which insights were inferential in nature, and which were intuitive in nature.[76] Yet, is it not the case that there can, and often is, great controversy as to whether something is true by intuition, or whether it is simply an inference? One need only refer to Strawson's own distinction between diachronicity and episodicity. According to his argument, intuitively attending to the nature of one's mental life reveals the episodic truth of selfhood. Yet, if the truth of episodicity was so crystal clear on the basis of intuition alone, why is it the case that many hold diachronicity to be true, on the basis of what they would say is their own intuition? Hence, if Strawson's arguments in favor of episodicity hinge exclusively on direction intuition, then it seems that Ricœur would have reason to doubt the truth of episodicity over that of diachronicity. Intuition alone is not enough evidence to assert the truth of one position over another.

The hermeneutic gesture here is that, if we want to understand the nature of the self, we can only do so indirectly through the interpretation of vast symbolic structures that—as symbols—stand in the place of direct lived experience. Narrative—and the tools we use to interpret it—is one such structure. However, the structure of narrative is not simply one amongst many others. Emplotment refigures human (inter-)action as it persists through time—whether it is futile or fructiferous. As such, if we want to understand the nature of the self, the best place to start is through its narrative dimensions.

With that, we can now move through the rest of Strawson's arguments with less effort. We dubbed the second formal argument as the argument from episodicity.

Episodicity is true.

If episodicity is true, then we do not experience ourselves narratively.

Therefore, the psychological narrative thesis—i.e. that human beings naturally experience their lives as already having a plot-like structure—is false.

Given the problems we encountered with Strawson's argument for episodicity, it seems that the truth of the first premise is, at best unclear, and at worst, false. Either way, this argument is unconvincing. However, allow me to make things a little more interesting. Ricœur, I think would *also* reject the psychological thesis. For him, it is not the case that we naturally experience ourselves in narrative terms. Rather, we appropriate certain features of narrativity in order to better understand lived experience, and ourselves. Rather than being a psychological phenomenon, narrative is an ontological condition of possibility: it is through narrative means that we can understand what it means to be a self.

The next argument was the argument from narrative egoism.

Narrativity entails finding forms of repetitive patterns that make up a story of one's life.

In searching for these forms, one focuses only on oneself.

Focusing only on oneself inhibits, rather than promotes, ethical action.

Therefore, we should not adopt narrative identity.

Perhaps this argument works on the other theories of narrative identity, but clearly, it is preposterous to apply this to Ricœur's. Let us simply recall that, for Ricœur, narrative is the answer to the very question posed by ipse-identity: Who am I? Further, it is not I who asks this question of myself, it is the other. According to Ricœur, selfhood is *fundamentally* intersubjective in nature. One cannot begin to understand oneself in the absence of another, and moreover, the initial character of self-understanding is ethical in nature. That is, in giving an account of myself, my life story is *always already* a response to a moral summons. Even the most mundane story that I can tell of myself to another has a moral dimension: it builds trust, and establishes a sense of self-constancy—the latter of which we might hold to be essential for an ethical life. On these grounds, we simply cannot recognize Ricœur's theory of narrative identity in Strawson's argument.

Let us now turn to the artifact argument.

Giving an account of oneself necessarily entails that certain details, experience, or facts of the matter be omitted for the aesthetic smoothness of the story.

If experiences, details, or facts of the matter are omitted, then one's life is not exhausted by narrative.

If one's life is not exhausted by narrative, then one's life is not reducible to narrative identity.

Therefore, life is not narrative.

Recently, Davenport has attempted to refute the artifact argument's conclusion by developing the concept of the "narrative," which states that lived experience is always already experienced in a sort of narrative-like way.[77] I do not want to go in this direction, and I do not think Ricœur would go in this direction either—as it seems like it might repeat Strawson's psychological thesis, which Ricœur would reject. I think Ricœur would question premise three.

Just because one's life is not exhausted by narrative, it does not mean that there is nothing to gain—in terms of self-understanding—by appropriating aspects of the structure of narrative. To the contrary, Ricœur would argue that narrative identity affords us the opportunity to return to previous slivers of our life-story. Further, in returning to our life-story, we are presented with the possibility of reinterpreting a particular experience or chapter—I use the word metaphorically, of course—in order to derive new meaning, and in order to inspire action. That the lived experience I narrate exceeds the story I tell is a *good* thing. It means that there is a wealth of meaning-potential that can be mined by the task of hermeneutic understanding.

It is precisely here where Strawson would retort with the revision argument.

Telling one's life-story can lead to revising it.

Revision is distortion or falsification.

If telling one's life story leads to revision, then, in giving an account of oneself, one serves only to move further and further away from the truth of who one is.

Therefore, we should not adopt narrative identity.

Ricœur would respond in two ways. The first involves premise two. It seems that Strawson assumes that revision *only ever* entails distortion. In this sense, revision is not just a form of distortion, it also a form of deception, and if so, revision is coercive in nature. Yet, this is clearly false. Not all cases of revising one's life story are deceptive or distorted. It is neither uncommon nor dishonest that we reflect on, or simply revisit, past experiences, and re-contextualize their meaning. In doing this, we find patterns that translate to life lessons, find struggles that turn into triumphs (or vice versa.) The present casts new light on the past, and the past casts new light on the present. When this hermeneutic circle is a healthy one, Ricœur would argue that it serves to inspire new courses of action, new ways of being.

Not all cases of revision are deceptive. Still, some are. What would be Ricœur's response here? Clearly, Ricœur would see this as a moral problem. Yet, I would raise two points: First, taking Ricœur's notion of narrative identity seriously entails an intersubjective relation with other human beings. As has already been mentioned, this relation always already discloses the moral dimension of human living. My life story conveys a sense of trust. One cannot be trustworthy—in the moral sense of the word—without being honest. Thus, if we take Ricœur's account seriously, in that we seek to be Ricœurian in how we capitulate our own narrative identity, any revisions we make to our life story ought not be deceptive in nature. Second, I would like to briefly bolster this position with the notion of the debt to the past that Ricœur develops in *Time and Narrative* and in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.[78] Accordingly, each and every one of us has a debt to the past—a debt that discloses a duty to live with a sense of fidelity that respects the past suffering and injustices to which humanity has been exposed both by the toll of history, and by the tragedy of our own inhumanity. Here, I would like to add the following: my debt to the past also entails a duty to not distort my own past. Where the temptation arises, I *owe* it to myself and others to refrain from (inauthentically) representing my past. I ought to take responsibility for it. If I live according to this duty, then Strawson's argument need not be a concern.

CONCLUSION

The confrontation between Ricœur's hermeneutic understanding of narrative identity and Strawson's anti-narrative arguments ought to be viewed in a healthy, productive way. For our purposes, this confrontation has afforded us the opportunity to approach Ricœur's account of narrative identity in a different context—specifically, one that shows where Ricœur's account of identity differs from his contemporaries', as well as how he would respond to the variety of objections capitulated by Strawson. As we have seen, Ricœur's hermeneutic understanding of narrative identity is able to withstand and respond to all of Strawson's objections. To the extent that these objections rest on his episodic understanding of selfhood, and to the extent that this understanding of selfhood rests primarily on intuition, Ricœur would respond that intuition alone is not enough to understand the nature of selfhood or identity. Rather, the shortest path to self-understanding is via a 'detour', as Ricœur would say, which entails reflecting on, and interpreting, one's lived experiences through the structure of narrative configuration. Narrativity, then, ought to be cast in a new light—namely, as an ontological condition of possibility. It is through narrative that understanding 'who' I am becomes possible in the first place.

[1] Ricœur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Vol. 1 - 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

[2] Kearney, Richard. *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004.

[3] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative Vol. 3, p. 247.*

[4] It is from the work of Marya Schechtman that I present Strawson's view of narrative identity as being "at best, trivial, and, at worst, pernicious." See, Schechtman, Marya. "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View." In *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, edited by Daniel D. Hutto, 155-79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[5] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival."

[6] Strawson, Galen. "Against Narrativity." *Ratio* XVII, No. 4 (2004): 428 – 452.

[7] Ibid., p. 428.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p. 429.

[10] Ibid., p. 428.

[11] Ibid., p. 429.

[12] Ibid., p. 430.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 431

[17] Ibid., p. 429.

[18] Davenport, John. *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality: From Frankfurt and MacIntyre to Kierkegaard*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

[19] To my knowledge, it is Dan Zahavi who first articulated Strawson's view of selfhood as being based on transient, short-term selves. See Zahavi, Dan. "The Experiential Self: Objections and Clarifications." In *Self, No Self? Perspecttives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, edited by Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi, 56-78. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; p. 73.

[20] I am basing my own analysis on Davenport's in *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality,* p. 20.

[21] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," p.433.

[22] Ibid., p. 437.

[23] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival."

[24] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," p. 440.

[25] Ibid., p. 441.

[26] Ibid., p. 442.

[27] Ibid., p. 443.

[28] Ibid., p. 432.

[29] Ricœur, Paul. *Oneself As Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 158.

[30] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," p. 436.

[31] Strawson, Galen. "Episodic Ethics." In *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, edited by Daniel D. Hutto, 85-116. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[32] Ibid., p. 95

[33] Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, Mortality,* p. 39.

[34] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," p. 450.

[35] Ibid., p. 447.

[36] Ricœur, Paul. "On Interpretation." In *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Edited by Kathleen Blamey, 1-22. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson. St. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

[37] Ricœur, "On Interpretation," p. 13

[38] Atkins, Kim. *Self and Subjectivity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005; p. 222.

[39] Ricœur, "On Interpretation," p. 15.

[40] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," p. 236.

[41] There is an ambiguity at the heart of the English translation of the French term *demander*. Namely, how is one to interpret the "demand" to put experience into words? Is this "demand" a moral obligation, does it rather depict a 'descriptive inescapability', or is it closer to the more colloquial translation of a request? For my part, I lean more towards understanding the "demand" as depicting a descriptive inescapability; the experiences we live through are more richly understood when they are also put into words. In this sense, experience *solicits* one to describe it more fully.

[42] Ricœur, Paul. "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics." In *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Edited by Kathleen Blamey, 39. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson. St. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

[43] Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, p. 2.

[44] Ibid., p. 115.

[45] I specifically have Dan Zahavi and John Davenport in mind, whose work has been referenced throughout the entirety of this paper.

[46] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another,* p. 116.

[47] The other three readings of sameness include: sameness as a quantitative concept, a qualitative concept, and sameness as uninterrupted continuity. The reader can refer to *Oneself as Another*, p. 116 for Ricœur's explanation of each meaning.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., p. 118.

[50] Ibid., p. 122.

[51] Ibid., p. 121. Ricœur has wrestled with the concept of 'character' throughout the entirety of his philosophical career. As he elaborates in *Oneself as Another,* in two of his earlier works, *Freedom and Nature* and *Fallible Man*, he initially understood one's character as a finite, immutable, and un-chosen perspective on the world that conditions the values that one accepts.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., p. 122

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., p. 123.

[60] Ibid., p. 124.

[61] While a fuller analysis of Ricœur's understanding of the threefold mimetic structure of narrative would be most helpful, undergoing such an analysis is beyond the confines of this paper. With that said, I will state only the following. According to Ricœur, rather than talking about a particular *narrative*, we ought to talk about *narrativity* as such. That is, narrative ought to be understood as a dynamic, threefold, dialectical process, revolving around its mimetic capacity. The first stage of mimesis—Mimesis$_1$, or "prefiguration"—refers to the broader conceptual network of action theory that the author, narrative, and audience implicitly refer to, in order to establish a meaningful narrative. The second stage—Mimesis$_2$ or "emplotment"—represents the activity of telling a story. Any narrative, by virtue of being a narrative, will configure thematic unity and meaning—i.e. establish concordance—

over a series of events, including reversals of fortune which resist and threaten the story's overall coherence—i.e. create discordance. Hence, Ricœur's term to identify all narratives as a form of 'discordant concordance'. Lastly, the final stage of mimesis—Mimesis$_3$ or "refiguration"—involves the audience's reception of the story, especially in terms of the way in which a story creates a Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons', where the 'world' of the text collides with the 'world' of the reader. Ultimately, the collision serves to create new possible avenues for the reader to move 'from text to action'.

[62] Ibid., p. 140.

[63] Ibid., p. 121.

[64] Ibid., p. 157.

[65] Ibid., p. 151.

[66] Ibid., p. 158.

[67] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

[68] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 153.

[69] Ibid., p. 165

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

[74] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 167.

[75] Menary, Richard. "Our Glassy Essence: The Fallible Self in Pragmatist Thought." In *The Oxford Handbook of The Self*, edited by Shaun Gallagher, 609-32. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Davenport, *Narrative Identity, Autonomy, and Mortality.*

[78] Ricœur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

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