

HOW DOES THE SELF ADJUDICATE NARRATIVES?

ŞERIFE TEKIN



KEYWORDS: self, narrative, mental disorder, adjudication problem.

PHILOSOPHERS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS have advanced a plethora of explanations of the self in relation to narratives, positing varying degrees of connection between them. For some, narratives created by a subject about herself shape her self-constitution (Flanagan 1991; Fivush 1994). For others, they help the subject to participate in social cognition (Hutto 2008). Some represent narratives as merely *one* basis of personal identity and consider them cognitive tools used by the subject to construct self-concepts (Neisser 1997; Tekin 2011); others render narratives *the* basis for self-constitution (Dennett 1992; MacIntyre 1981; Schechtman 1996). Some require that the subject create her ‘whole life narrative’ unifying her life experiences (Schechtman 1996; Flanagan 1991); others appeal to ‘multiple narratives’ about the subject, authored by herself and/or others (Fivush 2007; Neisser 1997; Tekin 2010). Psychologists use empirical studies of memory, joint reminiscence of the past, and parent–child narratives (Fivush and Nelson 2006; Hoerl and McCormack 2005), whereas philosophers work with thought experiments and appeal to mental disorders to connect narratives and the self (Flanagan 1996).

In “Whole Life Narratives and the Self,” David Lumsden (2013) joins the debate, arguing that a multiplicity of self-narratives is implicated in personal identity. He scrutinizes the rich philosophical critical landscape, juxtaposing narrative theories to neo-Lockean accounts of personal identity, and emphasizes the strengths of the former. He argues that there are good reasons to salvage narrative theories without committing to their stringent demands, such as the necessity of a whole life narrative for personal identity. For Lumsden, a person is a bundle of narrative threads, not a single whole life narrative. Yet a subject can have multiple narrative threads without sacrificing unity. In his view, this is more plausible than other narrative theories and should offer a suitable context for engaging with persons with mental disorders.

However, Lumsden’s proposal encounters a challenge that needs to be addressed if the theory is to offer resources for engaging with persons with mental disorders. I shall call this the adjudication-of-narratives problem (AP). If a person is a bundle of narrative threads with links in consciousness and the unconscious, as Lumsden argues, and if these threads sometimes offer alternate narrations of the same life episode, by virtue of emphasizing different details of the rich tapestry of the same life episode, how does the subject adjudicate these when/if they conflict? I stress that my addressing of this issue is not to argue against Lumsden, because

I find his theory appealing in both its responsiveness to the experiences of persons we encounter in our daily lives and its call for diminishing the stringent requirements of narrative theories to make them amenable to the context of psychopathology. Rather, in a bid to fine-tune the practical aspects of his proposal, I look more closely at the complexity of the connection between the self and narratives, as well as the complexity of the mental disorder experience.

According to Lumsden, a narrative selects from a range of rich details of a subject's life, connects the subject to her experiences, and captures the connection between the details and her mental state. Narrative threads are: (i) sequential, (ii) plotted, (iii) incomplete in contrast to life, (iv) created by the subject herself, and (v) available to consciousness. The third feature of narratives, their incompleteness in contrast to life, substantiates Lumsden's rejection of the necessity of 'whole life' narratives for personal identity. Narratives' incompleteness should not be taken as an indication of failure to capture life's richness; rather, different narrative threads can emphasize different facets of the rich texture of the same life episode. According to the fourth feature, narratives that are implicated in personal identity are created by the subject herself. AP arises when/if narratives about the same life episode conflict with each other, and I argue that (iii) and (iv) underlie this sort of conflict.

Following (iii), it is plausible that the narratives I create about the same life episode come into conflict because each captures a different (and incomplete) set of details. Following (iv), it is plausible that my self-narratives are sometimes veridical, sometimes not. They may be tinted by my (unconscious or conscious) interests and biases, as ample empirical evidence in social psychology shows (Gilbert 2006; Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Wilson 2002). My desire to obtain sympathy from others might encourage me to tell a non-veridical narrative in certain contexts, whereas my commitment to honesty might push me to a veridical narrative. Such conflict between narratives about the same life episode might lead to unease. Or I might be simply conflicted in deciding which narrative I should hold on to.

Suppose I injured my right ankle during my basketball game last week when I collided with a player from the opposing team. I might have conflicting narratives about the event. In one narrative, I might suggest that I fell down because the player hit me intentionally, because she wanted her team to win the game. In another narrative, I might consider it an accident. At this point, I might feel confused, because I may have reason to support the veridicality of both narratives. It is important for me to sort out these conflicting narratives about the incident because this has bearings on my attitude toward the other player, future games, my social relationships with team mates, and my basketball playing as a whole. Suppose further that I have a form of schizophrenia; I sometimes lose touch with reality and suffer from various delusions, among them the belief that others are intentionally trying to hurt me. Knowing that I suffer from such delusions at times, I doubt the veridicality of my narrative which says the player intentionally hit me. However, when I think of her hostile actions toward me and others over the course of the 2 years we have played together, and when I remember her engineering similar collisions before (resulting in the injury of other players), I suspect that my narrative of her intentionally hurting me is veridical. Yet I also remember times when she and I got along well; last year we supplemented our training by taking yoga classes together. I feel confused. I need to sort out this conflict to nurture my relationships with fellow players and to take control of the symptoms of my schizophrenia, because my narrative about her intentionally hurting me might be an early indication of another psychic episode; if so, I may need to discuss the situation with my psychiatrist.

AP has bearings on the subject's life, as this example illustrates. It is therefore important to consider Lumsden's discussion of unity and his claim that narrative threads connect the subject to her experiences. Foreseeing the tension created by (iii), the incompleteness of narrative threads in relation to life, he explains that narrative threads about our thoughts, moods, reactions, and behavior can be intertwined to form larger strands, and/or to cohere into a master narrative

that holds together all pieces of the subject's life. "Persistent narrative threads" (Lumsden 2013, XX), along with the "subject's ability to switch between different narrative threads" (XX) and her "ability to access the appropriate narrative in the appropriate contexts" (XX) to "deal with current circumstances" (XX) can provide sufficient unity of agency to develop and meet long-term goals. The 'normal' person's ability to draw on a narrative appropriate to the circumstance, for Lumsden, indicates her unity at the unconscious level. If the process takes place at the unconscious level, the adjudication-of-narratives occurs automatically. A healthy person "intuitively and unconsciously switches narratives to deal with the current setting a situation," whereas "the disordered person may need to work at the level of consciousness to link narratives explicitly in order to achieve the same result" (Lumsden 2013, XX). However, this point about unconscious switching needs more clarification because the process is complex.

AP targets the "switching between different narratives" (XX) and the ability to access "the appropriate narrative in the appropriate contexts" (XX). But how does this switching occur? What are the norms for the appropriateness of narratives? Does the social context in which narratives are created determine the norms of appropriateness? Do other persons influence the subject's adjudication of narratives?

Let us also consider Lumsden's (2013, XX) claim that narrative threads are "tightly connected" with the subject's experiences. This suggests that the subject would adjudicate conflicting narratives so as to choose the one that is most responsive to her experiences. However, this will not work, because as the basketball example above shows, I might (a) feel that both narratives are equally responsive to the incident that led to my injury or (b) choose the non-veridical narrative for reasons other than its "tight connection" with my experiences, that is, to gain the sympathy of the other players. In the case of psychopathology, it is even more difficult to discern what is tightly connected to the subject's experiences, because one feature of delusions is that they appear real to the subject.

It seems to me that implicit in the psychotherapeutic relevance of Lumsden's proposal is the idea

that the subject's audience is implicated in her ability to create beneficial narratives that are both integrated and appropriate. His appeal to psychotherapeutic context implies that the therapist plays a key role in helping the patient increase the quality of her life narratives to achieve increased agency. If this is how Lumsden wants to apply his narrative theory in the clinical context, we might suggest that the recognition of others' roles in the creation and adjudication of self-narratives might be one way to address and resolve the AP. Finding equilibrium between conflicting narratives might be dependent on the cognitive architecture of the mind (including Lumsden's point about the unconscious and automatic shift), and negotiating the epistemic features of narratives by discussing it with others. Going back to the basketball example, I might find equilibrium between my conflicting narratives about the accident with the help of my fellow players (discussing with them the various possible scenarios that might have led to the accident) and/or with the help of my therapist.

REFERENCES

- Dennett, D. 1992. The self as a center of narrative gravity. In *Self and consciousness: Multiple perspectives*, ed. F. Kessel, P. Cole, and D. Johnson, 101–15. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fivush, R. 1994. Constructing narrative, emotion, and self in parent-child conversations about the past. In *The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in self-narrative*, ed. U. Neisser, and R. Fivush, 136–58. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2007. Remembering and reminiscing: How individual lives are constructed in family narratives. *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1:45–54.
- Fivush, R., and K. Nelson. 2006. Parent-child reminiscing locates the self in the past. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 24:235–51.
- Flanagan, O. 1991. *Varieties of moral personality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1996. *Self-expressions: Mind, morals, and the meaning of life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, D. 2006. *Stumbling on happiness*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hoerl, C., and T. McCormack. 2005. Joint reminiscing as joint attention to the past. In *Joint attention: Communication and other minds*, ed. N. Eilan, C. Hoerl, T. McCormack, and J. Roessler, 260–86. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Hutto, D. 2008. *Folk psychological narratives: The sociocultural basis of understanding reasons*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lumsden, D. 2013. Whole life narratives and the self. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 20, no. 1:XX.
- MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After virtue*. London: Duckworth.
- Neisser, U. 1997. Concepts and self-concepts. In *The conceptual self in context*, ed. U Neisser, and D. Jopling, 3–12. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nisbett, R., and T. Wilson. 1977. Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review* 84:231–59.
- Schechtman, M. 1996. *The constitution of selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Tekin, Ş. 2010. Mad narratives: Exploring self-constitutions through the diagnostic looking glass. PhD thesis, York University, Toronto, Canada.
- . 2011. Self-concept through the diagnostic looking glass: Narratives and mental disorder. *Philosophical Psychology* 24, no. 3:357–80.
- Wilson, T. D. 2002. *Strangers to ourselves*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.