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Self and other: The limits of narrative understanding

If the self – as a popular view has it – is a narrative construction, if it arises out of discursive practices, it is reasonable to assume that the best possible avenue to self-understanding will be provided by those very narratives. If I want to know what it means to be a self, I should look closely at the stories that I and others tell about myself, since these stories constitute who I am. In the following I wish to question this train of thought. I will argue that we need to operate with a more primitive and fundamental notion of self; a notion of self that cannot be captured in terms of narrative structures. In a parallel move, I will argue that there is a crucial dimension of what it means to be other that is equally missed by the narrative approach. I will consequently defend the view that there are limits to the kind of understanding of self and others that narratives can provide.

1. The narrative account of self

Let me start out by presenting the narrative account of the self in some detail. A central starting point is the assumption that we need to distinguish between merely being conscious or sentient, and being a self. The requirements that must be met in order to qualify for the latter are higher. More precisely, being a self is an achievement rather than a given. How is selfhood achieved? In and through narrative self-interpretation. Some creatures weave stories of their lives, they organize their experiences and actions according to narrative structures thereby situating them in the context of a unifying story, and this is what constitutes them as selves. This is why being a self is quite different from being slim, 38-years old or black-haired. Who I am is not something given, but something evolving, something that is realized through my projects. There is no such thing as who (in contrast to what) I am independently of how I understand and interpret myself. To put it differently, no account of who one is can afford to ignore the issue of one's self-interpretation, since the former is (at least partially) constituted by the latter.

It is important to understand that the emphasis on narratives is not merely to be understood as an epistemological thesis. I attain insight into who I am by situating my character traits, the values I endorse, the goals I pursue, etc. within a life story that traces their origin and development; a life story that tells where I am coming from and where I am heading. In a similar manner, I get to know who you are by learning your life story. But the reason why narratives constitute a privileged way to obtain knowledge about the self is precisely because they constitute it. As Bruner puts it, "A self is probably the most impressive work of art we ever produce, surely the most intricate".¹ Thus, narratives do not merely capture aspects of an already existing self, since there is no such thing as a pre-existing self, one that just awaits being portrayed in words. To believe in such a pre-linguistic given is quite literally to have been misled by stories.

When it is being claimed that the self is a product of a narratively structured life, that it is constructed in and through narration, the claim is obviously not that selfhood requires the actual composition of an autobiography. Autobiographies are merely the literary expressions of the kind of narrative self-interpretation that we continuously engage in. We consequently need to distinguish the kind of narratives that characterize our ongoing lives from consciously worked-up narratives. For my self-interpretation to count as narrative is simply, according to Schechtman, for me to understand the different life episodes in terms of their place in an unfolding story.² It is a question of organizing my experiences and actions in a way that presupposes an implicit understanding of me as an evolving protagonist.

The narrative account is quite explicit in emphasizing both the *temporal* and *social dimension* of selfhood. As Ricoeur has argued, the time of human existence is neither the subjective time of consciousness nor the objective time of the cosmos. Rather, human time bridges the gap between phenomenological and cosmological time. Human time is the time of our life stories; a time structured and

1 J. Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 14.

2 M. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 97.

articulated by the symbolic mediations of narratives.³ Events and experiences that occur at different times are united by being incorporated into a single narrative. Whether or not a particular action, experience or characteristic counts as mine is a question of whether or not it is included in my self-narrative.⁴ In fact, according to MacIntyre, the unity of the self “resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end”⁵; or as Husserl – a thinker not customarily associated with the narrative approach – puts it, “The ego constitutes itself for itself in the unity of a (his)story [Geschichte]”.⁶ Narration is a social process that starts in early childhood and which continues for the rest of our lives. Who one is depends on the values, ideals and goals one has; it is a question of what has significance and meaning for one, and this, of course, is conditioned by the community of which one is part. The concepts I use to express the salient features of whom I take myself to be are concepts derived from tradition and theory and will vary widely from one historical period to the next and across social class and culture. As Bruner points out, our self-making stories are not made up from scratch; they pattern themselves on conventional genres. When talking about myself, my selfhood becomes part of the public domain, and its shape and nature is guided by cultural models of what selfhood should and shouldn’t be.⁷ Furthermore, others are called upon to hear and to accept the narrative accounts we give of our actions and experiences. To come to know oneself as a person with a particular life history and particular character traits is, consequently, both more complicated than knowing one’s immediate beliefs and desires and less private than it might initially seem.⁸ When I interpret myself in terms of a life story, I might be both the narrator and the main character, but I am not the sole author. The beginning of my own story has always already been made for me by others and the way the story unfolds is only in part determined by my own choices and decisions. In fact, the story of any individual life is not only interwoven with the stories of others (parents, siblings, friends etc.), it is also embedded in a larger historical and communal meaning-giving structure.⁹ I understand myself as the inheritor and continuer of a tradition, or to quote Husserl:

I am a member of a we-community in the broadest sense – a community that has its tradition and that, for its part, is connected in a novel manner with the generative subjects, the closest and the most distant ancestors. And these have “influenced” me: I am what I am as an heir.¹⁰

Ricoeur, who has frequently been regarded as one of the main proponents of a narrative approach to the self, has occasionally presented his own notion of narrative identity as a solution to the traditional dilemma of having to choose between the Cartesian notion of the self as a principle of identity that remains the same throughout the diversity of its different states and the positions of Hume and Nietzsche, who held an identical subject to be nothing but a substantialist illusion.¹¹ Ricoeur suggests that we can avoid this dilemma if we replace the notion of identity that they respectively defend and reject with the concept of narrative identity. The identity of the narrative self rests upon narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the same, the narrative identity can include changes and mutations within the cohesion of a lifetime. The story of a life continues to be reconfigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about him- or herself. It is this constant reconfiguration that makes “life itself a cloth woven of stories told”.¹² However, although it is undeniable that Ricoeur has made decisive contributions to the discussion, Ricoeur himself has also pointed to some of the limitations of this approach. As he states in *Temps et récit*, narrative identity is the name of a problem at least as much as it is that of a solution.¹³

Like most interesting accounts, the narrative approach certainly does face some problems. To tell a story about one’s own life is not simply a recounting of the brute facts, rather it is, as Bruner puts it, an interpretative feat.¹⁴ Stories are not simply records of what happened, but continuing interpretations and reinterpretations of our lived lives. They are essentially constructive and reconstructive phenomena that

3 P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit III: Le temps raconté* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1985), 439.

4 Op. cit. note 2, 94.

5 A. MacIntyre, *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 205.

6 E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 109.

7 Op. cit. note 1, 65.

8 D. A. Jopling, *Self-knowledge and the self* (London: Routledge, 2000), 137.

9 Op. cit. note 5, 221.

10 E. Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität II* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 223.

11 Op. cit. note 3, 443.

12 Ibid, 443.

13 Ibid, 446.

14 Op. cit. note 1, 12-13.

involve deletions, abridgments, and reorderings. A storyteller will typically impose more coherence, integrity, fullness and closure on the life events than they possessed while simply being lived. To put it differently, a narrative necessarily favours a certain perspective on one's experiences and actions to the exclusion of others. But insofar as there is no straightforward one-to-one correlation between the life as it is led and the life as it is told, one is immediately confronted with the question concerning to what extent one can talk about the truth and falsity of self-narratives. It seems misguided to suggest that self-narratives are constitutionally self-fulfilling and therefore infallible true. We can be mistaken about who we are, and it should be obvious that a person's sincere propagation of a specific life story does not guarantee its truth. In fact, in some cases the stability of our self-identity might be inversely proportional to the fixed stories we tell about ourselves. Elaborate storytelling might serve a compensatory function; it might be an attempt to make up for the lack of a fragile self-identity. But given that our self-narratives are fallible, are they only constrained by the narratives of others, or can we also appeal to narrative-transcendent facts? This question is, of course, related to the controversy over whether the narrative conception of self commits one to a realist or fictionalist take on the self. Some defenders of a narrative approach to selfhood have argued that the self is nothing but a fictional centre of narrative gravity. It is merely the abstract point where various stories intersect.¹⁵ In a parallel move, it has been argued that narratives merely reflect our need for a satisfying coherence, and that they distort reality by imposing fictional configurations on a life that in and of itself has no beginning, middle and end.¹⁶ By contrast, others have claimed that the narrative self has reality insofar as it is a *real* social construction. It has also been argued that although there are obvious differences between fictional narratives and real life ones – in life we have to take things as they come, we are in the middle of events, and are denied the authoritative retrospective point of view of the story-teller or historian¹⁷ – narrative beginning-middle-end structures can be seen as an extension and enrichment of configurations already found in experience and action.¹⁸ Lived time already has a quasi-narrative character, which is why it is not amenable to just any telling. What is dreamlike or fanciful is consequently not the belief that our lives have coherence, but the belief that they have none.¹⁹

It would lead too far to attempt to tackle all of these questions in the following. So what I intend to do is to focus on the underlying issue that really seems to be at stake in all the different questions: Self-narratives may capture something important about who we are, but is the narrative model capable of delivering an exhaustive account of what it means to be a self? Is it really legitimate to reduce our selfhood to that which can be narrated? Is it possible to resist fictionalism as long as the self is taken to be nothing but a narrative construction? In its dominant version, the narrative approach combines an epistemological and an ontological thesis. Per se, I don't have a problem with neither thesis, nor with their conjunction. I do think the stories we tell are a central means by which we come to know ourselves and others. I do think such stories reflect how we view ourselves and that these stories come to shape our self-understanding and thereby also who we are. Thus, I would readily concede that narratives play an important role in the constitution of a certain dimension or aspect of selfhood. However, I would oppose the exclusivity claim, that is, the claim that *the* self is a narratively constructed entity and that *every* access to self and other are mediated by narratives. These are the kind of radical claims that one can find among many of the defenders of the narrative account. As Wilhelm Schapp, for instance, writes in his classical work *In Geschichten Verstrickt*: Human life is a life that is caught up in stories, it is nothing apart from these stories, and such stories provide the only possible access to oneself and to others.²⁰

2. The experiential self

In my view, it is an unacceptable oversimplification to assume that the self is a univocal concept, as if there is only one type or level or aspect of self to reckon with. The first step in my argumentation will be to show that

15 D.C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 418; D. C. Dennett, 'The Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity,' *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, F. S. Kessel, P. M. Cole and D. L. Johnson (eds.) (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum), 103-115.

16 L. O. Mink, 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', *New Literary History* 1, 1970, 558.

17 D. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 59.

18 D. Carr, 'Discussion: Ricoeur on Narrative,' *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, D. Wood (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1991), 162.

19 Op. cit. note 17, 90.

20 W. Schapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1953/2004), 123, 126, 136, 160.

we need to operate with a different dimension or level of selfhood than the one addressed by the narrative account.

This is *per se* not a new idea. In recent years, Damasio and Metzinger have both argued in a similar fashion. In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio claims that a sense of self is an indispensable part of the conscious mind. As he writes: “If ‘self-consciousness’ is taken to mean ‘consciousness with a sense of self,’ then all human consciousness is necessarily covered by the term – there is just no other kind of consciousness”.²¹ When I think of the moon, read a text, perceive a windowsill, a red book, or a steaming teacup, I automatically and implicitly sense that I, rather than anyone else, am doing it. I sense that the objects I now perceive are being apprehended from my perspective and that the thoughts formed in my mind are mine and not anyone else’s. Thus, as Damasio puts it, my conscious life is characterized by a constant, but quiet and subtle, presence of self.²²

Consciousness is not a monolith, however, and Damasio finds it reasonable to distinguish the simple, foundational kind, which he calls *core consciousness*, from a more complex kind, which he calls *extended consciousness*. Core consciousness has a single level of organization and remains stable across the lifetime of the organism. It is not exclusively human and does not depend upon memory, reasoning, or language. In contrast, extended consciousness has several levels of organization. It evolves across the lifetime of the organism and depends upon both conventional and working memory. It can be found in a basic form in some nonhumans, but only attains its highest peak in language-using humans. According to Damasio, these two kinds of consciousness correspond to two kinds of self. He calls the sense of self that emerges in core consciousness *core self* and refers to the more elaborate sense of self provided by extended consciousness as *autobiographical self*.²³ From a developmental perspective, there are little more than simple states of core self in the beginning, but as experience accrues, memory grows and the autobiographical self can be deployed.²⁴

There is, superficially at least, a rather striking overlap between Damasio’s position and the view recently defended by Metzinger in his book *Being No One*. Metzinger also argues for a close link between selfhood, self-experience, and the first-person perspective. As he puts it, during conscious experience, human beings experience themselves as being someone. But the phenomenology of being someone is essentially connected to the phenomenology of perspectivalness, to the experiential perspectivity of one’s own consciousness. Our experiential life possesses a focus of experience, a point of view. It is a first-person perspective in the sense of being tied to a self. Thus, it doesn’t make sense to speak of a first-person perspective without speaking of a self.²⁵ But what does this experiential selfhood amount to? Metzinger writes that there seems to be a primitive and pre-reflective form of phenomenal self-consciousness that underlies all higher-order and conceptually mediated forms of self-consciousness, and in which these have to be anchored, if an infinite regress is to be avoided. What this pre-reflective self-intimacy amounts to, is a very basic and seemingly spontaneous, effortless way of inner acquaintance, of “being in touch with oneself,” of being “infinitely close to oneself.” It can also be articulated in terms of a pre-reflective and non-conceptual sense of ownership or consciously experienced “mineness” that accompanies bodily sensations, emotional states and cognitive contents. In non-pathological cases, all these mental states are pre-attentively and automatically experienced subjectively as one’s own states, as part of one’s own stream of consciousness. This consciously experienced selfhood – which precedes any thinking about the self – differs from all other forms of experiential content by its highly invariant nature. Excepting pathological cases, and contrary to, say, the scent of crushed mint leaves or the taste of buttermilk, it is always there. Frequently it will recede into the background of phenomenal experience. It will be attentionally available, but will often not be attended to at all, but merely be expressed as a subtle background presence.²⁶

From a purely descriptive point of view, however, there is nothing new in the analyses offered by Damasio and Metzinger. In both cases, we are dealing with a reformulation and (unintended) repetition of ideas already found in classical phenomenology. To put it differently, the most explicit defence and analysis of what might be called the *experiential dimension of selfhood* is precisely to be found in classical phenomenology, i.e., in thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry. Let me give a few examples.

21 A. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1999), 19.

22 Ibid, 7, 10, 127.

23 Ibid, 16-17, 127.

24 Ibid, 175.

25 T. Metzinger, *Being No One* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 5, 157, 303.

26 Ibid, 158, 267, 291, 626.

In *L'être et le néant*, Sartre argues that consciousness is at bottom characterized by a fundamental self-givenness or self-referentiality which Sartre terms *ipseity* (selfhood, from the Latin *ipse*).²⁷ When Sartre speaks of self, he is referring to something very basic, something characterizing (phenomenal) consciousness as such, and although it is something I can fail to articulate, it is not something I can fail to be. As he also writes, "pre-reflective consciousness is self-consciousness. It is this same notion of *self* which must be studied, for it defines the very being of consciousness".²⁸

In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty occasionally speaks of the subject as realizing its *ipseity* in its embodied being-in-the-world.²⁹ However, he also refers to Husserl's investigations of inner time-consciousness and writes that the original temporal flow must count as the archetypical relationship of self to self and that it traces out an interiority or *ipseity*. One page later, Merleau-Ponty writes that consciousness is always affected by itself and that the word "consciousness" has no meaning independently of this fundamental self-givenness.³⁰

In the beginning of the recently published *Bernauer Manuskripte über das Zeitbewusstsein*, Husserl writes that consciousness exists, it exists as a stream, and it appears to itself as a stream. But how the stream of consciousness is capable of being conscious of itself; how it is possible and comprehensible that the very being of the stream is a form of self-consciousness, is the enduring question.³¹ Husserl's investigation of temporality is to a large extent motivated by his interest in the question of how consciousness is given to itself, how it manifests itself. His analysis of what he calls the structure of inner time-consciousness (protention-primordial impression-retention) is precisely to be understood as an analysis of the (micro)structure of the pre-reflective self-givenness of our experiences.³² What we find in Husserl is consequently a sustained investigation of the relationship between selfhood, experiential self-givenness, and temporality.

To mention just one further example, Michel Henry has repeatedly characterized selfhood in terms of an interior self-affection.³³ Insofar as subjectivity reveals itself to itself, it is a self.³⁴ It is because consciousness is as such characterized by a primitive, tacit, self-consciousness, that it is appropriate to ascribe a fundamental type of *ipseity* to the experiential phenomena. More precisely, Henry links a basic notion of selfhood to the first-personal givenness of experiential life, and writes that the most basic sense of self is the one constituted by the very self-givenness of experience.³⁵

The crucial idea propounded by all of these phenomenologists is that an understanding of what it means to be a self calls for an examination of the structure of experience, and vice versa. Thus, the self is not something that stands opposed to the stream of consciousness, but is, rather, immersed in conscious life; it is an integral part of its structure. More precisely, the (minimal or core) self is claimed to possess experiential reality, it is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is in fact identified with the first-personal *givenness* of the experiential phenomena. This first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena is not something quite incidental to their being, a mere varnish that the experiences could lack without ceasing to be experiences. On the contrary, this first-personal givenness makes the experiences *subjective*.

Let me try to unpack this idea. Self-experience – at its most primitive – is simply taken to be a question of having first-personal access to one's own consciousness; it is a question of the first-personal givenness or manifestation of experiential life. Most people are prepared to concede that there is something "it is like" for a subject to undergo a conscious experience (to taste single malt whiskey, to have the blues, to remember a swim in the North Sea). But insofar as there is something it is like for the subject to have the experience, the subject must in some way have access to and be acquainted with the experience. Moreover, although conscious experiences differ from one another – what it is like to smell crushed basil leaves is different from what it is like to see the full moon or to hear Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta* –

27 J.-P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Tel Gallimard, 1943/1976), 142.

28 Ibid, 114.

29 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), 467.

30 Ibid, 487-488.

31 E. Husserl, *Die Bernauer Manuskripte über das Zeitbewusstsein (1917-18)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 44, 46.

32 E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie II* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), 118; E. Husserl, *Formale und Transzendente Logik* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 279-280.

33 M. Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation* (Paris: PUF, 1963), 581, 584, 585.

34 M. Henry, *De la subjectivité* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 52.

35 Op. cit. note 33, 581.

they also share certain features. One commonality is the quality of *mineness* (or to use Heidegger's term "*Jemeinigkeit*"), i.e., the fact that the experiences are characterized by first-personal givenness. That is, the experiences are given (at least tacitly) as *my* experiences, as experiences *I* am undergoing or living through. To put it differently, experiences are not merely characterized by certain qualitative features, they are also characterized by the fact that they necessarily exist for a subject or a self; they necessarily feel like something for *somebody*. The first-personal givenness of experiences consequently entails a primitive form of intrinsic self-reference. I do not first experience a neutral or unowned toothache or taste of cauliflower in order then in a subsequent move to have to ask the question "Whose experience is this actually?" And whether the experience in question is experienced as mine or not does not depend on something apart from the experience, but on the givenness of the experience. If the experience is given in a first-personal mode of presentation, it is experienced as my experience, otherwise not. In short, the self is conceived as the invariant dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences.

Incidentally, this view makes it clear that self-experience, on this view, is not to be understood as an experience of an isolated, worldless self. To have a self-experience is not to interrupt the experiential interaction with the world in order to turn one's gaze inwards; on the contrary, self-experience is the self-experience of a world-immersed self. It would, consequently, be a decisive mistake to interpret the phenomenological notion of a minimal experiential core self as some kind of Cartesian-style mental residuum, that is, as some kind of self-enclosed and self-sufficient interiority. The phenomenological notion of self is fully compatible with a strong emphasis on the fundamental intentionality, or being-in-the-world, of consciousness. It is no coincidence that even Heidegger employed such a minimal notion of self.³⁶

On a purely descriptive level, there is a striking similarity between the views espoused by Damasio, Metzinger, and the phenomenologists. But this is also where the agreement ends. Whereas Damasio claims that the sense of self is an indispensable part of the conscious mind and considers the conscious mind and its constituent properties to be real entities, not illusions,³⁷ and whereas the phenomenologists would argue that the self is real if it has experiential reality, and that the validity of our account of the self is to be measured by its ability to be faithful to experience, by its ability to capture and articulate (invariant) experiential structures, Metzinger defends the view that it would be a fallacy (what he calls the error of phenomenological reification) to conclude from the content and structure of phenomenal self-experience to the literal properties of an internal and non-physical object, which is what Metzinger takes the self to be.³⁸ In Metzinger's view, a phenomenological account of selfhood has no metaphysical impact. Our self-experience, our primitive pre-reflective feeling of conscious selfhood, is never truthful in that it does not correspond to any single entity inside or outside of the self-representing system. This is why Metzinger can write that the central ontological claim of his position is that no such things as selves exist.³⁹

But why should the reality of the self depend upon whether it faithfully mirrors either subpersonal mechanisms or external (mind independent) entities? If we were wholeheartedly to endorse such a restrictive metaphysical principle, we would declare the entire life-world, the world we live in, and know and care about, illusory. Metzinger argues that the central ontological claim of his position is that no such things as selves exist. But considering Metzinger's repeated claim that phenomenal content cannot count as epistemically justified content – at one point he explicitly characterizes our phenomenal experience during waking state as an online hallucination⁴⁰ – couldn't one by using the very same arguments show that there is no such "thing" as phenomenal consciousness itself?⁴¹ And what about the cultural and historical world, is that also fictitious? If there are no I, you, and we, how can there then be "a rich social reality"?⁴² Given Metzinger's view, would the truly consistent position not be to argue that there are in fact no such things as chairs, playing cards, operas, marriage ceremonies and civil wars?

But let me return to my main questions: Is *the* self a narrative construction? Are narratives the primary access to self? I think at this stage it should be obvious why I want to take exception to both claims. The experiential core self is an integral part of the structure of phenomenal consciousness and must be regarded as a pre-linguistic presupposition for any narrative practices. Only a being with a first-person

36 M. Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1999).

37 Op. cit. note 21, 7, 308.

38 Op. cit. note 25, 271. Since the phenomenologists would typically deny that the self is an object (be it an internal or an external one) one might wonder whether it is Metzinger himself who is engaged in a process of reification.

39 Ibid, 563-565.

40 Ibid, 51.

41 Ibid, 401, 404.

42 Ibid, 590.

perspective could consider her own aims, ideals and aspirations as her own and tell a story about them. When speaking of a first-person perspective one should consequently distinguish between having such a perspective and being able to articulate it linguistically (eventually to be labelled as a weak and strong first-person perspective, respectively). Whereas the former is simply a question of enjoying first-personal access to one's own experiential life, the latter obviously presupposes mastery of the first-person pronoun.

Some of the narrativists seem to recognize the existence of the former, but they fail to recognize its full significance and to draw the requisite conclusion, namely that even this primitive and foundational structure merits the name of self. In *Time, Narrative, and History*, for instance, Carr grants that experiences and actions must already be given as mine if I am to worry about how they hang together or make up a coherent life-story, but he then claims that such unity is merely a necessary and not a sufficient condition for selfhood.⁴³ In *Narrative and the Self*, Kerby insists that the attempt to explain the phenomenon of selfhood by appealing to the primitive structures of (time-)consciousness is like the attempt to describe a house only in terms of its framework or underlying structure. In his view the reality of the human self is not as easily accounted for.⁴⁴ One might readily agree that there is more to human existence than the possession of a first-person perspective, but on the other hand, who would want to live in a house that lacked a stable foundation? Finally, to mention just one further example, in *Making Stories*, Bruner admits that certain features of selfhood are innate and that we need to recognize the existence of a primitive, pre-conceptual self, but at the same time, he maintains that dynarrativia (which we for instance encounter in Korsakoff's syndrome or Alzheimer's disease) is deadly for selfhood and that there would be nothing like selfhood if we lacked narrative capacities.⁴⁵ Apart from wondering why Bruner doesn't make the obvious move and concede that it is necessary to operate with different complementary notions of self, one might also ask whether his allusion to neuropathology is really to the point. Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative brain disorder that results in profound memory loss, changes in behaviour, thinking, and reasoning as well as a significant decline in overall functioning.⁴⁶ The person suffering from Alzheimer's will consequently have a wide range of cognitive impairments; the comprehension and expression of speech (and narratives) will only be one of the areas affected. So even *if* no self remains in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's, one cannot without further ado conclude that dynarrativia was the cause of its death. (If one were on the lookout for a disorder that specifically targeted narrative capacities, global aphasia might be a better choice – but then again, who would want to claim that those struck by global aphasia cease being selves?). Furthermore, there is a big *if*. It is by no means obvious that Alzheimer's disease brings about a destruction of the first-person perspective, a complete annihilation of the dimension of mineness and that any experience that remains is merely an anonymous and unowned experiential episode, so that the "subject" no longer feels pain or discomfort as his or her own. In fact, it is hardly insignificant that experienced clinicians report that no one person with Alzheimer's disease is exactly like another.⁴⁷ But if this is true, and if Alzheimer's disease does in fact constitute a severe case of dynarrativia, we should draw the exact opposite conclusion from Bruner. We would be forced to concede that there must be more to being a self than what is addressed by the narrative account. This is in fact the conclusion drawn by Damasio, who explicitly argues that neuropathology provides empirical evidence in support of the distinction between core self and autobiographical self. Neuropathology reveals that core consciousness can remain intact even when extended consciousness is severely impaired or completely absent, whereas a loss of core consciousness will cause extended consciousness to collapse as well.⁴⁸

One option is to distinguish between a minimal experiential self and an extended narrative self. Another option is the following: When dealing with the experiential self, one might retain the term "self", since we are dealing precisely with a primitive form of self-givenness or self-referentiality. By contrast, it may be helpful to speak not of the self, but of the *person* as a narrative construction. After all, what is being addressed by a narrative account is the nature of my personal character or personality; a personality that evolves through time and is shaped by the values I endorse and by my moral and intellectual convictions and decisions. It might also be worthwhile to consider the etymology of the concept of person. The Latin *persona*

43 Op. cit. note 17, 97.

44 A. P. Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 32.

45 Op. cit. note 1, 86, 119.

46 L. Snyder, *Speaking our Minds: Personal Reflections from Individuals with Alzheimer's* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000), 44.

47 *Ibid*, 72.

48 Op. cit. note 21, 17, 115-119.

refers to masks worn by actors and is related to the expression *dramatis personae*, which designates the characters in a play or a story.⁴⁹

The fact that the person (i.e., the narrative self) presupposes the experiential self (but not vice versa) does not diminish the significance of the former. Due to the first-personal givenness of experience, our experiential life might be inherently individuated. It remains, however, a purely formal kind of individuation. A description of my experiential self will not differ in any significant way from a description of your experiential self, except, of course, in so far as the first is a description of me, the second a description of you. By contrast, a more tangible kind of individuality manifests itself in my personal history, in my convictions and decisions. It is through such acts that I define who I am, thereby distinguishing myself from others; they have a character-shaping effect. I remain the same as long as I adhere to my convictions; when they change, I change.⁵⁰ Thus, ideals can be identity defining; acting against one's ideals can mean the disintegration (in the sense of a dis-integrity) of one's wholeness as a person.⁵¹

Persons do not exist in a social vacuum. To exist as a person is to exist socialized into a communal horizon, where one's bearing to oneself is appropriated from the others. I become a person through my life with others in our communal world. As Husserl, a remarkably versatile thinker, observes:

The origin of personality lies in empathy and in the *social acts* which are rooted in the latter. To acquire a personality it is not enough that the subject becomes aware of itself as the center of its acts: personality is rather constituted only when the subject establishes social relations with others.⁵²

Usually, the self under consideration is already personalized or at least in the process of developing into a full-blown person. But although a narrow focus on the experiential core self might, therefore, be said to involve a certain amount of abstraction, there is no reason to question its reality, it is not a *mere* abstraction. Not only does it play a foundational role, but, the notion of an experiential core self has also found resonance in empirical science. There are for instance pathological limit situations where this minimal self might, arguably, be encountered in its purity.⁵³

3. Narratives and otherness

So far I have considered the relation between narratives and selfhood. What about our encounter with others? Isn't it the case that we make sense of the actions of others by placing them in narrative frameworks? Isn't it the case, as both Hutto and Bruner have argued, that our ability to understand others is greatly enhanced by our shared narratives and by our understanding of how a manifold of character types will react in various narrative scenarios?⁵⁴

I think there is a truth to these claims, and I think that the *Narrative Practice Hypothesis* constitutes a promising alternative to the standard positions in the Theory of Mind debate,⁵⁵ but I also think there is a limit to how far narratives can get us. Let me mention two of my reservations.

The first one is rather trivial. From a developmental point of view, it just will not do to make narratives the basis and foundation of intersubjectivity. Children only acquire narrative skills at a relatively late stage, but already from birth onwards, they engage in increasingly sophisticated forms of social interaction. Eye-contact and facial expressions are of paramount importance to the young infant, who already shortly after birth is able to distinguish its mother's face from the faces of strangers. When a mother mirrors a two to

49 This is neither to suggest that persons are after all mere fictions or that they are masks that somehow conceal the primitive core self. My point is merely that there is an etymological link between narratives and the original concept of persons.

50 J. G. Hart, *The Person and the Common Life* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 52-54.

51 Cf. L.L. Moland, 'Ideals, Ethics, and Personhood.' *Personhood*, H. Ikäheimo, J. Kotkavirta, A. Laitinen and P. Lyyra (eds.) (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press, 2004), 178-184.

52 Op. cit. note 10, 175.

53 Cf. J. Parnas, 'Self and Schizophrenia: A Phenomenological Perspective.' *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, T. Kircher and A. David (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 217-241.

54 D.D. Hutto, 'The Story of the Self: The Narrative Basis of Self-Development.' *Critical Studies: Ethics and the Subject*, K Simms (ed.) (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997); Op. cit. note 1, 16.

55 Cf. D. D. Hutto, 'The Narrative Practice Hypothesis.' *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, D.D. Hutto (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

three-month-old infant's affects, the infant will reciprocate and show sensitivity to the affective mirroring of the mother. In fact, infants clearly expect people to communicate reciprocally with them in face-to-face interactions, and to work actively with them in order to sustain and regulate the interaction. If the mother is asked to remain immobile and unresponsive, the infant will react by ceasing to smile, and will exhibit distress and attempt to regain her participation.⁵⁶

From around nine months of age, infants can follow the eye-gaze or pointing finger of another person and, when they do so, they often look back at the person and appear to use the feedback from his or her face to confirm that they have, in fact, reached the right target. In other words, they seek to validate whether joint *attention* has been achieved. Similarly, they might show objects to others, often looking to the other person's eyes, to check whether he or she is attending.

From early on children can recognize when they are being attended to by others. This is evident from their display of affective forms of self-consciousness (shyness, coyness, embarrassment, etc.) when looked at. Fourteen-month-olds are even able to recognize that they are being imitated by adults. In one experimental setup, an infant and two experimenters would be sitting across each other. One of the experimenters would be imitating the actions of the infant, whereas the other experimenter would perform other non-matching actions from within the same repertoire of movements. The infant would consistently look, smile and direct more testing behaviour at the imitating adult.⁵⁷

All of these cases – and there are many more – exemplify forms of intersubjectivity that precede narratively based interactions.

One possible retort might be that even if these forms do not comprise full-fledged narratives, they still contain what might be called micro-narratives; the exchanges are still structured as meaningful sequences with a beginning and an end. This reply is, of course, part of a strategy that we have already come across. Remember that several of the narrativists in order to increase the plausibility of their own positions found it necessary to distinguish consciously worked out narratives from pre- or quasi-narratives, which they claimed characterize our ongoing lives. Similarly, in order to ward off the accusation of fictionalism, several of them argued that the narrative beginning-middle-end structures should be seen as extensions and enrichment of temporal configurations already found in experience and action.⁵⁸ The problem with this type of retort, however, is that by severing the link between language and narrative, it stretches the latter notion beyond breaking point. The term threatens to become all-inclusive and consequently vacuous – in the end everything meaningful involves narratives – and this is surely a sign of bankruptcy.

Another objection might be that none of the examples mentioned above demonstrate that the infant is in possession of a proper understanding of the self-other distinction, and that such an understanding – which is a prerequisite for any real intersubjectivity – only enters the stage through language-use and narratives. It would lead too far to discuss this objection in detail, so I will simply refer to the work of developmental psychologists like Daniel Stern and Philippe Rochat, who in my view have argued convincingly for the presence of a basic self-other differentiation in young infants.⁵⁹

Let me pass on to my second reservation, which I want to discuss in slightly more detail. Contrary to what seems to be the prevalent view within the contemporary theory of mind debate, most phenomenologists would claim that it is possible to experience the feelings, desires, and beliefs of others in their expressive behaviour.⁶⁰ That I can have an actual *experience* of another conscious subject – and do not have to rely on theoretical inferences or internal simulations – does not imply, however, that I can experience the other in the same way as she herself does, nor that the other's consciousness is accessible to me in the same way as my own is. The second- (and third-) person access to psychological states differ from the first-person access, but this difference is not an imperfection or a shortcoming; rather, it is constitutional. It makes the experience in question an experience of another, rather than a self-experience. As Husserl would put it, had I had the same access to the consciousness of the other as I have to my own, the other would cease being an other and

56 E. Fivaz-Depeursinge, N. Favez and F. Frascarolo, 'Threesome intersubjectivity in infancy.' *The structure and development of self-consciousness: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, D. Zahavi, T. Grünbaum and J. Parnas (eds.) (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 221-34.

57 A. Gopnik and A.N. Meltzoff, 'Minds, bodies and persons: Young children's understanding of the self and others as reflected in imitation and 'theory of mind' research.' *Self-awareness in animals and humans*, S. Parker and R. Mitchell (eds.) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 166-186.

58 Op. cit. note 18, 162.

59 D. N. Stern, *The interpersonal world of the infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); P. Rochat, *The infant's world* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

60 Cf. D. Zahavi, 'Expression and empathy.' *Folk Psychology Reassessed*, D. Hutto and M. Ratcliffe (eds.) (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

instead become a part of myself.⁶¹ To demand more, to claim that I would have a real experience of the other only if I experienced her feelings or thoughts in the same way as she herself does, is nonsensical. It would imply that I would only experience another if I experienced her in the same way that I experience myself, i.e., it would lead to an abolition of the difference between self and other. Thus, the givenness of the other is of a rather peculiar kind. We experience the meaningful behaviour of others as expressive of mental states that transcend the behaviour that expresses them. As both Sartre and Lévinas famously argued, the otherness of the other is exactly *manifest* in this transcendence.

According to Sartre, any convincing account of intersubjectivity must respect the irreducible difference between self and other, must respect the *transcendence* of the other. Whereas a standard approach to the problem of other minds has been by way of asking how it is possible to experience others, Sartre took this line to be misguided, and instead proposed a reversal of the traditional direction of inquiry. According to Sartre, it is crucial to distinguish between the other, whom I perceive, and the other, who perceives me, that is, it is crucial to distinguish between the other as object, and the other as subject. What is truly peculiar and exceptional about the other is not that I am experiencing a *cogitatum cogitans*, but that I am encountering somebody who transcends my grasp, and who in turn is able to perceive and objectify *me*. Thus, rather than focusing upon the other as a specific object of empathy, or as somebody that can be grasped and fixed by means of narratives, Sartre argued that the true other, the other-as-subject, is exactly the being for whom I can appear as an object, and that it is when I have the painful experience of my own objecthood, for and before a foreign subject, that I have experiential evidence for the presence of the other-as-subject.⁶²

In his analysis of intersubjectivity, Sartre emphasized the transcendent, ineffable and elusive character of the other, and rejected any attempt to bridge or downplay the difference between self and other. A similar approach was adopted by Lévinas who also took the problem of intersubjectivity to be primarily a problem of the encounter with radical otherness. As long as we are conceiving of the other as something that can be absorbed by or integrated into a totality, we have not yet reached a proper understanding of the other as other: "If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other".⁶³ Lévinas consequently argued that a true encounter with the other is an encounter with that which cannot be conceptualized or categorized. It is an encounter with an ineffable and radical exteriority. The other is not conditioned by anything in my power, but can only offer itself from without, independently of all systems, contexts, and horizons as a kind of epiphanic visitation or revelation.⁶⁴ In *Totalité et infini* Lévinas explicitly criticized traditional philosophy for being a totalizing enterprise. In his view, it was a philosophy of power characterized by a relentless movement of absorption and reduction. It absorbed the foreign and different into the familiar and identical. It reduced the other to the same.⁶⁵ Needless to say, this is also a criticism that one could direct at the attempt to understand others by ensnaring them in unifying narratives. To put it differently, the narrative approach to others might be criticized for entailing what could be called a *domestication of otherness*: You reduce the other to that which can be captured in narratives.

Sartre's and Lévinas's accounts of intersubjectivity can be criticized in various ways. The most obvious objection is that I never encounter others in isolation, but always in a context. I meet others in the situational framework of a history with a beginning and a direction. But although both Sartre and Lévinas might, more generally speaking, be said to miss out on important aspects of sociality and interpersonal co-existence, I also think they call attention to a crucial aspect of what it means to encounter others; an aspect or dimension that I fear is lost by the narrative approach. Thus, once again, Schapp goes too far. In his book *In Geschichten Verstrickt*, he claims that what is essential about others are their stories. The encounter with the other in flesh and blood, the concrete face-to-face encounter, doesn't add anything significant, doesn't point beyond the narrative. In fact, and sticking to the metaphor, Schapp argues that the face also tells stories, and that meeting somebody face-to-face is like reading a book. It is when we know these stories that we know the other person. To know or meet somebody in person is merely to encounter new stories or have the old stories confirmed.⁶⁶ But as I have suggested, this take fails to realize that the other is precisely characterized by an otherness which resists or exceeds whatever narratives we bring to bear on him or her.

61 Op. cit. note 6, 139.

62 Op. cit. note 27, 302-3, 317.

63 E. Lévinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1979), 83.

64 E. Lévinas, *Totalité et infini* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1961/1990), 70.

65 Ibid, 33, 38.

66 Op. cit. note 20, 105-106.

4. Conclusion

A full appraisal of the narrative account of self must resolve some issues that to a large extent have shaped the ongoing dispute between phenomenology and hermeneutics. These issues include 1) the relation between experience and language, 2) the relation between temporality and historicity, and 3) perhaps most importantly, the question concerning to what extent self-experience is necessarily mediated through signs, symbols and cultural works; a question that has found a vivid articulation in Ricoeur's discussion of what he calls the wounded cogito (*cogito blessé*). I don't take myself to have addressed any of these issues exhaustively, but I hope it is clear that I reject the claim that phenomenology and hermeneutics are excluding alternatives. In my view, the two approaches complement each other, though it is probably also obvious that I would grant a certain priority to the phenomenological approach, and take issue with the kind of position that has been espoused by, for instance, Charles Taylor. According to Taylor, the self is a kind of being that can only exist within a normative space and he therefore claims that any attempt to define selfhood through some minimal or formal form of self-awareness must fail, since such a self is either non-existent or insignificant.⁶⁷ But, as I have argued, an account of self which disregards the fundamental structures and features of our experiential life is a non-starter, and a correct description and account of the experiential dimension must necessarily do justice to the first-person perspective and to the primitive form of self-reference that it entails. None of the narrative theories that I am familiar with have – in so far as they are at all aware of the problem – even come near to being able to explain how first-personal givenness could be brought about by narrative structures. But this failure is not really surprising, since the reverse happens to be the case. In order to tell stories about one's own experiences and actions, one must already be in possession of a first-person perspective. To claim that an experience is only appropriated as my own the moment I tell a story about it is simply wrong.⁶⁸

I do have some sympathy for the narrative approach, and for the general idea that who I am is a question of what matters to me, and therefore something that cannot be settled independently of my own self-understanding, but I don't think this approach can stand alone. It needs to be supplemented by an account that does more justice to the first-person perspective. This is why I have argued that it is mandatory to operate with a more primitive and fundamental notion of self than the one endorsed by the narrativists; a notion that cannot be captured in terms of narrative structures. In a parallel move, I have argued that there is a crucial dimension of what it means to be other that is bound to be missed by the narrative approach. In short, I have defended the view that there are limits to the kind of understanding of self and others that narratives can provide. One of the obvious questions that so far remain unanswered is whether there is a systematic link between the two limitations. The answer seems straightforward. The reason why the other is characterized by a certain dimension of inaccessibility and transcendence, the reason why the other is an other is precisely because he or she is also a self, with his or her own irreplaceable first-person perspective.⁶⁹

67 C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 49.

68 It also flies in the face of many recent important insights concerning the function of first-person indexicals (the fact that "I," "me," "my," "mine" cannot without loss be replaced by definite descriptions) and ascriptionless self-reference (the fact that one can be self-conscious without identifying oneself via specific properties).

69 For a further discussion of the issues presented in this paper, cf. D. Zahavi, *Self-awareness and Alterity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999) and D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the first-person perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). This study has been funded by the Danish National Research Foundation.