



# “Spectator to One’s Own Life”

**ABSTRACT:** *Galen Strawson (2004) has championed an influential argument against the view that a life is, or ought to be, understood as a kind of story with temporal extension. The weight of his argument rests on his self-report of his experience of life as lacking the form or temporal extension necessary for narrative. And though this argument has been widely accepted, I argue that it ought to have been rejected. On one hand, the hypothetical non-diachronic life Strawson proposes would likely be psychologically fragmented. On the other, it would certainly be morally diminished, for it would necessarily lack the capacity for integrity.*

**KEYWORDS:** Narrative, Episodic, Sense of Self, Integrity

## I. An Entrenched Argument

The literature on selfhood and value contains an argument, developed in the corpus of preeminent philosopher Galen Strawson (2004), which has become foundational. The argument aims to show that it is a mistake to think that the human life characteristically is or ought to be experienced in the form of a story, or even in the form of an extended whole at all. In the two intervening decades since publication, the argument has become entrenched; philosophers work in its aftermath, taking its legitimacy for granted. Yet, this shift was a mistake. Strawson’s reasoning, I argue, should have been rejected rather than accommodated.

We will discuss the details of the case momentarily, but it is important from the outset to see the extraordinary *form* Strawson’s argument took. His foundational premise was his own experience of the world as an “Episodic”: someone who does not experience life in a temporally extended way. With this premise in place, he leveraged it with tremendous force. The rhetorical power of the argument can be perhaps most appreciated in the single sentence, written in reply to Narrativist Maria Shechtman: “On the strong form of Schechtman’s view, I am not really a person” (Strawson 2004, 447). With this accusation, Strawson attempted a novel argumentative maneuver. He claimed his internal experience of life was incompatible with a rival philosopher’s account of personhood and personal flourishing. Those Strawson attacked were put in the unenviable position of suggesting that a colleague has a deficient form of life.

Strawson’s move was remarkably successful. Allen Speight suggests that Strawson’s article has been “taken to undermine both empirical and normative conceptions of the ‘narrative self’ that had been drawn on in earlier work” (Speight 2014, 1). Various Narrativists have worked to accommodate Strawson’s experience. Shechtman herself writes that his “report is completely plausible, and I



do not doubt it for a moment” (Schechtman 2007, 167). Accordingly, Schechtman revised her theory to allow for a way in which her view is after all “compatible with Strawson’s reports. . . and so immune from his main objections” (Schechtman 2007, 173; Weber-Guskar 2023, 1101 follows Schechtman). A similar concession appears in the work of Todd May, who lists as a requirement of his project that it must “allow us to see a life like Strawson’s as potentially meaningful” (May 2016, 73). Daniel Hutto gives approval to Strawson’s method, suggesting that some forms of Narrativism collapse if Strawson constitutes a “case of coherent non-Narrativizing, non-pathological self-experience” (Hutto 2016, 31). Though such discussions critically engage the implications of Strawson’s report, they do not question its basic validity. Many philosophers have also taken at face value Strawson’s claims to represent a larger group. Ben Bradley, for example, writes that some people possess narrative values, “but as Galen Strawson has pointed out, not everyone cares about such things,” (Bradley 2009, 161); or, with regards to narrative ethics in medicine, Rolf Ahlzén concludes, “Strawson reminds us that people are fundamentally different” (Ahlzén 2019, 8; See also Vitrano 2017, 570–71).

Something strange has happened here. I am skeptical that a private report of this kind would carry weight in any other area of inquiry. Yet, in Strawson’s case, the report has not only been accepted, but allowed to influence a whole course of thought. The literature has warped around Strawson’s argument, like a flower’s growth contorting around the shade of a larger plant. Though Narrativists haven’t surrendered, some have been influenced toward more moderate forms of Narrativism; and on the other side, critics of Narrativism cite Strawson’s report as if it were a kind of proof.

I believe there are strong reasons to reject Strawson’s position; the Episodic individual he proposes is analogous to the Frankfurtian wanton in its diminishment, a hypothetical life that we should hope no one occupies. After providing background context, my argument will come in two parts. First, I argue that we lack justification to accept Strawson’s descriptive claims about episodicity as a non-pathological variation in human psychology. Second, I argue that his normative account of the episodic life is morally untenable and incompatible with viewing one’s life as one’s own.

Though much of what I have to say is critical in nature, my critique provides constructive conclusions. By considering Strawson’s proposal directly and seriously, we can better see the role of our temporal extension, which we otherwise might overlook for its banality.

## II. Narrativism and Strawson’s Attack

It will be helpful to begin with the tenets of Narrativism, the principal target of Strawson’s critique and foil to his view. Narrativism holds that humans ought to be understood in terms of life stories. A life story, at its most general description, is the organization of the discrete events of a person’s life into a meaningful whole. Peter Goldie points out that this sharply distinguishes stories from annals which simply list sequences of events chronologically (Goldie 2014, 2). A story is

instead “a representation of those events which is shaped, organized, and coloured” (Goldie 2014, 2). A life story describes who a person is across time in a way that makes sense of him as a temporal creature; it gathers together and gives unity and coherence to the events of his life. Stories, by their arrangement, tell us something about their constitutive events that is not reducible to those events.

Very broadly construed, and glossing over stronger or weaker varieties, Narrativism is thus the philosophical view that a human life is, or ought to be, understood as a kind of story by the one living it. Why would someone think Narrativism is true? Charles Taylor provides what I take to be the basic observation that motivates narrative analysis:

We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fullness, or however the concern is formulated. . . . But this means our *whole* lives. If necessary, we want the future to “redeem” the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity. (Taylor 1989, 50–51)

The human life is naturally organized by direction and purpose which bind it together into a whole. We can best understand these features as a kind of narrative structure. A simple series of events, one after another, becomes a whole when the events are understood within a wider story. The rationale underlying Narrativism is this: To understand human life, both as it is and as we should aspire for it to be, we must, at least implicitly, recognize its narrative quality. Further, if we understand ourselves as inhabiting a kind of story, then we will have a special concern for our past and future; we will want them to be related in a cohesive way, so that the parts of our lives contribute to a whole story which is meaningful.

As Strawson observes, the Narrativist picture includes both a descriptive and normative element (Strawson 2004, 428). Descriptively, the Narrativist claims that humans ordinarily experience their own lives as having the form of a story, with each of us possessing a natural concern for past and future, and the desire to see the whole of one’s life as something meaningful and good above and beyond its individual moments. Normatively, the Narrativist claims that it is part of a person’s flourishing that she succeed in making sense of herself and her life as being about something—as having, as all good stories do, a point which makes sense of the parts. We ought to become not just people who, descriptively speaking, have stories; we ought to desire a life which is good. Strawson’s critique, which we now turn to, aims to undermine both the descriptive and normative claims of Narrativism.

### Strawson’s Report

As previously mentioned, Strawson’s critique depends to a great degree on his report of his internal experience of his life. This report is most centrally a denial that he experiences life in a narrative way, either as a self who persists across time or as a self with a whole life possessing a guiding unity. To explain his claim, he

introduces a pair of terms, calling himself an “Episodic” rather than “Diachronic” with regards to his experience of personal identity across time (Strawson 2004, 430). For the Episodic: “one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” (Strawson 2004, 430). This is opposed to those who experience life diachronically, where “one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future” (Strawson 2004, 430). The Diachronic experiences herself as existing through time, the Episodic does not. Now, Strawson of course does not deny that the organism, the human body which he is, existed in the further past. Rather, in identifying as an Episodic, and thus as not having existed in the further past, Strawson is describing “that which I now experience myself to be when I’m apprehending myself specifically as an inner mental presence or self” (Strawson 2004, 433). Strawson therefore distinguishes between two senses of the self: the self of a single human organism and the mental self which is subject to introspection. To distinguish between these two senses of self, Strawson uses an asterisk—“me” vs “me\*,” respectively; for ease of discourse, I’ll use the labels ‘biological self’ and ‘experiential self,’ respectively. Though Strawson affirms that his biological self exists through time, his experiential self is episodic. The upshot is that much of what is true of his biological self is untrue of his experiential self.

Memory, for Strawson, is a central point of incongruity between the two selves. Though he has memories of past events which occurred to his biological self, he does not believe they are his own in terms of his experiential self. According to Strawson, “the from-the-inside character of a memory can detach completely from any sense that one is the subject of the remembered experience” (Strawson 2004, 434). Accordingly, he states that his memories do not belong to his experiential self: “They certainly do not present as things that happened to me\*, and I think I’m strictly, literally correct in thinking that they did not happen to me\*” (Strawson 2004, 434). Strawson’s experience is deeply non-extended in nature. Though he can recall the far past portions of his biological life, he does not feel or believe that he is numerically identical with the experiential self to whom those earlier events happened.

An episodic sense of oneself is deeply at odds with the Narrativist view that human persons understand themselves as inhabiting an entire life. Narrativism depends on diachronicity. There cannot be a unified story about one’s life without believing that one existed in the further past. Strawson denies that he experiences himself as having a further past; likewise, he denies that his life can be described in narrative terms. He writes:

I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future. (Strawson 2004, 433)

Later, he adds:

I’m completely uninterested in the answer to the question. . . ‘What have I made of my life?’. I’m living it, and this sort of thinking about it is no part of it. This does not mean that I am in any way irresponsible. It is just that what I care about, in so far as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now. (Strawson 2004, 438)

His own life, taken as a whole, is simply not among Strawson’s concerns. It couldn’t be, given that he neither experiences himself as a (very much) temporally extended self, nor as having a history or future which are organizable into something like a story which is going somewhere. (Though, this matter admits of gradations, as Strawson allows for those who are, for example, only a little diachronic. In my discussion, I use ‘diachronic’ to refer only to the very diachronic part of the spectrum Strawson believes characterizes his own life.)

A final but important observation: Strawson ubiquitously uses the terms “Episodics” and “Diachronics” as labels for groups of people he is comparing and contrasting, stating that the Narrativists are making claims inconsistent not only with his experience, but also the experience of a larger group. His whole manner of speaking assumes no challenge on this point. He remarks, for example, that “Many will look no further than their friends and acquaintances, real and fictional, in realizing that Episodics are not as a group somehow morally worse off than Diachronics” (Strawson 2007, 90). Curiously, however, Strawson does not draw support for this claim from empirical studies. Instead, he interprets the writing of prominent historical authors “whose writings show them to be markedly Episodic” (Strawson 2004, 432, fn7). It is not clear that these individuals’ works really do show this (Rudd 2009, 69–70). What I want to underscore, however, is that reading into the inner life of (mostly dead) others is not the same as procuring supporting testimony from those others. We are not dealing with a matter of testimonial injustice, ignoring a group’s voice in communicating about itself. Quite the contrary, what we have is a single individual speaking for others who have little ability to confirm or refute his claim to be their representative.

### III. Responding to Strawson’s Descriptive Claims

With Narrativism and Strawson’s attack on it explained, we can now address Strawson’s argument. I will take up Strawson’s critique of the descriptive thesis of Narrativism first. If his argument works, it shows that human beings are not characteristically narrative in their self-understanding, for there is a large number of people who experience themselves non-narratively without accompanying pathology. I suggest that his argument doesn’t secure that conclusion; we are not given good reason to believe there are non-pathological Episodic lives.

Consider what characteristically happens where narrative thinking disappears. Two kinds of cases are of particular interest here, the first of which involves acute trauma. Tuly Flint and Yoni Elkins examine this subject in their study of individuals brought into therapy after very recent traumatic experiences related to combat shock (Flint and Elkins 2021, 17). For these victims, “there is still no

episodic narrative, not even a maladaptive one” (Flint and Elkins 2021, 20). The events are jumbled and no coherent sense can be made of the raw, uninterpreted data. The role of the therapist, in caring for such individuals, involves gradually crafting a narrative sequence together in a safe environment that does not needlessly cause distress (Flint and Elkins 2021, 18). The therapist then moves on to help the patient arrange the narrative into something not just cohesive, but true. If this process does not take place, Flint and Elkins write,

Clients may suffer from a state of stress due to the lack of coherent and sequential narrative, which may be accompanied by a feeling of lack of control, purposelessness and disconnection from reality. . . . Brain research theories explain that when there is no access to a clear and coherent narrative, the organizational, administrative functions of the brain are limited as well as the ability to connect to others. The “internal storyteller”. . . is not functioning, and the processing mechanisms are not able to help the person to cope. (Flint and Elkins 2021, 17, 19)

For such individuals, a loss of narrative undermines the mind’s ability to properly orient itself and act in the world.

Acute trauma can lead to incoherence in one’s narrative understanding of a relatively short period of time; there is a second kind of incoherence that extends beyond episodes and into one’s whole life story. Psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs has argued that Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a mental illness which is best understood as the “fragmentation of the narrative self” (Fuchs 2007, 381). Fuchs describes several consequences of this fragmentation. One is that those with BPD commonly experience the present too exclusively, and “this results in a temporal splitting of the self that tends to exclude past and future as dimensions of object constancy, commitment, responsibility and identity” (Fuchs 2007, 381). The irrelevance of what is outside the present leads to considerable difficulty in making decisions as a temporally extended agent. This leads, in turn, to another, more general problem of authentic agency. Drawing on Harry Frankfurt’s work on first and second order volitions, Fuchs writes of a patient with BPD: “Wishes and impulses flare up and vanish again, driving the patients forward, but without coalescing to form a long-term, resolved and overarching will. . . . One could say that instead of projecting themselves into the future, [such patients] just stumble into it” (Fuchs 2007, 381). Second-order volitions require in the first place that one cares about who one will become; they presuppose one’s first-order desires must be shaped and fought with over time. Without a care for the direction of one’s life, it is hard to see how to care about the development of habits or character. This leads to an absence of final ends; Fuchs writes that those with BPD “often describe lasting feelings of emptiness and boredom, since their transitory present has no depth” (Schmidt and Fuchs 2021, 381). Schmidt and Fuchs, in this connection, elsewhere present the heartbreaking words of patient Topher Edwards: “His [accounts] are replete with statements reflecting a deep puzzlement about himself: ‘I feel, for the most part, that I am only just existing. I am part of a

continuum but no more, potentially less” (Schmidt and Fuchs 2021, 321). It is difficult to see how to navigate one’s life without first knowing how to make sense of oneself.

These pathological cases are not, by themselves, conclusive about what must always happen; perhaps it is psychologically possible for a human to live a functional life without a narrative or even diachronic self-conception. But if a lack of an extended, unified self-conception has a demonstrated tendency to produce disfunction, the onus is on Strawson to demonstrate the existence of exceptions—*especially* given his claim to represent a large segment of the population. Although sometimes Strawson speaks as though the episodic life is a very common experience, at other times he acknowledges that what he describes will sound novel. He suggests, for example, that the descriptive claim of Narrativism “is the dominant view in the academy today” (Strawson 2004, 429. See also 428 and 439). He has also penned an essay defending how the episodic life could be fully ethical—which seems to presuppose that the Episodic life is in special need of defense and explanation (Strawson 2007). Yet, despite possessing the burden to give evidence for his account, Strawson provides no empirical support.

To be sure, there are others who have discussed new models for how a hypothetical Episodic might be able to live non-pathologically. But these remain hypothetical. Take, for instance, Philipp Schmidt and Thomas Fuchs (2021) on the one hand, and Natalie Gold and Michalis Kyratsous on the other (2017); both groups have argued in print over the role of narrative in understanding BPD, with Strawson’s report playing a central role as potential evidence for the possibility of a person who completely lacks a narrative sense and yet is non-pathological. Both groups include in their argument, respectively, the following disclaimers: “Granting that the kind of episodic life Strawson describes can be found even in the non-clinical population. . .” (Schmidt and Fuchs 2021, 324) and “if Strawson is right that the nonclinical population can be nonnarrative. . .” (Gold and Kyratsous 2017, 1024). Strawson’s description of his internal life is carrying quite a bit of weight; we do not actually have strong evidence to think there are many others who match his experience, and even those sympathetic to Strawson are not claiming otherwise.

One might respond on Strawson’s behalf by appealing to potential allies among those who deny the existence of the persistent self. Buddhism, for example, represents a vast religious and philosophical tradition which holds that the self is illusory, and would reject Narrativist claims interpreted metaphysically. Thus, perhaps Strawson is not so alone in his report, as there exists a large group who would stand with him. But in fact, the opposite is true. The view that the persistent, narrative self is an illusion contradicts Strawson’s report. Strawson doesn’t report experiencing an illusion; he reports experiencing nothing at all with regards to a diachronic or narrative self-conception. Compare this with Miri Albahari’s explication of a Buddhist philosophy of the self, where he describes the difficult work required for an individual to hypothetically wake up from the illusion of the self:

The general idea is that meditation would work, at least in part, by ‘reprogramming’ our usual patterns of attention so that the attention

would no longer be compulsively captured in the content of those ‘story lines’ needed to preserve the sense of a bounded self. . . While enslaved [to a sense of self], the attention is repeatedly drawn into thoughts and story lines whose content implicitly depicts the self as protagonist of recalled or imagined scenarios in the past and future. (Albahari, 2006, 208)

The default human position, on this view, is one “compulsively” drawn into a narrative self-conception. This is why careful practices must be habituated, such as meditation, to break the hold of a powerful illusion. Albahari is sensitive to psychology on this point, voicing concern that depersonalization in other (i.e., non-meditative) cases is highly pathological (Albahari 2006, 206–8). For Albahari, the removal of the sense of the persistent self, a protagonist who exists through time—even in what he deems positive cases—is not something that happens easily or naturally. Thus, this position actually sides with Narrativists rather than Strawson as far as the characteristic phenomenology is concerned. Our discussion of Episodics may be addressing a set of exactly one.

And the set may be even smaller. It is not clear that readers would violate norms of rationality by disbelieving Strawson’s report. It happens that in the body and footnotes of Strawson’s essay, he takes time to jab at religious believers—claiming that religion is “one of the fundamental vehicles of human narcissism” (Strawson 2004, 438, fn18). It is not necessary for my argument that he does this, but it does create a certain irony. Presumably Strawson speaks this way because he believes religious belief is false. Yet very many religious people report experiencing the supernatural directly; some claim to have encountered God. Strawson’s doesn’t state his own reasons for rejecting the veracity of these reports. He might believe those who make such reports are simply confused and have failed to understand the non-supernatural character of their experience. Perhaps, like Georges Rey, he thinks those who make such reports are self-deceived and no one who makes the reports truly believes them (Kolak and Martin 2005). An uncharitable person may think such reports of supernatural experiences are simply lies. Yet, if these are reasonable responses to experiential reports from a large group of people, they must also be reasonable responses toward the report of an individual. Why isn’t it open to Narrativists to suggest Episodics (supposing there is more than one) are confused, self-deceived, or lying? Perhaps the matter is clearer by analogy to a less fraught subject. Suppose there was a philosopher who claimed to have no experience of the badness of pain, though he insisted that he still felt pain. Suppose he accused certain philosophers of mind of creating theories which did not count his pain as real pain, thus excluding him. Further, he claimed to speak for very many others who felt the same way. I am skeptical that academics would change their theories so as not to exclude the mental life of the purported group of people. Yet this seems to be exactly what has happened in reaction to Strawson’s report.

I am not suggesting Narrativists are immune to legitimate critique. Peter Lamarque and John Christman have argued fruitfully that stronger varieties of Narrativism rest on a concept of narrativity that can’t bear the required weight



(Lamarque 2004; Christman 2004). Yet, Strawson’s move devalues such criticisms. If philosophers can shortcut debate by claiming to represent whole demographic groups, attending to other critiques becomes nonessential. In my view, Strawson’s argument is not just unconvincing, the general form it takes could prove problematic for philosophical discourse more broadly.

Philosophers should not revise their theories to accommodate the descriptive features of Strawson’s case. Maybe there are individuals who experience non-pathological episodicity; until that claim is validated, however, we needn’t incorporate it into philosophical theorizing.

#### IV. Responding to Strawson’s Normative Account

What about Strawson’s attack on the normative claims of Narrativism? In his worked out argument, he suggests that an episodic self-conception makes “no systematic quantitative difference in the warmth, completeness and depth” of one’s relationships (Strawson 2007, 88). The “richly moral and emotional life” and the “right feeling and right desire” that go with it are unaffected by whether one sees oneself as having existed in a life that extends into the past and future (Strawson 2007, 90). If he is correct, the diachronicity that Narrativism rests on would be undermined as an essential part of the fully moral life.

Strawson’s goal in this argument is explicitly non-revisionary; he is not radically amending our conception of the morally flourishing life to let in the hypothetical Episodics,<sup>1</sup> he is showing how they can already fit into our common conception of a fully flourishing life, with all the entailed moral emotions, values, and commitments. He is explicit on this point: If he is successful in his argument, then the consequentialist, deontologist, and virtue theorist can all agree that the episodic life is no less morally full (Strawson 2007, 90, 103). This provides vital goal posts for judging the success of Strawson’s argument. If the episodic life can only count as fully flourishing by revising our common morality, then Strawson has not met his stated goal. And his goal is a sensible one, I should add; *any* form of life could be moral if we are first willing to revise what it means to be moral to accommodate it.

There are two introductory challenges faced by Strawson’s normative account of the episodic life. First, how can an Episodic believe she has moral obligations if she does not feel herself as having existed in the further past? Jones sees that she is the human being, the biological self, who gave a promise a year ago, but she has no experience of herself as the person who gave that promise. She feels, literally, that the promise was given by someone else; why uphold someone else’s promise? Strawson’s position is that those around the Episodic must inevitably interact with his biological self, and, accordingly, they form expectations based on how his biological self has behaved in the past (Strawson 2007, 100–101). The experiential self therefore has a responsibility to fulfill obligations which previous experiential selves, through the same biological self, have incurred. For example, “If Lucy tells Louis she will do A, and dear Louis is expecting or relying on this,

<sup>1</sup> I omit the ‘hypothetical’ in what follows for ease of discourse.

then, other things being equal. . . she ought to do A” (Strawson 2007, 101). Thus, though she may not feel that it was she who gave the promise, she can recognize that she is nevertheless specially attached to the human being who gave the promise—a promise which someone is now counting on—and this is the same as recognizing her present obligation. The experiential self requires no feeling of past moral obligation to see, objectively, that she now has such an obligation and ought to act on it.

The second challenge is raised by Kathy Wilkes:

Remorse and contrition are among the (self-referring; experiential) mental phenomena that make no sense part from the idea that I (or the ‘Me\*’) had on some occasion in the past behaved badly or dishonorably; mourning is a form of sorrow that, like remorse and contrition, reaches into the present from the past. (Wilkes 1999, 27)

It seems there are human emotions, including moral emotions, which require a diachronic outlook. Though he does not own it, Strawson’s response to this objection is largely revisionary. For example, in response to the objection that Episodics cannot feel guilt, he rejects guilt as a proper moral emotion. But this is a serious failing for a position which is supposed to be compatible with ethical systems as they currently stand. Strawson’s account could not possibly fail to show the fullness of the episodic life if, any time a moral emotion or practice is raised as a counterexample, he rejects it as moral or changes its meaning. It is a fatal flaw that he depends on such revisions, and they provide reason alone to think his normative argument fails to achieve its stated aims. Instead of revision, he should have restricted himself to the amelioration that occupies other parts of his argument, aiming to show how historical attitudes such as forgiveness are not *essentially* historical. As we turn to the concrete examples in his account, this problem will rear its head repeatedly.

## Friendship, Guilt, Forgiveness, Gratitude

Strawson gives some specific examples of elements of the moral life which he argues are, with some careful analysis, either available to the Episodic or unnecessary in the first place. Friendship, guilt, forgiveness, and gratitude all fall under his discussion. I will spend the rest of this article arguing that this normative account is unviable, both in its examples and in principle.

To begin with, how could an Episodic individual achieve the fullest kinds of friendships? Mature friendships are innately historical. Strawson replies that the past need not play a role, because “A gift for friendship doesn’t require any ability to recall past shared experiences, nor any tendency to value them. It is shown in how one is in the present” (Strawson 2007, 109). But this is a desiccated view of friendship. The greatest friendships grow, mature, and eventually come to find nourishment through difficult times from their own past. Shared remembering can bind together two who have drifted apart by giving them motivation to continue on together ‘after all we’ve been through.’ As Christopher Moore and Samuel

Frederick argue, deep friendship requires some realization of a history held in common (Moore and Frederick 2017). It is a familiar human experience to wonder of an old friend, ‘Would we be friends if we were meeting for the first time only now?’ If friendship were reducible to one’s experience of it in the present, this would be an incomprehensible question. Yet it is not. Indeed, the question’s answer provides insight into the kind of relationship friendship is, for sometimes the reply to whether they could begin now is, ‘Probably not.’ Who the friends were when they began the relationship may be so different that the spark of friendship could not now be ignited. Yet acknowledging that fact is no obstacle to the friendship’s continued thriving, for the shared path they took informs their relationship, providing context for mutual understanding. If the Episodic cannot understand the question nor its negative answer, she cannot understand the fullness of friendship.

Similar relational problems arise in Strawson’s view of forgiveness. One might wonder: If the Episodic believes that there is a sense in which he did not exist in the past, how can he forgive past wrongs against himself, which are experienced by him as against somebody else? Strawson responds that this is no problem since we can forgive on behalf of others—and this includes earlier versions of ourselves. But what if the wrongdoer deeply desires forgiveness from Strawson *now*, and does not want it on behalf of someone else? He responds that the wrongdoers in question “already have [forgiveness] in sufficient measure, for [the victims] no longer feel wronged, although they remember what happened, and that is forgiveness” (Strawson 2007, 111). He concludes that desiring anything further from the forgiver is selfish and perverse.

There are two points to make here. First, there is no account of forgiveness on which to remember but “no longer feel wronged” counts as forgiveness. In fact, virtually every account of forgiveness in the philosophical literature *explicitly denies* this claim because it would count condoning, justifying, and excusing wrongdoing as forgiveness (e.g., Kolnai 1973, 96ff; Murphy and Hampton 1988, 29–21; Haber 1991, 12–14; Hieronymi 2001, 531ff; Griswold 2007, 54–55). More importantly, however, this view of forgiveness reflects Strawson’s belief that “guilt adds nothing—nothing good—to moral being” for both the Episodic and Diachronic (Strawson 2007, 93). I will have more to say about guilt shortly, but it is easy to see why Strawson’s account would require its rejection; guilt is historical. Yet what remains for those who do feel guilt? Like Aquinas’s “stain on the soul,” they feel pain for what they’ve done in the past, worrying that their guilt will overcome them (Aquinas 1920, II–I, Q86). This is why, as Jean Hampton evocatively writes, forgiveness has the capacity for liberation:

If the wrongdoer fears that the victim is right to see him as cloaked in evil, or as infected with moral rot, these fears can engender moral hatred of himself. Such self loathing is the feeling that he is, entirely or in part, morally hideous, unclean, infected. It can be directed at his character or dispositions or, more dangerously, towards everything that he is, so that he comes to believe that there is nothing good or decent in him. . . [this] can lead to self-destruction. (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 86)

Forgiveness offers healing to the sepsis of guilt even when—perhaps especially when—that guilt is well-deserved. Stripping forgiveness of its connection to guilt, and calling the wrongdoer selfish for yearning for its tonic, warps forgiveness beyond recognition. If guilt is rejected (already an illicit revision), the concept of forgiveness is also unacceptably undermined.

What about gratitude and resentment? How can the Episodic be grateful for a previous kindness which she experiences as having been granted to someone else? Strawson responds, simply, that he just does experience gratitude (Strawson 2007, 112ff). How is this possible? Drawing on the work of P.F. Strawson, he argues that these feelings are rooted in our psychology rather than in logical coherence (Strawson 2007, 99). Gratitude is hard-wired into our psychology, and the Episodic can no more fail to feel it than those who deny free will can fail to continue feeling attitudes of blaming.

Though this response again requires reliance on Strawson's testimony to get off the ground, there is another familiar problem. Once more, Strawson violates the theoretical neutrality to which his account aims to adhere. It is another form of revisionism to apply an error theory about the source of our moral emotions to explain gratitude, one with implications for the basis of everyone's moral emotions, not just the Episodic's.

## Ideals and Integrity

The problems for Strawson's normative account of the episodic life run more deeply than specific emotions or practices. At bottom, it is impossible for the Episodic life to be fully flourishing because it necessarily lacks the capacity for integrity, and, indeed, lacks it in three essential and different ways.

To show the first way the Episodic lacks integrity, we begin with some general remarks. Integrity, on one way of thinking, involves preserving the distinctness of a life and its basic commitments. Of special relevance is the work of Bernard Williams; his use of 'integrity' does not exactly keep its popular sense of honesty, but instead falls closer to its sense in the phrase 'structural integrity' (Smart and Williams 1973, 98). A person has integrity insofar as she is distinct from the world around her as an autonomous life; she acts in the world from her own views, projects, and commitments. In an illustrative critique of utilitarianism, Williams discusses a person who hesitates to maximize utility because the act required violates her deepest personal convictions (Smart and Williams 1973, 87–98). If the person in question is thoroughly utilitarian, any hesitation on account of her own commitments is rank squeamishness. She should give no more weight to her commitments and moral feelings than she would to any *one* person's feelings. Yet, if someone were really to think this way, Williams argues, it would mean the loss of "a sense of one's moral identity; to lose, in the most literal way, one's integrity. At this point utilitarianism alienates one from one's moral feelings" (Smart and Williams 1973, 104). The idea at the center of Williams's argument is that each person, as a person, inhabits a particular life, and that life is rightly oriented around specific personal and moral commitments. Each person is "identified with his actions as flowing from projects and attitudes which in some

cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about” (Smart and Williams 1973, 116). Requiring a person to justify her behavior only by appeal to impartial, impersonal principles, is to require, impossibly, attaching no special significance to her deepest life values. Who she is, on one hand, and her reasons for acting, on the other, would be unnaturally pulled apart.

It is important to see that integrity is not merely a matter of one’s ethical commitments. Thomas Nagel writes that among one’s reasons for acting are those which arise from a commitment “to one’s own projects and undertakings,” rather than recognition of their independent value (Nagel 1979, 131). Nagel points out that these personal reasons mark one side of a fundamental divide between how a person thinks about himself and others. One’s reason for thinking it would be good for people in general to care for their children is just that “it would be a good thing, impartially considered” (Nagel 1979, 132). In a person’s own case, however, she does not care for her loved ones out of impartial approval of their value, but because she is specially invested in their happiness. Susan Wolf remarks that, never acting from one’s own, specific reasons, instead always acting from impersonal desires for the objective moral best “seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self” (Wolf 1982, 424). It is a hallmark of human persons that we each take up and maintain different projects and relationships by committing to causes, institutions, careers, families, friends, or hobbies. We see our lives, to use Williams’s language, as being *about* these commitments; the person with integrity will not abandon them.

In contrast, the Episodic cannot have commitments or ideals of his own—the first way he lacks integrity. While the Diachronic can live with commitment and consistency, moving with purpose on the path she has chosen for herself, the Episodic, *ex hypothesi*, has no sense of himself as going anywhere or aiming at anything with his life. There is a literal sense in which he does not see himself as having come from anywhere. His life cannot be about anything and he cannot see any path as more aligned with his ideals than another, because, crucially, what he finds himself caring about has been shaped by an earlier self with whom he does not identify. His ideals are not really his: *they were chosen by someone else*.

Now, one might reply that people feel responsibility for the projects of others, such as a family business, and may see these responsibilities as a matter of integrity. If someone can feel responsibility for other lives and projects, couldn’t the Episodic feel responsibility for the previous selves with whom she shares a biological life? This would be peculiar; the Episodic does not care about her past (Strawson 2004, 433). Yet even if she did feel responsible for previous others, how could she identify which responsibilities are authentically hers? There is something lamentable about a dominated person whose life is fully occupied fulfilling the ambitions and goals of another—her life is about someone else’s life. The Episodic would be unable to avoid such a fate. She would have no foundation of sustained commitment by which to judge whether her feelings of responsibility for others reflect who she really is, unable to distinguish authenticity from domination.

There is a second way of understanding the Episodic’s lack of integrity: A central function of integrity is to oppose hypocrisy, but the Episodic could never encounter

substantive hypocrisy which needs opposing. Hypocrisy does not apply to the Episodic because no action of his could count as betraying his ideals. As we will see, to have the kind of self which admits of hypocrisy, a person must first see himself as living through time with a degree of stability in his basic commitments.

Consider, in general, what is involved in violating one's ideals. This is clearest at the extremes, in what one takes to be most forbidden. Josiah Royce argues that a person, in examining his commitments and the direction of his life, must naturally determine what his boundaries of behavior are; these borders are set in relation to the ideals which give his life meaning and direction (Royce 1913, 246). The most forbidden will include actions which are abhorrent because they are unethical (e.g., torture) and also those which are unthinkable because they are contrary to the life course that individual has chosen (e.g., burning one's life work for money; abandoning a lifelong friendship on a whim). If he violates a final boundary—or, to use Robin Dillion's language, passes one of his "points of no return"—he is committing a kind of suicide: "a deliberate wrecking of what makes life, for himself, morally worthwhile" (Dillon 1992, 134; Royce 1913, 244). Eleonore Stump likewise suggests that such a person now has a "moral elasticity" and must live on knowing that he lacks unbreachable limits in his commitments (Stump 2018, 58). For Stump, it is not just that the wrongdoer in such cases will go on feeling guilty for violating an abstract principle, but that he has violated himself. He is a traitor to his deepest ideals. The self-traitor must live on knowing that he has relinquished guiding landmarks, the hard limits which gave "resoluteness and clearness" to his life (Royce 1913, 247). He knows that he has the capacity to override what he thought was absolute, that he cannot be counted on to be loyal even to himself.

This conception of self-betrayal is trivial without diachronic experience. For illustration, suppose that the self-traitor sees the act he is about to commit and also that it would violate his deepest commitments. Why couldn't he, to avoid hypocrisy, simply change his ideals prior to committing the act? If he sets aside that ideal, then at the time of committing the act there would be no contradiction between his behavior and commitments. Of course, this is not really an option. Basic commitments can provide orientation amidst shifting circumstances precisely because they are the sort of things that cannot be easily uprooted. Abruptly rejecting allegiance to a basic ideal is itself a betrayal of constancy; it expresses a failure to take up one's ideals as parts of oneself—parts whose loss would be a kind of amputation.

Returning now to the Episodic, we find that she is never in danger of this kind of self-betrayal or self-amputation. She does not have a firm enough self for it. Because she has no experiential past, there is no difference to her between a whim and a sustained value that has become an integral part of her. She has no way of distinguishing between a mere change of mind and self-betrayal. But the ability to make such a distinction is crucial for acting with integrity. If there is to be a change in a person's ideals or basic projects, it is important that she finds continuity in the transition, so that old commitments are transformed rather than abandoned. A person who is constantly choosing directions, beliefs, and projects which are new and contradictory to the old is too elastic, too passive; she is an

extension of the world’s movements around her. Yet, the Episodic is *always* in such a position because she experiences all of her projects and commitments as something which, like herself, she has only recently encountered. Accordingly, the Episodic *can make no distinction between transformations and breaches of her commitments*. Without appeal to her past (experienced as her own), she has no grounds for identifying different changes in her ideals as being more or less aligned with who she is. The categories of hypocrisy and integrity, therefore, do not apply to her.

A third way integrity is impossible for the Episodic is expressed by his numbness to a kind of disappointment to which others are importantly vulnerable. This is the disappointment a person feels over his misfortune which is uniquely unavailable to nearby spectators—what Williams calls “agent-regret” (Williams 1982, 27). A spectator to misfortune can see its badness, objectively speaking, but only a participant in misfortune can feel that it is bad *for him*. Williams illustrates the difference through an example of a truck driver with a passenger riding in the front seat (Williams 1982, 28). Through no fault of his own, the driver strikes and kills a child. Though the driver and passenger are equally blameless, only one can regret the misfortunate as his own. Williams remarks that “there is something special about [the driver’s] relation to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault” (Williams 1982, 28). Indeed, he argues, if the driver were not bothered by the accident merely because he was blameless, we should consider this not just callous, but a failure to take full responsibility for himself (Williams 1982, 28). The driver’s regret expresses that he cares about having a good life, a life uninvolved in killing, and that he is rightly dismayed when he is moved, even involuntarily, away from that ideal. Conversely, the Episodic could not later care in this way about such an accident, for she would feel it literally happened to someone else. She will reflect on it like the passenger in her truck, observing the accident without feeling a sense of having participated in it. This is yet another way of saying that she cannot care about ideals of her own because she cannot care about past movements away from those ideals.

We can conclude, by way of summary, that the concept of integrity could not apply to the Episodic. The ideals he finds himself with are not his own because he didn’t choose them; the earlier evils he has caused he feels were not caused by him; he feels that someone else will experience the future which results from his current choices. To the extent he thinks about any of these things, he thinks only impersonally, as a spectator, as one without stake. Without concern for his integrity, the Episodic begins not to look like a full agent at all, for he is detached from fundamental concerns which other agents have about themselves and by which they make coherent choices about their lives.

### Taking Responsibility for One’s Life

The conclusions of the previous section are confirmed by Strawson’s own statements about how the Episodic must approach responsibility and conscience:

One doesn’t have to care about one’s past in any essentially self-concerned way, still less feel or conceive it as one’s own, in order



to act well or be disposed to act well. *What matters morally in any situation one is in is the moral structure of that situation.* In some cases facts about one's past actions are part of the moral structure of the present situation, in which case one's own past is part of what matters, but, again, one will not need to care about it in an essentially self-concerned way, or now conceive it as one's own. (Strawson 2007, 104, emphasis mine)

For Strawson, the right decision for a person at any moment is determined from without, by "the moral structure of that situation." Notice how this inverts the language of integrity. Rather than making decisions based on one's deep commitments and ideals, what one ought to do is determined by the external factors one finds oneself in. Crucially, for the Episodic, *those external factors include his own history.* The experiential self's actions are utterly discrete, extracted by what the moment demands rather than chosen by a coherent self with settled goals, boundaries, commitments, and ideals. The Episodic may fulfill the objectively correct obligation that happens to present itself in the present moment, but, without reference to the diachronic, she fulfills an obligation that does not belong to her in particular. The obligation has fallen, interchangeably, to whoever happened to be in that situation.

Given this punctuated view of the self, it is no surprise that Strawson is openly disdainful of guilt as a form of regret. He writes that guilt is "essentially superficial, essentially self-indulgent. . . and above all petty" (Strawson 2007, 93). The unpleasantness of such feelings might occasionally motivate some to avoid wrongdoing, but that is irrelevant. In a particularly bold passage, he adds:

Consider dear Lucy, who has, regrettably, performed some action A. Suppose that she is thinking that A-ing is wrong, and suppose she has acquired a particularly vivid sense that A-ing is wrong specifically because she herself has A-d in the past. This can be so without her being in any way disposed to fix on or give special weight or attention to the fact that she herself has A-d. (Strawson 2007, 97)

Strawson is arguing that one's own past connection to evil should be no matter of special concern in the moral life. There is no need after committing evil to think of oneself as tainted or corrupted, and in fact such thinking is self-indulgent. This conclusion is reinforced by Strawson's comments that contrition "is the more attractive the more fully it involves grasp of and sorrow about the harm done, and the less it involves focus on the fact that it was oneself who did it" (Strawson 2007, 92). Strawson seems to hold that it is better to always feel regret as a spectator rather than as the acting agent—better to feel, impersonally, that *someone's* behavior was regrettable rather than *one's own* behavior.

In contrast to Strawson's view of guilt, Williams insists that "it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone, and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would" (Williams 1982, 29). Guilt, and its accompanying desire to 'make things right,' need



not be justified only by appeal to future instrumental value. It can be justified by its value in giving coherence to one’s life. This point is pressed in a different context by David Velleman (Velleman 1991, 150). Part of the purpose of learning from one’s mistakes, he argues, is to learn from them *as* one’s own mistakes. By integrating the mistake into a life and learning from it, its meaning changes (Velleman 1991, 151). If we held Strawson’s view of the matter, and took one’s own connection to past misfortune to be irrelevant (except as indicators of how one is disposed to behave in the future), then we might conclude instead that the point of learning from one’s mistakes is just to produce more future value. But if that were true, then it would absurdly follow that reforming myself should bear no more significance to me than reforming any one person; preventing a group of troubled youth from committing the same mistake might be less self-indulgent than tending to my own character.

Guilt, gratitude, resentment, regret, and other historical emotions are bound up with a person’s past and settled values. The Diachronic’s capacity for integrity does not ensure that he will act with concern for it, but it creates the possibility. When he holds fast in adversity, he may behave with endurance, perseverance, and hope, looking to the future knowing that “struggle can be blessed with the foretaste of achievement, and the good we set our hearts on can be sweeter because they have been won” (Lewis 1950, 498). These emotions and behaviors represent a commitment to seeing himself as a person with a whole life rather than an impersonal viewpoint happening to exist at this moment. They require having a perspective not as a disinterested spectator, but as a participant with the highest stake there could be. Strawson’s account, on the other hand, represents a radically dis-integrated view of the human person, one which dissipates integrity and individuality.

### A Possible Objection and Two Responses

A defender of Strawson’s position might bite the bullet. Schechtman acknowledges, “It is always open to an Episodic to simply claim that he feels no such alienation, and it does not distress him at all to have obligations and responsibilities that connect to motives and experiences with which he cannot identify” (Schechtman 2007, 177). Perhaps the lack of integrity I have been describing is only bad for those who experience life in diachronic and narrative ways—perhaps integrity only matters for those with a certain psychology. Or, at any rate, who are we to pronounce otherwise?

There are two responses to make here. First, it is possible for a person to both lack a good and lack an appreciation of its absence. As James Gould observes, a person who lacks freedom may internalize his oppression to the point that he reports sincerely no interest in freedom (Gould 2022, 501). Yet, we are not therefore obliged to accept that, for him, a lack of freedom is no loss. So, even if the Episodic does not experience a lack of integrity as a loss which diminishes happiness, this does not compel us to revise our beliefs about the universal value of integrity.

The second response is that Strawson’s report itself ought to give us independent reason for doubting that the Episodic life is not without negative consequences.

Strawson believes his experience to be paradigmatic of a life which is both Episodic yet fully flourishing, but when he gets into the details, the self-conception he presents is startling. He writes in a recent discussion:

If I consider myself, I find that my self-biography is just a chronology, a list of dates. It's a filing cabinet (mostly empty). It doesn't in any way represent progression. It involves no narrative flow, although I can of course report certain causal sequences (but I am bad at this). . . . What about my self-concept, my self-conception? When I try to summon it, I have a sense of complete blankness. . . My sense is that all that I am is here now and that what I am is fundamentally unclear to me. It's a profoundly nonnarrative experience. If I try to think further about myself—if I try to bring a self-conception to mind—initial thoughts about character traits are met with blankness. (Strawson 2020, 141)

Strawson goes on to say that he can think of individual facts about himself, such as his tendencies and preferences, and that

Such facts—bits and pieces—may be important. . . To take them for what they are—bits and pieces—and not to try to assemble them in any discursive fashion, may be the beginning of wisdom, and perhaps also the end of it, in any project of self-understanding. (Strawson 2020, 142)

To whatever extent that it is reasonable for this report to be used as support for the episodic life, it can also be used fairly in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, it conveys a picture of one who seemingly has almost no sense of self. It expresses both disunity and a passive attitude toward fragmentation. If this experience is the best counterexample to the importance of diachronicity or narrative to a flourishing life, I do not think Narrativists have reason to revise their views.

## V. Conclusion

I have argued that Strawson's account is unsuccessful in undermining the central theses of Narrativism. As an attack on the descriptive elements of Narrativism, his report falls short of compelling evidence. Further, and independently, the normative dimensions of Strawson's proposed episodic life would require major revisions in moral theorizing. They also run counter to caring about one's own life by precluding the possibility of integrity. Accordingly, the notion of the fully flourishing episodic life ought to be rejected.

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