

Getting the story right: a Reductionist narrative account of personal identity

Jeanine Weekes Schroer · Robert Schroer

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Abstract A popular “Reductionist” account of personal identity unifies person stages into persons in virtue of their psychological continuity with one another. One objection to psychological continuity accounts is that there is more to our personal identity than just mere psychological continuity: there is also an active process of self-interpretation and self-creation. This criticism can be used to motivate a rival account of personal identity that appeals to the notion of a narrative. To the extent that they comment upon the issue, proponents of narrative accounts typically reject Reductionist metaphysics that (ontologically) reduce persons to aggregates of person stages. In contrast to this trend, we seek to develop a narrative account of personal identity from within Reductionist metaphysics: we think person stages are unified into persons in virtue of their *narrative continuity* with one another. We argue that this Reductionist version of the narrative account avoids some serious problems facing non-Reductionist versions of the narrative account.

Keywords Personal identity · Narrative · Reductionism

1 Introduction

Accounts of personal identity that appeal to psychological continuity and accounts that appeal to narratives are often portrayed as being located at opposite ends of a spectrum: the former are “Reductionist” in that they (in some sense) “reduce” persons to aggregates of psychologically connected person stages, while the latter are non-Reductionist and tend to be more focused on practical, not metaphysical,

J. W. Schroer (✉) · R. Schroer
Department of Philosophy, University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, MN, USA
e-mail: jschroer@d.umn.edu

R. Schroer
e-mail: rschroer@d.umn.edu

questions surrounding personal identity. In this paper, we go against this view of the field and develop a narrative account of personal identity while embracing the Reductionist program that both reduces persons to aggregates of person stages and engages the traditional metaphysical questions surrounding personal identity.

We begin, in Sect. 2, by reviewing a standard version of Reductionism that unifies person stages into persons in virtue of their psychological continuity with one another. We argue that psychological continuity accounts miss an important aspect of personhood: they miss the importance of activities of self-interpretation/creation. We aim to capture this aspect of personhood via the notion of a narrative.

In Sect. 3, we review how other accounts that put the notion of a narrative to work in this area either explicitly reject the metaphysics that ontologically reduces persons to person stages or develop accounts of personal identity that are silent on the Reductionism/non-Reductionism debate. In contrast to this trend, our narrative account will explicitly accept (ontological) Reductionism¹; we will put the notion of narrative to work from *within* a framework that reduces persons to person stages.

In Sect. 4, we undertake the project of building such an account, introducing and refining several key ideas—e.g. narrative explanation, narrative connectedness, and narrative continuity—in the process. (In the course of developing the latter two ideas, we draw several parallels to psychological connectedness and psychological continuity.) Finally, in Sect. 5, we compare our Reductionist version of the narrative account to two non-Reductionist versions of the narrative account and show how our Reductionism provides important additional resources for tackling some of the problems facing those non-Reductionist narrative accounts.

2 Psychological continuity and self-interpretation/creation

We will interpret the question of (diachronic) personal identity as being the question of what makes a person (x) at time t1 and a person (y) at time t2 the same person. Although some have questioned this way of framing the issue of personal identity, we will follow the lead of many others and take this framing of the question for granted.² In response to this question, a wide spectrum of theories have been advanced, including (but not limited to): body theories that analyze personal identity in terms of the persistence of a physical body³; animal theories that analyze it in terms of the persistence of a human animal⁴; dualist theories that analyze it in terms of the persistence of a non-physical substance (like a Cartesian Ego)⁵; so-called

¹ The notion of Ontological Reductionism will be explained, and contrasted with Epistemological Reductionism, later in this paper.

² For discussion of some of the issues (and concerns) with framing the question of personal identity along these lines, see Olson (1997).

³ For a fascinating (and influential) argument in favor of the body theory, see Williams (1970).

⁴ See Olson (1997).

⁵ See Swinburne (1984).

“simple views” where the persistence of persons is taken as a brute fact⁶; and many more.

In this paper, we focus on another popular cluster of theories of personal identity, theories that build accounts of personal identity out of various psychological ingredients—e.g., experiences, beliefs, memories, etc. This general approach follows Locke in thinking that personal identity is a broadly forensic notion and that the best way to capture its connection to other notions such as responsibility, compensation, etc. is through understanding personal identity in psychological terms. We will be working within this same broad tradition: our account construes personal identity as a forensic notion built out of certain psychological elements.

As a foil to our account, let’s start by considering a similar kind of account of personal identity: psychological continuity accounts. Here is a generic version of such an account

An earlier person stage X and a later person stage Y are stages of the same person iff:

- (1) X is psychologically continuous with Y
- (2) The mental states linking X and Y together are caused in the right way
- (3) There is no branching (i.e. there is no other person stage, Z, existing at the same time as Y, that also satisfies the relevant analogs of conditions 1 and 2)

Let’s review some of the key ideas from this account, starting with the notion of a “person stage”. Lewis (1976, 1983) characterizes this notion from a perdurantist perspective where, in general, objects persist over time in virtue of having temporal parts. From within such a perspective, a person stage is viewed as being a temporal part of a person.⁷ In addition, Lewis maintains that a person stage is an entirely physical object that is much like a short-lived person—like persons, person-stages walk and talk, possess beliefs and desires, and possess many of the other physical/spatial properties as persons. Although his view is not completely free of problems and complications, we will interpret the notion of a “person stage” along the same lines as Lewis.⁸

This account is a “Reductionist” account in that it reduces persons to aggregates of person stages that are bound together, into persons, in virtue of being psychologically continuous with one another. “Reductionism” has been cashed out in a variety of ways in the debates over personal identity.⁹ As mentioned above, we interpret the basic idea of Reductionism in terms of the attempt to, in some sense, treat persons as consisting of sets of person stages. This basic idea can be sub-

⁶ Such a position is suggested by the work of Chisholm (1976) and Merricks (1998).

⁷ For a rival account that interprets “person stages” in terms of stages of a person’s life history, and not in terms of temporal parts of a person, see Shoemaker (1984).

⁸ One follow-up question concerns the actual duration of a person stage, an issue that Lewis is rather vague about. For discussion of this issue, see Schechtman (1996) and Brink (1997).

⁹ For discussions of some of the ways in which this notion has been interpreted, see Baillie (1993) and Noonan (2003).

divided into two further, and more specific, ideas, depending upon whether “reduction” in question is viewed as *ontological* or *epistemological*.¹⁰ We will view Reductionism of the *ontological* type as maintaining that all the facts about persons depend upon, and are ontologically settled by, facts about person stages. According to this kind of Reductionism, once God fixes all the facts about person stages, he (or she) has thereby fixed all the facts about persons. As an example of a theory that denies ontological Reductionism (as we’ve interpreted the notion), consider a dualist theory that maintains that personal identity is underpinned by the persistence of a non-physical soul. According to such a theory, God’s fixing all the facts about person stages—which, recall, are *physical* entities—would not thereby fix all the facts about persons, since many of the latter facts are determined by a substance that is *non-physical*.

We will treat Reductionism of the *epistemological* stripe as maintaining that all facts about persons can be *analyzed*, without remainder, in terms of facts about person stages.¹¹ To put it another way, this kind of Reductionism maintains facts about persons can be a priori derived from facts about person stages. Notice that it’s possible to endorse Ontological Reductionism—it’s possible to endorse the claim that all the facts about persons (logically) supervene upon facts about person stages—without endorsing Epistemological Reductionism. Such a position would be analogous to non-Reductionist physicalist theories of mind that maintain that although mental properties supervene upon physical properties, they cannot be analyzed in terms of them.

With the distinction between Ontological and Epistemological Reductionism in hand, let’s return to the generic version of the psychological continuity account sketched above. As we’ve laid this account out, it implies Ontological Reductionism, but not Epistemological Reductionism; it maintains that facts about (diachronic) personal identity are *metaphysically determined* by certain facts about person stages, but it does not claim that the former can be *analyzed* in terms of the latter. And in what follows, Ontological Reductionism will be the central, but not exclusive, focus of our arguments.

Now let’s turn to the notion of “psychological continuity”. Psychological continuity is built out of a more basic relation obtaining between individual person stages: the relation of psychological connectedness. According to Parfit’s (1984) influential treatment, which we will (roughly) follow, two person stages count as being “psychologically connected” when there are direct connections between some of the mental states/actions of those person stages: for instance, when the latter has memories that are ostensibly of the experiences of the former, when the latter acts on intentions of the former, when the latter has the same beliefs, desires as the former, etc. Psychological continuity theories can differ, of course, with regard

¹⁰ Johnston (1997) invokes a similar distinction between kinds of Reductionist positions with regard to personal identity.

¹¹ In his interpretation of Reductionism, Parfit (1984) includes the stipulation that all the facts in which personal identity consists can be described “impersonally”—i.e. in terms that do not mention persons or personhood. It is tempting to read this stipulation of Parfit’s as being a statement of Epistemological Reductionism, as we’ve defined that notion.

to which of these direct relations are given the most significance with regard to personal identity. A defender of a simple memory theory may appeal only to memory, for example, while other psychological continuity theorists may accord equal weight to all the above-mentioned direct connections.

With the notion of “psychological connectedness” in hand, we can define psychological continuity. Two person stages are psychologically continuous with one another if and only if they are psychologically connected *or* there is an overlapping chain of intermediate person stages linking the two original stages, a chain by which each person stage is psychologically connected with the stage immediately before it and the stage immediately after it. (For the record, Parfit adds the additional requirement that psychological continuity is built out of person stages that are “strongly connected”. Two person-stages count as being strongly connected when the number of direct psychological connections obtaining between them is at least half the number of connections that hold in the lives of normal people every day. We will ignore this complication in what follows.) In this way, psychological continuity is the metaphysical glue that binds person stages into persons; it is what ontologically determines facts about personal identity.

The second and third conditions in our generic version of the psychological continuity account can be covered more quickly. The second condition handles cases of delusion with regard to personal identity in a way that doesn’t render the overall account circular. Suppose, for instance, that you have memories of being Muhammad Ali. Are these memories real or delusional? To assert that your apparent memories are delusional because the experiences remembered did not happen to you leads the psychological continuity account to circularity. To avoid defining personal identity in terms of (accurate) memory and then defining (accurate) memory in terms of personal identity, the psychological continuity account maintains that whether or not your apparent memories of being Muhammad Ali are delusional is determined by how those mental states were caused.¹² The third condition, in turn, handles fission cases. If a teleporter hiccups and sends my mental blueprint to both Mars and Venus, there would be *two* entities existing at the same time that, according to the first two conditions, have equal claim to being me. In virtue of including the third condition—a “no branching” condition—such duplication or fission cases become identity destroying and the potential paradox is removed.

There is a longstanding concern that the notion of psychological continuity, understood along the lines sketched above, misses (or at least fails to highlight) something important about what it’s like (for most of us) to be persons. Consider, for example, the charge that Korsgaard (1989) makes against Parfit’s (1984) version of the psychological continuity account

...our relationship to our actions and choices is essentially *authorial*: from it, we view them as *our own*... We think of living our lives, and even of having

¹² For elaboration upon this strategy, which invokes the notion of “quasi-memories” or “q-memories”, see Shoemaker (1970) and Parfit (1984).

our experiences, as something we *do*. And it is this important feature of our sense of our identity that Parfit's view leaves out. (p. 121, her emphasis.)

The basic idea is that psychological continuity accounts neglect the importance of self-interpretation (and self-creation) activities that feature prominently in our personhood. The mere fact that two person stages are psychologically connected—the fact that the latter has memories ostensibly of the experiences of the earlier, or acts on the intentions of the earlier, or shares beliefs/desires of the earlier—does not entail the presence of the activities of self-interpretation/self-creation that are central to our experience of being persons. In this way, an account that appeals just to psychological continuity misses something important about personhood.

This complaint against psychological continuity accounts is found in places besides the work of Korsgaard. To give just one further example, DeGrazia (2005) claims that, when it comes to understanding why we value survival, it is not enough to say that survival is valuable simply because it allows us to have additional experiences.

But to stress experience is to stress only a relatively passive side of human persons: what we take in through the senses and process with our minds. Of course, we humans are also *agents*—beings who act, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes after deliberation and planning. Agency seems no less central to what we are (at least during our existences as persons), and what we care about, than experience is. (p.79, his emphasis)

Especially important in this regard, we think, are the activities of self-interpretation and self-creation: the reason we value survival is because surviving gives us the possibility “to become the sorts of people we want to be” (DeGrazia 2005, p. 82).

Following the lead of many (but not all) of those who emphasize such activities in our experience of our personal identity, we will capture the idea that persons are actively self-interpreting and self-creating creatures via *the construction of self-narratives*. In this way, we will accommodate the fact that our sense of our selves involves something more than just a passively constructed “sequential listing of life events”—it also involves “an account of the explanatory relations between them—a story of how events in one's history lead to other events in that history” (Schechtman 2007, p. 160).

3 Narrative accounts and Ontological non-Reductionism

We have argued that typical accounts of personal identity which emphasize psychological continuity fail to capture the activities of self-interpretation and self-creation central to the experience of being a person and to personhood more generally. The problem is that the fact of person stages being psychologically connected to one another does not guarantee the existence of such activities. Our positive proposal, which we will develop in Sect. 4, will capture this important feature of the experience of being a person via the notion of a narrative.

Before giving that account, however, we first want to highlight an interesting trend among defenders of narrative accounts of personal identity: a trend of

rejecting the Reductionist framework. To be fair, some who appeal to the notion of a narrative in this context frame their discussions in such a way that is silent on the Reductionism/non-Reductionism debate. For example, Humphrey and Dennett (1989) as well as Flanagan (1996) put narrative accounts of personal identity to work in explaining the phenomenon of Multiple Personality Disorder, but do so in a way that is seemingly agnostic about the metaphysical issue of Reductionism versus non-Reductionism. But among those appealing to the notion of a narrative who do take a stand on the Reductionism/non-Reductionism debate, that stand is in favor of non-Reductionism and against Reductionism.¹³ As a result, extant narrative accounts of personal identity tend to either be radical departures from Reductionist accounts (in that they explicitly reject the metaphysics underpinning such accounts) or be focused upon questions that are entirely different from those traditionally associated with the metaphysics of personal identity.¹⁴

We want to further examine the trend towards non-Reductionism among advocates of the narrative account of personal identity by briefly reviewing the positions of two of its most prominent defenders: Marya Schechtman and Anthony Rudd. In reviewing the positions of these philosophers, our central focus will be to highlight their commitment to Ontological non-Reductionism.¹⁵ This will set up a contrast to the position that we want to develop: a position that puts the notion of a narrative to work within a Reductionist metaphysics of personal identity and endorses Ontological Reductionism. Within this Reductionist framework, we will not treat the notion of a narrative as a replacement for the notion of psychological continuity. Instead, we will treat it as a refinement of the notion of psychological continuity—we will use the notion of a narrative to zero-in on those instances of psychological connectedness between person stages *that include activities of self-interpretation/self-creation*.

So let's get to it. Both Schechtman and Rudd endorse the basic idea that a narrative, in some sense, cannot be ontologically reduced to the causal interactions of the mental states of metaphysically distinct person stages.¹⁶ In developing his narrative account, Rudd (2005) fleshes this idea out by claiming that the narrative plays a role akin to the role that a Cartesian Ego plays in establishing personal

¹³ See, for instance, the positions advanced in Schechtman (1996) and Rudd (2005); the non-Reductionism of both of these positions will be discussed later in this paper. MacIntyre (1984) advances a position of anti-naturalism more generally with regard to action, a position that implies the kind of non-Reductionism that we are discussing in the text. Stokes (2011) stands against this trend in arguing that narrative accounts are implicitly committed to Reductionist metaphysics. Unlike ourselves, however, Stokes does not undertake the project of developing an explicitly Reductionist version of the narrative account. Instead, he views an implicit commitment to Reductionism as a reason for rejecting narrative accounts. (For expositional reasons, we will not engage the particulars of Stokes' argument in this paper.)

¹⁴ As Stokes (2011) points out, many narrative accounts of personal identity tend to focus on practical concerns without explicitly focusing upon the metaphysics of such a position. (See, for instance, Schechtman's (1996) discussion of the "characterization" problems of personal identity.)

¹⁵ That said, we will also comment upon an argument for Epistemological non-Reductionism found in the work of Schechtman.

¹⁶ For additional discussion of the general idea of narratives being irreducible wholes, including permutations within that idea, see Schechtman (2011) and Stokes (2011).

identity for dualists. Like an indivisible Cartesian Ego, Rudd treats an extended narrative like it is a substance that cannot be reduced to more “fundamental” substances (i.e. individual person stages). But unlike a Cartesian Ego, whose essence is *independent* of the whatever psychological properties it happens to instantiate, an extended narrative—or an “expressive mental substance”, as Stokes (2011, p. 94) usefully describes Rudd’s idea—has its psychological properties *essentially*.¹⁷ For this reason, a narrative “substance” could not be the substance that it is in absence of the psychological properties/mental states it has.

Now let’s turn to Schechtman’s (1996, 2007) narrative account of personal identity, the most thoroughly developed narrative account of personal identity out there. Unlike Rudd, Schechtman does not mime the basic idea of dualism and claim that narratives are different kinds of substances than physical person stages. Instead, her Ontological non-Reductionism is underpinned by her claim that some properties of persons (and their narratives) cannot be instantiated (or as she puts it, “reproduced”) in person stages. More specifically, she claims that some of the mental states of persons—mental states that are part of, and shaped by, the narrative of persons—cannot exist in an isolated, short-lived person stage.

It is by no means obvious that the most essential part of a person’s experience at any time can be reproduced in an independent time-slice, even if we imagine that slice containing all of the relevant forward- and backward-looking elements...[Our experience] is *essentially* something that takes place over time, and whose relevant attributes cannot be caught in a moment or even a series of moments. (Schechtman 1996, pp. 144–145, our emphasis)

This is an ontological claim—it’s a claim about what mental states can be “reproduced” in a person stage or, as we’ve put it, a claim about what properties of a person can be instantiated by a person stage. As we read her, the key idea is that some mental states are such that they could only occur in a metaphysical entity that, unlike a person stage, has a *substantial* temporal existence. Unlike Rudd, then, Schechtman does not claim that the problem with (ontologically) reducing persons to person stages is that they are fundamentally different kind of substances than person stages. Instead, the problem is that some mental states of persons are such that they can only be instantiated in an entity that has a substantial temporal existence.¹⁸

We’ve laid out the sense in which Rudd and Schechtman embrace Ontological non-Reductionism. We do not want to critically engage with their ideas/claims on this front, at least not directly. Instead, we will work on the positive project of developing a version of the narrative account from within a metaphysics that

¹⁷ Rudd argues that this allows his view to avoid one of the problems facing the more traditional notion of a Cartesian Ego—i.e. the problem that it (the Ego) is individuated separately from the psychological properties it happens to instantiate.

¹⁸ Schechtman is a bit cagey about which mental states of persons cannot be replicated in a person stage. In a separate paper, one of us claims that Schechtman thinks that our self-experiences—more specifically, our experiences of our selves as being (substantially) temporally extended entities—cannot be reproduced in a person stage. (See Schroer 2013).

embraces Ontological Reductionism. If you like, you can think of this as a “the-proof-is-in-the-pudding” style of argument: if we can develop an account where distinct persons stages successfully undertake the project of constructing/participating in a narrative, then that demonstrates that there is no deep tension or incompatibility in deploying the basic idea of a narrative within a metaphysics that embraces ontological Reductionism.

Before undertaking that project, however, we want to comment briefly upon the other kind of Reductionism identified earlier in this paper: Epistemological Reductionism. More specifically, we want to consider an analogy, from Schechtman, that could be taken to motivate Epistemological non-Reductionism in the context of narrative accounts of personal identity. The analogy in question involves a rich stew: Schechtman claims just as the taste of a complicated stew cannot be understood in terms of the tastes of its individual ingredients, considered in isolation of one another, the experience of a being a person—and of possessing a narrative and having that narrative shape your experience—cannot be understood in terms of the psychological properties of an individual person stage. In short, a person’s narrative (and how that narrative impacts and influences the character of that person’s various mental states) cannot be fully understood or analyzed in terms of a complex sum of various interactions between discrete mental states of a series of person stages. With its emphasis upon the ability to “understand” the overall flavor of the stew in terms of its individual ingredients, this analogy motivates a kind of non-Reductionism with regard to *analysis*—it motivates *Epistemological* non-Reductionism.¹⁹ Although the central goal of this paper is the development of a narrative account of personal identity that embraces *Ontological* Reductionism, we think it is worthwhile to take a quick digression to explore, at least initially, the prospects of a narrative account that also embraces *Epistemological* Reductionism.

Towards that end, let’s take a second look at the stew analogy, an analogy that, if accepted, seems to speak against Epistemological Reductionism. We suspect that the real reason people think that we cannot fully analyze the flavor of the complex stew in terms of its many ingredients is because of the so-called “explanatory gap” that exists between the experiential and the physical. If, in general, experiences cannot be fully analyzed in terms of physical states/properties, then the particular experience of the stew’s overall flavor—i.e. the experience of tasting the stew—will not be fully analyzable in terms of the physical properties of the various (physical) ingredients of that stew. But if this is the reason we can’t fully analyze the flavor of the stew in terms of its ingredients, then the stew is not a good analogy for a narrative account that embraces Epistemological non-Reductionism. For if the explanatory gap is the reason we can’t analyze the flavor of the stew in terms of its ingredients, then *the complexity of the stew is irrelevant*: even a “stew” that contained only one ingredient (besides water) could not have its flavor—i.e. the

¹⁹ What’s more, if we assume that, in the *ontological* sense, a stew is nothing but its ingredients, Schechtman’s analogy seems to support Epistemological non-Reductionism without also supporting Ontological non-Reductionism. (We want to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this point to our attention.)

experience of tasting it—fully analyzed in terms of the physical properties of its sole ingredient.

In order for the stew analogy to work properly in this context, we have to make sure that the claim that the flavor of the stew cannot be analyzed in terms of its ingredients is not gaining whatever plausibility it has from the explanatory gap. Towards that end, we could recast the claim so that it is instead about some *purely physical* property of the overall stew; we could say there is some physical property of the overall stew—perhaps the physical property that underpins what we would call “its taste”—that cannot be fully analyzed in terms of various physical properties of the ingredients. But when the claim is recast in these more specific terms it becomes considerably less plausible, or so it seems to us.

In summary, we do not think Schechtman’s stew analogy provides much legitimate motivation for Epistemological non-Reductionism in the arena of narrative accounts of personal identity. We suspect that the claim that the overall flavor of the stew cannot be analyzed in terms of its ingredients seems plausible only because of the existence of a general explanatory gap between the experiential and the physical. As a result, it’s not a good analogy for how the narrative arises from a complex interaction of discrete mental states in a way that prevents us from analyzing it (i.e. the narrative and its impact) in terms of those mental states and their many interactions. Of course, by undermining this analogy we haven’t thereby established that narrative accounts can be successfully wedded to Epistemological Reductionism. Instead, all we’ve done is remove one obstacle to such a potential union. Given that we are already trying to wed narrative accounts to Ontological Reductionism, we will leave the project of fully investigating this potential union between narrative accounts and Epistemological Reductionism for another day.

Now that we’ve completed our digression into Epistemological Reductionism, it’s time to return to Ontological non-Reductionism. We’ve seen that, although there are important differences between the narrative accounts of Schechtman and Rudd, they both embrace Ontological non-Reductionism; they both embrace the general idea that narratives (and their impact upon our mental states) cannot be ontologically reduced to the mental states (and their interactions) of a series of person stages. In what follows, we will reject this idea and put the notion of a narrative to work within a metaphysics where the mentality of persons is *completely ontologically reducible* to the mental states of person stages.

4 A Reductionist narrative account

Recall the basic schema, given in Sect. 2, of the psychological continuity account:

An earlier person stage X and a later person stage Y are stages of the same person iff:

- (1) X is psychologically continuous with Y
- (2) The mental states linking X and Y are caused in the right way
- (3) There is no branching

In this section, we develop an Ontological Reductionist account of personal identity that deploys the notion of narrative continuity, not the notion of psychological continuity, in a schema such as this. To explain what we mean by “narrative continuity”, however, we first need to say something about the notions of “narrative explanation” and of “narrative connectedness”.

4.1 Narrative explanation

If you possess a narrative (or narratives) of your life, then that means you can explain the significance of some of your experiences, desires, actions, etc. in terms of the role they play within that narrative. (We follow Schechtman (1996, 2011) in characterizing “a narrative” as an account of life events that tells a story of how some events in one’s history lead to other events in that history.) In this manner, possessing a narrative makes it possible to give *narrative explanations* of some of your mental states, actions, etc. To be clear, a subject does not need to be consciously rehearsing or reciting a story about her life to count as “possessing” a narrative explanation of some of her mental states/actions. Rather, the test for possession is counterfactual: *if queried*, she could produce an explanation of the relevant mental states/actions that lays bare their significance in virtue of embedding these states/actions in a story (or stories) about herself and her life. You can think of the “possession” of a narrative explanation for some mental state/action as being underpinned by the subject’s possession of (or the instantiation within the subject of) a complex dispositional property. Understood along these lines, the question of whether a person stage could possess a narrative explanation for some of its mental states/actions translates into the question of whether a person stage could instantiate the appropriate complex dispositional property, a property that, if triggered, would result in the subject offering a story-like explanation of some of those mental states or actions.

Let’s examine the nature of narrative explanations. So far, our account of what makes these explanations “narrative” has been pretty vague—it amounts to little more than asserting that it is a form of explanation of one’s mental states/actions that is structured like a story. This vagueness invites a challenge to narrative accounts, a challenge that has been pressed with force by Strawson (2004). The challenge is to fill in the details of what needs to be true of a subject in order for her to qualify as “possessing a narrative” that neither sets the bar too low nor too high.

We begin with the concern of setting the bar too low. To avoid being trivial, the idea of structuring the events and experiences of your life via a narrative needs to require something more than merely planning ahead and subsequently performing events in a particular order.

If someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial. (Strawson 2004, pp. 437–438)

In attempting to avoid setting the bar too low—in developing an account that requires the subject to do something more than just plan ahead and execute certain

actions in the right order—one runs the risk of being impaled by the other side of Strawson’s challenge: setting the bar so high that hardly anybody meets it. For instance, an account of “possessing a narrative” that requires the subject to view/structure the events of her life via a single, life-long story that approximates, in quality and coherence, one written by a talented author—i.e. a life story with a gripping plot that contains no loose ends, well positioned and developed characters, etc.—sets the bar too high. Hardly anybody meets that standard of possessing a narrative.²⁰

To navigate this challenge, let’s return to the example that Strawson uses in illustrating the concern of setting the bar too low: the example of making coffee. Consider two subjects, each of whom is making coffee. For one of these subjects, the desire for coffee (and experience of making it) fits into a narrative about his life. The other subject, in contrast, is in the situation described by Strawson in that he is “simply making coffee”. For expositional purposes, we’ll call the former (the one who possesses a narrative explanation of his coffee-making-desire/experience) “Larry” and the latter (the one who doesn’t possess such an explanation) “Perry”.

When asked why he is making coffee or what it’s like to do so, Perry will say things like “I make coffee because I want some” or “First, I grind the beans. Second, I boil the water...” or “I hear the water boiling, I smell the coffee, I feel the warm cup in my hand, etc.” What’s important is that Perry will not locate his desire for coffee, the actions required for making coffee, or the experience of making coffee relative to a bigger, story-like picture of his life, because with regard to coffee making there is no such “bigger picture” for Perry.

In virtue of possessing narrative explanations of his desire for coffee (and the experience of making it), Larry is in a position to say more than Perry when confronted with the same questions. The particulars of Larry’s narrative explanation of this desire/experience, of course, will turn upon the particulars of his life history and how he interprets and defines himself. To help give a sense of how this might go, here are two examples of how Larry’s history and self-conception could generate narrative explanations of the mental states/actions involved in his making coffee:

1. My desire for coffee is part of my overall addictive personality...I also really desire cigarettes and cheap booze. This makes the experience of making coffee somewhat unpleasant for me, for it reminds me of this overall flaw in my character. Making coffee is a daily reminder, in a small way, of both my past struggles with addiction and of the kind of person I am striving to be—the kind of person who doesn’t need chemicals to feel good about himself.
2. As a child, I awoke every morning to the sights, sounds, and smells of my parents making coffee. I loved the experience of starting the day sitting around the breakfast table with my parents, feeling safe. Every morning, I recreate the same experience, as an adult, and thereby recapture an

²⁰ This description of an unrealistic conception of possessing narrative comes from Schechtman (2007, p. 160).

element of my childhood that I still long for and find comfort in. In a small but significant way, making coffee gives me the strength necessary to undertake the upcoming challenges of the day.

These explanations of Larry's desire for coffee (and of his experience of doing so) are *narrative* in that they "employ the kind of logic found in stories when (characters) describe, explain, and choose their behavior" (Schechtman 2011, p. 398). These explanations involve Larry understanding his mental states and actions through the lens of a story in which he is the evolving protagonist—i.e. a protagonist who is aware of how his history informs and shapes his present character and who continues to evolve as he moves into the future. This is an especially important feature of a "narrative explanation", as we are understanding the notion, for such an explanation of a mental state or action connects that mental state/action to the *subject's sense of himself, of where he has been, and where he is going (or trying to go)*. Notice that there is nothing like this in Perry's explanations. When Perry explains why he is making coffee (or what it is like to do so), there is no (interesting) self-reflection, nor is there a sense of how his desire for coffee (and his experience of making it) fits into where he has been and where he is going as a developing (and self-creating) person. Instead, there is just the desire for coffee and an awareness of the steps that he needs to take in order to satisfy that desire.

With this contrast between Larry and Perry in place, let's return to Strawson's challenge. The challenge, recall, was to give an account of "possessing a narrative" that avoids two extremes: it needs to avoid setting the bar for possessing a narrative so low that someone like Perry satisfies it simply in virtue of making coffee, but it also needs to avoid setting the bar so high that hardly anyone qualifies as possessing a narrative. We think our description of what it takes to possess a narrative satisfies these requirements. Let's start with the concern of setting the bar too low. According to our account, possessing a narrative involves more than just thinking ahead and planning to do things in a certain order; it also involves possessing an explanation of some of your mental states/actions that mirrors the basic logic of a story and that involves the subject reflecting upon her or his character and thinking about how that character has been shaped by past events and how it will continue to be shaped. Perry's explanations of his coffee-making desire/experience clearly do not satisfy these criteria.

What about the other side of Strawson's challenge? Has our account set the bar for possessing a narrative explanation too high? To assuage this fear, consider the following facts about our account. First, a subject does not need to be consciously rehearsing/articulating a self-story in order to count as possessing a narrative. Instead, it just needs to be the case that *if she were queried*, she would be able to produce such a story. Second, to count as a narrative explanation, the explanation she produces only needs to *approximate* the logic of a story, a story that involves the subject reflecting upon her character, how that character has been shaped by past events, and how it will continued to be shaped by future events. It does not need to match, in quality and coherence, a story written by a professional author.

Also relevant to the concern of setting the bar too high is the fact that we do not require that the narrative explanations possessed by a given subject all fit together

into a single, overarching life-story.²¹ Under our account, the narrative that frames Larry's experience of making coffee via his childhood memories of family and feelings of security need not be interlaced or otherwise connected to the narrative explanations that frame and explain some of his other experiences/actions. The narrative explanation that frames his experience of balancing his checkbook, for instance, may have no connection to his childhood memories of family or feelings of security.²² To put the point more generally, the requirement that the subject interpret the events of his or her life via "explanations that mirror the logic found in stories" does *not* entail that those narrative explanations all fit together into a single, overarching story of the person's life. In this regard, we follow the lead of Velleman (2006, p. 222) when he states "[i]n my view, however, we tell many small, disconnected stories about ourselves—short episodes that do not get incorporated into our life-stories".²³ We read Flanagan (1996, p. 66) as pointing to the same idea in his narrative account when he describes persons as being "multiplex".

In summary, there are several aspects of our account that are important to keep in mind when considering the question of whether we've set the bar for possessing a narrative too high. First, a subject does not need to have a narrative consciously before her mind in order to count as possessing it. Instead, she only needs to satisfy a counterfactually stated condition: namely, that if she were queried, she would produce a narrative. Second, the narrative she would produce does not need to match, in quality and consistency, the kind of story produced by a professional author. Instead, it only needs to approximate the logic of a story. Finally, the various narrative explanations that she would produce, if queried about some of her mental states/actions, do not need to all fit together into a single, overarching life-story. In at least these respects, then, our account does not set the bar for possessing a narrative too high.

4.2 Narrative connectedness and narrative continuity

With the idea of a narrative explanation in place, let's turn to the project of defining the notion of "narrative connectedness". First, however, a quick terminological note: In his discussion of narrative accounts of personal identity, Flanagan also

²¹ For some people who maintain that subjects do possess a single, overarching narrative of their lives, see MacIntyre (1984), Dennett (1992), and Rudd (2009).

²² The claim that there may be no connection between some of Larry's narratives invites the question of how a *single* person with such non-overlapping narratives differs from someone with Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder). Unfortunately, exploring the issues raised by this question—e.g. Is this disorder a legitimate phenomena? If so, what are its defining criteria? Is it a phenomenon best described in terms of there being multiple people housed in one and the same body? etc.—would bring us too far afield from the central topic of this paper. For attempts to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of a narrative account of personal identity, see Humphrey and Dennett (1989) and Flanagan (1996).

²³ In describing these "short episodes", Velleman mentions examples like the eating of a meal, the answering of a phone, and the scratching of an itch (pp. 202–203). We think the nature of these examples invites Strawson's charge that Velleman may be setting the bar for possessing narrative explanations *too low*. Since Velleman does not say much about the nature of the narrative explanations at work in these examples, it is difficult to determine whether he has the resources to escape Strawson's charge.

makes use of the term “narrative connectedness”, which he describes as being “able to tell some sort of coherent story about my life” (p. 65) and as “working at making one’s plans and projects materialize” (p. 66). Although there are some broad similarities between his account of “narrative connectedness” and the account we develop below, it’s not at all clear whether Flanagan means to put this notion to work within a *Reductionist* metaphysics of personal identity or not. In addition, our account will be more detailed and draw a much tighter connection to the pre-existing notion of psychological connectedness than Flanagan’s.

Recall that psychological connectedness involves various direct relations/connections between temporally separated mental states/actions: experiences causing memories ostensibly of those experiences, intentions and the actions they lead to, the continuation of various beliefs and desires over time, etc. We will interpret *narrative* connectedness as also involving various direct relations/connection between mental states/actions; more specifically, it involves a *subset* of the direct relations/connections that are involved in psychological connectedness. In this way, you can view our shift of emphasis from psychological connectedness to narrative connectedness as involving a *refinement* of the former, and not as involving a complete rejection of it.

So, both psychological connectedness and narrative connectedness involve direct relations/connections between various mental states/actions: experiences causing memories, intentions leading to actions, the continuation of various beliefs and desires, etc. The difference is that in the case of narrative connectedness, the subject possesses a narrative explanation of at least some of the mental states/actions involved in the relevant relations/connections of psychological connectedness. (To put it another way, in addition to instantiating the mental states/actions involved in the relations of psychological connectedness, the subject also instantiates a complex dispositional property that, when triggered, results in the subject giving a narrative explanation of some of the aforementioned mental states/actions.) Narrative connectedness is basically psychological connectedness *plus some narrative explanation*; for this reason, being psychologically connected is necessary, but not sufficient, for two temporally disparate mental states/actions being narratively connected.

To make further progress towards understanding our notion of narrative connectedness, let’s compare it to what you might call “mere” psychological connectedness—i.e. psychological connectedness where the subject does *not* possess any narrative explanations of the relevant mental states/actions. Suppose, for example, that a subject experiences a Chicago Bulls’ game and then later (seemingly) remembers that experience. In this case, there will be a relation of psychological connectedness between these two mental states. In order for these same two mental states to qualify as being narratively connected, however, the subject would also have to possess a narrative explanation of that experience/memory. Perhaps the Bulls game was a reward for accomplishing a particularly difficult task and memories of this experience now remind the subject that she is both capable of accomplishing difficult tasks and, when doing so, worthy of enjoying substantial rewards. In this way, the experience (and memory) of the Bulls game comes to play a more significant role in the subject’s evolving sense of

herself, a role not played by “mere” experiences/subsequent memories that are *not* embedded in narrative explanations.

As another example of mere psychological connectedness—that is, psychological connectedness *without* narrative connectedness—consider a subject who continues to have the same desire merely as a result of mental inertia. Like Frankfurt’s (1971) wanton, this subject never undertakes the project of reflecting upon, assessing, or attempting to modify the relevant first-order desire. The mere continuation of this desire over time qualifies as an instance of psychological connectedness. Typically, however, there is more to our experience of ourselves than just an awareness that certain desires, beliefs, etc. persist in us over time. As Christine Korsgaard (1989, p. 121) puts the point

But we can distinguish between beliefs and desires that continue merely because, having been acquired in childhood, they remain unexamined from beliefs and desires that continue because you have arrived at, been convinced of, decided on, or endorsed them. In an account of personal identity which emphasizes agency or authorship, the latter kind of connection will be regarded as much less boring than the former. This is because the beliefs and desires you have actively arrived at are more truly your own than those which have simply arisen in you...

We are linking the sense of authorship that Korsgaard speaks of to narrative explanation. The idea is that continuing beliefs/desire become “much less boring” with regard to our personal identity *when they can be given narrative explanations*. For a continuing desire to count as an instance of *narrative* connectedness, it is not enough that the subject simply happens to find herself having the same desire over time. Instead, she must reflect upon that desire and have its continuing presence in her psychological economy play a role in a story she would tell about herself and her evolving character, if prompted. To put the point more generally, this continuing desire must play a role in her active projects of self-interpretation and self-creation; it must figure in one of the stories of who she is and/or who she is trying to be.

Now that we’ve got the notion of narrative connectedness on the table, let’s put it to work. Under our account, the metaphysical “glue” that binds person stages together into persons is narrative connectedness, not “mere” psychological connectedness. But how, exactly, does this binding work? Consider, for instance, a completely mundane, everyday action that does not seem to enter into any of the narrative explanations you would give about yourself, if queried. There are a number of candidates for such actions: tying one’s shoes, driving to work, grading quizzes, and feeding the dog all come to mind as examples.²⁴ Suppose that there are some actions like these that are not incorporated into any of your narrative explanations of your life. Does it follow that they are not your actions? Here’s a similar case, focused upon experience, not action: suppose you walk into a friend’s house and smell cinnamon. Suppose that this particular olfactory experience plays

²⁴ We are not saying that it’s impossible for these particular actions to be subsumed under a narrative explanation. All we are saying is that we expect that most people perform at least some mundane, everyday actions, like these, that are not subsumed under any of their narratives.

no role in any narrative you would tell about yourself, if queried. Does it follow that this experience isn't yours?

According to the account we wish to give, the actions/experiences described above can still count as being your actions/experiences even though they are not subsumed in any of your narratives. To explain how this works, let's shift gears and consider a simple version of the memory theory. Suppose that, right now, you (seemingly) remember only some of the mental states/actions of an earlier person stage. Does that mean the other mental states/actions of that person stage, the mental stages/actions that you do not (seemingly) remember, aren't yours? No, for remembering *some* of the mental states/actions of a given person stage is sufficient for making *all* of the mental states/actions of that person state yours. Of course, the mental states/actions of the person stage that you can actually remember are likely to have *greater phenomenological salience* with regard to your sense of self than will the mental states/actions that you do not remember. In a metaphysical sense, however, *all* of these mental states/actions still count as being yours.

We wish to occupy the analog position in our narrative account of personal identity: being narratively connected to *some* of the mental states/actions of an earlier (or later) person stage is sufficient for making *all* the mental states/actions of that person stage yours. Of course, the mental states/actions of the earlier person stage to which you have a narrative connection are likely to have a *greater phenomenological salience* with regard to your sense of self than will the mental states/actions of that earlier person stage that are not incorporated into any of your self-narratives. In a metaphysical sense, however, *all* of these mental states/actions still count as being yours.²⁵

One might object that there is a significant asymmetry between how the defender of a physicalist psychological continuity theory would deploy this kind of strategy and how we are deploying it.²⁶ One might object that under the former approach the explanation of the *diachronic* unity of various mental states of a person and the explanation of the *synchronic* unity of various mental states of a person *are of the same kind*: the synchronic connections obtain in virtue of the relevant mental state being instantiated *by the same brain*, while the diachronic connections obtain in virtue of the relevant mental states being instantiated in various *time-slices of the same brain* that are causally connected to one another in the right way. According to our account, however, diachronic connections between mental states of a person obtain in virtue of those states being narratively continuous with one another, while the synchronic connections do not. (This is the result of our claim that some mental states of a person may not be subsumed in any of his or her narratives.)

We disagree with the opening claim made in this objection; we don't think that, under a physicalist psychological continuity theory, the explanations of diachronic and synchronic unity of a person's mental states are really of the same kind. In the

²⁵ Cf. Schechtman (2007) on the difference between a narrative account of "persons" and a narrative account of "selves". Using Schechtman's terminology, we are giving a narrative account of *persons*, whereas the above point about phenomenological salience would be better understood as being a point about a narrative account of *selves*.

²⁶ We want to thank an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

case of the diachronic unity of a person's mental states, the explanation of that unity is in terms of the psychological continuity of those mental states. Granted, in most "normal" cases this psychological continuity is supported, or carried by, a series of time-slices of the same brain. But it doesn't need to be this way; the theory, as we understand it, is consistent with the relevant psychological continuity being supported, or carried by, a series of time-slices of *different brains* (in the case where a person's mental states are transferred from brain to brain), or even by a series of time-slices of *a computer's hardware* (in the case where a person's mental states are uploaded and maintained within a computer). To put the point in more general terms, what makes this account "physicalist" is simply the requirement that the carrier of the relevant psychological continuity be physical, not that it be a single physical brain. This means that the physical psychological continuity theory, as we've been interpreting it, does *not* give explanations of the same kind for diachronic unity and synchronic unity. Which means, in turn, that there is not a significant asymmetry between it and the narrative account that we prefer on this front.

Here's another problem case for our account, a problem that echoes Reid's "brave soldier" objection to Locke's memory theory of personal identity. As we age our narrative explanations of various mental states/actions may change, become defunct, or be replaced with entirely new narrative explanations. As a result, you (i.e. your current person stage) may lose narrative connectedness to some of the mental states/actions of earlier persons stages to which you were formerly narratively connected. For instance, some of the mental states/actions of the 5-year-old you could be narratively connected with some mental states/actions of the 18-year-old you, and some of the mental states/actions of the 18-year-old you could be narratively connected with the mental states/actions of the 40-year-old you, and yet there may be *no* narrative connectedness between the mental states/actions of the 5-year-old you and the 40-year-old you.

The analog of this problem for Locke involved memory: the brave soldier remembers being the boy who stole apples, and the old general remembers being the brave soldier, but the old general does not remember being the boy who stole apples. The contemporary defender of the memory account solves this problem by appealing to *overlapping chains of memory connectedness*: although the old general does not remember being the boy, he does remember being someone—the brave soldier—who, in turn, remembers being the boy. In this manner, there is a chain of "memory continuity" linking the general and the boy. This chain, in turn, is sufficient for metaphysically binding the person stage that is the boy and the person stage that is the general into one and the same person.

We wish to solve our version of the Reid's problem in basically the same way: although the 40-year-old you is not narratively connected to any of the mental states/actions of the 5-year-old you, she/he is narratively connected to some of the mental states/actions of the 18-year-old you who, in turn, is narratively connected to some of the mental states/actions of the 5-year-old you. More generally, person stages can be unified into a single person in virtue of overlapping chains of narrative connectedness or, as we'll put it, "narrative continuity". So just as psychological continuity is built out of overlapping chains of psychological connectedness, chains

that allow the psychological continuity account to expand out and bind more person stages together, narrative continuity is built out of overlapping chains of narrative connectedness, chains that allows our (Reductionist) narrative account to expand out and bind more person stages together.

Finally, recall that according to our account a person's life can be woven together via *multiple* narratives, it need not be woven together via a single, lifelong story. This feature of our account allows narrative continuity to reach even farther out in the process of binding person stages together into persons. These narratives can begin and end at different times relative to one another—some run concurrently with one another while not cleanly fitting together into a single, unified, story. For instance, some of the events (experiences, desires, etc.) of my current life are framed by the narrative of being a professional philosopher, a narrative that began around 7 years ago; others by the narrative of being a spouse, a narrative which began around 9 years ago; others by the narrative that today is going to be a day where I shake off my annual winter funk accomplish a lot more tasks, a narrative which began about 5 h ago. Some of these narrative explanations may interact and interlace with one another (e.g. my narrative of being a professional philosopher interacts with my narrative of shaking off my annual winter funk and accomplishing *research* tasks), while others may not (e.g. my narrative of being a good partner may have no interesting interaction with my narrative of being a professional philosopher; my home life and work life may be sharply segregated from each other). Each of these narratives “reaches out” to different mental states/actions in my past (and my future) and, as a result, unifies the person stages that have those mental states/actions with my current person stage.

4.3 Drawing it all together

Now that we've explained the notions of narrative explanation, narrative connectedness, and narrative continuity, let's return to the basic Reductionist schema for personal identity, given in Sect. 2, and replace the notion of psychological continuity with the notion of narrative continuity.

The narrative account

An earlier person stage X and a later person stage Y are two stages of the same person iff:

- (1) There is narrative continuity (which is composed of narrative connect-
edness or overlapping chains of narrative connectedness) between some
of the mental states/actions of X and some of the mental states/actions of
Y
- (2) These mental states are causally related to each other in the right way
- (3) There is no branching

We wish to treat condition 2 and condition 3 in basically the same way they are treated by defenders of standard psychological continuity accounts. So the significant difference between our account and those accounts involves condition 1. In virtue of defining “narrative connectedness” partly in terms of “psychological

connectedness”, our account of personal identity is best viewed as a *refinement* of accounts of personal identity that focus upon psychological connectedness more generally. We think that the latter accounts are on the right track, but they fail to capture an important aspect of the first person experience of a being person. As argued in Sect. 2, we think such accounts fail to capture the sense in which our personhood is active, the sense in which we play an active role of interpreting and creating ourselves.

Our strategy for capturing this important aspect of our self-experience was to appeal to the notion of a narrative; more specifically, we narrowed the focus from *all* relations of psychological connectedness obtaining between two person stages to *just those* relations of psychological connectedness for which there are narrative explanations of the relevant mental states/actions. As a result, person stages are not bound together into persons in virtue of *mere* relations of psychological connectedness between experiences and memories, intentions and actions, continuing beliefs and desires, etc. Instead, they are bound together into persons in virtue of such connections where the subject has actively framed the relevant states/actions in a story-like account of how the past has influenced her current character and how that character continues to evolve into the future.

The manner in which we put the notion of a narrative to work in this context differs from most other attempts in that we continue to embrace a Reductionist metaphysics of persons that seeks to ontologically reduce persons to aggregates of person stages. In the next section, we will show how our commitment to such Reductionism allows us to circumvent some problems afflicting narrative accounts of personal identity that *reject* a metaphysics that ontologically reduces persons to person stages—in particular, Schechtman’s account and Rudd’s account.

5 Some advantages of the Reductionist narrative account over non-Reductionist accounts

In Sect. 3, we highlighted the uniqueness of our position—in particular, we highlighted the fact that it puts the notion of a narrative to work from within a Reductionist framework—by briefly comparing it to the positions of Schechtman and Rudd. In this final section, we revisit these two non-Reductionist narrative accounts and point to a problem for each. These problems do not arise for a narrative account, such as ours, that embraces Ontological Reductionism. Obviously, much more could be said regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each of these non-Reductionist narrative accounts relative to our Reductionist account. Our task is simply to make the first strike in this debate.

5.1 An advantage over Schechtman’s account

Any narrative account of personal identity must confront the problem of error, for sometimes people are simply not who they think they are. In this section, we argue that, in virtue of her rejection of Ontological Reductionism, the problem of error is particularly acute for Schechtman.

Schechtman (1996) is aware of the problem of error and, in response to it, she allows that not all narratives are identity constituting. More specifically, she maintains that when a narrative is unfaithful to the “objective facts” it fails to be identity constituting and, as a result, the subject is not the person she takes herself to be.²⁷ So what are the relevant “objective facts”? As Schechtman notes, they can’t be facts about personal identity, on pain of circularity. In a discussion of a deluded man who structures his mental states/actions using Napoleon’s narrative, Schechtman relies upon the fact that our culture tends to associate particular *persons* with particular *bodies* to argue that the man’s narrative is unfaithful to the “objective facts”—the basic idea is that there will be questions about the relevant *physical bodies* to which the man will not be able to give satisfactory answers. Examples of such questions include: Are you in the same human body as Napoleon? How long do living human bodies typically last? Who is the woman to whom you are currently married? Is it Josephine? How old is her body? etc. The fact that the subject struggles to give satisfactory answers to questions such as these is what makes it the case that his narrative fails to accommodate the “objective facts”.

This strategy for accommodating the possibility of error in one’s narrative becomes strained, however, when we transition to cases of body switching—i.e. cases where one person’s psychology is reliably transplanted into another person’s body and brain, and vice versa.²⁸ After such a procedure, we can assume that both the subjects involved will give reports that suggest that they have switched bodies and brains. By and large, philosophers are inclined to view these reports as being accurate. The challenge for Schechtman is to identify the relevant “objective facts” in these scenarios that make it the case that these self-reported narratives are accurate and not delusional.

We think the obvious choice for such “objective facts” would be *facts about the causal connections between the mental states of the various person stages of the persons involved in the body-switching scenario*—i.e. the kind of facts brought into focus by the 2nd condition of our Reductionist version of the narrative account. The idea here is that the subjects’ reports are accurate—they are the persons they think they are, post-procedure—because there continues to be “the right kind” of cause in the continuity of the relevant mental states. Since Schechtman rejects the Ontological Reductionist project of reducing persons in terms of series of person stages that possess mental states that bear the right kind of causal connection to one another, she is prohibited from offering such an account; she’s prohibited because such an account would treat a subject’s mental states as reducible to a series of mental states of individual person stages.

So we know what Schechtman can’t say about these cases: she can’t say that the “objective facts” that make the narratives of people involved in body-switching scenarios accurate involve sequences of person stages with mental states that are

²⁷ Schechtman (1996) also allows that there can be errors of “interpretation” in one’s narrative—cases where a subject’s narrative accurately reflects the “objective facts”, but interprets those facts in a bizarre manner. The latter type of error will not be the focus of the cases that follow.

²⁸ We want to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting an improvement to this case that strengthened our argument.

caused in the right way. Nor can she say that the relevant “objective facts” involve the physical bodies of the persons involved, for this case involves a switch in bodies. Nor can she say that the relevant “objective facts” involve the brains of the persons involved, for this case involves a switch of (or transference of mental states between) brains. So what can she say? For the record, here’s what she does say about such cases.

If someone did tell a story involving more than one body in such a way that it indicated a grasp of the intimate connection that usually holds between persons and human beings, the narrative self-constitution view could allow it as an identity-constituting narrative and so allow that a single person had actions and experiences in more than one body. We have a good idea of what a story would be like because we have seen several examples in the hypothetical cases offered by psychological continuity theorists. These cases never begin by simply asking us to imagine one person inhabiting more than one body—they always offer elaborate accounts of how this could happen. The purpose of these cases is precisely to offer a sane and comprehensible story of how personal identity and human identity could diverge—a story that does not violate our fundamental concept of personhood. (1996, p. 132)

The problem is that, in this passage, Schechtman doesn’t say what precisely it is about these stories that lead people to view the procedure as being identity-preserving. Instead, she merely observes that people do, in fact, view these stories in this way. But we need to know what *exactly* it is about such cases that leads people to accept that the first person reports of the subjects—e.g. “I’ve switched bodies and I now have a new brain!”—as being *accurate* and *not delusional*. What are the relevant “objective facts” that determine whether these narratives are accurate or inaccurate? If one is prohibited, as Schechtman is, from appealing to facts about causal continuity of mental states over time, it’s not clear what resources are left to appeal to in answering this question.

In at least this way, then, a narrative account of personal identity that embraces Ontological Reductionism has an important additional resource that Schechtman’s non-Reductionist account lacks. In understanding the difference between accurate and delusional self-experiences, we can appeal to the *causal etiology of the mental states of various person stages*.

5.2 An advantage over Rudd’s account

In Sect. 3, we saw that Rudd mimes the metaphysics of the dualist in giving his narrative account of personal identity. According to the dualist account, a person at one time is numerically identical to a person at another time if and only if both persons have the same Cartesian Soul. The difference is that Rudd treats the relevant “object” not as being a Cartesian Soul, but rather as being something akin to an extended narrative ego. Although we suspect that Rudd also lacks an effective response to the problem of error—the focus of our previous criticism of Schechtman—our objection here will focus on another problem facing Rudd, a

problem that mirrors one of the classic problems facing dualist accounts of personal identity.

Consider cases of fission—i.e. cases where a hypothetical surgical procedure creates two persons out of one, where each new person seemingly has equal claim, in virtue of her self-told narrative, to being the original person. Such scenarios present a serious challenge to the dualist, for the question of whether the original survives the procedure and, if so, whom she survives as, does not seem to have an obvious answer.²⁹ It seems to us that the narrative account—when explicitly wedded to non-Reductionist metaphysics that mimics the dualist account, as in Rudd’s account—is impaled by the same argument, and for the same reason. For what could possibly settle the question of which post-procedure person inherited the relevant “object”—i.e. the same “extended narrative ego”, the same “expressive mental substance”—from the original person? No physical fact seems like it could do it. Nor could the reports or conscious experiences of either of the subjects who walk out of the procedure. What’s left?

In virtue of embedding our appeal to the notion of a narrative within a framework that embraces ontological Reductionism, we think have a leg up in the case of fission. To be clear, Reductionists are divided about the best response to cases of fission. The important point, for our purposes, is simply that Reductionists have *viable* responses to such cases, responses that are superior to anything the non-Reductionist has to offer. And we are in a position to co-opt these Reductionist responses.

To appreciate this point, consider Lewis’ (1976) Reductionist response to the case of fission. Much in the way that two roads can share some of the same spatial parts before they branch off from one another and head in different directions, Lewis claims that two persons can share the same sequence of person stages (which, recall, are temporal parts of a person) before they split, via a fission procedure, and go their separate ways. Although the particular version of Reductionism that Lewis prefers unites person stages into person via their psychological continuity to one another, we see no reason why the same reply to the cases of fission cannot be given by Reductionists, like us, who instead unite person stages into persons via their narrative continuity to one another.

Another well-known Reductionist response to cases of fission comes from Parfit (1984), who argues that fission cases reveal that, when it comes to survival, “identity doesn’t matter”. Although cases of fission destroy identity, what “really matters” with regard to survival—relations of psychological continuity between person stages—continues to exist. Again, we see no reason why the same reply cannot be given by Reductionists, like us, who emphasize narrative continuity over psychological continuity. Although cases of fission destroy personal identity, what “really matters” with regard to survival—*narrative* continuity between person stages—continues to exist.

²⁹ Perhaps the most influential version of this argument is Parfit’s (1984) discussion of “My Division”. For an attempt to respond to Parfit on behalf of a particular version of non-Reductionism—a version that appeals to a Cartesian Soul—see Swinburne (1984).

6 Conclusion

The account of personal identity developed in this paper draws upon two ideas—a metaphysics of Ontological Reductionism and narrative accounts of personal identity—that have not been explicitly wedded and, in fact, are often portrayed as being in opposition to one another. To develop such an account, we had to do several things. First, we had to give a response to Galen Strawson’s general concern about narrative accounts of personal identity setting the bar too high or too low. Our response involved laying out the notion of a “narrative explanation” and explaining how the bar for possessing such explanations is neither too low nor too high. Second, we had to find a way of supplementing (or refining) the notions of psychological connectedness and psychological continuity to reflect the fact that persons are actively engaged in projects of self-interpretation/creation. Towards that end, we developed the notions of “narrative connectedness” and “narrative continuity” and then substituted these notions into the general Reductionist schema for personal identity. Finally, we had to motivate this new Reductionist narrative account of personal identity relative to the more popular non-Reductionist versions of the narrative accounts. Towards that end, we demonstrated how our Ontological Reductionism gives us an important additional resource for tackling the problem of error facing Schechtman’s non-Reductionist account and the problem of fission facing Rudd’s non-Reductionist account.

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