

NARRATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF THE SELF IN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Issues concerning “the self”—its nature, our knowledge of it, mechanisms for transforming it, and much else besides—are historically central and currently active areas of research in philosophy, theology, and psychology. An increasingly important idea in all three disciplines is the view that *narrative* is somehow essential to the self and intimately connected with key aspects of the life and development of a person. Narrative, or the activity of constructing narratives, has been credited with all manner of different roles in our lives, from contributing to positive outcomes in the wake of trauma, to helping us make sense of and find meaning in our own actions and other events that make up our lives, to unifying our consciousness and explaining important aspects of our agency, to constituting us as persons. In all three disciplines, prominent researchers make grand claims about the connections between narrative, personhood, identity, and the self that cry out for philosophical exploration.

The Narrative-self (NS) paradigm is an interconnected family of theories positing important relations between narrative and the self. Across multiple disciplines, this family of theories suggests that important aspects of a human person (e.g., the capacity for agency or moral responsibility, or the capacity to form the kind of self-concept that many would take to be a prerequisite to agency and responsibility, a person’s identity, or even the person herself) are somehow built up, unified, or otherwise dependent upon narratives generated by the brain and shaped, at least in part, by one’s peers, culture, or social context.

NS theories have gained a substantial following among philosophers. Notably, the philosophers most attracted to such accounts are, for the most part, *not* analytic metaphysicians whose research substantially engages traditional debates about the metaphysics of identity, persistence, and the nature of persons (e.g., Derek Parfit, David Lewis, Peter van Inwagen, Theodore Sider, Trenton Merricks, and Hud Hudson). Instead, the NS paradigm has received its most significant uptake within three different but overlapping bodies of philosophical literature: (a) work directly on or heavily influenced by Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor, three early pioneers of the NS paradigm in philosophy; (b) debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science that focus primarily on the implications of certain findings in neuroscience for our conception of human persons and the self (e.g., Daniel Dennett and John Bickle); and (c) the literature on agency (particularly *moral* agency) and the ownership of thought and action (e.g., Marya Schechtman, Jenann Ismael, Bernard Williams, Hilde Lindemann, and J. David Velleman).

In addition to being towering figures in philosophy, Ricoeur, MacIntyre, and Taylor are also tremendously influential in theology. Accordingly, it is partly through their work that NS theories have gained a following in theology as well. At the same time, however, Robert Jenson—one of the 20th Century's most influential systematic theologians—maintains that the idea that “a person is a story” is simply part of the Christian tradition. (*The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*: 151) Although perhaps initially implausible, this idea in Jenson seems to be founded on a cluster of ideas expressible in slogans like “one is what one does”—a familiar enough idea in the philosophy of human agency, and an idea whose application to God has important roots in and influence through historical figures like St. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, contemporary theologians like Jenson and Bruce McCormack and some biblical scholars, like Richard Bauckham. Accordingly, some theologians and biblical scholars are drawn not only to an NS theory of the *human* self, but also to an NS theory about God.

The most provocative claims made about the relationship between narrative and the self are those that suggest that a *person*, her *identity*, or her *self* somehow *is* or is *made* or *constituted by* narrative. Just how provocative these claims are, however, depends to some extent on how *person*, *identity*, and *self* are understood. It is not at all clear what those terms mean in the context of claims like “a person is a story” or “the self [or identity] is constituted by narrative”. Interesting and important work remains to be done in addressing this question.

Philosophers have typically held the distinction between the *substance* that a person is (if persons are substances at all), and her various attributes, aspects, social roles, histories, and so on to be of great interest. This tripartite distinction—substance, subject, and self—is a useful starting point for framing, and explaining the significance of, the ontological questions this project aims to explore.

Many philosophers want to collapse the substance-subject-self distinction: the *self* *is* the subject, the person, which is also a substance (a material object or an immaterial soul). Relatedly, a person's *identity* is typically construed as her numerical sameness with herself. In light of this, it is natural for philosophers to read claims like “the self is constituted by narrative” or “a person's identity is constituted by the content of her self-narrative” as claims to the effect that some particular substance, a *human person*, is constituted by narrative. Thus understood, however, the central claims of the NS paradigm are deeply puzzling. How, after all, can a *substance* be constituted by narrative? On this reading, it is tempting (though not inevitable) to read the NS paradigm as offering a kind Humean, or eliminativist theory of human persons: given that a person, a self, a subject is a substance (if anything at all), and given that there is nothing more to a person than a narrative produced by a brain, then we should think of persons as mere fictions. Hence, there are no persons, no subjects, no selves; there is only narrative.

Alternatively, one might collapse the subject-self distinction (the self *is* the subject) but deny that subjects are substances. Theologian Robert Jenson seems to endorse this sort of view. A person is *not* a substance, he says; rather, a person is a story. Thus, subject and substance come apart; but there seems to be no separate category of “self” in his work. Jenson’s view is suggestive, but also raises difficult ontological questions. What exactly *is* a human subject, if she is not a substance and is in some sense a story, or narrative?

Alternatively: how might we craft an account of *narrative* to accommodate both our ordinary understanding of that notion and the initially puzzling claim that part of what it is to be a person is to be or include some kind of narrative? In response to the second question, one might be tempted to follow John Davenport—and, to some extent, Jenson himself—in thinking of collections of real world events as story-like, and having a kind of narrative structure. Or, in response to the first question, one might follow Jenann Ismael in characterizing a human subject as a unified collection of perspectives or points of view, and maintain that narrative plays an important role in the unification of the subject. Both of these views deserve further exploration; while views like Ismael’s are particularly empirically and philosophically promising.

Finally, one might insist on collapsing none of these distinctions, maintaining that a self is distinct from a subject, while at the same time either denying or remaining neutral on the substancehood of the subject. Psychologists commonly use terms like “self” and “identity” in a way that preserves the subject-self distinction, as do many theologians and some philosophers. On this way of thinking, selves and identities are *had by* subjects; and human subjects may well have several of each over time, or perhaps even at a time. The trouble, however, is that one is hard pressed to find in *any* of the relevant literature a philosophically adequate account of the nature of the self (or an identity) understood in this sense; nor is there much by way of clear discussion and explanation of how one’s self or one’s identity in this sense might figure into an account of *what one is*, or of the conditions under which one persists over time. Again, more work is needed.

It is clear enough that, on this way of thinking about the self—where the self is differentiated from both subject and substance—or about a person’s identity, talk about one’s self lies in the same conceptual neighborhood as talk about *who* a person is (as contrasted with talk about *what* a person is). A good answer to the “Who am I?” question will tell a story, one that specifies some salient role for me and perhaps also identifies certain key attributes as central (even if not metaphysically essential) to me. It is easy, then, to see how narrative partly constitutes who I am. In ordinary conversation, too, talk about *who* a person is or who she might become is, unlike talk about *what* a person is, intimately wrapped up with talk about identity and the self. To explain who someone is, we say something about their identity; we naturally distinguish between our past, present, future, possible, superficial, real, and other kinds of “selves,” and we naturally assimilate these

selves to facts about who we have been, who we (really) are, who we might or will be, who we present ourselves to be, and so on. In short: selves and identities, whatever exactly those things might be, are both psychologically important and at least partly narratively constituted to include or imply truths about *who* I am (beyond or instead of mere facts about *what* I am), or truths about who I can be or become downstream of the circumstances in which I presently find myself. What kind of thing—what substance, property, process, etc.—could play this role in a theory about the nature of human persons and their persistence over time?

In addition to pressing questions in metaphysics, important questions about how narrative appropriation and ownership relate to positive self-transformation remain vastly underexplored. The philosophical-theological importance of these questions in moral psychology is evident once we attend to the fact that the Christian scriptures invite us to appropriate a variety of new “family narratives”, all explicitly with an eye to facilitating personal transformation. The New Testament is replete with claims to the effect that, in Christ, we have been reborn, adopted into a new family, given a new life and a new identity in Christ, and so on. What does such appropriation involve?

Our aim is to stimulate new research on various aspects of the NS paradigm that have hitherto been underexplored or even wholly neglected. We expect proposals to acknowledge existing research in relevant areas and to suggest how they will advance this research. Accordingly, we solicit applications on one or more of the following **Research Questions**:

1. Is there a viable non-eliminativist, non-substance view of persons, construed as subjects of thought or experience, according to which narrative (either in the ordinary sense, or on some plausible revisionary understanding) is partly constitutive of a person?
2. If a person is a substance and *not* (even partly) constituted by narrative, might there still be something else—a self, or an identity—that is narratively constituted and is, in some theoretically identifiable way, metaphysically, psychologically, and theologically important?
3. What is the relationship between a *narrative conception* of the *human person* and other apparently rival conceptions—e.g., substance dualism, property dualism, hylomorphic and non-hylomorphic versions of animalism, “brainism” (the view that persons are brains, or parts thereof), Lynne Baker’s constitutionalism, and the various forms of emergentism defended by philosophers?

4. What role do narrative construction and the appropriation or ownership of a narrative play in explaining or bringing about changes in a person's psychological traits, self-understanding, or identity?
5. What role do narrative construction and the appropriation or ownership of a narrative play in other kinds of positive self-transformation?
6. What are the constraints on—i.e., the conditions for and obstacles to—narrative appropriation?
7. What are the implications of the NS theories for the thesis that God, or Jesus of Nazareth (understood as God incarnate) is a self and an agent? (Or, conversely, what do the key tenets of Christian theology pertaining to these issues imply about the viability of NS theories?)
8. What possibilities are opened or closed by NS theories for understanding the ways in which human persons can be transformed by grace, or indwelt by the Holy Spirit?