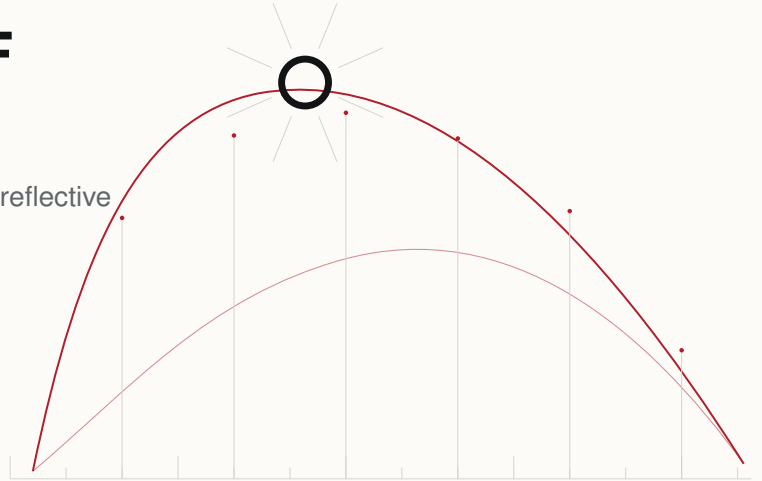


THE EMBODIED NARRATIVE SELF

A dialectical study of Merleau-Ponty's pre-reflective embodiment and Schechtman's narrative self-constitution



CENTRAL THESIS

Narrative identity is not a free reflective construction layered onto a neutral body; it is made possible and constrained by the pre-reflective structures of embodied self-awareness. Conversely, the body-subject requires narrative articulation to become diachronically accountable as a person.

Contents

This paper situates both thinkers in their intellectual contexts, reads the primary sources closely, constructs a dialectical synthesis, and tests it against the main objections in the secondary literature. Superscript numerals refer to the notes; full details are in the bibliography.

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophical intersection between Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of pre-reflective embodiment and Marya Schechtman's narrative self-constitution view. It argues that these two accounts, often treated as competing models of selfhood, are better understood as dialectically complementary: narrative identity is not a free reflective construction layered onto a neutral body but is made possible and constrained by the pre-reflective structures of embodied self-awareness; conversely, Merleau-Ponty's body-subject requires narrative articulation to become diachronically accountable as a person. Drawing on primary source analysis of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, and Schechtman's *The Constitution of Selves* and *Staying Alive*, the paper situates both thinkers within their historical and intellectual contexts, analyzes the critical reception of each, and proposes an integrated account of embodied narrative constitution that preserves the insights of both traditions while addressing their respective limitations.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty; Schechtman; embodiment; narrative identity; pre-reflective self-awareness; body-schema; personal identity; phenomenology; self-constitution

1. Introduction

The question of what constitutes the self has animated philosophy from its origins. In the contemporary analytic and continental traditions, two influential yet divergent answers have emerged. On one side, phenomenologists working in the tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty have articulated a conception of the self as fundamentally embodied and pre-reflective, grounded in the body's practical engagement with the world prior to any explicit self-thematization. On the other, philosophers of personal identity such as Marya Schechtman have developed narrative accounts according to which persons constitute their identities through self-interpretive stories that confer unity, moral accountability, and practical intelligibility upon their lives. These two traditions have developed largely in parallel, with limited direct engagement between them.¹

This paper contends that the relationship between pre-reflective embodiment and narrative self-constitution is not one of opposition but of dialectical complementarity. The central thesis is twofold: first, that narrative identity is not a free reflective construction imposed upon a neutral substrate of bodily experience but is enabled and constrained by the pre-reflective structures of embodied self-awareness, including body-schema, motor intentionality, habit, and intercorporeality; and second, that Merleau-Ponty's body-subject, while ontologically primary, requires narrative articulation to become diachronically accountable as a person, that is, as the kind of entity that can bear moral responsibility, sustain self-interested concern, and be recognized within a community of practical interaction.²

The argument proceeds in several stages. After situating both thinkers within their intellectual histories, I provide a close reading of the primary sources for each. I then construct a dialectical synthesis showing how each framework illuminates and corrects the other. This is followed by a critical examination of major objections from the secondary literature, including Galen Strawson's anti-narrativity critique, the Zahavi-Gallagher minimal-self tradition, and feminist and social critiques of disembodied narrative accounts. I conclude

by outlining the implications of an integrated embodied narrative constitution view for personal identity theory, agency, psychopathology, and social recognition.

2. Historical and Intellectual Context

2.1 Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Tradition

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) developed his phenomenology of embodiment against the backdrop of Husserlian phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, and the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre. Edmund Husserl's analyses of the *Leib* (lived body) and the *Body Schema* (*Schema der Wahrnehmung*) in *Ideen II* provided Merleau-Ponty with the conceptual resources for thinking the body as a pre-objective orientation toward the world rather than a physical thing among things.³ Husserl's distinction between act intentionality, which characterizes explicit, thematic consciousness, and operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), which operates beneath the level of reflective awareness, was taken up and transformed by Merleau-Ponty into the cornerstone of his account of perception as essentially bodily.

The influence of Berlin-School Gestalt psychology, particularly the work of Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Goldstein, is evident in Merleau-Ponty's early *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), where he argues that behavior cannot be understood as a mechanistic stimulus-response chain but must be grasped as a *Gestalt*, a meaningful whole shaped by the organism's relation to its environment.⁴ The neurological case studies of Goldstein, particularly the famous patient Schneider, whose brain injury disrupted his capacity for abstract motor projection, provided Merleau-Ponty with empirical material for demonstrating that normal perception and action depend on an intact body-schema and what he terms motor intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Heidegger's *Being and Time* is equally crucial. Heidegger's critique of the Cartesian subject and his analysis of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) provided an anti-Cartesian framework that Merleau-Ponty radicalized by insisting that being-in-the-world is irreducibly bodily. Where Heidegger largely passed over the body in silence, Merleau-Ponty made it the centerpiece of phenomenological inquiry. Against Sartre's sharp distinction between being-for-itself (consciousness) and being-in-itself (the body as object), Merleau-Ponty argued for an ambiguous, intertwined relation between subject and body that neither dualism nor monism can adequately capture.⁵

The broader intellectual context includes the legacy of Cartesian dualism, which Merleau-Ponty saw as the fundamental error of modern philosophy. Descartes's *cogito* established self-awareness as the privilege of a disembodied thinking substance, rendering the body a mere extended thing. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project can be understood as a sustained attempt to overcome this dualism by showing that consciousness is not a bodiless ego that happens to inhabit a physical organism but is constituted by the body's engagement with the world. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes, for Merleau-Ponty, 'perception is a behavior effected not by consciousness but by the body, but not by the body as a piece of the physical world, rather by the body as lived, a living body.'⁶

2.2 Schechtman and the Analytic Personal Identity Tradition

Marya Schechtman's work emerges from the analytic tradition of personal identity, which was transformed by Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (1984) and the broader neo-Lockean program. John Locke's classical definition of personhood in terms of the continuity of consciousness and memory established what Schechtman calls the reidentification question: under what conditions is a person at one time numerically identical to a person at another time?⁷ Parfit's reductionist critique argued that personal identity consists merely in psychological continuity, with no further fact of the matter, and that identity is not what matters for survival, moral responsibility, and self-interest.

Schechtman's intervention in *The Constitution of Selves* (1996) begins with the diagnostic observation that the standard analytic debate conflates two distinct questions. The reidentification question concerns the diachronic numerical identity of a person: what makes a person at t_1 the same person as a person at t_2 ? The characterization question concerns which psychological characteristics, experiences, and actions are properly attributable to a given person. As Schechtman writes, the question is 'which beliefs, values, desires, and other psychological features make someone the person she is.'⁸ She argues that analytic philosophy has treated the reidentification question as the real metaphysical problem while consigning characterization to merely metaphorical status, and that this has undermined attempts to provide a satisfying account of the features that matter most to us: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation.

Schechtman's narrative self-constitution view (NSCV) draws on and transforms a tradition that includes Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1990), and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989). MacIntyre argued that human action is intelligible only within the context of a narrative, that a life has the form of a quest, and that the unity of a life is the unity of a narrative. Ricoeur distinguished between ipse and idem identity, arguing that narrative configures the temporal coherence of a self. Taylor emphasized that self-interpretation is inescapable and that our identity is constituted by our commitments to goods that frame our moral horizon. Schechtman takes from these thinkers the core insight that selfhood has a narrative structure while recasting it within the analytic framework of personal identity theory and subjecting it to the rigorous constraints of the characterization question.⁹

In her later work, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life* (2014), Schechtman significantly revised her position, developing what she calls the Person Life View (PLV). This account sees persons as 'unified loci of practical interaction' and defines the identity of a person in terms of 'the unity of a characteristic kind of life made up of dynamic interactions among biological, psychological, and social attributes and functions mediated through social and cultural infrastructure.'¹⁰ This revision is significant for the present study because it marks a partial convergence with the embodiment tradition: the PLV explicitly includes biological and physical attributes as constitutive components of personhood, thereby narrowing the gap between narrative and embodied accounts of the self.

3. Merleau-Ponty: Pre-Reflective Embodiment and the Body-Subject

Body-Subject

3.1 The Body-Subject and the Rejection of Cartesian Dualism

The foundational concept of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the body-subject (*le corps propre*), developed most fully in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Against the Cartesian tradition that treats the body as an extended thing controlled by an immaterial mind, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is not an object of consciousness but its very subject. As he puts it, 'I am my body,' meaning that consciousness is not a bodiless ego that happens to inhabit a physical organism but is constituted through the body's practical engagement with the world. The body is 'my point of view upon the world' and the medium through which all meaningful experience is possible.¹¹

This reframing has profound implications for the concept of self-awareness. On the Cartesian model, self-awareness is a reflective act in which the mind turns back upon itself, grasping itself as a thinking substance. Merleau-Ponty inverts this priority: reflective self-consciousness is derivative of and parasitic upon a more fundamental, pre-reflective mode of self-awareness that is built into the body's being-in-the-world. Before I thematize myself as an 'I' through explicit reflection, I am already non-thematically aware of myself as an embodied agent oriented toward the world. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the silent or tacit cogito: 'a presence to self that precedes and conditions one's explicit grasp of oneself or of the world, a tacit cogito that precedes the spoken cogito.'¹²

The tacit cogito is not a fully determinate self-consciousness but an 'inchoate' and ambiguous mode of self-experience that 'becomes explicit and determinate only when it finds expression for itself.' It is, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, pre-objective and pre-personal, operating beneath the threshold of thematic awareness. This does not mean it is unconscious in the Freudian sense; rather, it is a form of awareness that does not take itself or its objects as explicit themes. The lived body, as one scholar puts it, 'equals pre-reflective consciousness, which in turn equals the tacit cogito.'¹³

3.2 Body Schema, Motor Intentionality, and the Intentional Arc

Central to Merleau-Ponty's account is the concept of the body schema (*schema corporel*), which he borrows from Husserl and the neurologist Henry Head. The body schema is a pre-conscious, dynamic system of bodily movements and spatial equivalences that makes kinesthetic awareness and purposeful action possible. As the Stanford Encyclopedia explains, it is a 'pre-conscious system of bodily movements and spatial equivalences' that enables the body to orient itself in space and to engage with its environment without explicit reflective monitoring.¹⁴

The body schema is to be distinguished from the body image, a distinction later formalized by Shaun Gallagher. The body image consists of ‘a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body,’ while the body schema is ‘a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring.’¹⁵ The body schema is pre-personal and holistic, operating beneath the level of self-referential intentionality. It is what allows me to walk beneath a low-hanging branch without bumping my head, to reach for an object without calculating the distance, and to navigate my environment with a practical fluency that precedes explicit spatial reasoning.

Closely related is the concept of motor intentionality, which Merleau-Ponty introduces to capture the body’s capacity to project meaning and respond directly to the world without cognitive reflection. Motor intentionality is not act intentionality (the deliberate, representational intentionality of conscious thought) but operative intentionality: the body’s skillful, pre-reflective orientation toward possibilities of action in its environment. Through the famous case of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that when motor intentionality is damaged, the patient loses not only the capacity for abstract movement but the very structure of his lived world, what Merleau-Ponty calls the intentional arc: the ‘connection of the past, the future, and the environment with the present’ that gives experience its coherence and depth.¹⁶

The intentional arc is a crucial concept for the present study because it already suggests a temporal dimension to embodied selfhood. The body-subject is not a momentary point of awareness but a sedimented history of motor skills, perceptual habits, and practical orientations. The habitual body consists of ‘sedimentations of past activities that acquire a general, anonymous, and autonomous character,’ constituting a bodily memory that underlies and supports explicit recollection.¹⁷ This sedimentation of habit provides a form of temporal continuity that is bodily before it is narrative, a pre-reflective diachronicity that any subsequent narrative articulation must build upon.

3.3 Anonymity, Intercorporeality, and the Flesh

A critical feature of Merleau-Ponty’s account is the anonymity of pre-reflective bodily self-awareness. The body-subject is characterized by a ‘general and anonymous existence’ that precedes personal identity. As Merleau-Ponty writes, perception is governed by an ‘anonymous subjectivity of the body, which remains enmeshed in and connatural with the world that it perceives.’ The senses are unified without losing their distinctness, and ‘their anonymity is a consequence of the historical thickness of perception as a tradition that operates beneath the level of reflective consciousness.’¹⁸ This anonymity is not a deficiency but a structural feature of embodiment: the body is always already engaged with the world before ‘I’ explicitly take up this engagement as mine.

In his later, unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty deepens and radicalizes these themes through the concept of flesh (*la chair*). Flesh is not matter in the physicalist sense nor spirit in the idealist sense but the primordial element in which both subject and object, self and world, are intertwined. The flesh is ‘the body inasmuch as it is the visible seer, the audible hearer, the tangible touch, the sensitive sensible.’¹⁹ This concept of chiasm or intertwining captures the reversibility of perception: when I touch, I am also touched; when I see, I am also visible. The flesh is characterized by ‘an anonymity

innate to myself,' a generality of the sensible that precedes the individuation of personal selves.²⁰

Intercorporeality extends this chiasmatic structure to the domain of intersubjectivity. My experience of other persons is not mediated by inference from their bodily behavior to an inner mental life; rather, I encounter others directly within the shared field of intercorporeal being. The other's body and mine are moments of a common flesh, and my awareness of the other is grounded in the same pre-reflective bodily openness through which I am aware of myself. This has important implications for narrative identity: if intersubjective recognition is a condition of personhood, as Schechtman's reality constraint suggests, then this recognition operates at the pre-reflective, intercorporeal level before it is thematized in narrative form.

4. Schechtman: Narrative Self-Constitution and the Characterization Question

Characterization Question

4.1 The Reidentification/Characterization Distinction

The architecture of Schechtman's account rests on a fundamental diagnostic distinction. In *The Constitution of Selves*, she argues that the standard analytic debate over personal identity has been systematically distorted by a failure to distinguish between two questions that are typically conflated. The reidentification question asks: 'What are the conditions under which a person at one point in time is properly reidentified at another point in time?' This is a question about diachronic numerical identity, a criterion of what makes something one and the same thing as itself at different times. The characterization question asks: 'What are the conditions under which various psychological characteristics, experiences, and actions are properly attributable to some person?'²¹

Schechtman's key move is to argue that the four features of personal existence that matter most to us, survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation, are linked to personal identity in the sense of the characterization question, not the reidentification question. The standard debate, by focusing exclusively on reidentification, has failed to address what is really at stake. As she writes, 'There is a strong pre-philosophical sense that facts about personal identity underlie facts about four basic features of personal existence: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation. I contend that the four features are indeed linked to facts about personal identity, but identity in the sense of the characterization question, not the reidentification question.'²²

4.2 The Narrative Self-Constitution View

Having shifted the analytic focus to the characterization question, Schechtman proposes her narrative self-constitution view (NSCV) as the answer. The cornerstone of this view, as she states, 'is the claim that a person's identity is created by a self-conception that is narrative in form. Most broadly put, this means that constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and the logic of a story, more specifically, the story of a person's life, where story is understood as a conventional, linear narrative.'²³ On this view, identity is not pre-given and awaiting discovery; it is actively constituted through the development and revision of an interpretive self-narrative.

The NSCV holds that 'a person's identity (in the sense at issue in the characterization question) is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers.' A person's characteristics are theirs not because of some pre-narrative metaphysical fact but 'because, and to the degree to which, they contribute to and shape' the person's narrative.²⁴ The self-narrative is not merely descriptive but constitutive: it does not merely report who one already is but

creates who one is through the interpretive act of narration. This is a constitutive rather than a descriptive account of the relation between narrative and selfhood.

Schechtman emphasizes that the self-narrative is ‘largely implicit and automatic, though occasionally explicit.’ It is not the case that one must constantly be composing an autobiography; rather, one’s narrative operates as an organizing framework through which experiences are selected, interpreted, and integrated into a coherent life-story. This narrative self-conception ‘not only defines who she is, what she stands for, and what makes her life meaningful, but also shapes the interpretive framework in terms of which she understands and engages with the world.’²⁵

4.3 The Articulation and Reality Constraints

To prevent the NSCV from collapsing into unconstrained fictionalism, Schechtman imposes two constraints on identity-constituting narratives. The articulation constraint requires that a person be able to articulate the connections between elements of their self-narrative in ways that are intelligible to themselves and to others. As Schechtman explains, although the narrative is largely implicit, ‘you should be able to answer basic questions if put to you,’ supplying the local details and explanatory links that render the narrative coherent.²⁶ The articulation constraint ensures that identity-constituting narratives are not merely subjective fantasies but are structured by norms of coherence and intelligibility.

The reality constraint demands that self-narratives ‘cohere with the basic contours of reality.’ More specifically, the narrative must (i) fit with one’s culture’s concept of a person, (ii) fit with the narrative that others would tell of one’s life, (iii) be free from widespread factual errors (or, insofar as there are such errors, those errors must fit with one’s actual behavior patterns or with how people tend to see one), and (iv) involve interpretations of events that are comprehensible.²⁷ The reality constraint prevents the wholesale invention of fictitious identities and ensures that self-constituting narratives remain accountable to the social and factual world.

These constraints are philosophically significant for the present study because they implicitly acknowledge a dependence of narrative on factors that are not themselves narrative. The reality constraint, in particular, requires that narratives answer to factual and social realities that are, at least in part, bodily and material: the physical facts of one’s body, one’s environment, one’s biological development, and one’s observable behavior. This opens a space for the embodiment tradition to argue that the pre-reflective structures of bodily experience are among the realities that constrain and enable narrative self-constitution.

4.4 The Person Life View: Later Developments

In *Staying Alive* (2014), Schechtman develops the Person Life View (PLV), which represents a significant evolution of her thinking. The PLV holds that ‘persons are entities that live characteristic kinds of lives, person lives. To be a person is to live a person life; particular persons are individuated by individuating person lives; and sameness of person over time is defined in terms of the sameness of a person life.’²⁸ A person life consists of three interrelated aspects: first, ‘the attributes of the individual, the physical and psychological

capacities and internal structures that she possesses'; second, 'the kinds of activities and interactions that make up the individual's daily life'; and third, 'the social and cultural infrastructure of personhood, the set of practices and institutions that provides the backdrop within which the kinds of activities that make up the form of life of personhood become possible.'²⁹

The PLV is important for this study because it marks a shift toward a more embodied and socially situated conception of personhood. By including physical capacities and biological development as constitutive components of personal identity, and by foregrounding the role of social and cultural infrastructure, the PLV narrows the distance between Schechtman's account and the phenomenological tradition. The person life is not a disembodied narrative but a dynamic interaction among biological, psychological, and social dimensions, mediated through cultural practices. This creates a natural bridge to Merleau-Ponty's account of the body-subject as always already embedded in an intersubjective, cultural world.

5. The Dialectical Synthesis: Embodied Narrative Constitution

5.1 Embodiment as the Pre-Narrative Condition

The first movement of the dialectical synthesis establishes that pre-reflective embodiment functions as the enabling and constraining ground of narrative self-constitution. This claim can be elaborated through several converging lines of argument.

First, the temporal continuity that narrative requires is not initially a narrative achievement but a bodily one. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the habitual body as the sedimentation of past activities provides a pre-reflective form of diachronicity. The body carries its past in the form of acquired motor skills, perceptual habits, and practical orientations. A pianist's fingers remember sonatas; a swimmer's body knows the water; a grief-stricken person's posture carries the weight of loss. These sedimented bodily structures provide the temporal continuity upon which narrative self-interpretation operates. As a recent study in the phenomenology of embodied narrative puts it, 'bodily dispositions support the temporal continuity and expressive unfolding of the narrative self, including both the narrated I and the narrating I. In this view, narrative identity emerges from embodied engagement with the world rather than from purely cognitive processes.'³⁰

Second, the content of self-narratives is shaped by bodily experience. The stories we tell about ourselves are not abstract cognitive constructions but are rooted in the affective, sensory, and motor experiences that constitute our embodied engagement with the world. Our self-narratives are populated with bodily memories: the feeling of a first bicycle ride, the shame of a physical failing, the joy of bodily mastery. Even abstract narrative elements, values, commitments, character traits, are typically rooted in and expressed through bodily practices. A person's narrative identity as 'courageous' is inseparable from the bodily dispositions that constitute courageous action: the steady heartbeat, the direct gaze, the willingness to act in the face of physical danger.

Third, the articulation constraint itself has an embodied dimension. The capacity to articulate one's narrative, to supply local details and explanatory connections, presupposes the bodily capacity for speech and gesture, which are themselves motor-intentional achievements. More deeply, the intelligibility that the articulation constraint demands is not purely logical but practical: a narrative is intelligible when it makes sense in terms of the embodied practices, habits, and social interactions that constitute a person's form of life. The reality constraint, likewise, requires that narratives answer to the body's reality: its physical capacities and limitations, its observable behavior, its biological development. A narrative that represents oneself as capable of flight fails the reality constraint not because it is logically incoherent but because it violates the embodied conditions of human existence.

5.2 Narrative as Reflective Articulation of Bodily Life

The second movement of the dialectic establishes the converse claim: that the body-subject requires narrative articulation to become diachronically accountable as a person. While

Merleau-Ponty's account establishes the ontological priority of pre-reflective embodiment, it also reveals its limitations as a complete account of personhood.

The body-subject, as Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledges, is characterized by anonymity and generality. The pre-reflective cogito is not a personal self but a 'general and anonymous existence' that precedes the individuation of persons. The body schema, motor intentionality, and habit operate beneath the threshold of personal identity. While this provides the ontological ground for selfhood, it cannot by itself account for the practical features that define personhood: moral responsibility, self-interested concern, survival, and compensation. These features require a level of reflective self-articulation that the pre-reflective body alone cannot provide.

Consider moral responsibility. To hold someone responsible for a past action is not merely to trace a causal chain of bodily behavior; it is to attribute the action to a person who can recognize it as their own, explain it in terms of their character and commitments, and respond to it with appropriate emotions such as guilt, pride, or regret. This requires the person to locate the action within a narrative framework that connects past, present, and future in a way that is intelligible to themselves and to others. The bodily sedimentation of past actions, the habitual body that carries the traces of what one has done, provides the material for such narrative attribution, but the attribution itself is a narrative act. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes, Schechtman argues that the features that matter most to us are 'linked to facts about personal identity, but identity in the sense of the characterization question, not the reidentification question.'³¹

Similarly, the reality constraint has a narrative dimension that goes beyond the body. While the body provides the material substrate of reality, the reality of a person's life is also constituted by the narratives that others tell about them. Schechtman's requirement that one's self-narrative 'fit with the narrative that others would tell of their life' acknowledges that personal identity is not a purely private, bodily affair but a socially negotiated construction. Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeality provides the pre-reflective ground for this social dimension, but the social infrastructure of personhood, the practices, institutions, and norms that define what it is to be a person in a given community, requires narrative articulation to become operative.

5.3 Tension, Opacity, and Resistance

The dialectical relationship between embodiment and narrative is not harmonious but marked by tension. The pre-reflective body does not simply cooperate with narrative self-constitution; it also resists it. This resistance manifests in several ways.

The anonymity of the body-subject means that there are dimensions of bodily experience that are not, and perhaps cannot be, fully appropriated by narrative. The body's automatic processes, its proprioceptive self-awareness, its affective dispositions, and its habitual orientations operate beneath the threshold of narrative articulation. As Catriona Mackenzie notes, there are 'dimensions of our embodiment that necessarily elude integration into the embodied first-person perspective.' The result is that narrative self-constitution is always partial: the self-narrative never fully captures the lived body, and there is always a bodily remainder that exceeds narrative appropriation.³²

This excess can be productive or disruptive. Productively, it ensures that narrative self-constitution is never a closed, totalitarian project; the body's opacity keeps the self open to revision, surprise, and transformation. The body continues to have experiences, acquire habits, and undergo changes that narrative must accommodate rather than dictate. Disruptively, the bodily remainder can manifest as trauma, psychopathology, or alienation: the body that carries the unassimilated traces of traumatic experience, the body-image dysmorphia that resists narrative correction, the habitual body whose sedimented racism or sexism contradicts one's explicit narrative commitments. In such cases, the body does not merely enable narrative but actively contests it.

Conversely, narrative can distort lived embodiment. A person may construct a self-narrative that systematically misrepresents their bodily reality: the anorexic who narrates themselves as overweight, the traumatized soldier who narrates himself as fearless, the chronically ill person who narrates themselves as healthy. Such narratives fail the reality constraint precisely because they violate the bodily substrate of experience. This suggests that the reality constraint, properly understood, must include not only social and factual dimensions but an embodied dimension: the narrative must cohere with the pre-reflective reality of the lived body, not merely with third-person facts about it.

5.4 Toward Embodied Narrative Constitution

The dialectical synthesis proposed here can be stated as follows: personal identity is constituted through the reflective narrative articulation of a pre-reflectively embodied life, where the body provides the enabling ground, the constraining material, and the resisting excess of narrative self-constitution, while narrative provides the reflective, socially accountable, diachronically extended structure that makes the body-subject into a person. This account preserves the ontological priority of embodiment while acknowledging the constitutive role of narrative in personhood.

The relationship between the two is recursive rather than unidirectional. The body provides the pre-narrative ground from which narrative emerges; narrative, in turn, reshapes the body through the incorporation of narrative commitments into bodily habits and dispositions. The person who narrates themselves as courageous gradually acquires the bodily dispositions of courage; the person who narrates themselves as broken acquires the bodily posture of defeat. This recursive dynamic is what makes embodied narrative constitution a genuinely dialectical rather than merely additive process: each pole is transformed by its relation to the other.³³

6. Critical Reception and Objections

6.1 Strawson's Anti-Narrativity Critique

The most influential criticism of narrative identity theories comes from Galen Strawson's essay 'Against Narrativity' (2004). Strawson distinguishes two theses: the psychological narrativity thesis, which holds that human beings typically experience their lives in narrative form, and the ethical narrativity thesis, which holds that one ought to experience one's life narratively in order to live well and achieve full personhood. Strawson rejects both.³⁴

Against the psychological thesis, Strawson introduces his own case. He professes to have 'absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with a form, or indeed as a narrative without a form,' and distinguishes between Diachronic self-experience, in which one experiences oneself as the same self persisting across time, and Episodic self-experience, in which the self is experienced as a series of relatively disconnected present moments. Strawson claims to be an Episodic and argues that this is a perfectly healthy and legitimate mode of self-experience, not a deficiency or pathology.³⁵

Against the ethical thesis, Strawson argues that it is 'authoritarian' to claim that everyone ought to live narratively. The narrative life is not inherently superior to the episodic life; some of the most creative and ethically admirable people have been Episodics. The ethical narrativity thesis, Strawson contends, is not only empirically false but normatively oppressive.

Schechtman has responded by arguing that Strawson's Episodic self-experience is itself a form of narrative self-understanding, albeit one characterized by cognitive awareness without affective identification. On this reading, 'Strawson's episodic life is in fact a narrative life with mere cognitive awareness but no affective identification,' and his criticism 'should be better framed as a call for a distinction between the two kinds of self-narratives, one with affective identification and the other with mere cognitive awareness.'³⁶ This response is partially successful but does not fully address the force of Strawson's challenge, which is that narrative theories risk overgeneralizing from one mode of self-experience to all of humanity.

The embodied narrative constitution view proposed here offers an additional response to Strawson. If narrative self-constitution is grounded in pre-reflective embodiment, then the bodily dimension of selfhood, which Strawson does not deny, already provides a form of temporal continuity and self-unity that does not require explicit narrative articulation. The habitual body, the sedimentation of motor skills and perceptual habits, constitutes a pre-narrative form of diachronicity that can ground personal identity even in the absence of explicit narrativity. This means that Strawson's Episodic, while perhaps lacking explicit narrative self-constitution, still possesses the embodied ground of selfhood that makes narrative possible. The question then becomes not whether one must be narrative but whether the embodied ground of selfhood is itself a form of implicit narrativity, a question that the dialectical account leaves open in a productive way.

6.2 The Minimal Self Tradition: Zahavi and Gallagher

A second line of criticism comes from the phenomenological tradition itself, particularly from the work of Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher on the minimal self. Zahavi argues that pre-reflective self-awareness is a structural feature of all consciousness, not dependent on narrative or reflection. On this view, 'experiential phenomena are characterized by a quality of mineness, the fact that the experiences are given (at least tacitly) as my experiences.' This minimal self is 'pre-reflective, meaning it is an immediate awareness that we have prior to the act of reflection. It is an awareness of the experience during the experience itself, rather than something we only gain after the experience has taken place.'³⁷

Zahavi and Gallagher distinguish the minimal self, which is the pre-reflective, non-conceptual, first-personal givenness of experience, from the narrative self, which is the temporally extended, conceptually structured, socially constructed self of autobiography. They argue that the minimal self is ontologically prior to and independent of the narrative self: one can have minimal selfhood without narrative selfhood, as in early infancy or certain forms of cognitive impairment, but not vice versa.³⁸

This critique challenges narrative identity theories by suggesting that they mistake a higher-order, derivative form of selfhood for the fundamental one. If the minimal self is the basic structure of self-awareness, then narrative self-constitution is a secondary accomplishment that presupposes but does not constitute selfhood. The embodied narrative constitution view can accommodate this critique by distinguishing, as Merleau-Ponty himself does, between different levels of selfhood: the pre-reflective, anonymous, embodied self-awareness of the tacit cogito (which corresponds closely to Zahavi's minimal self), the personal, reflective self-awareness of the spoken cogito, and the narrative self-constitution that links these levels through the temporally extended structure of a life-story. On this layered account, narrative does not replace minimal selfhood but builds upon it, transforming the anonymous, pre-personal body-subject into a diachronically accountable person.

Gallagher's distinction between body image and body schema further supports this integration. The body schema, as a 'system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring,' provides the pre-reflective, non-representational ground of selfhood, while the body image, as a 'system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body,' can be incorporated into and shaped by narrative self-understanding.³⁹ The recursive relationship between body schema and body image, between operative and act intentionality, mirrors the recursive relationship between embodiment and narrative that the dialectical account proposes.

6.3 Feminist and Social Critiques of Disembodied Narrative

A third line of criticism comes from feminist and social philosophy, which has challenged narrative identity theories for their tendency toward disembodiment. As one critic notes, Schechtman's narrative self-constitution view, by applying 'a narrative twist to the neo-Lockean dualist intuition of a disembodied, or disembodiable, psychological continuity, as opposed to biological continuity,' is 'ultimately a disembodied one.'⁴⁰ The narrative self, on this reading, is a cognitive construction that floats free of the bodily, material conditions of

its own possibility.

This critique is partially answered by Schechtman's later Person Life View, which explicitly includes physical and biological attributes as constitutive of personal identity. But the deeper point, that narrative identity theories have historically neglected the lived body in favor of the narrated self, is well taken. The embodied narrative constitution view addresses this by insisting that narrative is always grounded in and answerable to the lived body, not merely to third-person biological facts about it. The body is not merely a constraint on narrative but its condition of possibility: the medium through which experience is had, the substrate from which narrative content is drawn, and the resistant excess that prevents narrative from achieving total self-transparency.

Feminist philosophers have also emphasized the socially constructed nature of both embodiment and narrative. Gender, race, class, and disability are not merely biological facts that narrative describes but embodied social formations that shape both bodily experience and narrative self-understanding. The body schema itself is not neutral but is constituted through social practices: the gendered habits of posture, movement, and bodily self-presentation that sediment into the habitual body. This means that the dialectical relationship between embodiment and narrative is mediated by social structures, and that any adequate account of embodied narrative constitution must attend to the political dimensions of both embodiment and narrativity.

6.4 The Scalar Approach: Degrees of Narrativity

A final objection worth considering is that the binary distinction between narrative and non-narrative selfhood is too crude. As one scholar argues, 'we need to move away from a binary understanding of narrative as something an entity (the self) strictly is or is not; rather, we need to see narrative as an attribute admitting of degrees.' This scalar approach proposes three levels: the unnarratable, the narratable, and the narrative, corresponding to different degrees to which embodied experience can be and is incorporated into narrative self-constitution.⁴¹

This scalar approach is congenial to the embodied narrative constitution view. It acknowledges that not all embodied experience is narratively constituted, that some dimensions of bodily life are pre-narrative or unnarratable, while others are available for narrative appropriation without being fully narrated, and still others are actively constituted through narrative. The dialectical account does not require that all selfhood be narrative but that personhood, in the full sense that includes moral responsibility and practical concern, requires a degree of narrative self-constitution that is grounded in but not reducible to the pre-reflective body. The scalar model allows for variation in the degree and kind of narrative integration while preserving the insight that embodiment and narrative are mutually constitutive.

7. Implications and Conclusion

7.1 Implications for Personal Identity Theory

The embodied narrative constitution view has several significant implications for the philosophy of personal identity. First, it suggests that the traditional dichotomy between psychological continuity and biological continuity accounts of personal identity is a false one. Both are necessary but neither is sufficient. Psychological continuity, as constituted through narrative self-constitution, is grounded in the biological continuity of the embodied organism, while biological continuity, as the persistence of a living body, acquires its personal significance through narrative appropriation. The Person Life View, with its cluster-concept approach to identity, points in this direction, but the embodied narrative constitution view makes the dialectical relationship between the biological and the narrative explicit.

Second, the view has implications for the practical concerns that Schechtman identifies as central to personal identity: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation. Each of these concerns has both a narrative and an embodied dimension. Survival is not merely the persistence of a narrative but the continuation of a bodily life that can be narratively appropriated. Moral responsibility is not merely narrative attribution but the attribution of actions to an embodied agent whose habitual body carries the sedimented traces of what they have done. Self-interested concern is not merely narrative identification but the practical orientation of an embodied being toward its own future. Compensation is not merely narrative justice but the rectification of bodily and narrative harms.

7.2 Implications for Psychopathology and Trauma

The embodied narrative constitution view offers resources for understanding psychopathology and trauma. Many forms of psychological distress can be understood as disruptions of the dialectical relationship between embodiment and narrative. In depersonalization disorder, the pre-reflective sense of bodily self-awareness is disrupted, creating a gap between the narrative self and the lived body that manifests as a feeling of unreality or detachment. In body dysmorphic disorder, the narrative self-understanding systematically distorts the embodied reality, violating what I have called the embodied dimension of the reality constraint. In post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatic event is bodily sedimented in flashbacks, hyperarousal, and habitual avoidance patterns that resist narrative integration, creating a bodily remainder that disrupts the coherence of the self-narrative.

These clinical phenomena confirm the dialectical thesis: where embodiment and narrative are out of alignment, psychopathology results. Treatment, correspondingly, must address both poles: narrative therapy alone cannot resolve a bodily trauma that resists articulation, and somatic intervention alone cannot resolve a narrative distortion that misrepresents the body. The most effective therapeutic approaches, from this perspective, are those that work at the interface of embodiment and narrative, such as somatic experiencing, dance movement therapy, and embodied approaches to cognitive-behavioral therapy.

7.3 Conclusion

This paper has argued that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of pre-reflective embodiment and Marya Schechtman's narrative self-constitution view, while developed in different philosophical traditions and addressing different questions, are best understood as dialectically complementary rather than competing accounts of selfhood. Pre-reflective embodiment, as articulated through Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the body-subject, body schema, motor intentionality, tacit cogito, habit, anonymity, flesh, and intercorporeality, provides the enabling ground, constraining material, and resisting excess of narrative self-constitution. Narrative self-constitution, as articulated through Schechtman's distinction between reidentification and characterization, the narrative self-constitution view with its articulation and reality constraints, and the later Person Life View, provides the reflective, socially accountable, diachronically extended structure that makes the body-subject into a person.

The dialectical relationship between these two dimensions is recursive rather than unidirectional: the body enables and constrains narrative, while narrative reshapes and transforms the body. This recursivity is what makes personal identity a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a fixed state, and what makes the self both given (in the pre-reflective anonymity of the body) and achieved (through the reflective articulation of narrative self-constitution). The resulting account, embodied narrative constitution, preserves the insights of both the phenomenological and the analytic traditions while addressing their respective limitations: it answers the disembodiment objection to narrative theories by grounding narrative in the lived body, and it answers the under-articulation objection to embodied phenomenology by showing how the body-subject becomes a person through narrative. The critical reception of both traditions, including Strawson's anti-narrativity critique, the Zahavi-Gallagher minimal self tradition, and feminist and social critiques of disembodied narrative, reveals that neither embodiment nor narrative alone can provide a complete account of selfhood. It is in their dialectical intersection that the full complexity of personal identity comes into view: a self that is neither merely a body nor merely a story but an embodied narrative being, constituted through the ongoing, tension-laden, recursive interplay between the pre-reflective anonymity of the lived body and the reflective articulation of a life-story.

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Notes

- 1 The phenomenological and analytic traditions of selfhood have developed largely independently. For an exception that bridges the two, see the analysis of narrative and personal identity in Merleau-Ponty in <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14484528.2018.1485538>
- 2 This thesis aligns with recent work arguing for a “mutually shaping” relationship between embodiment and narrativity; see <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11097-026-10156-0>
- 3 On Husserl’s influence on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the lived body, see the Stanford Encyclopedia, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 4 See the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” <https://iep.utm.edu/merleau/>
- 5 On the relation to Heidegger and Sartre, see Stanford Encyclopedia, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 6 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 7 On Locke and the reidentification tradition, see Stanford Encyclopedia, “Personal Identity and Ethics,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/identity-ethics/>
- 8 Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), as quoted in <https://academic.oup.com/book/38782/chapter/337595704>
- 9 On the MacIntyre-Ricoeur-Taylor background, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/identity-ethics/>
- 10 Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, review of *Staying Alive*, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/staying-alive-personal-identity-practical-concerns-and-the-unity-of-a-life/>
- 11 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012 trans.), as discussed in <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 12 On the tacit cogito, see EBSCO, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/phenomenology-perception-maurice-merleau-ponty>
- 13 See the analysis in <https://studia.reviste.ubbcluj.ro/index.php/subbphilosophia/article/download/3202/9687/32794>
- 14 Stanford Encyclopedia, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 15 Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (2005), as reviewed in <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/how-the-body-shapes-the-mind/>
- 16 On Schneider and the intentional arc, see https://aporia.byu.edu/pdfs/pulido-an_entirely_different_kind_of_synthesis.pdf
- 17 On the habitual body, see Stanford Encyclopedia, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 18 Stanford Encyclopedia, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>

- 19 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, https://monoskop.org/images/8/80/Merleau_Ponty_Maurice_The_Visible_and_the_Invisible_1968.pdf
- 20 On flesh and anonymity, see Stanford Encyclopedia, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/merleau-ponty/>
- 21 Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), as discussed in https://www.uky.edu/teaching/PHI_350_Schechtman.pdf
- 22 Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), as quoted in <https://academic.oup.com/book/38782/chapter/337595704>
- 23 Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (1996), 96, as quoted in <https://people.umass.edu/lrb/files/bak14selfnar.pdf>
- 24 Cambridge University Press, “Narrative Self-Constitution,” in *Embodied Narratives*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/embodied-narratives/narrative-selfconstitution/>
- 25 On narrative as interpretive framework, see <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/embodied-narratives/narrative-selfconstitution/>
- 26 Schechtman, as quoted in <http://profiles.cognethic.org/Schechtman.pdf>
- 27 On the reality constraint, see https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/92981/Aydemir_uwm_0263M_13224.pdf
- 28 Schechtman, *Staying Alive* (2014), as in <https://academic.oup.com/book/12024/chapter/161309788>
- 29 Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/staying-alive-personal-identity-practical-concerns-and-the-unity-of-a-life/>
- 30 See <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11097-026-10156-0>
- 31 Stanford Encyclopedia, “Personal Identity and Ethics,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/identity-ethics/>
- 32 On bodily opacity, see <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09515089.2018.1548698>
- 33 On the recursive interplay of embodiment and narrative, see <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09515089.2018.1548698>
- 34 Strawson, “Against Narrativity” (2004), https://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/against_narrativity.pdf
- 35 On Strawson’s Episodic self-experience, see <https://philosophybreak.com/articles/galen-strawson-our-lives-are-not-stories/>
- 36 On the Strawson-Schechtman debate, see <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-the-american-philosophical-association/>
- 37 On Zahavi’s minimal self, see <https://loc.closetotruth.com/theory/zahavi-s-pre-reflective-for-me-ness>
- 38 On the minimal vs. narrative self distinction, see <https://unfinishablemap.org/concepts/self-and-self-consciousness/>
- 39 Gallagher, as discussed in <https://academic.oup.com/book/41218/chapter/350689865>
- 40 On the disembodiment critique, see https://repositorio.ulisboa.pt/bitstream/10451/64598/1/TM_Alberto_Colombo.pdf

- 41** On the scalar approach, see <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11097-016-9485-8>

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