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# Not with narratives, not without narratives: A review of “Things That Bother Me: Death, Freedom, The Self, etc.” Galen Strawson

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## ABSTRACT

In this short article I will review Galen Strawson’s most recent book, “Things That Bother Me: Death, Freedom, The Self, etc.” As it is impossible to do justice to the full collection in a review, and as many readers will already have encountered his ideas elsewhere, I will focus on Strawson’s critical views on the narrative approaches to the self as these are revealed in several of the essays.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Galen Strawson’s most recent book, a collection of essays called *Things That Bother Me: Death, Freedom, The Self, etc.*, offers a guided tour of his previous work on topics that have long “bothered” philosophers, including consciousness, free will, the self, naturalism, and death. Most of the ideas presented in the essays will be familiar to those who have read Strawson’s work, but his autobiographical notes, as well as his essay “Two Years’ Time,” where he tells a coming-of-age story from the 1960s, provide an interesting and engaging context in which his philosophical work can be interpreted. As it is impossible to do justice to the full collection in a review, and as many readers will already have encountered his ideas elsewhere, I will focus on Strawson’s critical views on the narrative approaches to the self as these are revealed in several of the essays.

In “The Sense of Self,” “A Fallacy of Our Age,” “I Have No Future,” and “The Unstoried Life,” Strawson repeats his thoughts on the self and his arguments against the narrative approaches to the self. It is important to understand the type of narrative approach he is targeting in his criticism, as ‘narrative’ is a fuzzy concept, used in a wide variety of ways, and the philosophical and psychological literature on the topic is complex. Philosophers and psychologists have advanced a plethora of explanations of the self in relation to narratives, positing varying degrees of connection. For some, the narratives a subject creates about herself shape her self-constitution (Fivush,

1994; Flanagan, 1991). For others, they help the subject participate in social cognition (Hutto, 2008). Some represent narratives as merely one basis of personal identity and consider them to be cognitive tools used by a subject to construct self-concepts (Neisser, 1997; Tekin, 2011); others render narratives as the basis for self-constitution as such (Dennett, 1992; MacIntyre, 1981; Schechtman, 1996). For example, for Jerome Bruner, the self is a “perpetually rewritten story” (Bruner, 1990). Some require that a subject create a “whole-life narrative” unifying her life experiences (Flanagan, 1991; Schechtman, 1996); others refer to “multiple narratives” about the subject, authored by herself and/or by others (Fivush, 2007; Neisser, 1997). Psychologists use empirical studies of memory, joint reminiscences of the past, and parent-child narratives (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Hoerl & McCormack, 2005), while philosophers work with thought experiments and appeal to those with mental disorders to connect narratives and the self (Flanagan, 1996).

Strawson distinguishes what he calls the “psychological narrativity thesis,” an empirical and descriptive thesis which holds that individuals do live their lives in narrative form, from what he calls the “ethical narrativity thesis,” according to which individuals *should* live their lives in narrative form because it is essential to a well-lived life and full personhood. He then argues against both claims: both the ethical narrativity thesis and the psychological narrativity thesis are false in any non-trivial version. If someone claims that making coffee is a narrative involving narrativity because it requires advanced thinking and planning and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then he takes the claim to be trivial.

This distinction between psychological and ethical narrativity theses, he points out, leaves us with a spectrum of positions. A strong narrativity thesis endorses both psychological and ethical narrativity: we live our lives by narrating, and it is a good thing we do. At the other end of the spectrum is the view that we do not live our lives in a narrative form, and it is a good thing that we do not. Strawson is committed to defending the latter view. His rejection of strong narrativity hinges on his refusal of the claim that the self is narratively constituted. This idea, for him, necessarily implies having a “diachronic self-experience,” in which a subject considers herself as someone with a past and a future. However, for Strawson, such diachronic self-experience or narrativity is not a universal form of experience; rather, a subject may have an “episodic self-experience,” in which she does not figure herself as an entity that extends to a past and a future.

Strawson’s distinction between episodic and diachronic forms of self-experience is based on his phenomenological understanding of the sense of self. The notion of the self, he argues, arises from a prior and independent sense of self which can be described from a phenomenological standpoint. He writes, “We have to examine the sense of the self – the ordinary, core human experience of having or being a self – before we try to work out whether there

is such thing as the self' (Strawson, 2018, p. 24). According to Strawson, an individual must experience herself as the subject of experience, which is a single (hiatus-free), ontically independent, and mental thing, in order to have any kind of self-experience. Strawson suggests, at a minimal level, an individual must experience herself as the subject of experience that is a single (hiatus-free), ontically independent, and mental thing. This is a momentary self without any history or long-term continuity, a "bare locus of consciousness, void of personality" (Strawson, 2004, p. 492). According to this view, a human being experiences a series of transient selves, each of which lasts as long as one unique experience. These selves come into existence and disappear without continuity. When seen as an inner, mental thing that is not persistent over time, the self is bound to have episodic self-experiences. Thus, with respect to the self – the inner, mental entity who is the subject of experience at a given time – Strawson denies the narrativity thesis.

Further, in Strawson's view, experience of the self as the subject of experience, as a single, mental thing, is not exclusive to humans; rather, immediate self-experience can be extended to non-human things. It is not essential that this minimal self be embodied. Strawson uses phenomenological methods to derive the concept of the self, that is, he uses his own experience of himself in order describe what the self is.

In the book, Strawson expresses his sympathy with the Buddhist conception of the self. He shares with Buddhists the idea that the self exists, in the sense of a subject of experience, a locus of consciousness at any given moment, while retaining all the essential Buddhist criticisms of the idea of the self. His view resists the idea promulgated by many analytic philosophers according to which the self is a myth insofar as it is supposed to be different from the human being considered as a whole. His view of the self is thus both "materially respectable and distinctively mental and – however short lived – as real as a stone" (Strawson, 2018, p. 44).

Given the reflective nature of the work, it is interesting that Strawson doesn't engage directly with previous criticisms of his views. For example, his reliance on a phenomenological approach to making sense of self-experience appears untouched by the criticisms of Dan Zahavi and Josef Parnas, who worry that Strawson appears to understand phenomenology as a kind of atheoretical and pre-scientific account of how things seem to be at a perceptual or introspective glance, tacitly identifying it as a common-sense consideration of folk psychology instead of a unique philosophical method to make sense of the first-person encounter with reality (Zahavi & Parnas, 1998).

Also, Strawson is not concerned with different iterations of narrative approaches to the self that do not see narrativity as synonymous with diachronicity. For example, the target of Strawson's focus is the first-person experience of the self over time. Defenders of the narrative approach to the self, such as

Owen Flanagan and Marya Schechtman, on the other hand, focus on autobiographical narratives insofar as they are implicated in character-formation or personal identity. Flanagan and Schechtman consider how autobiographical narratives, as forms of self-representation, play a role in the constitution of identity. They do not focus merely on “the experience of the self at a given time” because their larger goal is to develop an understanding of the self that can account for the dynamics of our moral psychology – a psychology which enables us to enter into ethical relationships in a moral community.

That said, Strawson’s work offers a compelling discussion of the inherent weaknesses in narrative approaches to self, including their disregard of the fundamental structures and features of our experiential life, such as the pre-reflective self-consciousness that underlies all higher-order and conceptually mediated forms of self-consciousness. Narrative approaches, for example, fall short of describing the first-person givenness of consciousness. Although language and narrative play crucial roles in human self-consciousness, some dimensions of human experience, such as affect and emotions, can be better accounted for by imagination and art without confining oneself to the limitations of story-telling.

Finally, although Strawson expresses his qualms about narrative approaches to the self, his biographical notes certainly represent a narrative addition to the book and tell us much about the philosopher – his deep interest in the idea of infinity as a child despite his nonreligious upbringing, his preoccupation with the idea of death, and his coming-of-age experiences in the 1960s. This encourages the reader to think that narratives have some value, if only for entertainment, in thinking about the self.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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