
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 7, number 1, Winter 2011

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

Narrative Identity and Autonomy

Reply to Commentaries

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Thanks to our four commentators for their thoughtful and challenging commentaries. Before responding to the issues raised by the commentators we begin by briefly recapping our argument.

Our paper was motivated by two main concerns. The first was to question the coherence of Galen Strawson's (1999,

2004, 2007) conception of the episodic self and to defend a broadly narrative approach to identity against his critique of narrativity. Drawing on Elyn Saks' (2007) autobiographical narrative of schizophrenia, we drew attention to the suffering caused by the breakdown in acute (and chronic) mental illness of a person's sense of herself as a diachronic agent. We also argued that Saks's reflections on her experience attest to the importance of capacities for narrative self-understanding for leading a flourishing life.

The second concern was to argue for the importance of distinguishing the conditions for selfhood or practical identity from the conditions for autonomy.ⁱ We claimed that this distinction is blurred in Marya Schechtman's (1996) otherwise illuminating narrative self-constitution approach to identity. We argued that in order to explain how illness narratives, such as that of Saks, can enable a person to manage her illness sufficiently to constitute a relatively coherent practical identity, the coherence requirements on what can count as a self-constituting narrative need to be looser than those proposed by Schechtman. As John Christman points out in his commentary, this gives our approach to selfhood "a kind of flexibility that makes room for idiosyncratic life paths as well as subject positions that may themselves be structured by pathologies and discontinuities" (2). At the same time, we wanted to maintain that the conditions for autonomy are more stringent than the conditions for selfhood. This enables us to explain, as Natalie Stoljar points out, how an illness narrative might play an important role in an agent's self-conception and in enabling her to constitute a sufficiently coherent sense of self, even if illness may be precisely what diminishes her capacity for autonomy.

None of the commentators appear to take issue with our critique of Strawson, and all four commentators agree on the importance of distinguishing the conditions for identity from the conditions for autonomy. The commentators' concerns

seem to focus on four clusters of issues: the notion of narrative coherence; the notion of an illness narrative; the implications of our argument for gendered and racialized narratives; and the relationship between autonomy and authenticity. We address each of these issues in turn.

i. Agency and Narrative Coherence

The first set of issues, raised in the commentaries by John Christman and Paul Benson, concerns the notion of narrative coherence. Christman asks first whether Saks's experience of self-fragmentation results from disruption to her sense of diachronic continuity or from synchronic fragmentation. Our answer is both, because, as we make clear in our critique of Strawson's episodic self, we think that a sense of diachronic continuity is necessary for having a sense of synchronic coherence. In the paper, we support this claim with reference to Shaun Gallagher's (2003) argument that the capacity to organize our experience into a basic temporal structure is a necessary condition for the pre-reflective sense of self that grounds capacities for self-reference, metacognition and autobiographical memory. In recounting and reflecting on her experiences of psychotic disorganization, Saks also suggests that synchronic and diachronic fragmentation are interconnected.

While sympathetic to our argument that the coherence requirements on self-constituting narratives should be loosened, Christman also wonders what level and kind of coherence, intelligibility and integration are required for a self-constituting narrative, as distinct from say a dream sequence. As he points out, a dream sequence may make some kind of narrative sense to the dreamer but presumably would not count as self-constituting and does not make much narrative sense to others. We want to respond to this question in two stages.

First, there are a number of characteristics of coherent and intelligible narratives that distinguish them from other sequences, such as chronicles or dream sequences, which also depict a series of events or experiences. A minimal set of requirements for a coherent narrative is that it must explain the causal connections between the events/experiences and actions it recounts; it must structure event/experience sequences into temporal orderings that need not be chronological but must be intelligible; it must provide a context within which individual events /experiences and their significance can be understood; and it must be meaningful in the sense that it enables the reader or audience to make sense of the inner lives and perspectives of the characters – their motives, and emotional responses to other characters and to the events and actions described in the narrative. Ricoeur's notion of "emplotment" sums up this requirement in characterizing narrative as an organizing and interpretive structure that links character, motive, object and circumstance in such a way as to enable us to ask and answer questions of "who?", "why?", "how?", "when?", "where?" (Ricoeur 1992). Note that because narrative structures are forms of communication, as well as of understanding, the criteria for coherence are subject to intersubjective norms.

Second, extending this conception of narrative coherence to self-narratives, we would argue that, to be self-constituting, a self-narrative must also meet requirements of causal and temporal intelligibility; it must enable the person to make sense of significant events and experiences in her life, her memories, traits of character, emotional responses, values, and relations with others; and it must provide a self-interpretive context within which she can project herself into the future via intentions and plans. We are thus in agreement with Schechtman on the need for constraints on self-constituting narratives. We also agree with her that these constraints are intersubjective because personhood is social. As Schechtman argues, in order to constitute herself as a

person, an individual needs to be able to “grasp her culture’s concept of a person and apply it to herself” (Schechtman 1996, 95). Her self-narrative must also be capable of being made intelligible to others and must conform, to at least some degree, with others’ narratives of her. Schechtman proposes two main constraints on self-constituting self-narratives: a reality constraint and an articulation constraint. Our disagreement with Schechtman focuses on her interpretation of these constraints, which we argue are too stringent and consequently blur the distinction between narrative self-constitution and autonomy. We expand on this claim in sections two and three below.

Benson says that he is not persuaded by our response to “story-telling” critiques of narrative, arguing that “without some such elements of coherent story or tale, diachronic modes of understanding or sense-making simply cannot be expected to comprise narratives in any meaningful sense” (3). What we have said above about the notion of narrative coherence should make it clear that we don’t disagree that self-narratives must meet coherence constraints. What we reject is the conception of narrative self-constitution that underpins “story-telling” critiques, such as that of Strawson or Samantha Vice (2003): that self-interpretation involves thinking of oneself as if one were a character in a novel, or “thinking of oneself and one’s life as fitting the form of some recognized genre” (Strawson 2004, 442).

A more substantial objection raised by Benson concerns the relationship between agency and selfhood. If, on a narrative self-constitution view, selfhood is an achievement of agency, then, he asks, “who or what is the entity that constructs a narrative self-interpretation and, in so doing, brings into being diachronically extended, rationally intelligible selfhood?” Benson’s reference to an entity and his claim that “the agent must exist and be capable of self-reflective activity prior to the emergence of a personal self” suggests that he

thinks our account (and perhaps narrative approaches to identity more generally) is metaphysically confused and conflates the agent and the self. We are not entirely clear if Benson’s objection is metaphysical; if it is, we wish to make it clear that in our view narrative identity is practical, not metaphysical. Alternatively, Benson’s objection may be that narrative approaches to the self problematically fail to distinguish different dimensions of selfhood.

Within the recent literature, there are (at least) two important ways of carving out distinctions among different dimensions of selfhood. In phenomenologically-informed cognitive science, theorists distinguish between the minimal, embodied self of primordial self-awareness – what Antonio Damasio (1999) refers to as the “core self” of “core consciousness” and Gallagher (2000) and Dan Zahavi (2005) refer to as the “minimal self” – and the narrative or extended, autobiographical self. On Zahavi’s interpretation, the minimal self is the pre-reflective self of first-personal experiential givenness. Zahavi criticizes narrative theorists for failing to recognize that the narrative self is phenomenologically and ontologically dependent on this experiential self. He suggests reserving the term “self” for the minimal, experiential self and referring to the narrative self as narrative personhood. We agree that it is important to distinguish between the minimal, embodied self and the narrative self, although we did not draw this distinction in the paper under discussion. We also accept that the minimal, embodied self is developmentally prior to the emergence of the narrative self. However, we would caution against making the distinction between these different dimensions of selfhood too sharp. As Gallagher points out, because of the reconstructive nature of memory, although “the registration of episodic memory as ‘my’ memory of ‘myself’ clearly depends on a minimal but constantly reiterated sense of that self that I recognize, without error, as myself...the core features of the self are constantly being reinterpreted by the narrative process”

(2000, 20). Zahavi also acknowledges that the subjectivity of the minimal experiential self is a bare subjectivity, rather than a personalized subjectivity, and that we are only concretely individuated as narrative persons. It is only when narrative personhood disintegrates, for example in chronic schizophrenia or in advanced dementia, that, arguably, we glimpse a residual core self.

J. David Velleman (2006) makes a different kind of distinction among different reflexive “guises” of the self: the self of what he variously refers to as the person’s “self-image,” sense of self or narrative self-conception; the self of personal identity or self-sameness over time; and the self as autonomous agent. The self as autonomous agent is motivated by the higher-order aim of making sense of oneself, and it is clear that for Velleman this self is the locus of agential control. He often describes it as the unrepresented, thinking “I” of the person’s mental standpoint that is the mental analogue of the geometric point of origin of the person’s visual perspective (2000, 30-31; 2006, 358). Velleman thinks that the self as autonomous agent makes sense of oneself via two distinct forms of understanding: causal explanation and narrative understanding. Thus he also refers to the autonomous agent as the “inner narrator” that makes up the narrative self it then enacts. Given Benson’s reference to Velleman in his commentary, we suspect that Benson is pressing us to make, or to clarify our position with respect to, this kind of distinction between the agent that constructs the narrative self and the self it constructs. We cannot address this question in detail here, but we hope the following brief comments will suffice to outline our general position. First, we agree with Velleman’s resistance to understanding the self in any of its guises as a metaphysical entity or motivational essence. Second, we are sympathetic to Velleman’s idea that as persons we are motivated by the higher-order aim of making sense of ourselves and that a central way in which we do so is via narrative self-understanding. Third, we think Velleman is

right to distinguish among different senses or reflexive guises of the self. However, as Mackenzie has argued in detail elsewhere (Mackenzie 2007), we think these dimensions of selfhood are more integrated and interrelated than Velleman suggests.

ii. Illness Narratives

Benson says he is perplexed on multiple grounds by our discussion of illness narratives. Specifically, Benson suggests that it is not clear what we mean in claiming that Saks had to accept that her illness is part of who she is in order to develop a coherent sense of self. Nor is he clear why we think that Saks’s complex stance towards her psychotic delusions raises questions for Schechtman’s interpretation of the reality constraint.

In response to the first issue, it is important to reiterate that we are not making a metaphysical claim about Saks’s deep or essential self. What we are claiming is that Saks’s illness is a central feature of her life and her practical identity, and has to be taken into account in much of her practical reasoning and deliberation. Benson’s commentary implies that a mentally ill person’s sense of self and capacities for rational agency are quite distinct from her illness and that the illness is an affliction that “periodically debilitates or disorganizes [her] capacities for lucid practical reasoning and rational conduct.” Saks did think of her illness in this way, especially in the early stages of its onset. This is in part why she felt estranged from her psychotic delusions and also resisted medication – because she regarded her illness as other than herself and wanted, as she says, “to exist in the world as my *authentic self*” (Saks 2007, 226). However, her autobiography attests to her growing realization that to manage her illness she could not think of it as other than herself but had to accept it as a central aspect of her practical identity. We suggested that James Phillips’ (2003) notion of an illness narrative helps explain this process of acceptance.ⁱⁱ Illness narratives are narratives that

revolve around the person's illness and its meaning within her life. Following Phillips, we argued that an illness narrative can enable the construction of a sufficiently integrated narrative identity *if* it restores the agent's sense of her self and her agency and if it enables her to make sense of her experiences, including her experience of her illness (Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, 48).

On this same issue, Stoljar questions how we reconcile the "apparently incompatible claim that illness narratives contribute to the constitution of a self that is an agent's 'own' and the claim that at the same time these aspects of the authentic self are inauthentic and hence undermine autonomy" (4). We take up the issue of autonomy in the next section. At this point, however, it is helpful to make two clarifications in response to this question. First, we would argue that one reason for distinguishing between practical or narrative identity, on the one hand, and autonomy on the other, is that it makes it easier to disambiguate two different senses of "one's own." An agent can acknowledge that an aspect of her identity, for example a character trait, or a psychological disorder, is "her own," in the sense of being a "circumstantially necessary" (Oshana 2005) part of who she is, without it being "her own" in the sense that she affectively identifies with it, endorses it, or is autonomous with respect to it. Thus we see no inconsistency between accepting an aspect of one's practical identity as "one's own" in the first sense while feeling alienated from it. This is why we do not accept Schechtman's claim that "aspects and experiences from which I feel alienated...are not part of my narrative" (2007, 171), and it is why we think she blurs the distinction between identity and autonomy. Second, we do not agree that aspects of the self from which we may feel alienated are necessarily inauthentic. To be authentic is to be true to oneself, and being true to oneself may sometimes require acknowledging that aspects of oneself from which one feels affectively alienated are nevertheless central to one's practical identity.

This leads us back to Benson's second concern with our discussion of illness narratives. Benson says he is perplexed about why we think illness narratives challenge Schechtman's interpretation of the reality constraint and why we suggest the need to loosen the coherence constraints on self-constituting narratives. To clarify, on Schechtman's view, elements of an agent's self-narrative that conflict with the reality constraint, such as psychotic delusions, cannot be self-constituting. Our argument is that this interpretation of the reality constraint is too stringent because it cannot account for the role of illness narratives in self-constitution. Moreover, the requirement that only those aspects of a person's life and experience with which she strongly affectively identifies can count as part of her narrative imposes overly stringent conditions on diachronic (and synchronic) integration. Saks's recurring delusion that she was a mass murderer, for example, clearly violates the reality constraint. Since this delusion results in feelings of self-alienation, it also violates Schechtman's requirement of strong affective identification. We see this as a problem for Schechtman's account because this delusion plays a pivotal role in Saks's life experience and in her practical identity. To understand herself and also to regain a sense of her own agency, Saks therefore had to come to terms with this delusion and its role in her life; that is, to integrate it into her self-narrative. This process of integration, we suggest, involves the construction of an illness narrative that enables her to distinguish the false *content* of the psychotic delusion from an acceptance of the *fact* that she suffers delusions.

iii. Race, Gender and Autonomy

Stoljar is clear about our purpose in distinguishing between the content of psychotic thoughts and the role of illness narratives in enabling a person to gain self-understanding with respect to her psychosis. She wonders, however,

whether it will always be possible for agents to make this distinction clearly, suggesting that in the case of internalized oppressive race narratives, for example, “it may be impossible to distinguish the race narrative from its contents because race narratives seem to *imply* beliefs with certain contents” (4). Since the content of these beliefs is false, this raises the question of whether such narratives violate the reality constraint and hence whether such agents have a narrative identity. A further question is whether gendered and racialized narratives have the potential to undermine agents’ autonomy in the same way as the experience of psychotic illness.

The question of how our analysis of illness narratives might bear on racialized and gendered narratives raises interesting and complex issues that we can only address in outline here. Before addressing Stoljar’s specific questions, it is important to highlight a significant difference between illness narratives and race or gender narratives. Illness narratives, we have suggested, can play an important therapeutic role in giving meaning to an illness and its impact on the person’s life, even if these narratives may sometimes involve confabulation or delusion. Their function is therefore quite different from race or gender narratives, which function to enforce oppressive social norms, political structures and relationships.

Stoljar’s questions about race and gender are nevertheless valuable in drawing attention to the fact that an adequate account of the coherence constraints on self-narratives must take account of the ways in which social norms of personhood are bound up with norms and narratives not only of gender and race, but also of class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and (dis)ability. Constructing a coherent self-narrative in social contexts marked by oppression, or in contexts where others do not recognize and treat one as a person, may therefore be extremely fraught. This is why “consciousness raising” plays an important role in countering

the effects of social oppression, by bringing to awareness the implicit beliefs bound up with oppressive narratives.ⁱⁱⁱ

In response to Stoljar’s questions, we would argue firstly, that in extreme situations, for example in contexts characterized by significant physical violence and brutalization, sexual abuse, severe psychological trauma, or brainwashing, the internalization of oppressive narratives of race and gender may threaten an agent’s capacity to constitute a coherent narrative identity.^{iv} We would also suggest that Benson’s (2000) analysis of the gaslighted woman is an example of an agent subject to a form of psychological oppression that has not only impaired her autonomy competences but also undermined her sense of identity. In less extreme situations, an agent’s capacity to constitute an identity need not be threatened by oppression, although her narrative identity – the agent’s character, beliefs, values, emotional responses – will certainly have been shaped by the oppressive cultural narratives that she has internalized, which will include false beliefs about herself. As a result, her self-narrative may contribute to the ways in which oppression impairs her autonomy.

Secondly, then, as Rocha suggests, we allow for the possibility that if an agent’s autonomy competences are sufficiently compromised by the oppressive norms she has internalized, or by false or delusory beliefs, then her autonomy is threatened. We stress, however, that autonomy is a matter of degrees and domains. Living with a serious mental illness may impair some of an agent’s autonomy competences more than others, at some times more than others, and in some situations more than others. Further, different agents with similar illnesses may be impaired to different degrees, depending on their individual circumstances, including the level of social support available to them. The same applies to agents who have internalized oppressive norms and narratives.

Stoljar raises two further questions about autonomy that require more detailed answers than we can provide here. The first is whether the reality constraint imports a substantive constraint into our conception of autonomy. Although Rocha does not pose this question explicitly, his commentary also raises the question of whether a relational approach to autonomy ought to embrace substantive constraints. The second concerns whether we do, or ought to, endorse a distinction between authenticity and autonomy.

In response to the first question, in the paper we gave three reasons for thinking that a person with chronic mental illness, such as Saks, could only be partially autonomous: that her autonomy competences are partially impaired by the illness; that there are aspects of her identity from which she will always feel alienated; and that psychological disorders can undermine the affective attitudes of self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem that we claim are necessary for autonomy. These reasons thus refer to three conditions for autonomy: competence conditions; authenticity conditions; and weakly substantive self-affective conditions, which we did not discuss in any detail in the paper.^v We had not considered before whether our commitment to a loose reality constraint on self-constituting narratives does import a substantive constraint into our conception of autonomy, but Stoljar may be correct in suggesting that it does.

The second issue raised by Stoljar pushes us to clarify the extent to which we are in fact committed to authenticity conditions for autonomy. In our discussion above, in disambiguating two different senses of “one’s own,” we claimed first, that one can accept an aspect of one’s practical identity as “one’s own” – in the sense of being a circumstantially necessary part of one’s identity – while feeling alienated from it; and second, that aspects of the self from which we may feel alienated are not necessarily inauthentic. The question we now need to address is whether

one can be autonomous with respect to an aspect of one’s identity from which one feels alienated. In the paper we endorse Christman’s non-alienation interpretation of the authenticity condition, suggesting that we think autonomy *is* inconsistent with alienation (Christman 2001; 2009). In many cases, such as that of Saks, we think this is the case. However we are persuaded by arguments, such as those proposed by Oshana (2005) and Benson (2005) that ambivalence and sometimes alienation need not be inconsistent with autonomy.^{vi} We suspect, therefore, that we may need to rethink our general commitment to authenticity conditions for autonomy.

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ⁱ We use the terms “selfhood” and “practical identity” interchangeably here. An implication of our argument in Mackenzie and Poltera (2010) is that a narrative self-constitution view provides the best framework for understanding the process of practical identity formation.

ⁱⁱ We discussed Philips' notion of an illness narrative because he applies this concept to psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia. However, the notion of illness narrative was originally developed by other theorists, notably Arthur Frank (1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ For an orthogonal discussion of how racist and sexist norms can shape an agent's beliefs and threaten her sense of self, see the collected papers in Sullivan and Tuana (2007).

^{iv} This kind of theoretical claim requires empirical support. We suggest that relevant empirical support can be found in the psychological and psychiatric literature on "traumatic dissociation," arising from memories of physical or sexual abuse, cultural dislocation, war trauma, and other traumatic experiences. Spiegel (2006) characterizes traumatic dissociation as a "failure to integrate aspects of identity, memory and consciousness" (567), resulting in fragmentation of the self.

^v For a more detailed discussion of this constraint, see Mackenzie (2008). There is a slight difference between us with respect to this issue. Mackenzie is committed to a weakly substantive conception of relational autonomy. She is also sympathetic to Westlund's (2009) dialogical approach, but agrees with Benson and Stoljar that this may commit Westlund to a more substantive view than she acknowledges. Poltera is committed to a weaker substantive conception of relational autonomy than Mackenzie and is less sympathetic to Christman's non-alienation interpretation of the authenticity condition. Poltera wants to allow for the possibility that, in some circumstances, an agent can be autonomous despite being alienated, ambivalent or subject to oppressive social norms.

^{vi} See Poltera (2010) for a more detailed discussion of this issue.