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Practical Imagination and its Limits

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True life, life at last discovered & illuminated,
the only life therefore really lived,
that life is literature.

—Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, III, p. 895

It is common to talk about options, where an option is a course of action an agent can take. A course of action, in turn, is that which can be the object of intention. For example, the infinitives in the following three cases pick out courses of action: I intend *to have a beer*; I intend *to get a job at the mill*; I intend *to join the union*.

Talk of options occurs in the context of discussions of agency, judgments about what rationality requires, assessments of what we have most reason to do, accounts of what morality requires, and so it is found throughout philosophy of action, theories of practical reason, moral theories, etc. It has not often been noticed in this literature (in fact, as far as I can tell it has never been noticed) that there are two ways to understand what makes something an option: first, an option just is some course of action physically open (or, to be maximally liberal, logically open) to an agent; second, an option just is some course of action that the agent either in fact deliberates about taking or is psychologically capable of deliberating about taking.[1] Let us, for the moment, dub the first kind of option an *external option* and the second kind of option an *internal option*.

At any given time, there are far more external options open to an agent than the agent is psychologically capable of deliberating about taking or actually does deliberate about taking. Even if we fixed an otherwise normal agent's ends and fixed his attitudes towards his ends such that the ends stood in transitive preference relations to one another, and even if that agent was a maximally consistent and coherent practical reasoner, there would still remain many more means to achieving all the agent's ends than the (otherwise normal) agent in

1. I shall discuss this disjunction at greater length below.

fact considers or could consider when deliberating about what to do.[2] And, given that no one is such a hygienic valuer or practical reasoner (and given that we regularly abandon and revise our ends, which sometimes involves further practical deliberation), the set of internal options — *i.e.*, the set of courses of action the agent does or psychologically could seriously consider — is always much, much smaller (and not necessarily a proper subset of) the set of external options — *i.e.*, the set of courses of action physically or logically open to the agent.

At this stage, one might argue that mere lack of time or energy explains this and so there is, in fact, no philosophical issue here. But this is to misunderstand the puzzle. For, lack of time or energy cannot explain why *these* courses of action are (or could be) considered as options rather than *those* courses of action. What, then, determines which courses of action agents see or could see as options (*i.e.*, what determines the set of internal options), and why do so many other possible — or even impossible — courses of action remain utterly out of deliberative view?[3] These are the questions I address in this essay.

It might be postulated that this question is not in any way philosophical: there is just some brute, dumb process — *e.g.*, some combination of social, cultural, and genetic causes — that determines what an agent's internal options are (*i.e.*, what courses of action the agent sees or can see as options). In short, one might say that there is no genuine *normative* story here; a brutely causal explanation along the lines of the explanation of why certain materials are extracted from food in digestion and why other materials are excreted would be the whole story, and that isn't much of a *philosophical* story. But we have reason to doubt this explanation. For there is presumably some psychological mechanism through which all of these non-psychological forces shape which courses of action appear to the agent as options. If we assume that such a mechanism is like the capacity for belief formation or the capacity for practical deliberation in that it operates according to norms that, if made explicit, could both be followed and ground criticism, then uncovering and/or reconstructing these norms is a genuine philosophical project along the lines of uncovering and reconstructing epistemological norms or norms of practical reason.[4] For the purposes of this Essay — and because of highly suggestive arguments given by both philosophers and social psychologists, which are discussed in Section 4 below — I shall presume that there is such a mechanism and so that there are recoverable norms governing it. That is, I presume that the — or at least one very important — mechanism that presents courses of actions as internal options to a deliberating agent ought to be contrasted with dumb human capacities (like, *e.g.*, our capacity to digest food) which do not operate according to intelligible norms. Thus, I presume that the mechanism responsible for internal options is like familiar philosophically significant capacities such as the capacities for belief formation and practical deliberation, which *are* governed by intelligible norms. I shall call this option-presenting mechanism the *practical imagination*. The aim of this paper is therefore to reconstruct the norms of practical imagination.

How shall I go about this project? I shall argue that while values, ends, and the demands of both means-end coherence and consistency of beliefs play roles in determining what internal options an agent has,

2. It would not even matter if the agent was such that given any two courses of action, the agent always prefers one to the other and the complete set of these preference relations was transitive. For, the issue is that at any moment, given the huge number of courses of action that are consistent with the agent's ends and are also physically or logically open to the agent, the agent could not deliberate over all these courses of action prior to choosing one, *i.e.*, they could not all be internal options.

3. A version of this problem goes under the heading of the frame problem in robotics. A useful resource is Zenon Pylyshyn, ed., *The Robot's Dilemma: The Frame Problem in Artificial Intelligence* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1987). See also Jerry Fodor's work on the modularity of mind and, in particular, the ignorance associated with informationally encapsulated modules in Jerry Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). I thank Troy Cross for reminding me of this literature.

4. On the norms of belief, see, *e.g.*, David Velleman, "On the Aim of Belief", in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 244–81; David Owens, "Does Belief Have an Aim?", *Philosophical Studies* 115 (2003): 283–305; Nishi Shah, "How Truth Governs Belief", *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 447–82l; Nishi Shah and David Velleman, "Doxastic Deliberation", *Philosophical Review* 114 (2005): 497–534.

all these factors together cannot determine what courses of action an agent sees as options. What other resources do we have to explain the operation of the practical imagination? Drawing upon both recent work in social psychology and a strain of philosophical argument that has attempted to show how human beings have a practical understanding of themselves that is mediated by what we can call a *narrative identity*, I argue that the norms governing the construction of a narrative identity are among the most important, albeit not the only, norms governing the practical imagination.

What is an Option?

External options are those courses of action physically or logically open to an agent regardless of whether the agent does or can deliberate about that course of action. Internal options are those courses of action that the agent in fact seriously considers or could seriously consider in the course of practical deliberation. From here on out, when I use the term 'option' without a modifier, I am referring to internal options. When I refer to external options, I will use the term 'external option'.

An option is one of at least two courses of action about which one deliberates or can deliberate when one is faced with a choice about how to live. Thus, options always exist only in the context of deliberation about more than one option. Options must be, in some straightforward way, possible objects of intentions, since the normal consequence of settling on an option — *i. e.*, the normal consequence of concluding one's practical deliberations with a choice of an option — is intending to take that option. An option can be understood as an end, so long as it is conceived as the active realization of that end (so that it can be the object of an intention), or as a means to some end. If there are courses of action that are neither means nor ends, then these can be options as well.

I've distinguished between options understood as courses of action about which one *in fact* deliberates and options understood as courses of action about which one *could* deliberate. There are many factors that can prevent one from actually attending to certain courses of action in one's deliberations: exhaustion, drunkenness, illness, and so on. These physical limits of the practical imagination are not philosophically interesting — or at least they are not philosophically central to the current inquiry. The limits on the practical imagination that concern us here are those that are *internal* to the proper functioning of the practical imagination, *i. e.*, the internal limits that are given by the *constitutive norms* of the practical imagination. Thus, our focus is not on options understood as courses of action that an agent in fact considers — since these may be determined by philosophically marginal physical factors — but instead options understood as courses of action that a fully functioning agent could attend to given the limits of her practical imagination as determined by the constitutive norms of the practical imagination. So, if the agent is not suffering some deficit, then what the agent sees as options are the agent's options.

Some clarifications are in order.

First, this suggests that there can be cases in which an agent sees some course of action as an option when that course of action is not an external option. In such cases, the agent is relying on the world's being a certain way that it is not, and so the agent will fail in realizing her choice if she chooses to pursue that option.[5] This is no ground for objection: we can intend to do things that we in fact cannot do. So, it should be the case that we can deliberate over options that are not external options.[6]

Second, one might at this point deny that there are internal limits on what one can see as an option. Any adult agent, the objection goes, can consider any course of action in the course of deliberation. So, there are no norm-based limits on the practical imagination; there are only limits imposed by time and standard human fragility. This is

5. For more, see Matthew Noah Smith, "Reliance", *Noûs* 44 (2010): 135–157.

6. Hence the following sentence is not as confusing as it may at first seem: I can choose from options that I do not have. Employing the jargon I have introduced, this sentence should be parsed as: I can choose from internal options that are not external options.

false. It is not the case that one can just off the cuff seriously deliberate about taking any given course of action. For, practical deliberation concludes in an intention, and so practical deliberation itself is not something that one can just do off the cuff. Practical deliberation is prompted by pressure to make a decision about how to live, and so practical deliberation itself is partially defined by a kind practical commitment, namely, a commitment to intend to do what one decides to do as a result of deliberation. We might say that practical deliberation expresses a practical commitment to answering the questions "What ought I to do?" or "How ought I to live?" where the questions are not posed idly or for academic purposes.[7] Such "on-line" deliberation should be contrasted with evaluation of courses of action, which needn't conclude in an intention.

For example, I can evaluate the merits of buying a sandwich right now for lunch, but if I am not already committed to answering the question of whether to buy a sandwich (or whether to have lunch), my conclusion that I ought to buy a sandwich will not yield an intention. The conclusion that it would be best if I bought a sandwich might irresistibly prompt me to *actually* deliberate about whether to buy a sandwich, which will *then* yield an intention. But such deliberation over options was not what I was initially up to when merely evaluating courses of action. Now, it may be possible for a philosopher or a parent or a teacher to browbeat someone into serious deliberation, but we oughtn't underestimate how difficult this can be.[8] Repeatedly prompting someone with a question about whether to act in some manner is usually insufficient for generating actual practical deliberation. It normally can generate only serious evaluation, although even this can be difficult to prompt if people are not motivated to do the hard work of such evaluation. In short, getting someone — or oneself — to take a course of action seriously as an option is far more difficult than it might first appear: there are significant barriers to this. And among the barriers are the norms governing the practical imagination. That is, at least one explanation of the difficulty of seeing some courses of action as options — even if prompted to do so — is that these courses of action would be outside the limits of the practical imagination: such deliberation would violate the norms of practical imagination. This is not to say that these norms cannot be overcome — they are after all not causal laws. It is just to say that governance by the norms of the practical imagination goes a long way towards explaining much of the resistance to seeing certain courses of action as options.

I am not denying, then, that we can imagine taking certain actions when we do not see them as options. Let us call these cases of first-person fantasy (FPF). An FPF is an imagining of a series of events that either has a first-personal mode of depiction in which the agent is the undepicted subject or has a third-personal mode of depiction in which the agent is depicted (and picked out) as subject. Unlike options, FPFs are not conjured within the context of the deliberatively live sort of question I've urged is the context of full-blooded practical deliberation. So, FPFs do not represent courses of action that play overt roles in our practical lives; they are the mode of presentation by which we engage in both off-line evaluation and idle fantasy.

Finally, let us note that when one sees some course of action as an option, one is not blindly in the grip of ritual or habit. Rather, one has some sense that a choice both can be and is to be made.[9] For example, if two people in a tradition-bound community plan to get married and they straightaway intend to have the wedding ceremony that tradition requires, then they do not see having the wedding ceremony that

7. For more on this, see Nishi Shah, "How Action Governs Intention", *Philosophers' Imprint* 8.5 (2008). See also Bernard Williams's discussion of moral incapacities and the unthinkable, in which Williams allows that one could imagine killing babies but one could not decide to do it. See Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 92–93; and Bernard Williams, "Moral Incapacities", in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 46–55. I discuss this at greater length below.

8. For example, if moral evaluation and practical deliberation were identical, then imagine how moral and political philosophy classes would regularly erupt into do-gooding chaos!

9. For a sophisticated discussion about choice in practical deliberation, see Richard Holton, "The Act Of Choice", *Philosophers' Imprint* 6.3 (2006): 1–15.

tradition requires as an option in the sense that I am using the term. They are, of course, acting intentionally in planning to have the traditional wedding ceremony, but in an important sense they are not *choosing* to have the traditional wedding ceremony. For if one simply straightaway acts in certain manner, then while one acts intentionally, one is still acting entirely out of habit, ritual, or tradition and quite emphatically *not* out of choice.[10]

The notion of an option that I am using has now been sharpened to a point at which it is fair to say that it is a technical notion. But, it is not overly technical—it still more or less fits with ordinary usage of the concept. There are a few points where it may appear not to fit, though. I want to disarm some worries associated with such an appearance.

First, suppose one is walking along a bridge and has a flight of fancy in which one imagines throwing oneself off the bridge. One might say that one has suddenly come to see killing oneself by throwing oneself off the bridge as an option. This, though, would not count as seeing something as an option on my account since one does not engage in serious deliberation about flights of fancy such as these. Is this a problematic deviation from common usage? It is not. Consider that if one did see throwing oneself off the bridge as an option, we would say that one is suicidal. But we recognize a clean distinction between having suicidal fantasies, which are not all that uncommon, and being suicidal, which is rarer and much more worrisome. *This* distinction is straightforward and it tracks the option/FPF distinction I have described. So, any worries associated with these sorts of cases should be abated.

But now this discussion suggests a further distinction between an impulse to φ and seeing φ-ing as an option. Can this distinction be sustained without rendering too unusual my notion of an option? Yes, it can. Impulses are sudden and powerful desires that demand that we either immediately give in to them or immediately resist them. The capacity to deliberate is either disabled by impulses or just too slow to engage impulses. If we manage to resist our impulses, as we often do once we've reached even a young age, we are then in a position to deliberate about whether we ought to give in to them. In such cases, the impulse is transformed into an option (with the relevant correlative option being doing something other than what we, defeasibly, feel impelled to do).[11] This, again, is unproblematic: the impulses gripping someone in an episode of obsessive-compulsive disorder are quite distinct from the impulsive options one fleetingly considers and defeats. So, again, the notion of an option that is at work in this essay fits our general usage well enough.

Possible Norms of the Practical Imagination

In what follows, I consider and reject a few candidate norms of the practical imagination, thereby clearing the ground for my positive proposal.

Seeing φ-ing as an option requires only not believing that one cannot φ and desiring to φ.[12]

Call this proposal the *Prior Desire Requirement* (PDR). How does it fare? Not well.

First, it is not impossible for the practical imagination to present

10. This is not to say that courses of action one sees as options are not in some sense determined by exogenous forces: so long as there is winnowing, selecting, or merging of these courses of actions into a set of options, and so long as such winnowing, selecting, or merging is not itself completely governed by non-psychological force but also governed by the practical imagination, then the practical imagination is shaping one's options.

11. This suggests a further distinction between impulses and more standard desires, according to which an impulse is a sudden, powerful urge to do something at that very moment whilst a desire has a more inchoate or subtle form. For example, the husband's impulse to kiss his wife right then, right there is distinct from the husband's desire to kiss his wife sometime somewhere.

12. I am presuming that the practical imagination is restrained by a simple norm of consistency: one can see as options only courses of action one does not believe one cannot take. There is a large specialized literature on the role of norms like this in practical reason. For something of an overview, see Michael Bratman, "Intention, Belief and Instrumental Rationality", forthcoming in David Sobel and Steven Walls (eds.), *Reasons for Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13–36.

as an option either some course of action one has no desire to do, or some course of action one has a desire not to do. For example, suppose I know my teeth need cleaning and I want my teeth to be clean, but I do not want to go to the dentist. I surely can see going to the dentist to get my teeth cleaned as an option; it is just not one I want to take. Furthermore, there is nothing irrational about seeing as an option something one does not want to do (or something that one wants not to do). In fact, the capacity to see as an option a course of action that we don't want or want not to take assists us in critically reflecting on our desires (or lack thereof). In the dentist case above, for example, that I can see going to the dentist as an option could be part of what helps me to see that my lack of desire to go desire *not* to go to the dentist is irrational.

Additionally, we often seem to treat the contents of our desires as either purely exogenously determined (*e.g.*, as when the potential object of desire is actually paraded before one's senses or when the relevant desire is prompted by queries) or as infantile in their simplicity (*e.g.*, as a desire for the security of the mother, for the breast, for excreting, for eating, etc.) and so as somehow inborn. But objects of desires are neither always purely exogenously determined (on pain of regress) nor always inborn (on pain of a failure to explain novelty).[13] And since desire is not a productive capacity but is instead only a motivational one, the capacity to desire cannot generate its own objects. Here we seem to have a role for the practical imagination to play: it can present courses of action for the faculty of desire to latch on to (although this is obviously not the whole story). We begin motivationally neutral with respect to options until we consider them in some detail and then come to desire either to pursue them or to avoid them.

13. First, objects cannot always be exogenously determined, since at least some of the time, someone had to dream up that object in the first place. This applies just as much to the case of options: I can see a novel course of action as an option, as is often the case in people who engage in "experiments in living". Second, objects of adult desire are obviously not infantile in their simplicity, and even granting the (probably false) Freudian thesis that the objects of all desires can be explained in terms of infantile drives, the novelty of adult desire still requires explanation.

Seeing φ-ing as an option requires only not believing that one cannot φ and φ-ing is not ruled out by one's moral incapacities.

In Bernard Williams's discussion of a moral incapacity or the unthinkable,[14] Williams notices that there are some things that we just can't do. For example, most people just cannot kill innocent people for fun. The reason why is not that they would be overwhelmed by disgust if they tried but that they could not even try because they could not *decide*, with the appropriate intention being generated, to kill innocent people for fun. What is behind this incapacity is the commitment to "totally decisive considerations" which yield "the conclusion that I cannot do it."[15]

At first, Williams's account of moral incapacity does not seem germane to the discussion of the practical imagination. For, moral incapacities appear to be *products* of deliberations over options: the course of action I discover I cannot take is one I already treat as an option but, through deliberation, I find I am incapable of intending to perform that option. The practical imagination, on the other hand, is what fixes what we treat as an option prior to or in the context of practical deliberation. So, the practical imagination's operation is prior to the deliberative conclusions that are moral incapacities.

But this is not quite the view Williams had. For, Williams points out that "[moral incapacities] constitute the limits within which I decide: if I know I cannot φ, then φ-ing is not one of the courses that can enter my deliberative field of choice …"[16] Williams later goes on to describe such instances as "the silence of certain courses of action", which is to say that they are absent from the deliberative field of choice.[17] Moral incapacities are therefore often *not* the products of explicit deliberations or reflection on what we already know. Rather, moral incapacities seem to be incapacities even to *consider* choosing certain courses

14. See note 7.

15. Williams, "Moral Incapacity", p. 51.

16. *Ibid*.

17. *Ibid*.

of actions, which is the sort of thing we are looking for. So, Williams's comments about moral incapacity *are* germane to the discussion. Unfortunately, though, this account of moral incapacities is too narrow to provide much insight into how the practical imagination functions. For, genuine moral incapacities are too few and far between to account for the immense number of courses of action that are excluded from deliberation as options. That is, moral incapacities cannot do all the work of excluding from the deliberative field all the courses of action that are cognitively available to any agent. The vast majority of courses of action an agent could deliberate about are permissible by the agent's own lights. But most of these courses of action are not presented as options. Thus, while Williams' account of moral incapacities can (partially) explain why we don't see some courses of action as options, it is a marginal explanation. Most of the work done by the practical imagination will proceed by norms quite distinct from those that express the firm moral dispositions constitutive of the boundaries of an agent's moral character. So, repurposing Williams's account of moral incapacity as the whole story of how the practical imagination functions would be an inadequate strategy.

On the other hand, I strongly endorse a hermeneutic point Williams makes in the course of his discussion of moral incapacities. Williams argues that representing the silencing of options as the product of deliberation is not the same thing as claiming that conscious deliberation preceded the silencing of the options. It is only to say that "the idea of a possible deliberation by the agent in such terms gives us the best picture of what the incapacity is … [I]f we want to know what exactly an agent can and cannot do in this sense, we need to know how that agent would deliberate in given circumstances."[18]

Williams goes on to claim that (i) there are underlying dispositions that are constitutive of an agent's character that generate the moral incapacities; and (ii) these dispositions can be recovered in a manner intelligible to us (and especially to the agent himself) by representing the "silencing" of courses of action as a consequence of the application of certain norms.[19] This is the approach I take below in my account of the norms governing the practical imagination: I do not hold that agents deliberate about which courses of action are options, but instead that we can best reconstruct the processes at work via the idea of the agent's sorting courses of action into options through the application of certain norms. Perhaps, if prompted in the right sort of way, the agent will consciously and deliberately appeal to these norms in his explanation of why it is that he saw certain courses of action as options while others were shielded from deliberation. But usually, underlying dispositions do the work of excluding certain courses of action from the agent's deliberative field, and no explicit appeal to norms ever occurs even though these dispositions are, for many reasons, best cashed out in terms of the norms in question.

The Volitional Necessity Requirement

Harry Frankfurt, in a series of important articles, describes an account of the will and the self that has, at its core, the concept of a volitional necessity.[20] Roughly, volitional necessities are, according to Frankfurt, brute limits on the capacity to identify with one's desires as motivationally effective. Identification, in turn, is the acceptance of some desire as motivationally effective, *i.e.*, acceptance of some desire as the desire that will move one to act. When one accepts some desire as motivationally effective, one thereby takes that desire as one's own, and so identifies with the desire and the concomitant action that, if everything is working correctly, flows from that desire. In Frankfurt's language, this is also what it is to *care* about something: what one cares about is the object of the desire with which one identifies. In cases where one identifies with a desire *wholeheartedly* — where one cares wholeheartedly about something — one is reflectively satisfied

18. *Ibid*.

19. *Ibid*., p. 52.

20. See, generally, Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

in the sense that there is nothing else one cares about that conflicts with identifying with that desire (*i. e.*, there are no other desires with which one identifies that conflict with that desire). In this way, volitional necessities non-accidentally limn the boundaries of the motivational territory with which one wholeheartedly identifies and thereby, according to Frankfurt, at least partially compose what we might call one's self.

Identification, it should be emphasized, does not require evaluation of some higher-order attitude towards a desire. Frankfurt instead describes identification variably as treating something as important or as accepting it. Regardless of how we make sense of treating a desire as important or of accepting some desire, Frankfurt's notion of identification is definitely entirely a matter of attitudes that essentially have motivational potency, as opposed to attitudes that essentially are merely epistemic. In other words, the identification relationship is between different attitudes whose defining functions are cashed out in motivational terms, namely desires and other "passions" and not beliefs or "ideas". This careful restriction to the "passions" is not an accident, either. For Frankfurt is cashing out a kind of hierarchical endorsement of desires that is meant to be the analogue of a kind of Cartesian epistemic certainty, which is something like reflective satisfaction with a belief — a satisfaction that "resounds" throughout the entire system of beliefs.[21] That is, the epistemic analogue of a volition with which one wholeheartedly identifies is a belief about which one is certain, or, to put it in familiar Cartesian terms, a belief that is clear and distinct.

We can now wonder whether practical imagination is governed by norms involving volitional necessities. The claim is not that Frankfurt asserted that volitional necessities play the primary role in determining what we see as options; it is just that these psychological necessities seem to be just the sorts of things that would do the work of the practical imagination. With that in mind, we can ask whether we can see a course of action as an option if it is not consistent with our volitional necessities. Let us call the norm in question the Volitional Necessity Requirement (VNR). The VNR requires all options to be courses of action that the agent can care about even if the agent does not in fact care about them (*i. e.*, ones that are merely consistent with the agent's volitional necessities). A stronger version of the VNR — VNR* — would require that all options are course of action the agent *in fact* cares about. And, an even stronger version — VNR** — would require all options to be courses of action that the agent necessarily cares about (*i. e.*, she cares about them as a matter of volitional necessity). Let us call these norms the VNR family of norms.

My objections to the VNR family of norms are the following. Frankfurt tells us that volitional necessities operate over contentful volitions, which in turn are a special class of contentful desires. But as argued above, the practical imagination need not operate over desires, much less over volitions. For there can be cases in which one has no conative attitude whatsoever towards a course of action until after one sees it as an option.

Second, the VNR family of norms seem too limited to do the work of the practical imagination, since they will frequently fail to rule out sufficient numbers of courses of action, presenting far more courses of action as options than we in fact consider when deliberating. So, even if we do repurpose the VNR family of norms as norms of the practical imagination, they will, like moral incapacities, operate mostly at the margins of our deliberative lives when it comes to which courses of action we see as options.

Summary

What we believe, our values, our ends, a means-end coherence norm, and our moral incapacities can shape what we see as options. But both on their own and together, these factors cannot winnow down all the courses of action that are open to an agent into the options the agent considers when deliberating. Most importantly, these factors primarily winnow down courses of action at the margins. Furthermore, these

21. I take this insight from Barbara Herman's excellent discussion of Frankfurt's account of volitional necessities in "Bootstrapping", in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, eds., *Contours of Agency* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 253–274.

considerations do not positively highlight some course of action as *fitting* as an option. What we are seeking then is some set of norms that, together with these factors mentioned at the head of this paragraph, can both rule out certain courses of action and recommend certain courses of action as options.

Narrative Identity and Norms of Narrative

In this and the next section I offer a proposal for the norms of the practical imagination that, along with the factors discussed above, determine what courses of action we see as options. As mentioned, I shall be following Bernard Williams's appeal to deliberation as a hermeneutic tool in his explanation of moral incapacity. Williams writes:[22]

> [T]he underlying dispositions [that are the ground of the agent's moral incapacities] have not before been focused through and on to that very conjunction of features [constitutive of a particular case]. The incapacity to do this thing is an expression of those dispositions as applied to this situation *through this very deliberation* … [I]f the deliberation is sound and convincing, it is so because it is the best expression of dispositions that were there already. In creating an application, the deliberation reveals a potentiality.

Thus, I treat the articulation norms of practical imagination as a hermeneutic strategy for making sense of the practical imagination. Insofar as the description of the operation of the practical imagination as governed by these norms is convincing, then, it is so "because it is the best expression of the dispositions [constituting the practical imagination] that were there already".

Narrative Identity

Much of agency can only be understood diachronically.[23] This diachronic context is not an accidental jumble or heap of psychological attitudes but is instead a rich, complex, and highly structured tapestry of psychological states. Many philosophers have come to describe this tapestry as a *narrative*.[24]

22. Bernard Williams, "Moral Incapacity", p. 52 (italics in original).

23. Cf. Christine Korsgaard's comments:

> Some of the things we do are intelligible only in the context of projects that extend over long periods. This is especially true of the pursuit of our ultimate ends. In choosing our careers, and pursuing our friendships and family lives, we both presuppose and construct a continuity of identity and of agency … In order to carry out a rational plan of life, you need to be one continuing person. You normally think you lead one continuing life because you are one person, but according to this argument the truth is the reverse. You are one continuing person because you have one life to lead.

("Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency", in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 392). See also Elizabeth Anderson, "Reasons, Attitudes and Values: Replies to Sturgeon and Piper" 106 *Ethics* 3 (1996): 538–554, esp. pp. 541ff.; Edward Hinchman, "Trust and Diachronic Agency" 37 *Nous* 1 (2003): 25–51; and much of Michael Bratman's work on intentions (see his "Reflection, Planning and Temporally Extended Agency" and "Three Theories of Self-Governance" in *Structures of Agency* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200]): 21–46, 222–53, respectively).

24. See Bernard Williams, "Imagination and the Self" in *Problems of the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 26–45. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), who writes that it is "a basic condition of making sense of ourselves" that "we grasp our lives in a narrative" (p. 48). See also Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2nd Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), who writes:

> It is because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others … [E]ach of our shorter-term intentions is, and can only be made, intelligible by reference to some longer-term intentions … and so behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest term intentions are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer. Once again, we are involved in writing a narrative history. [193]

See also Daniel Dennett, "The Origins of Selves" 3 *Cogito* (1989): 163–173, and "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity", in Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale L. Johnson (eds.), *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 103–115; see also David Velleman, "The Self as Narrator", in *Self to Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 203–223. Elizabeth Anderson in "Reasons, Attitudes and Values: Replies to Sturgeon and Pipe" writes about how we can have a reason to φ when seeing φ-ing makes "narrative sense." (p. 542). See also David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," 112 *Philosophical Review* 1 (2003): 1–25. For an objection

There are many good reasons why this word is apt. Perhaps most significantly, there is a large (and growing) literature in developmental psychology demonstrating that people form their identities through the construction of life story narratives.[25] By "forming their identities", I do not mean forming a self that persists through time and that can be destroyed in death (or in teletransportation).[26] What I mean is what we might call our sense of ourselves as concrete individuals (where this "sense of self" could be subconscious). While identities are abstract objects along the lines of stories, musical scores, or recipes, narrative identities must also be realized in something, and in this case I presume that they are realized in a variety of psychological states (and perhaps even in bodily states). Thus, the claim (and it is, as evidenced by the citations in notes 24 and 25, a pretty widely held view) is that insofar as our agency is expressed through the adoption of ends, plans, and values, we have *narrative identities* constituted by an array of psychological states.[27]

Narrative identities are not self-consciously and meticulously written memoirs or autobiographies that, once authored, remain static. Rather, narrative identities are narratives constructed by selecting and arranging traits, memories, beliefs, values, and so on either into a narrative whole or into a multiplicity of narrative wholes. These narratives are constantly updated and subject to revision, and certain norms govern how they are constructed, updated, and revised. Despite this constant revision in light of new experience and activity (or imagined past experiences, or the presentation of new ideals, and so on), narrative identities provide a unity of lived experience that overlays the cascading hallucinatory and disorderly consciousness of everyday life (well represented, for example, in the Penelope episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*). In short, then, persons construct narratives about themselves for themselves that bring together many particulars under unified headings. I shall not speculate on what fundamental forces move people to do this; I posit only an underlying drive to construct unifying narrative identities — a desire which may be reducible to other, more basic drives.[28]

Narrative construction and revision need not be accomplished

to this approach, see Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity" *Ratio* 17.4 (2004): 428–452. For a response to Strawson's argument, see James L. Battersby, "Narrativity, Self, and Self-Representation" *Narrative* 14.1 (2006): 27–44. I thank an anonymous referee for reminding me of Strawson's article.

25. The classic defense of the general claim is found in Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* 2nd Edition (New York: Norton, 1963). An important essay in social theory on the topic is Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach" 23 *Theory and Society* (1994): 605–649. Some other crucial texts include B.J. Cohler, "Personal Narrative and the Life Course", in P. Baltes and O.G. Brim (eds.), *Life Span Development and Behavior* Vol. 4 (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 205–241; Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy and the Life-Story: Psychological Inquiries into Identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); J.A. Singer and P. Salovey, *The Remembered Self* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Roy F. Baumeister and Leonard Newman, "How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experiences: Motives that Shape Autobiographical Narratives," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20 (1994), 676–690; J.A. Singer, "Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespace: An Introduction" *Journal of Personality* 72 (2004): 437–459; and Kate C. McLean, Monisha Pasupathi, and Jennifer Pals, "Selves Creating Stores Creating Selves: A Process Model of Self-Development" 11 *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2007), 262–278. For overviews, see especially Dan P. McAdams, "Identity and the Life Story", in Fivush and Haden (eds.), *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 187–207, and Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (eds.), *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association 2006). See also articles cited in this section *passim*.

26. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 200ff.

27. For early important usage of the term 'narrative identity' in the social sciences, see Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity". For a useful discussion of it in the psychological literature, see Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, "Introduction", in McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (eds.), *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, 3–11.

28. This brute desire is a cousin of David Velleman's brute desire for self-knowledge as articulated in *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). What separates it from Velleman's brute desire for self-knowledge is that the conditions for satisfaction of this desire are more easily met: construction of a narrative identity is not regulated by either a truth norm or a norm requiring epistemic justification. For speculation on deeper motives behind the drive for the construction of a narrative identity, see Roy F. Baumeister and Leonard Newman, "How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experi-

through careful reflection and authoring. For narrative construction and revision can also occur below the cognitive surface. Furthermore, there is no reason not to assume that individuals unconsciously use narratives from popular culture and their beliefs about their family histories, among other sources, as templates for the construction of their own narrative identities.[29] Also, not everything that happens in one's life is used as material in the construction and revision of one's narrative identity. Some memories and experiences are salient and others are not. But what makes a memory or experience salient beyond its being a memory or experience of an extreme spectacle?[30] The answer to this question is that our narrative identity provides the basis for salience while at the same time being constituted by materials whose salience depends upon the materials' relationships to the overall narrative. Our narrative identities, in short, both are partially constituted by our memories, beliefs, values, and other materials, and determine the "salience metric" by which these very memories, beliefs, values, and other materials become narratively salient and thereby are incorporated into the narrative identity.

So, the claim I am presenting here is not that a narrative identity is essential for personhood: something other than a narrative identity may be able to do the job that so many claim narrative identity does. Nor is it the claim that a narrative identity is the sole or dominant manner in which we understand ourselves. Finally, I am not claiming that understanding ourselves narratively is necessary for a good life.[31] In general, while we may understand both the good and ourselves in non-narrative terms — *i.e.*, in terms of our being characters located within literary geographies, or in terms of ourselves as performing roles or socially constructed identities, such as gender, or in terms of ourselves as emulating role models, to name a few examples[32] — the psychological and philosophical evidence points in the direction of a narrative identity playing an enormous — probably a central — role in our self-understanding as practical agents. My goal in this section, then, is not to defend this claim — I shall be taking it for granted — but instead to articulate norms governing the construction, update and revision of one's narrative identity.[33]

Norms of Narrative Construction, Update, and Revision

Whether some string of events amounts to a narrative depends upon whether the collection of events meets certain standards. For example, neither geographical descriptions nor ethnographic descriptions are narratives. Nor, for that matter, is a list of what happens every ten minutes at the same street corner. For, as narratologists have long argued, narratives are, at their hearts, *stories* and so manifest a kind of structural unity that goes beyond a mere list of events.[34] But how are we to understand this structural unity? Philosophers — and many narratologists — have a fairly straightforward notion of this unity in terms of temporal, causal, and characterological relations. But I shall argue that these norms are insufficient for securing unity in a narrative identity. Both a thematic norm and a meta-norm governing the application of

ences: Motives that Shape Autobiographical Narratives" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20.6 (1994): 676–690.

29. For the construction of identities, see, *e.g.*, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991).

30. For more on the nature of spectacle, see Matthew Noah Smith, "Terrorism, Shared Rules, and Trust" *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16.2 (20080: 201–219, esp. p. 212–214.

31. But see David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time", in *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 56–84.

32. Velleman has recognized the importance of ideals to our agency. See his "Motivation by Ideal" in *Self to Self*, 312–329. For more on the norms of performing a gender role governing the exercise of our agency, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

33. This is the most significant way in which the discussion in this section is distinct from much of the philosophical and psychological work on narrative. For, that work rarely discusses what makes something a narrative, and in particular what norms govern the sort of narrative that plays the roles in our lives that they claim narratives play.

34. See especially Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, translated by Christine van Boheemen (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1985). This is the classic contemporary text on narratology. A good overview of classic and recent work is in David Herman, *Basic Elements of the Narrative* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

the thematic norm play ineliminable roles in securing the narrative unity that diachronic narrative identities display. But while this intervention may appear to be a challenge to narratology and to philosophers who appeal to narrative, it is not. It is instead a friendly amendment whose ultimate aim is to articulate four norms that govern the construction and revision of narrative identities and is not a general theory of narrative. The upshot of this discussion will be the following: these norms governing the construction of the narrative identity are constitutive norms of the practical imagination, *i.e.*, they are the norms governing which courses of action we see as options.

Temporal and Causal Norms[35]

The temporal norm requires that beliefs and memories organized into a narrative cohere temporally with the agent's overall set of beliefs. Thus, a memory of some event x that represents itself as having occurred ten years ago and a memory of some event y that represents itself as having occurred five years ago cannot be flipped in temporal order within the narrative. For, that would generate an inconsistency between the belief that x occurred ten years ago, the belief that y occurred five years ago, and the representation (in the narrative) that y occurred before x. But this would violate an epistemic norm requiring global consistency of one's credal attitude. So, this temporal norm governing narrative coherence in fact falls out from a more general norm mandating consistency in belief in a fairly simple manner.

The second norm, which is a causal norm requiring that narratives represent events as being causally related only if they meet one's folk theory of causation, also falls out of a more general epistemic norm requiring global consistency of credal attitudes. For, consistency requires that one not both believe that C did not cause E and represent in one's narrative identity that C did cause E.[36]

If these were the only two norms governing the construction of narrative identity, then it seems that what really regulates the construction of narrative identity would be some general epistemic norm requiring global consistency of credal attitudes. Insofar as such a proposal is philosophically attractive, it probably is because one sort of norm that seems to have undeniable authority is an epistemic norm, and it is attractive to try to ground the authority of norms that may be involved in practical reason on secure foundations such as this.[37]

But it is hard to see how such a norm could establish narrative unity. Simple reporting of facts must be unified under some sort of heading if it is not to take the form of a mere heap of events, each related to every other in different ways. The mere fact that the same agent is involved in each event establishes only a superficial unity, one that lacks the explanatory power we seek when trying to understand why certain events are left out of and others included in the narrative. We can see this when considering newspaper articles, modernist literature, and cinéma vérité documentaries and reportage, which are attempts to plainly state "just the facts". These narratives, which often are scrupulously constructed according to temporal and causal (and logical) norms, are unified into stories by a powerful norm that is quite distinct from temporal and causal norms. This norm prevents a concatenation of causally and temporally ordered episodes constituting the piece from being just a gush of events represented from the camera's

35. For a discussion of the empirical data regarding these norms' operation in the construction of narrative identity, see T. Habermas and S. Bluck, "Getting a Life: The Emergence of the Life Story in Adolescence" *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (2000): 748–769.

36. The order of recollection doesn't matter: it's only the way in which the memory presents itself. Nelson Goodman noted this: "[F]lashbacks and foreflashes are commonplace in narrative, and such rearrangements in the telling of a story seem to leave us not only with a story but with very much the same story" ("Twisted Tales", in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.),*On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 99–115, p. 100.

37. Positions like this generally go under the heading of "cognitivism" about practical reason. It comes in stronger and weaker forms, but the general idea is that the norms of practical reason are derivative of, or subservient to, the norms of theoretical reason. Some canonical statements of this view include: Gilbert Harman, "Practical Reasoning", reprinted in *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 46–74, and *Change in View* (MIT Press, 1986); David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* and *The Possibility of Practical Reason*; R. Jay Wallace, "Normativity, Commitment, and Instrumental Reason", *Philosophers' Imprint* 1.3 (2001); and John Broome, "The Unity of Reasoning?" in Simon Robertson (ed.), *Spheres of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62–92.

or journalist's point of view. This is precisely the norm that is not followed when one just reports what happens in one's life at 10-minute intervals (making appropriate causal links), and the non-governance by such a norm is one main reason why such reportage would seem a pointless and meaningfully unrelated series of events.

Temporal and causal norms cannot highlight this path rather than that one in the way that narratives do by focusing on one course of events to the exclusion of others. That is, some norms cannot explain why we treat these paths as important while others as irrelevant. Experimental physicists are famously constrained by theoretically determined experimental controls, which allow them to isolate the relevant series of events they are studying.[38] What plays the role of such scientific theories for the storyteller such that certain paths, certain incidents, are isolated by being highlighted and others are controlled for by being downplayed or simply ignored in the narrative? In order to make sense of narratives as narratives, in order to make sense of why this event starring the character is presented as a central feature of a narrative and that event starring the character is not mentioned at all, we look for some sort of point or some sort of arc that allows us to bring the cascade of events under a single heading. In short, in order for a series of causally and temporally related events to have *narrative unity*, there must be some sort of *thematic unity*.[39] Without such a theme, a representation of facts, even if ordered in a careful, epistemically hygienic timeline and even if always centered on the same character or represented from the same first-personal point of view, will not make narrative sense: it will not constitute a story. So, not only is conformity to a thematic norm necessary for a series of events to constitute a story; the thematic norm takes normative precedence over temporal and causal norms. For, these latter norms operate in the service of a thematic norm and not the other way around. (I shall discuss this a bit further below.

The Thematic Norm

By a theme, I mean something like an organizing idea of a narrative — the idea that can govern which events are part of the narrative and which are not, which events are represented as crucial and which are not, and so on. These organizing ideas may be canonical story forms (stories about redemption, stories about conflict with others, stories about conflict with nature, etc.) or they may be allegorical figures representing some distinctive *modus vivendi* (*e.g.*, the faithful servant, the sacrificing family member, the great man, the self-made man, etc.) that is cashed out or understood in story form.[40] These are the themes or thematic icons that play a regulative function as formal constraints on narrative construction and revision. That is, the thematic norm requires that the content of the narrative constituting some agent's narrative identity realizes the theme in question. It does this by determining which memories, beliefs, etc. are incorporated into the narrative constituting the identity and then by determining the significance of the event in the narrative.

Let us consider the theme of redemption to see more clearly how themes govern the construction and revision of narrative identities. The redemptive theme is the theme of being a person whose life is characterized by overcoming a setback (or repeatedly overcoming setbacks). Such a redemptive theme would lead to memories of, for

38. A classic discussion of this is in Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), esp. chapters 9, 14–16.

39. Thus, Robinson and Taylor write about the memories that partially constitute one's narrative identity that they "consist of a set of temporally and thematically organized salient experiences and concerns". See (J.A. Robinson & L.R. Taylor, "Autobiographical memory and self-narrative: A tale of two stories", in C.P. Thompson, D.J. Herrman, D. Bruce, J.D. Read, D.G. Payne, & M.P. Toglia (eds.), *Autobiographical memory: Theoretical and applied perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998), 125–144, at p.126. For more see Kate C. McLean, "Stories of the Young and the Old: Personal Continuity and Narrative Identity" *Developmental Psychology* 44.1 (2008), 254–264.

40. For more on redemption as a theme in narrative identities, see, *e.g.*, Dan McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a philosophical account that can be extended in a way congenial to this claim, see David Velleman, "Motivation by Ideal". In this way I am trying to broaden what a theme is so as to suggest that there is a diversity of ways in which our narrative identities might be constituted.

example, certain instances of suffering, failure, and/or oppression early in life being affectively highly charged, while other memories, *e.g.*, of successes and outside support being affectively neutral. Thus, the memories of the initial setback play a crucial role in the narrative identity, namely, they constitute the "opening chapters" of the narrative. Those memories of early assistance or success that are not affectively charged, in turn, lose their prominence and thereby do not demand to be fit into one's narrative identity.[41]

In general then, themes determine which memories, experiences, and self-identified traits are narratively salient. Those that don't fit the theme fade or are actually rejected as deeply uncharacteristic; they can even be disavowed as, in some sense, not one's own actions.[42] Finally, the thematic norm must be understood in the context of the broader narrative. It's not as if there is a free-floating, rigid theme into which a jumble of memories and experiences is jammed like so much dough into a bread-pan. Rather, themes emerge, and through a process of selection, reproduce and strengthen themselves. Thus, Singer and Salovey show, for example, that the strongest memories are those that are "vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern in an individual's life".[43]

Themes play a crucial conservative role in narrative construction: they act as a bulwark against the abandonment or radical change of a narrative. Narrative identities operate over large portions of one's life, synthesizing and presenting oneself to oneself as an agent of a certain sort living in a world of a certain sort. The theme, then, provides a stable structure to our narrative identities, which in turn help to constitute us as temporally extended, historically and culturally situated persons as opposed to, *e.g.*, a person-in-the-abstract or merely a bearer of rational capacities. In short, themes, because they are manifested only in extended, realized narratives (there can be no theme of an uncomposed story) exert conservative pressure on narrative identities by pressuring them to maintain their integrity as organized wholes. Thus, the pressure of the thematic norm unifies experiences and memories into narrative wholes. For, what separates a narrative whole from the cascade of merely causally and temporally related experiences is the way that themes bring these experiences together into a broader pattern that is recognizable at a reflective distance. Otherwise, the series of experiences are linked together like so many sausages, and in no other way. This does not preclude themes from being radically altered or abandoned. But because themes are what hold narratives together, such radical alteration or abandonment occurs only at the cost of the narrative identity itself. Thus, if we accept the existence of a brute and powerful drive to construct a narrative identity, then abandoning or radically altering a theme will require more than mere whim.

The Aesthetic Norm

If the thematic norm ensures that a concatenation of psychological states constitutes a narrative identity, and if deviations from this norm threaten the constitution of the narrative identity, then there are one or more norms that determine what counts as a deviation and when there is so much deviation that the narrative identity disintegrates. But being-a-narrative is neither a natural-kind property nor a property something has largely in virtue of meeting demands of truth, epistemic justification, morality, or practical reason. Rather, narratives and the property of being a narrative are distinctively aesthetic in nature. Thus, I take the meta-norms governing the manner in which other norms — in particular, the thematic norm — are applied in narrative

41. This is a very rough articulation of the process. Narrative psychologists are currently exploring the mechanisms involved, and recent work strongly suggests that the process I've just described is central. See, *e.g.*, Martin Conway, Jefferson Singer, and Angela Tagini, "The Self and Autobiographical Memory: Correspondence and Coherence" *Social Cognition* 22.5 (2004), 491–529, and Jennifer Pals, "Narrative Identity Processing of Difficult Life Experiences: Pathways of Personality Development and Positive Self-Transformation in Adulthood" *Journal of Personality* 74.4 (2006), 1079–1110.

42. Here, then, is another force, in addition to the Frankfurtian volitional necessities, that demarcates the boundaries of the self.

43. J. Singer & P. Salovey *The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in Personality* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 13.

construction and revision to be norms of *taste* governing what makes a narrative attractive. In short, these meta-norms, which I shall refer to together simply as the aesthetic norm from here on out — determine when some concatenation of psychological states sufficiently meets certain standards of "narrative beauty": the less "narratively beautiful", the less of a narrative. Importantly, then, the aesthetic norm does not govern all things considered aesthetic judgments. A narrative can be all-things-considered quite ugly while at the same time being "narratively beautiful". Despite this threat of confusion, I use the term 'aesthetic norm' because I take the content of this norm to be both a matter of taste and something that in a weak sense (discussed in the next section) determines to some degree which courses of action we find attractive.

The aesthetic norm operates along two axes. First, it governs how many disparate narrative themes can be woven together into a single narrative (or how many narratives with disparate themes can co-exist: I shall treat these as functionally identical characterizations of this axis of the aesthetic norm). Second, the aesthetic norm governs how rigidly the thematic norm will regiment construction and revision of the narrative constituting the narrative identity. Let us take a more detailed look at each axis.

First, narratives can be simple in that they are governed by a single theme. Others can draw together a range of themes that are woven tightly together like a tapestry or that are stitched together like a quilt, in both cases yielding a polyphonic narrative. The aesthetic norm governs this process, in one case pressuring narrative construction in a direction that avoids thematic conjunction or hybridization. In the other case, the norm can exert pressure in favor of conjunction or hybridization. I talk of hybridization in addition to conjunction because mere conjunction can simply involve the addition of a theme that is already implicit in an existing theme. For example, consider the religious zealot who has always seen his life in terms of a story of a spiritual warrior overcoming personal obstacles to realize God's will, but who then comes to see his life also in terms of a story of a *political* warrior overcoming institutional obstacles to realize God's will. This adjustment to his narrative identity involves conjoining a new theme to an old theme, but the two themes can be easily seen as species of the same genus. Hybridization, impurity, or mongrelization of themes involves bringing together into a single narrative multiple themes (or bringing together multiple narratives with different themes) that are in tension with each other. The aesthetic norm governs how much thematic complexity and tension of either sort can be tolerated without strong pressure towards revision in favor of thematic purity and single-focus resolution.[44]

The second axis along which the aesthetic norm regulates application of the thematic norm is the narrative's conformity to its theme. Narratives can realize themes to a greater or lesser extent; narratives can have loose threads hanging higgledy-piggledy from a tight thematic structure or they can be "clean", without any episodic danglers. The aesthetic norm thus also regulates how strictly the narrative will hew to a theme. Depending upon what the aesthetic norm requires, then, as the narrative begins to deviate from the theme, different responses will be required. If the norm permits (or even requires) a messy narrative — one that has many episodes that do not fit the theme and therefore, in light of the theme, are puzzling additions to one's narrative identity — then one may find these episodes as welcome or expected additions to one's narrative identity. But if the norm requires a clean narrative — one that is, as much as possible, devoid of these puzzling episodes — then, in the face of counter-thematic episodes, one may

44. Nietzsche saw quite clearly how multiple narrative identities can put pressure on each other and, to a certain degree, he celebrated this (although that is open to challenge). Nietzsche writes:

> The self is a fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum … [T]he assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought in consciousness.

The Will to Power, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 490.

suffer a certain crisis, experiencing a powerful pressure to revise one's narrative identity in the service of thematic clarity (or these episodes may not be particularly affectively valenced and therefore may not be incorporated into one's narrative identity).

The work of the aesthetic norm need not occur at the level of cognitive processing, but it might. Suppose, for example, that one reflects on one's narrative identity (represented to oneself as a life-story or as just the general "bent" of one's life) and one finds a narrative incorporating multiple and conflicting themes. This may strike one as repulsive. In such cases, one may feel pressure to resolve the tension in one direction or the other even if one does not believe that this is going on (or suspect it, or whatever). On the other hand, one might find a narrative identity that incorporates heterogeneous themes to be attractive. In fact, like much art and literature today that celebrates a kind ultra-hybridity of self, many social psychologists argue that the "postmodern self" is the most common narrative identity in contemporary Western society.[45] Thus, we find both thematic purity at one end of the aesthetic spectrum and the hybridity of intermingled narrative themes at the other end of the aesthetic spectrum. The aesthetic norm locates one spot on that spectrum and then regulates narrative construction and revision in light of that. We might say that this spot on the spectrum is a regulative ideal for the thematic purity and thematic complexity of a narrative identity, and that in light of this regulative ideal, narrative identities are reformed and reorganized.[46]

45. See, *e.g.*, E.E. Sampson, "The Challenge of Social Change for Psychology: Globalization and Psychology's Theory of the Person" *American Psychologist* 44 (1989): 914–921, "The Deconstruction of the Self", in J. Shotter and K.J. Gergen (eds.), *Texts of Identity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 1–19; K.J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Modern Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); H.J.M. Hermans, H.J.G. Kempen, R.J.P. van Loon, "The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism" *American Psychologist* 47 (1992), 23–33; and Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For a sympathetic response to this challenge, see, *e.g.*, Dan P. McAdams "The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: A Modest Proposal", in R. Ashmore and L. Jussim (eds.), *Self and Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 46–78.

46. An enormous amount has been written on regulative ideals in Kant. For my understanding of the regulative ideal, I rely heavily on Philip Kitcher, "Projecting the Order of Nature", in R.E. Butts, ed., *Kant's Philosophy of Physical Sciences* (New York: D. Reidel Publishing, 1986), 201–235. Kant writes, about the force of the regulative ideal on our theoretical reason: "For the law of reason to seek unity is necessary, since without it we would have no reason, and without that, no coherent use of the understanding, and, lacking that, no sufficient mark of empirical truth; thus in regard to the latter we simply have to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), at A651/B679).

Insofar as organizing memories, beliefs, and other attitudes in ways violating temporal and causal norms promotes conformity to the theme, and insofar as one is in the grip of an aesthetic norm that promotes narrative construction that would require violation of the temporal and causal norms, then the grip of temporal and causal norms will be loosened. For, the raw regulative power of the thematic and aesthetic norms is greater than the regulative potential of the temporal and causal norms, since the power behind the thematic and aesthetic norms is the brute need for a narrative identity. In sum, the thematic norm is what secures the unity of the narrative, and so secures the existence of the narrative identity itself. And the aesthetic norms govern the application of the thematic norm. So if we accept that there is a brute drive to construct a narrative identity and, presumably, a brute aversion to loss of narrative identity, then there will be much more powerful forces behind the norms *modulating* the temporal and causal norms than any rationalist pressures towards narrative identities maintaining strict causal and temporal order at the risk of thematic and therefore narrative disintegration. In short, when the choice is loss of narrative identity versus inconsistency, the default will be to cling to narrative identity at the cost of inconsistency.[47]

Summary

Nothing I have said here suggests that these norms are unbreakable (if they were, they wouldn't be norms of the sort we are interested

47. Whether there is value in greater consistency is another question. I am articulating here an account of the mechanisms governing construction of narrative identities.

in). People can find themselves in situations in which their narrative identities are challenged. Since I have not denied that, for example, an agent's values can play a role in determining what she sees as an option — I have only claimed that values operate mostly at the margins of the practical imagination — an agent can reflect on herself and find that the narratives in terms of which she understands herself are alien or morally or politically objectionable and thereby see changing her narrative identity as an option. But, this is an exceptional case, and so not trouble for my view: it invites elaboration not rejection. Thus, nothing I have said should be taken to entail that practical deliberation is completely governed by narrative identities. We can globally evaluate our narrative identities on a number of normative axes and then decide what to do about them. But this is not something that happens with great frequency: how often do people *seriously* deliberate about radically changing their self-conceptions? Furthermore, agents cannot, through mere force of will, change their narrative identities at the drop of a hat. An extreme turn of events — *e.g.*, events involving significant emotional upheaval — can destabilize one's narrative identity, leading to alterations such that one becomes, as is often said, a different person. But, again, this is (fortunately) the exception. Thus, while it is certainly possible to act in ways that ultimately do violence to one's narrative identity, it is precisely the stability of the narrative identity ensured by the norms of narrative construction and revision that gives sense to talk of such destabilization and deviation from the narrative identity.

To summarize, then, the claims in this section: human beings construct narrative identities that are stable in virtue of being thematically unified, although what counts as thematic unity is itself not fixed but subject to determination by a complicated aesthetic norm. One question naturally emerges at this point. Beyond merely determining narrative salience through rendering certain memories and experiences affectively charged, in virtue of what other processes can these norms regulate the construction of narrative identities? After all, modulation of the affect-ladenness of one's memories is a limited and blunt tool for shaping a narrative identity so that the narrative identity is in conformity with the demands of the thematic and aesthetic norms described above. My claim is that the norms of narrative identity are also the norms of the practical imagination. Consequently, the practical imagination serves, in many ways, the aims of the narrative construction and revision by presenting as options actions that fit the demands of the norms governing the construction and revision of the narrative identity of the agent.

Back to Options: How the Practical Imagination Works

Recall the puzzle at the heart of this paper: there are many more courses of action open to an agent than the agent deliberates about when deliberating about how to live, so we need an account of why certain courses of action can be in deliberative view while others are excluded from the deliberative field. That is, we need an account of what determines an agent's options (where, remember, by "options" I mean "internal options"). We have found that appeals to norms of means-end coherence, the demands of desire, moral incapacities, and what an agent's ends and volitional necessities are cannot fully explain why certain courses of action are options while others aren't. We need to find other factors to carry most of the burden of shaping what courses of actions are an agent's options. Because we have substantial evidence that individuals have narrative identities, and because these narrative identities take the form of stories whose construction and revision are governed by the four norms discussed above, and because these narrative identities are constituted by both memories and intentions, it is natural to assume that the demands of constructing and revising narrative identities can shape our deliberative lives. In particular, there is a clear analogy between the effect that the norms governing the construction and revision of narrative identities has on memories — highlighting some, downplaying others, perhaps even playing a role in the fabrication of memory — and the effect that such norms could have on practical deliberation. Thus, I claim that a course of action is an option when that course of action fits as a possible

addition to one's narrative identity — as an episode or a chapter that is added to one's narrative identity — where fittingness is largely determined by the norms of narrative construction and revision and the demands of norms governing means-ends coherence and consistency with desires, values, and beliefs. In particular, I claim that norms governing construction and revision of narrative identity do work that has heretofore been unrecognized: insofar as a course of action fails to meet minimum criteria governing constitution and revision of one's narrative identity, then one will not, *ceteris paribus*, see that action as an option but instead, if one attempts to imagine it, as an FPF.[48]

How does this work? As just mentioned, narrative identities extend backwards and forwards in time and so have a janus-faced quality, looking back to draw together the loose strings of memory and existing beliefs (or even fabricated memories) into a narrative whole while looking forward towards future experiences and events in order to add to and develop the narrative.

In retrospect, what is picked out as narratively salient are those memories, experiences, etc. that fit a narrative theme according to the requirements of the causal and temporal norms, as well as the aesthetic meta-norm. Presumably, these "materials" are marked as narratively salient by becoming affectively charged. That is, they are associated with strong feelings — positive or negative — and this affective valence just makes them part of our narrative identity. The valence of the affect associated with the narrative materials may also shift as they settle into the narrative or as the narrative around them changes: what was once a terrible experience becomes a revelatory one, or vice versa.[49]

In prospect, this functions via the practical imagination and the options that flow from practical imagination. The practical imagination presents to the agent options from which the agent chooses. When an agent sees an action as an option, she sees it as one possible component of her narrative identity (although not under that guise). For, if an agent chooses to enact some option, she will thereby add to her narrative identity. Thus, by choosing to pursue an option an agent shapes her narrative identity or brings her lived experience back into line with the requirements of the thematic and aesthetic norms governing her narrative identity. When courses of action do not fit a narrative identity — when they run afoul of the norms governing the construction and revision of a narrative identity — the actions (or their representations) very well may remain cognitively accessible by the agent. But they will be alien to the agent's identity, *i.e.*, they will be actions that fail to meet the aesthetic norms governing the development of the theme(s) holding together the agent's overall narrative identity. Thus, if the agent wishes to conjure herself taking that action, she can still do so, but it will usually be in the form of an FPF. That is to say, the agent conjures a story and then sees herself as a character in that story, but she does not see that story as *her* story, but only as a story in which she is a character (unless she is trying to deviate from her narrative identity or is drunk or otherwise impaired). We might say that when conjuring an FPF, an agent sits back and watches herself from a distance as opposed to when an agent conjures an option, in which case the agent is *engaged* with that role in the story. All conceivable actions, then, are presumably available for FPF, but not all are available as options, since the conditions under which engagement with an action is psychologically possible are usually quite stringent: the action must meet the demands of the construction of a narrative identity.

For example, if the aesthetic norms governing construction and revision of one's narrative identity do not allow for thematic fragmentation or diffusion but instead exert strong pressures towards thematic purity, then one's practical imagination will not present as options those actions that threaten thematic fragmentation or diffusion. These actions remain available as objects of FPF, though, since merely conjuring oneself performing some action but not treating that conjuring as

48. The *ceteris paribus* clause is meant to exclude cases of destabilization and deviance from narrative identity discussed above.

49. For more on this, see Daniel Gilbert on affective forecasting: Daniel T. Gilbert and Jane E. J. Ebert, "Decisions and Revisions: The Affective Forecasting of Changeable Outcomes" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82.4 (2002), 503–514, and Daniel Gilbert and Timothy D. Wilson, "Prospection: Experiencing the Future", *Science* 317 (2007): 1351–1354.

a potential part of one's narrative identity fails to threaten the aesthetic status — the beauty — of one's narrative identity. The conjuring is, we might say, an offline conjuring in the sense that it is not in any way connected to the construction of the agent's narrative identity. On the other hand, if one's life takes certain twists and turns, or if one's aesthetic norms are radically altered, what once seemed as mere fantasy may begin to appear as an option. But, barring such disrupting events in one's life and barring radical changes to the norms governing the construction and revision of one's narrative identity, the action will simply be available as an FPF. This also allows us to understand how two people with the same actions open to them might see themselves as having radically different options: "One man's trivial revision is another man's upheaval".[50] That is, for one person, incorporating taking some action into his narrative identity might amount to a thematic upheaval and so simply fail to be presentable as an option. His practical imagination thereby is limited in its capacity to present that action as an option. But for another man, incorporating taking the action would amount to a trivial revision to his narrative identity and so is easily presented as an option (although whether he in fact decides to take that action is another question altogether).

50. Frank Manuel and Fritzie Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1979), p. 8. Consider also what John Rawls says about upheavals:

> [Citizens] may regard it as simply unthinkable to view themselves apart from certain religious, philosophical, and moral convictions, or from certain enduring attachments and loyalties … These convictions and attachments help to organize and give shape to a person's way of life, what one sees oneself as doing and trying to accomplish in one's social world. We think that if we were suddenly without these particular convictions and attachments we would be disoriented and unable to carry on. In fact, there would be, we might think, no point in carrying on. But our conceptions of the good may and often do change over time, usually slowly but sometimes rather suddenly. When these changes are sudden, we are particularly likely to say that we are no longer the same person … On the road to Damascus Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle.

John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical", in *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 405.

The norms governing the practical imagination, then, are the norms regulating the construction and revision of our narrative identities. In particular, courses of action that do not fit the narrative theme, where fittingness is determined by aesthetic norms, are not presented by the practical imagination as options, whereas those that do can be presented by the practical imagination as options.[51]

More Deviations[52]

This account of options is highly conservative. But we can act in surprising manners, and so we can see as options courses of action that do not fit our narrative identities. How is this possible given my view?

First, we must recall that it is not a simple matter to see any course of action as an option. Options are courses of action that we seriously consider taking. It is not in any way uncommon to spend long hours evaluating whether some wild adventure would be a great thing to do or how wonderful a change of careers might be, and then to go right on back to making the same old predictable, standard choices that define our lives. We may wish to call this *akrasia*, but it is simpler to treat it as a case of not seriously deliberating about reshaping one's life in light of these evaluations. Why? Because one is not deciding *whether to take* these courses of action; one is merely evaluating these courses of action. If one repeatedly comes to conclude that a wild adventure or a change of careers would be best, one might begin to deliberate about whether to pursue that life — and things will almost surely become much more emotionally tumultuous at that point. Idle speculation is easy; deciding whether to change is hard.

Thus, while it surely may be rational — even reasonable — to see as options courses of action that do not fit one's narrative identity, it can be distressing, where the distress is due to the way in which such a deliberation does violence to how a narrative identity unfolds with

51. The thesis of this paper partially dovetails with Frankfurt's claims about how what we care about and what we love determines the outline of the self and, importantly, our action. I haven't space here to discuss this, but it is worth future consideration.

52. I thank an anonymous referee for urging me to address this at greater length.

respect to the governing theme. What is required in order to consider seriously as options such courses of action is the means to overcome the aesthetic demands of the norms of narrative construction governing the practical imagination. This can be done but it comes at some psychological cost. This is not news: we often feel uncomfortable when we start considering whether to choose new ways to live.[53] But, once we settle into the new life — once our narrative identities are adjusted in light of how our lives have changed — these new courses of action can seem quite natural — even beautiful![54]

53. What accounts for the liberating feeling of acting out of character? I can explain that: the feeling of liberation comes from feeling free of the demands of the norms of narrative construction. But, this feeling usually comes after we have chosen to act, not when we are, usually with a fair bit of trepidation, considering taking the action, *i. e.*, when we are still considering it as a mere option.

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