

From Persons to Selfing: Some Developments of Parfit's Legacy

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Abstract

In this paper we shall discuss some aspects of Parfit's thought in connection with what we regard as a promising, quasi-naturalist approach to the self. The focus is not so much on the concept of person (considered as the starting point of a metaphysics of person), which—for our present purposes—we take essentially to be a forensic notion; our point is, rather, that certain ideas developed by Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (1984) may be viewed as a component of a bottom-up account of the self that combines psychobiological and narrativist aspects. At the same time, however, we believe that his reductionist-eliminativist approach is not able to account for certain important facts concerning the mental health of a person and her way to being in the world. Moreover, it is worth noting that in our arguments a considerable role is played by empirical evidence. This is an important difference with respect to traditional analytical approaches to personal identity, which are usually based on conceptual analysis and thought experiments. Indeed, our approach is better considered as an instance of naturalized metaphysics in Quine's (1981) sense, even if—as we shall see—in a rather moderate sense.

The structure of the paper is the following. In the first section we describe (sketchily) our theory of the self. In the second section we discuss to what extent the main tenets of our view fit well with Parfit's work. As we shall see, there is agreement, in particular, on his "impersonality thesis", that is, the view (which can be also found in Daniel Dennett 1969, 1991) that personal phenomena should be ultimately explained starting from non-personal terms. In the third section, we highlight the shortcomings of Parfit's position as a view of the self, and we explain why our particular version of narrativism can appropriately be considered as a *realist* account of the self.

Keywords: Self, Realism about the self, Impersonality thesis, I/Me.

1. A Quasi-naturalist Approach to the Self

In Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster (2016; see also 2015, 2018 and 2019) we put forward a theory of the self that combines contributions from philosoph-

ical psychology with a variety of findings from developmental, social, clinical and personality psychology. On our view, the self is constituted by the couple <I, Me>—in a somewhat Jamesian way—where the I is the *process* of constructing diachronically a series of self-representations, each corresponding to a tentative Me. The self is indeed a constructive process that starts in the very early stages of our life and runs unceasingly throughout our entire life. We call this process the *selfing*, exactly to highlight its procedural and dynamic character.

The selfing process is a complex and multi-level one, whose main objective is the creation and maintenance of the Me, the ongoing and dynamical self-representation accessible to the subject's introspective activities. It is important to note that, while the selfing is complex, the Me is simple. With this we mean that, at the personal level where it is experienced, the Me is normally given as something that, similarly to Descartes' thinking substance, is simple (i.e. it cannot be analyzed in terms of simpler relations such as physical or psychological features), synchronically unitary and diachronically identical.

The selfing process is in the first instance psychobiological, to the extent that springs spontaneously, already in the first months of life, from perception, proprioception and interoception. The most precocious mental states underlying the development of the self are both unconscious and simply conscious states.¹ Indeed our methodological strategy involves deriving complex psychological functions from more basic ones, i.e., from what is evolutionarily prior to what is more sophisticated, following a path proceeding from unconscious to the sophisticated self-conscious ("bottom-up strategy").

The selfing process is articulated in three main stages, i.e., there are three main kinds of Me: *i*) bodily self-consciousness, which is the representation of one's own body as a whole; *ii*) psychological self-consciousness, which is the representation of one's own organism as something possessing mental states; *iii*) narrative or biographic self-consciousness, i.e., a representation of the self as a temporally extended entity, a mindful organism who has a story.

A complete, mature self requires all the three stages, and each stage presupposes the successful attainment of the previous one. Therefore, even though the possession of an experienced body is the primary condition of self, the sophisticated ability of conceiving of themselves as numerically identical cross-temporal entities and as protagonists of a biography is also a necessary condition for the constitution of a full-fledged self. This implies that the primary constituents of the self are to be explained in a purely naturalistic way, whereas the final stages involve cultural and social aspects (including normative ones, see *infra*, §3) that cannot be reduced to a purely naturalist (viz. purely neurocognitive) theory.

The cornerstones of our proposal are the following:

1) The theory is both realist and narrativist. The theory is realist insofar as the selfing process is absolutely real, in the sense that, far from being a mere interpretation or creation, it possesses causal efficacy; and a kind of causal efficacy that underpins our intra- and inter-personal balances, so that perturbations or disruptions of this process may have pathological effects on our psychological well-being and mental health. At the same time the theory involves a narrativist

¹ By "simply conscious" we mean intentional states not involving any form of self-consciousness. For instance the experiential state of a three months baby who is observing her hand.

component, since the most advanced development stage of the selfing process is in part constituted by the ability of constructing narratives. Therefore, contrary to what is usually assumed, narrativism does not necessarily entail anti-realism about the self. In the third section we shall provide an extensive argument for this thesis.

2) The theory is quasi-naturalist, in two senses, one metaphysical,² the other epistemological and methodological as well. On the metaphysical side, the idea is that the selfing is in large part an activity of the organism, and does not presuppose either a transcendental self or any form of self-consciousness. In Kantian terms, the selfing is an *empirical* synthesis function. On the epistemological-methodological side, the point is that all the assumptions and the theses constitutive of the theory confront the empirical results from cognitive neuroscience and empirical psychology. Indeed, on this perspective, the theory can be regarded as an instance of naturalized metaphysics in Quine's sense. However our account is (only) *quasi*-naturalist because of the narrative component. Indeed, the ability of representing themselves as the protagonists of a story can hardly be explained with natural facts only (i.e. facts fully explainable with the descriptive resources of the natural sciences). The challenge is to show that there is continuity between the natural, organismic stage (which is essentially biological) and the socially modulated psychological stage.

3) The theory does not presuppose the existence of a pre-reflective self-consciousness in Gallagher and Zahavi's sense (Zahavi 2005, Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, 2015). Self-consciousness is rather the result of a constructive process, starting from the sense of the body and ending in a biographical self-representation. At most we could say that, during the process of construction of the bodily image, some perceptual and proprioceptive representations carry implicitly self-specifying information, but no full-blown representation of the bodily self is available before the two years of life (more or less).

The first point, the issue of the compatibility between realism and narrativism, is particularly important from our point of view. The reader interested in points 2 and 3 can refer to Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster 2016 (especially sections 4.2, 4.3—for point 2—and 3.3—for point 3). Of course, the claim that the theory is both realist and narrativist calls for a justification, since narrativism is more commonly taken as an anti-realist position. This will be the topic of the third section. And the claim that the I is conspicuously realized by subpersonal processes is also something that requires further development, for at least two reasons. First, the notion of the self seems to be paradigmatically personal—to put it in a few words: to be endowed with a self is a property of the human person. Second, reference to subpersonal processes seems to involve a reductionist attitude. Is our naturalist, bottom-up account indeed reductive? And if it were so, how to conciliate this reductionism with the narrativist component?

Here comes into play Parfit's "impersonality thesis", that is, the view (that can also be associated with Dennett) that personal phenomena should ultimately be explained in non-personal terms. The role of the thesis, however, is different: in Parfit the thesis is the main pillar of his overall metaphysical picture of minds and persons, whereas in our account the thesis is important in connection

² To the extent that a clear-cut division can be traced between metaphysical facts and epistemological facts, what can hardly be held on our view.

with the need of clarifying the relation between subpersonal and personal levels of explanation of the self. Indeed, as we shall see in the third section, we claim that a full-fledged theory of self and self-knowledge should be based on both subpersonal and personal explanations. Let us consider, to begin with, the impersonality thesis.

2. Parfit's Reductionist Stance and Its Limits

A comparison between our theory of the self and Parfit's one is difficult, because, at the time he published *Reasons and Persons*, the historical context, the methodology and the theoretical interests were significantly different from today's ones. Nevertheless, we believe that there are certain important similarities and differences that make the comparison worth to do.

Parfit's impersonal account of the nature of persons is based on the neo-Humean idea that the word "person" applies to collections of experiences connected by some psychic chain. There is no irreducible reference to persons or subjects, thus it seems possible to describe persons and/or subjects of experience in purely objective terms.

Our proposal has many things in common with Parfit's approach (even if it is not based on a "semantic approach", but rather it is based on empirical research). Here we would like to underline what we take to be the fundamental point, that is the negation of the self as a *substance*, something close to a Cartesian Pure Ego, or "any other kind of separately existing entity" (Parfit 1984: 210)—that is an entity that could exist separately from body and thoughts:

Even Reductionists do not deny that people exist. And, on our concept of a person, people are not thoughts and acts. They are thinkers and agents. I am not a series of experiences, but the person who has these experiences. A Reductionist can admit that, in this sense, a person is what has experiences, or the subject of experiences. This is true because of the way in which we talk. What a Reductionist denies is that the subject of experiences is a separately existing entity, distinct from a brain and body, and a series of physical and mental events (*ibid.*: 223).

In fact our criticism of substantialism goes beyond the criticism of Cartesianism, and might also be associated to the rejection of a widespread idea, the claim that conscious experience entails self-consciousness. In Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster 2016 we try to show that there is no compelling evidence in favor of pre-reflective or non-reflective self-consciousness that accompanies every conscious state from birth. To be sure, the defense of pre-reflective self-consciousness (which represents a very deep and relevant alternative to our proposal, and would deserve a critical exam that it not possible here—see Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster 2016: §3.3; Paternoster 2013) is not a form of classical substantialism, being rather more reminiscent of Kantian transcendentalism. In any case, like Parfit, we don't start with an "already made" self, nor we believe that personal identity is a "further fact" that involves more than physical and psychological continuity (and the relevant social and cultural influences), and in general we reject the idea that "psychological unity is explained by ownership" (Parfit 1984: 275).

On the other hand, we are dissatisfied with the eliminative/reductivist outcome of Parfit's criticism, since it overlooks the fact that the abilities required to develop a narrative identity—which is a full-fledged self—can hardly be con-

financed to cerebral and bodily operations, though being constructed upon them.³ The Reductionist—as described in the previous quotation—denies that the subject of experience can be separated from its physical basis and this, in a sense, is true: no selfing process could be in place without an organismic basis. Yet, the selfing process cannot be exhausted by its cerebral basis, since other psychological and extracranial ingredients are necessary. For instance, the ability to ascribe mental states to themselves presupposes, very likely, the ability to ascribe mental states to others; and this, in turn, requires precocious social interactions with caregivers. It is intuitively clear that the higher the stage of development is, the more important is the involvement of social aspects. The ability of producing a narrative depends on a series of psychological competences and social transactions that have little to do with the brain, which is just a causal condition and by no means the only one. In other words, the reduction of mental abilities to organism could perhaps work in the first year of life; but, as soon as the child begins to attain the ability of self-ascribing mental states, it is hard to account for her subjectivity in purely biological terms. This is an epistemological flaw, which, however, has in our opinion a metaphysical counterpart: there is a sense in which it is perfectly legitimate to talk about a “psychological reality”: processes and structures developed from the age of 2 years to 5 about make a difference, that is, have a causal impact on the life of the child.

Therefore, one major difference between our account and Parfit's one is that we associate to his “anti-substantialist” attitude the defense of a realist theory of the self. In particular, as we saw in the previous section, we propose a theory of the self which is both narrativist and realist.

A further clarification of the difference between Parfit's approach and our version of (“robust”) narrativism can be obtained taking into account his thesis that persons are (ontologically) similar to nations: “I claim that a person is not like a Cartesian Ego, a being whose existence must be all-or-nothing. A person is like a nation. [...] The account of their identity over time would, in its essential features, be similar” (Parfit 1984: 275). In this perspective a subject's personal identity may be matter of degree and (in a sense of this word) conventional:

A nation is in many ways unlike a person. Despite these differences, the identity of persons over time is, in his fundamental features, like the identity of nations over time. Both consist in nothing more of the holding over time of various connections, some of which are matters of degree. It is true that in my old age I will be just as much me. But this truth may be fairly compared with the truth that (say) modern Austria is still *just as much* Austria. A descendant of the Habsburg Emperors could justifiably call this truth trivial (Parfit 1984: 316).

On this view, there is a robust degree of conventionality (and semantic vagueness) in establishing whether someone is the same person she was. At this point it is quite easy to move a further step and claim that persons are ontologically

³ We don't take into account further development of Parfit's thought on this complex issue. In Parfit (2012: 26) we can read: “[...] we aren't animals, but are the conscious, thinking, controlling parts of these animals”—a thesis apparently far away from the eliminativist attitude present in *Reasons and Persons*.

very thin or even evanescent.⁴ By contrast, in our view, the self is a robust entity. Of course, it is not enough to *claim* that the self as characterized in our account is real; we have to show that this is the case. This is the task of the following section.

3. An Open Problem: Is the Selfing View Realist Enough?

The basic reason for our claim that the selfing process (i.e. the self as an active subject) is real is that it is the process that produces our intra- and inter-personal balances, thus curbing the menace of “ontological insecurity”.⁵ It is therefore the causal foundation of psychological well-being and mental health.

Arguably, the strongest objection to the legitimation of calling “realist” our view of the self stems from the thesis that, properly speaking, the self is a substance (a thing). Any account of the self that does not recognize this point is not a real account of the self—it does not result in a real self.

In the first instance, one could reply that this objection begs the question. It should be independently argued that the self is not (and cannot be) a psychobiological process. Clearly, this answer presupposes a metaphysically revisionist attitude: one must be prepared to acknowledge that the self is not what is usually taken to be, being instead a subpersonal construct.

Admittedly, even discounting the fact that revisionism calls for a justification, our reply faces two difficulties. First, since certain personal level properties of the self cannot be attributed to a subpersonal process—for instance, the property of being object of introspection (or of being simple)—one should explain where do these properties come from. Second, even if the selfing process has causal efficacy, identifying the self with a subpersonal process is exactly the move made by Dennett: even his Joycean machine,⁶ in fact, has a causal role, perhaps contrary to what Dennett himself states in his most eliminativist moments. So—being the Dennett’s Joycean machine a paradigmatically non-realist conception of the self—are we completely justified in claiming the reality of the self?

From this point of view, the property of being causally efficacious does not change the things. If everybody, including Dennett himself, calls “eliminativist” (or “anti-realist”) his approach, convincing our opponent that our subpersonal account works better than Dennett’s one will not be enough: even if it does, still it cannot be regarded as a genuinely realist account.

Therefore, we are charged with the task of justifying our claim that the self as we conceive it of is real at a personal level, or, more properly, is a real entity that possesses personal level properties.

⁴ For the reasons previously exposed, we do not claim that Parfit makes this step, but only that it follows naturally from his assumptions.

⁵ Ontological insecurity is a concept originally developed by Ronald Laing to interpret the experience of schizophrenia. It terms a state of precariousness where a person lacks the basic existential assurances that a healthy individual takes for granted; that is the ability to “encounter all of the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity” (Laing 1960: 39).

⁶ That is, Dennett’s metaphorical understanding of the stream of consciousness as a virtual serial machine installed through the use of natural language on the parallel hardware of the brain.

The background of our argument for the reality of the self is given by the definition of the self we introduced above (cf. §1). The self is constituted by the couple <I, Me>, where the I is a process (the “selfing” process) and the Me is a dynamic collection of representations constructed and updated over the years by the I. We could say that the I-self is a process of objectivation which produces the Me-self, i.e., the process of self-representing of a psychobiological system.

Now, against this background, we need to show that: *i*) the Me, or at least the highest developmental stages of the Me, is real and personal; and *ii*) the (real) me is a full-blooded component of the selfing process. Let us start with the second, relatively easier claim; then we will argue for the first claim, which requires a more extensive treatment.

The idea is that the Me should not be regarded as something *detached* from the selfing process that engenders it. The Me has rather to be seen as an active component of the selfing process, insofar as it causally affects the process itself (Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster 2019). This is the more true the higher the stage of development. Since, over the years, the Me becomes more and more personal and retroacts to the selfing process, the role of the *personal* in the selfing process becomes more important. We could say that, when the organism attains the narrative identity stage, the selfing process becomes aware of itself (acquiring the ability to entertain a cognitive self-representation),⁷ so that, in a way, it is a self. The distinction between the I and the Me somewhat fades. As we put in the quoted article, “The one who represents and the represented entity tend to overlap. It is as if the self acquired the awareness of its own existence, and came to “know” that its own existence depends on the existence of its body, believing at the same time that it is different from its body” (ibid.).

Let us turn now to the first claim. In what sense could we say that the Me is real (and personal)? Note that the most developed version of the Me is narrative identity, and the debate between realism and antirealism was usually concerned with narrative identity. Therefore, far from resting content with the justification of the reality of selfing—of the self as a psychobiological function—we should try to say something on the reality of Me as narrative identity.

The basic very general idea is that in the process of narrative self-construction there is an essential psychodynamic ingredient. Affective growth and construction of identity cannot be separated. The psychological description of the self that the young child feverishly pursues is an “accepting description”, i.e., a description that is indissolubly cognitive (as a *definition* of self) and emotional-affectual (as an *acceptance* of self). The child needs a clear and consistent capacity to describe herself, which is fully legitimized by caregivers, and socially valid. And this will continue to be the case throughout the entire life cycle. Adolescent crisis, and together with it the process of social autonomization in post-adolescence, is largely a problem of identity. In Erik Erikson's seminal theory of identity development, the fundamental problem of adolescence lies in moving from a *heteronomous* identity to an *autonomous* self-definition. This requires an identity synthesis, i.e., a reworking of childhood identifications into a larger, self-determined set of self-identified ideals. The optimal outcome of such a process is a kind of dialectic balance in which the ego syntonic pole of identity syn-

⁷ Moreover, if we allow that the selfing process may manipulate inner representations endowed by phenomenological content, we can attribute to the selfing process (taken as the <I, Me> system), *consciousness of itself*.

thesis is predominant over the ego dystonic pole of identity confusion (i.e., an inability to develop a workable set of ideals on which to base an adult identity).

Erikson sees identity confusion as an insufficient integration of self-images originating from a “weakness of the ego”.⁸ This claim leads us into the psychopathological dimension of the inextricable link between identity self-description and self-consciousness. One cannot ascribe concreteness and solidity to one’s own self-consciousness if it does not possess at its center, and as its essence, a description of identity that must be clear and, inextricably, “good”, in the sense of being worthy of love (Balint 1965). If the self-description becomes uncertain, the subject soon loses the feeling of being present.

We can restate then that the incessant construction and reconstruction of an acceptable and adaptively functioning identity is the process that produces our intra- and inter-personal balances, and is thus the foundation of psychological well being and mental health. And this process is the ongoing construction of a system of defenses, the continuously renovated capacity to curb and cope with anxiety and disorder (Jervis 2014). Consider, for example, the construct of *autobiographical reasoning*. This is essentially a mechanism to compensate for threats of self-discontinuity. In circumstances of relative stability, personal sameness in time or personal stability may be established by the mechanism whereby the remembered self is systematically distorted by automatically assimilating it to the present self-concept, increasing the similarity between the present and remembered reflected self, in order to maintain conceptual self-sameness (Conway, Singer and Tagini 2004). When change is acknowledged, however, such a mechanism fails to create self-continuity. In circumstances of biographical change, the diachronic continuity of the self can be re-established by autobiographical reasoning through arguments that spell out transformations and their motives (Habermas and Köber 2015).

The selfing process imposes thus a *teleology of self-defense* on the human psychobiological system; and here is where the argument for a realist view of the self takes off. The self is the biological-cognitive process of reflexivity which emanates from the dialectic between the Jamesian I and Me. Indeed, as we saw above, the relation between the I and the Me is properly to be conceived as a sort of dialectics in which the I determines the Me, but at the same time each Me has a causal efficacy on the self. And unlike the continuously self-rewriting autobiographies of Dennett’s Joycean machine,⁹ the storied Me that the selfing process makes is not an epiphenomenon, but rather a layer of personality that serves as a *causal* center of gravity in the history of the system.¹⁰

Conceiving narrative identity as a causally efficacious layer of personality pre-empts a standard antirealist objection. Narrativism, so the objection goes, is an approach that puts normative constraints on our self-narratives—constraints

⁸ McAdams (1996: 57) notes that, in this context, Freud’s *das Ich* is taken as a synthetic function, a synthesizing process, and thus coinciding with selfing.

⁹ These autobiographies are only “a confabulatory by product of the decentralized brain activity that actually regulates behaviour” (Ismael 2006: 346).

¹⁰ “The self that is ‘the center of narrative gravity’ [...] is a causally efficacious part of the whole system” (Flanagan 1992: 195); “What I’m going to suggest is that the autobiographical monologue pieced together by the Joycean Machine [...] has an important and substantial role in the intrinsic dynamics of the body” (Ismael 2006: 353). See also Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster 2016: ch. 5.

such as “narrative coherence”. But what prevents from suspecting that “a person may possess a completely coherent self-identity that is nevertheless false” (Kristjánsson 2010: 39)? Realists are thus required to offer criteria by which they can distinguish between self-narratives that are truthful and those that are confabulated, self-deceptive, or paranoid (Matthews and Kennett 2012). And here is where a personological view of the narrative self comes into play.

During personality development, internalized and evolving stories of the self layer over adaptations, which layer over traits, and this process of layering may be *integrative*: “Traits capture the actor’s dramaturgical present; goals and values project the agent into the future. An autobiographical author enters the developmental picture [...] to integrate the reconstructed past with the experienced present and envisioned future” (McAdams 2015: 226). The selfing process, then, takes the form of what Jung (1971) identified as *individuation*, namely, a search for itself that strives for a synthesis of the various strata of personality.

Such a process has an ethical dimension that is reminiscent of the Aristotelian ideal of *eudaimonia*. Most relevantly for our purposes, *eudaimonia* can be reinterpreted in terms of identity (Ferrara 1998). The good life can be seen, with Aristotle, as the *telos* at which the best human conduct aims but, differently than Aristotle, as a *telos* not preordained to the individual but immanent to the vicissitudes of one’s mental life. To act in accordance with virtue cannot mean to perform well the task most typical of the human being *in general*, but to perform well “the task of maintaining the integrity of one’s identity in the plurality of situations one encounters and of expressing the salient traits of one’s identity in a unique biography” (Ferrara 1998: 31). Although this task confronts every person, its content varies from individual to individual and cannot be known a priori:

The good life or *eudaimonia* [...] is then a life-course in which one is able to enrich the main plot of one’s life-narrative with the largest possible amount of episodes and sub-plots compatible with the preservation of a sense of overall unity. The ability to unify one’s biography into a coherent narrative is a good which plays a similar role to *eudaimonia* for Aristotle (ibid.).

In this *personological* and *eudaimonic* framework,¹¹ a criterion that affords a distinction of self-knowledge from self-deception becomes available. Deceptive self-narratives are those that fail to integrate with the other layers of personality. Telling a coherent self-story is then not enough: a fully coherent but false self-narrative is a “façade” marked by bad faith, something inauthentic which tends to pass itself off as the “deep” structure of the person. Such a narrative is an idle wheel within the process of individuation.

We could also put things in the following way. There are narratives more authentic than others. The more authentic narratives are those that better match our nature.¹² Attaining this form of authenticity is an ethical goal. Indeed, moral judgment concerns, rather than the single acts of a person, its character, which is, as we saw above, a constitutive trait of personal identity.

¹¹ Research on *eudaimonia* and *eudaimonic* well-being has proliferated recently in personality psychology. For a review, see Waterman 2011.

¹² Also, it is plausible to include among the more authentic narratives those that better describe the natural world and, more important, the social world.

“Know yourself” is an ethical imperative, extremely difficult to attain; yet this difficulty does not rule out that there actually is a yourself waiting to be known. The starting point to know themselves is the Me, but we can learn that the Me is often deceiving and try to improve our self-knowledge accordingly. Therefore the Me helps changing ourselves, i.e., changing itself.

In the light of this, there seems to be a form of subjectivity of our nature that can more or less be grasped by self-narratives. It might be that our self-knowledge tools are so vague—or even mutually immeasurable—that we are not able to discriminate among different versions of ourselves. Yet, there are certainly cases in which we are able to discharge the most implausible versions of ourselves.

The model of self-knowledge implied here is psychotherapeutic as well as ethical. Biographies may be soliloquies, but they are also presented socially. This typically occurs in psychotherapy, and biographies serve then as vehicles for negotiations of identity (Doris 2015). In this perspective, the construction of a self-narrative characterized by the Lockean critical appropriation of one’s own actions and mentations can be seen as a patient-therapist exchange of autobiographical arguments in which illusions and self-deceptions are rooted out and dispelled. This can be seen as an exercise of demystifying hermeneutics whose criterion of objectivity lies in a dynamic psychology driven by the cognitive sciences. In this psychotherapeutic context, the individual’s “actual self”—what Flanagan (1991) called the “actual full identity”¹³—is the life story as told from the “ideally objective standpoint” of a subpersonal theory which is always in dialectical relationship with the personal level of analysis.¹⁴

This will be enough, we hope, to justify the realist character of our “heretic” narrativism. Let us now go back on the comparison with Parfit.

Parfit believes that his theory—according to which, contrary with our strongest intuitions, our continued existence through time is neither “a deep further fact”, and a “all-or-nothing fact”—is an antidote to the fear of our “inevitable death”:

When I believed the Non-Reductionist View, I also cared more about my inevitable death. After my death, there will no one living who will be me. I can now redescribe this fact. Though there will later be many experiences, none of these experiences will be connected to my present experiences by chains of such direct connections as those involved in experience-memory, or in the carrying out of an earlier intention. Some of these future experiences may be related to my present experiences in less direct ways. There will later be some memories about my life. And there may later be thoughts that are influenced by mine, or things done as the result of my advice. My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad. Instead of say-

¹³ Actual full identity is “the self as seen from the point of view of a certain class of theoretical perspectives that admit the reality of the self as an emergent phenomenon and try to give an objective account of what it, in general and in particular, is like” (Flanagan 199: 137).

¹⁴ Thus we take very seriously Flanagan’s (2012) worry that theories from cognitive sciences may “couch the explanation of action in unfamiliar scientific terms, not in terms of the theory of action framed in the commonsense language of ideals and commitments.”

ing, "I shall be dead", I should say, "There will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences". Because it reminds me what this fact involves, this redescription makes this fact less depressing (Parfit 1984: 281).¹⁵

Despite Parfit's heroic effort to make this position plausible—and his interesting attempt to connect this sort of "liberation from the self" to the Buddhist tradition ("My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences", *ibid.*)—we think that a somewhat less dismissing analysis of the unpleasant nature of death would be a point in favor of our position.

We live in a world populated by real selves. Entities with a subjective take on their world, and whose experience expresses a point of view and exhibits what-it-likeness.¹⁶ Recently, Nicholas Humphrey speculated that phenomenal consciousness, which we take as the first product of the self¹⁷—and the "soul" that results from it—is not an epiphenomenon or a spandrel, but a specialized adaptation that has transformed the lives of the organisms who possess it. First, conscious beings "*revel in being* phenomenally conscious" (Humphrey 2012: 92). They develop a "will to exist"—not just an instinct for self-preservation, but a desire to exist, which moves them to act in ways they would not otherwise have done. Second, conscious beings "*love the world* in which they are phenomenally conscious" (*ibid.*). They project phenomenal properties onto the world, and the psychological effect of this is to make the world seem a place of intrinsic value, delight, and enchantment, which we are inspired to engage with, explore, and discover. Third, they "*esteem their selves* for being phenomenally conscious" (*ibid.*). One's conscious self seems to be the source of the phenomenal richness of the external world, and, sensing this, humans form a vastly enhanced conception of their individual significance. They first develop the concept of a core self endowed with a seemingly substantial existence; and this provides the psychic bass line that unites the other mental faculties to form a personal self in time, which not only feels, but also thinks, wills, perceives, remembers, and so on. Thus, reflective conscious beings come to see themselves as individual egos, or souls, whose fate and development are of central importance to them.

¹⁵ It is worth to note that this does not work with my death, and especially does not work with the death of our loved. In our mind there are experiences related to the loved dead; although this can certainly give us comfort (a part of them lives, metaphorically, inside us), the dead friends are no more there. There is no real dialogue, there is no future with them, just a past that progressively loses vividness and fades away.

¹⁶ Thomas Nagel (1986) is the most famous proponent of this position. We do not discuss here Parfit's objections to Nagel's views ("Nagel once claimed that it is psychologically impossible to believe the Reductionist View. Buddha claimed that, though this is very hard, it is possible. I find Buddha's claim to be true" (Parfit 1984: 280).

¹⁷ Indeed, on our view, objectual (or transitive) consciousness is also phenomenal: "The first, minimal condition required for the development of the self is the possession of a simple or primary *object consciousness*. Primary object consciousness is the mere experiencing of the objects and properties of the world, in virtue of the possession of representational capacities. Any organism endowed of perceptual and motor systems with a certain degree of complexity, that is, whose behavior is mediated by some representational structures (as opposed to purely 'behaviorist' organisms), has object consciousness" (see Di Francesco, Marraffa and Paternoster 2016: 73 and *passim*).

All this has “dramatically increased the investment individuals make in their own survival” (ibid.: 93). We are adapted to the “soul niche” (ibid: 158)—a conceptual territory where we represent ourselves and others as unitary, coherent, compact, self-justified and somehow “noble”. Although this conceptual niche is where we flourish as a species, it can be dangerous; the more exalted our conception of the self, the more anxious we become about the loss of the self (ibid.: 115, 125).¹⁸

4. Conclusive Remarks

To sum up, we part company with Parfit (and Dennett as well) on a crucial point: the self, properly conceived, is real; and it is real despite being partly constituted by narratives—or, maybe better, by the ability of producing narratives. In our picture there is a clear sense in which we can be regarded, in the words of Ismael (2006), as *self-governing* systems, in opposition to mere self-organizing systems, as is the case of Dennett’s theory.

Despite the crucial role ascribed to subpersonal processes—the selfing starts with organismic subpersonal processes—we claim that it is impossible forgoing the personal level. Indeed, the different Me-representations constructed over the years are personal level constructions.

From a methodological perspective, our approach is largely empirical, as is evidenced, for instance, by the very limited (if any) role played by thought experiments, so important in Parfit’s work. We acknowledge that mental experiments based on the flow of consciousness (which persists, halves itself, splits in two, coexists in a unique mind or is shared by several subjects, etc.) are clever, yet they need a reformulation in the light of our pluralist approach: on our view the robust Joycean machine, over and above producing the (conscious) phenomenological flow, constructs our narrative identity, working on disparate materials at different levels, such as personality traits, unconscious motivations, shallow or deep affective structures, relational schemas, various applications of the theory of mind. If we “offload” the contents (the Me) of a person into a robot, the immediately following process of managing and maintaining this Me will be carried out by a totally different selfing process. And in order to reproduce the very same selfing process we would need a body and a relational and cultural texture identical—or at least functionally isomorph—to the original.

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¹⁸ On this point see also Solomon *et al.* 2004; Varki and Brower 2013; Jong and Halberstadt 2016.

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