



# Self-Narrative, Affective Identification, and Personal Well-Being

**ABSTRACT:** *The narrative view of personhood suggests that we as persons are constituted by self-narratives. Self-narratives support not only the sense of personal persistence but also agency. However, it is rarely discussed how self-narratives promote or hinder personal well-being. This paper aims to explore what a healthy self-narrative looks like. By reframing a famous debate between Strawson and Schechtman about narrative personhood, I argue that self-narratives can hinder our personal well-being when affective identification leads to inflexible self-images, illustrated with the examples of imposter syndrome and rationalization. Furthermore, I explore how having a healthy self-narrative is not about disengaging from one's personal past and future, but about fostering affective identification in ways that allow flexible self-images.*

**KEYWORDS:** self-narrative, affective identification, personal well-being, imposter syndrome, rationalization

## Introduction

The narrative view of personhood suggests that we as persons are constituted by self-narratives. Self-narratives support not only the sense of personal persistence but also agency. However, it is rarely discussed whether and how self-narratives are related to personal well-being. In this paper, I accept the narrative view of personhood with the goal of exploring what a healthy self-narrative looks like. In particular, I argue that self-narratives can get in the way of our personal well-being when affective identification leads to inflexible self-images. I propose that a flexible self-image indicates healthy self-narratives, namely, self-narratives with constructive affective identification.

The discussions in this paper presuppose the narrative view of personal identity, which in the current state of literature is contentious. It is disputable whether the narrative view indeed captures personal identity in a metaphysical sense, namely, the metaphysical underpinning of a person's identity over time. But even if the narrative view does not satisfyingly capture the metaphysical identity of a person, it is widely accepted that the narrative view nicely captures personal identity in the practical sense, namely, our practical organization of ourselves as persisting over

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time (Atkins and Mackenzie 2008). Undeniably, the question remains just how the two senses of personal identity relate to one another (Shoemaker 2007; Schroer and Schroer 2014; Baker 2016). But the importance of the narrative view in capturing the practical identity of persons should not be overlooked because how we practically organize ourselves is an issue as important as, if not more important than, our metaphysical identity (the dichotomy between metaphysical identity and practical identity can also be questioned, see Schechtman [2010]).

Furthermore, personal well-being here is broadly construed. A self-narrative is considered to impede personal well-being if it prevents us from acquiring or maintaining things that we consider valuable, such as mental health, meaningful relationships, and self-growth. There is an additional question of whether such things are objectively valuable, namely, whether they are valuable regardless of an individual's taking pleasure in them or desiring them. I follow objective list theories to hold that such things are objectively valuable.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the examples discussed in this paper do not involve scenarios where individuals fail to maintain mental health, meaningful relationships, or self-worth while experiencing absolutely no pain or frustration of desires. For this reason, it is possible to make the discussions in this paper compatible with other personal well-being theories, namely, hedonism and desire-based theories.

In section 1, I explain the narrative view and lay out some important features of self-narratives. In section 2, I pose the question about self-narratives and personal well-being by examining a famous debate between Marya Schechtman and Galen Strawson. In section 3, I explain how self-narratives may impede personal well-being through affective identification with the creation of inflexible self-images. In section 4, I suggest that while affective identification can lead to inflexible self-images, affective identification is also important in supporting agency. After discussing the balance between the benefits and harms of affective identification, and relating the discussions back to the debate between Schechtman and Strawson in section 5, I conclude that a healthy self-narrative with constructive affective identification is one that involves a flexible self-image.

## 1. The Narrative View

The narrative view of personhood suggests that we constitute ourselves as persons by constructing self-narratives, such as narratives about life trajectories and career plans (Schechtman 1996, 2014; Lindemann 2001; Velleman 2005). In this view, we are both the narrators and actors of our self-narratives. As the narrators of our self-narratives, we interpret life events, find meanings in personal interactions, and attribute to ourselves various character traits and propensities. As the actors in our self-narratives, we act in accordance with our interpretation and attribution, and we typically find projects and commitments that suit our self-perceived characteristics and abilities. In other words, we 'live out' the self-narratives we tell

<sup>1</sup> One possible understanding of such objectively valuable goods is in terms of Ronald Dworkin's critical interests, which are the interests that persons believe themselves and others *should* want to have because such interests constitute a good life (Dworkin 1993: 201–202).

(Velleman 2005: 215). In this section, I explain the narrative view and lay out some important features of self-narratives to prepare the ground for discussions about self-narratives and personal well-being.

According to the narrative view, self-narratives support the sense of personal identity. Such a sense of identity comes from the connection among personal past, present, and future through the attribution of meaning. Through the construction of self-narratives, individuals find reasons for the occurrence of a life event and interpret its implications. For instance, a graduate student may justify their participation in a teaching program during a busy term by putting together a self-narrative in which the character has a long-time passion for teaching as well as by interpreting the participation in the program as helping with the passion. The sense of personal identity can also come from the identification of personal projects and commitments, given that both personal projects and commitments take time. Seeing oneself as having the commitment to improve teaching skills, for instance, implies that one will invest time in improving teaching skills such as by working with mentors to reflect on one's practices in the past and conduct improvement plans in the future.

Both the attribution of meaning and the identification of projects and commitments involve the sense of oneself as a persisting being, one with relevant past experiences and future steps to take to carry out projects or fulfill commitments. But the sense of persistence is typically understood as a matter of practical, rather than metaphysical, identity. It is understood as practical identity because narrative identity is about how we practically conceive of ourselves, but the issue of how we practically conceive of ourselves, after all, is arguably not the same as the issue of what we are metaphysically (Baker 2016; Schroer and Schroer 2014). While it is questionable whether the practical and the metaphysical issues can indeed be clearly separated, in this paper I will not go into this question. I will restrict myself to the realm of practical identity even though I believe practical identity is not separate from metaphysical identity (see Schechtman 2014). However, the defense of this claim goes beyond the scope of the paper, and the discussions in the paper do not rely on the truth of this claim.

The practical identity of a person as supported by self-narratives is intricately related to the agency of a person. The meanings an individual attributes to life events often shape the ways in which the person interacts with the world. Furthermore, the projects and commitments described in self-narratives are often action-guiding. These points are clear in the example of the graduate student described above. By interpreting the participation in a teaching program as having tangible career benefits, rather than as merely adding another line to their CV, the student will participate more actively in the program. Additionally, by articulating the commitment to teaching, the student would be motivated to take relevant steps to fulfill the commitment or find ways to demonstrate the commitment throughout the teaching program.

While self-narratives support practical identity and agency, it is not clear whether the sense of identity and agency as supported by self-narratives is always good for an individual. An individual's self-narrative can involve a negative self-image that prevents the individual from acquiring self-confidence and self-esteem, which will

be further discussed later in this paper. Such a negative self-image can reinforce itself by casting shadows on individual life events that could otherwise be viewed in a positive light. It can also contribute to self-destructive behaviors. While there have been some discussions in the literature regarding the way self-narratives contribute to self-destructive behaviors (e.g., McConnell 2016), further exploration is still needed regarding the relation between self-narratives and personal well-being.

Before moving on to explore the relation, I want to highlight some features of self-narratives to frame the focus of the discussions better. The first feature concerns the nature of self-narratives. The narrative view does not require an individual to have a single, life-long, unified self-story. Instead, an individual can have overlapping short stories as long as there is no perceived contradiction. For instance, an individual can have narratives about how they have built their career, how they developed a fear of dogs as a child, and how their love for nature shapes their retirement plan. The various narratives can be held together without having all of them fit into a single, life-long story with an overarching theme, especially if there are no immediate contradictions among those narratives (Velleman 2005: 222; see also Schroer and Schroer 2014). Thus, the self-narratives under consideration here are not necessarily life-long, unified self-stories but can be some of the overlapping short stories.

The second feature of self-narratives is that self-narratives are socially informed. They are socially informed not only in the sense that an individual's self-story is commonly shaped by the social narratives collectively told in society, but also in that the status of personhood may be maintained through the narratives told by others when an individual is incapable of constructing their own stories. For example, an individual's self-story is shaped by social narratives when the individual, in understanding themselves as a member of a particular social group, internalizes the image of the particular social group as depicted in social narratives (Lindemann 2001). Furthermore, an individual remains a person through the narrative construction of their loved ones even when the individual comes to have dementia and loses their narrative capacity (Schechtman 2014; see also Lindemann 2014). Thus, by claiming that self-narratives may prevent personal well-being, I do not mean to suggest that this is necessarily the individual's fault in constructing such self-narratives; instead, the fault can very much lie in problematic social discourses and practices.

Finally, self-narratives can be implicit. The narrative view does not require individuals to constantly articulate self-narratives in an explicit, conscious manner. Instead, the narrative view only claims that individuals need to articulate their self-narratives when invited to engage in self-reflection, such as being pressed to explain emotional reactions. In this way, the self-narratives of interest go beyond the conscious self-stories to the implicit self-conception and self-image that shape individuals' perception and behaviors.

In sum, self-narratives as described in the narrative view support an individual's practical identity and agency. Such self-narratives need not constitute a single, life-long, unified self-story with an overarching theme. Furthermore, self-narratives are socially informed and sometimes implicit.

## 2. Self-Narratives and Personal Well-Being

Given that self-narratives support practical identity and agency and that practical identity and agency are typically considered crucial for a rich and meaningful life, the narrative view appears to suggest implicitly that self-narratives are crucial for personal well-being. This suggestion is under debate in the exchange between Galen Strawson and Marya Schechtman. In this section, I examine the exchange between Strawson and Schechtman to explore the relation between self-narratives and personal well-being.

The debate between Strawson and Schechtman is primarily a debate about whether the narrative view is accurate descriptively and normatively (Strawson 2004; Schechtman 2007). In other words, it is about whether we *in fact* constitute ourselves as persisting persons through self-narratives and whether we *ought to* constitute ourselves as persisting persons through self-narratives. While the debate is primarily about the descriptive and normative accuracy of the narrative view, the debate involves implicit disagreement on whether a distinction between healthy and unhealthy self-narratives can be made. The disagreement does not receive much attention in the more recent literature, but it deserves close examination and further engagement. In what follows, I unpack the implicit disagreement between Schechtman and Strawson to bring out questions about self-narratives and personal well-being for further investigation.

According to Strawson, the narrative view is problematic regardless of whether it is a descriptive view or a normative view. He believes that the descriptive version of the narrative view is wrong because it is not the case that everyone in fact sees their life as constituted by self-narratives. Strawson himself, for one, does not see his life as constituted by self-narratives. Furthermore, he claims that the normative version of the narrative view is overly strong because it is authoritarian to claim that everyone ought to see their lives as constituted by self-narratives.

Strawson then offers what he calls the episodic view as an alternative to the narrative view. According to Strawson, the episodic view is the view that an individual sees their life as episodic in nature, in the sense that 'one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future' (2004: 430). In other words, having an episodic life involves seeing oneself as short-lived rather than persisting. Furthermore, one does not see one's life as constituted by self-narratives with a quest for a unifying theme.

The idea of an episodic life seems counterintuitive. For example, just how can individuals have rich and meaningful lives when they see their lives as episodic? A lot of important things in life such as personal projects and commitments take time. Furthermore, we learn from past mistakes to plan for the future, and we use future goals to guide current decisions. Accordingly, it seems that we need to be able to see ourselves as persisting in order to have rich and meaningful lives.

To address this possible criticism, Strawson suggests that having an episodic life does not mean complete ignorance of one's past, nor does it mean disregarding one's future entirely. Instead, it only means that an individual has no sense of their current self as being there in the past or continuing to be there in the future. In Strawson's

view, an individual can be perfectly aware of how their current situation is shaped by their past mistakes or of what future consequences would follow from one's current decisions without feeling that their current self is the same as their past or future selves. An episodic life, then, can be equally, if not more, rich and meaningful as compared to a narrative life. Furthermore, a narrative life can sometimes be problematic by involving a sense of self-importance or significance that is not necessarily good for an individual. As Strawson suggests, the kind self-telling involved in self-narratives is either motivated by a sense of one's own importance or significance, which is questionable, or 'wrapped up in forms of religious belief that are—like almost all religious belief—really all about self', which has a risk of narcissism; he also claims that self-narratives are almost always wrong (see Strawson 2004: 436–437).

In response to Strawson, Schechtman suggests that an episodic life in fact presupposes a narrative life. That is, seeing oneself as episodic in nature already presupposes seeing oneself as having self-narratives. An episodic life is thus not an alternative to a narrative life. Instead, it is only a particular form of a narrative life. As Schechtman claims,

Strawson acknowledges quite a strong relation among the temporal parts of his human life taken as a whole. He recognizes that he\* [i.e., his current self] has a special relation to other parts of the life of Galen Strawson, that these are of special emotional significance, and that he has certain responsibilities with respect to them. All that he lacks is an identification of those other parts of Strawson's life as him\*. The relations within his human existence, however, contain much of what is involved in having a self-narrative of the sort I have been describing. (Schechtman 2007: 168)

In other words, an episodic life is just a narrative life without identification, especially affective or emotional identification, with one's past or future.

The kind of identification Schechtman is particularly concerned with here is affective identification. Affective identification is contrasted with cognitive awareness (2007: 167). Cognitive awareness is about the understanding of the connections among one's past, present, and future, such as the awareness of one's poor grade as a result of failing to study hard before the exam. By contrast, affective identification is about affectively taking the past experiences and future consequences as one's own, such as understanding a past mistake as representing a personal flaw and therefore feeling ashamed of it. According to Schechtman, Strawson's episodic life is in fact a narrative life with mere cognitive awareness but no affective identification. What Strawson's view shows, then, is that there can be a narrative life with mere cognitive awareness but no affective identification, rather than that there is an alternative to a narrative life.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Strawson's

<sup>2</sup>A possible objection from Strawson to this interpretation of his view is that a life with mere cognitive awareness cannot be counted as a narrative life at all because narratives understood in terms of cognitive

criticism against the narrative view 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.

Strawson's view, understood in terms of the distinction between the two kinds of narratives, suggests that a narrative life with mere cognitive awareness is equally or even more conducive to personal well-being, compared to a narrative life involving affective identification. By contrast, while Schechtman acknowledges that affective identification can sometimes be detrimental, she believes that a life with affective identification in general is richer and more meaningful than a life with mere cognitive awareness. As she claims, 'lives that encourage affective and emotional identification with the past and future instead of resting with mere cognitive awareness of what one did and projections of what one might do are often made richer and smoother through this effort' (2007: 177). The disagreement between Strawson and Schechtman can then be understood as follows: For Strawson, a healthy self-narrative involves mere cognitive awareness but no affective identification. As for Schechtman, a healthy self-narrative involves both cognitive awareness and affective identification.

The exchange between Strawson and Schechtman raises three interesting questions. The first question is: What is it that can make affective identification bad for an individual? As Schechtman and Strawson both suggest that affective identification can be bad—they merely disagree on whether affective identification can also be good and whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages—it is important to discuss further what makes affective identification bad so that potential strategies may be developed for engaging with affective identification in a productive way. This question is discussed in section 3.

The second question is: In what way might affective identification be important for a meaningful life? An important point in Schechtman's view is that affective identification allows individuals to re-evolve emotions and interests that no longer occur spontaneously but still have important implications for decisions and personal relationships (2007: 176). However, further clarification and development are needed regarding this point as Schechtman herself also admits (178). Addressing the question of 'how affective identification might be important for a meaningful life' helps clarify and develop the point described above, which is done in section 4.

The third question is whether some middle ground can be found between Strawson's and Schechtman's views. If it can be better clarified what makes affective identification bad for individuals and how affective identification may be important for a meaningful life, then we can potentially better define a healthy self-narrative, namely, one that allows affective identification without having it getting in the way of personal well-being. This question is discussed in section 5.

awareness become trivial. The response to this possible objection is that narratives understood in terms of cognitive awareness become trivial only when cognitive awareness involves nothing more than 'thinking ahead and doing things in the right order', but cognitive awareness involves more than that. For the triviality objection see Strawson (2004: 439). For responses to the triviality objection see Schechtman (2007: 160–61) and Schroer and Schroer (2014: 455–57).

### 3. Self-Narrative, Affective Identification, and Personal Well-Being

In this section, I discuss the question of what it is that can make affective identification bad for individuals. I argue that affective identification is bad for individuals when it creates certain self-images or self-conceptions that are inflexible. This point will be illustrated through the examples of the imposter phenomenon and rationalization.

Before delving further into the discussion, it is worth mentioning that inflexibility is not the only condition under which self-images or self-conceptions may impede personal well-being. Another condition is accuracy. However, the condition of inflexibility is more relevant to affective identification, and it can be argued that inaccuracy is often the result of inflexibility. For this reason, I will mainly focus on the condition of inflexibility, but I will also discuss the condition of inaccuracy, especially how inaccuracy is often the result of inflexibility.

As explained previously, affective identification involves an individual's taking relevant past and future parts of the individual's life as its own, such as understanding a past mistake as representing a personal flaw. The identification is affective because the act of taking relevant past and future experiences and actions as one's own usually has emotional implications. By treating a past mistake as representing a personal flaw, an individual is likely to feel not only embarrassment or guilt but also shame. (Shame differs from guilt and embarrassment in that shame involves a perception of personal deficit, whereas guilt and embarrassment do not; see Nussbaum [2006]). The identification is affective also because the act of taking relevant past and future experiences as one's own is usually accompanied by what Schechtman calls inward empathy, which is the ability to relate one's current self to the situation of one's past or future self to remember or simulate relevant emotions (Schechtman 2007: 171; see also Schechtman 2001). Such affective connections with one's past and future are fostered through narrative construction, sometimes with the help of evocative objects, objects with which we associate specific personal experiences or expectations, such as the photos we took during birthday celebrations or the champagne we bought in expectation of a personal accomplishment (Heersmink 2018; Schechtman 2007: 176–77).

Such affective connections with our past and future can sometimes create particular self-images or self-conceptions. For example, by taking a past mistake as one's own and by continuing to remember the shame from having made the mistake, one may conceive of oneself as a terrible person who is unworthy of respect and love. Or, by indulging oneself in past accomplishments, one may think of oneself as a high achiever who can never fail. I believe that affective identification impedes personal well-being when the self-images or self-conceptions created become inflexible or static. To be clear, this does not mean that affective identification as such impedes personal well-being. Instead, this only means that affective identification plays a significant role in interacting with cognitive and social factors to foster inflexible or static self-images, thereby preventing personal well-being. I illustrate the significant role of affective identification below through

the example of the imposter phenomenon, in which individuals have negative self-images, and rationalization, in which individuals possess positive self-images.

The imposter phenomenon, also known as imposter syndrome, is the phenomenon that individuals see themselves as incompetent despite external validation, and as a result they persistently fear to be exposed as imposters in their roles. Such a phenomenon can be associated with social anxiety as a result of the lack of a sense of belonging, and it can also be linked to stress and depression, as a result of the obsession with minor mistakes and the internal urge to continue to work harder. Recent discussions of the imposter phenomenon in philosophy have focused on the involvement of self-deception (Gadsby 2021) and irrationality (Slank 2019) in the imposter phenomenon as well as on the normative concerns about the use of the concept of imposter syndrome itself (Hawley 2019; Paul 2019). My discussion here differs from the recent discussions in suggesting that the imposter phenomenon shows that affective identification prevents personal well-being when it creates inflexible self-conceptions or self-images.

Consider a graduate student, Pat, who comes from a low-income family and constantly finds themselves lacking the social experiences and knowledge that most of their peers have in the graduate program. While other people do not seem to care, Pat always feels like they do not fit into the program and that they need to work harder to prove their worth. As a result, Pat works extremely hard and receives outstanding grades, several awards, and abundant praise from faculty members and other graduate students in the program. But despite all the accomplishments and praise, Pat still feels like they are not good enough. In fact, Pat considers themselves less intelligent than their peers and has tremendous anxiety over being exposed as an imposter one day. Pat believes that their achievements are mostly due to luck rather than ability and that others' compliments come mostly out of sympathy or attempts at affirmative action rather than sincere acknowledgment. Pat is constantly stressed over some minor mistakes they made and takes the mistakes as evidence for their inadequacy (the example is modified from Gadsby's example of a PhD student; see Gadsby [2021: 1]).

In this example, the individual, Pat, identifies with their family background and comes to see themselves as inferior to their peers. While other people do not seem to care about Pat's family background or Pat's lack of certain social experiences and knowledge, Pat takes these as part of who they are, as something that separates them from their peers, and as a result Pat feels anxious and the need to work harder. By identifying themselves with their family background, Pat creates a particular self-image in their self-narrative, namely, an image of themselves as less intelligent, as someone who has somehow found their way due to luck but whose inadequacy can be exposed at any moment.

It is clear from the example that the affective identification constructed through the individual's self-narrative contributes to preventing their personal well-being. Pat suffers from mental health problems as a result of their negative self-image and is likely to have problems building meaningful professional relationships with others and difficulties having a sense of belonging in the program. However, the crucial reason why the affective identification contributes to prevent personal well-being goes beyond merely having a negative self-image—it also has to do

with the fact that the negative self-image described in the above example is static or inflexible.

The negative self-image described above is static or inflexible in the sense that it is resistant to modification in light of counterevidence. While Pat is surrounded by abundant counterevidence suggesting that Pat is in fact a competent person, Pat mostly ignores or discredits the evidence and instead focuses on what affirms their existing self-image. A self-image is then inflexible also in that it is self-reinforcing. It directs one's attention away from the things that can be presented as counterevidence and distorts one's interpretations of them, such as by making one believe that the compliments from others are made only out of sympathy rather than being a sincere acknowledgment. Another example of how inflexible self-images are self-reinforcing has to do with self-stigmatization such as in mental illness (e.g., see Corrigan and Rao 2012) and addiction (e.g., see Matthews, Dwyer, and Snoek 2017).

Such features of inflexible self-images are the crucial reasons why affective identification contributes to the prevention of personal well-being—those features prevent individuals from properly assessing relevant evidence in relation to their self-image. Those features also keep individuals from satisfying their practical needs, such as the need to find belonging in a community or the need to flourish in a graduate program. Finally, identifying with a particular family background by itself, while it may lead to some anxiety and stress, does not necessarily lead to a full-blown imposter phenomenon. Individuals can modify their self-image in light of external validation; they can even see their particular background as giving them perspectives and strengths that other people do not have.

But affective identification does not impede personal well-being only when it involves a negative self-image. It can also prevent personal well-being when it involves a positive self-image. Rationalization is an example. Rationalization occurs when someone seeks and produces justifications for things they already believe or strongly prefer, such as a political ideology or a positive self-image (Schwitzgebel and Ellis 2017). While rationalization may have its values, rationalization sometimes blinds a person to their shortcomings or to different perspectives:

Consider the case of a scientist who refuses to adjust the course of her research program despite the urging of her peers who [worry that] it is fundamentally unsound. Since it is more pleasant to inhabit the fantasy world where she is a misunderstood genius than the real world where she is an ordinary thinker with a lot of work ahead of her, she may rationalize her intransigence by concocting a story about the inability of her peers to comprehend her profoundly original ideas. (D'Cruz 2020, para. 3)

The scientist described in the above example has a self-narrative with a positive self-image, depicting herself as a researcher unmatched among her peers and not understood by them. Her self-image is also inflexible in that it is resistant to modification in light of counterevidence, namely, the concerns about her research

program from her peers; it is also self-reinforcing by discrediting her peers as unable to appreciate her exceedingly original idea.

The positive self-image prevents the personal well-being of the above scientist because it not only stops her from properly evaluating her research program to address the potential problems at the early stage of her research, but it also makes her unable to build meaningful relationships with her peers to learn from their experience and expertise. Such a self-image is self-destructive for it undermines the individual's goal of developing a successful research program and obstructs her personal growth to become an outstanding scientist.

Nevertheless, some may point out that inflexibility is not the only problem here. Inaccuracy is another factor to consider. The reason why the scientist's self-image is self-destructive has to do with the fact that her self-image is not only inflexible but also inaccurate, in the sense that her self-image does not correspond with reality, namely, that she is not a genius but merely an ordinary thinker. While I agree that inaccuracy is an important reason why the scientist's self-image is self-destructive, I think inaccuracy is often a result of inflexibility. If her self-image were more flexible, the scientist would be able to modify her self-image in light of the feedback from her peers, thereby making her self-image correspond better with reality. She would then be able to see that she is not as much of a genius as she might think and that her research program is fundamentally flawed. But because her self-image is inflexible, her self-image cannot be adapted to accommodate feedback as well as others' perspectives, and thus she loses touch with reality.

In sum, when affective identification leads to inflexible self-images or self-conceptions, it becomes bad for individuals by preventing their personal well-being, regardless of whether the self-images or self-conceptions are positive or negative. In the case of the imposter phenomenon, the negative self-images prevent individuals from seeing their self-worth, whereas in the case of rationalization, the positive self-images prevent individuals from engaging in productive self-scrutiny. Furthermore, part of the reason why affective identification associated with inflexible self-images prevents individuals' personal well-being is that it also makes the self-images inaccurate.

The significant role of affective identification in influencing our personal well-being has to do with the tendency of affective identification to shape our cognitive dispositions, for example, by biasing our perspectives toward particular kinds of information and styles of reasoning. Our affect, such as emotion, has been suggested to influence our judgment and decision-making (Lerner et al. 2015; Forgas 1991). It has also been suggested that our social identification influences the information we accept as valid (Kahan 2017). Given that both our affect and our identification have a role in shaping our cognitive dispositions, it is reasonable to think that affective identification would also influence cognitive dispositions.

The tendency of affective identification to shape our cognitive dispositions can be reinforced by social factors, such as how members of particular social groups tend to be perceived or treated in a society; for example, it is arguable that the imposter phenomenon has to do with the systematic biases against members of particular social groups (for relevant discussions, see Tulshyan and Burey 2021). Further

exploration on how affective identification interacts with cognitive and social factors to foster inflexible self-images would deepen our understanding of the significant role of affective identification, but this is nevertheless not something I can do full justice to in this paper.

#### 4. The Importance of Affective Identification

While affective identification can contribute to inflexible self-images, affective identification is not always harmful. In this section, I suggest that affective identification plays an important role in supporting our agency. To have agency without the disadvantages following from affective identification, then, is to ensure that the self-images created through affective identification are flexible and thereby accurate.

An important role affective identification plays in supporting agency is that affective identification helps to re-evolve certain emotions and interests that do not occur spontaneously anymore but still have important implications for one's decisions and personal relationships (Schechtman 2007: 176). As Schechtman describes,

We look at photographs, go to reunions, take second honeymoons, maintain holiday traditions, listen to oldies stations, re-read our favorite novels, and in various other ways stock up on the madeleines and tea that aid in recovering lost time . . . there is value in seeking to maintain affective connection to as much of our (person) lives as we can. (176–77)

I suggest that the value in fostering affective connections to the past to recover lost emotions and interests has to do with informing current decisions and relationships in light of past experiences. Below are two examples.

The first example concerns the way building affective connections to the past helps to foster sympathy for others. Consider a parent who vividly remembers and can still identify with their younger self as an avid partier (this example comes from Schechtman [2001: 101–102]). Being able to have an affective connection to their younger self allows them to have sympathy for their teenage kid, who is making some of the unwise kinds of choices the parent once made. Such affective identification allows the parent to better relate to their kid, which informs their parenting decisions. However, this does not mean that parents who have little affective connection with their younger self or who were not themselves partiers when they were younger *must* lack sympathy for their teenage kids who happen to be partiers. It also does not mean that sympathetic understanding cannot come through other routes. Instead, it only means that in the case of the parent who used to be a partier and has relevant affective identification, their sympathetic understanding would be grounded in their *first-person experience* of being a partier. Such first-person experience allows them to have better epistemic access to what their kid is going through because there may be something about the experience of being a partier that someone would not fully understand unless they have undergone the experience themselves.

The second example concerns the way building affective connections helps individuals regain the character traits they once had in the past to deal with current challenges. Consider a person who comes from a disadvantaged family who has succeeded in their career after years of hard work. After living a comfortable life for too long, the person gradually loses the resilience and adaptability that they once had. With a sudden business shutdown due to unforeseen challenges, the person is facing a crisis and is unsure whether they can survive it. By reliving and reconnecting with their past struggles, the person may be reminded of how they have survived similar challenges in the past as well as of the resilience and adaptability they once demonstrated, and in the process they may gain confidence for rebuilding their business. Identifying with the past and taking the past resilience as their own inform their decisions and actions with regard to whether and how to deal with a current challenge.

The two examples above show that affective identification plays an important role in supporting agency. By helping one foster sympathetic understanding or regaining important characters, affective identification has important implications for one's decisions and actions regarding how to interact with others or whether to confront a current crisis. In this way, affective identification, with the potential self-images created, is not always harmful but can sometimes be conducive to personal well-being.

Nevertheless, I expect two possible objections. The first objection is as follows: While it may be true that affective connections can sometimes be beneficial, the affective connections in the above examples can also lead to the kind of inflexible self-images described in the previous section. For instance, the individual who comes to see themselves as resilient may become overly optimistic about their abilities and the prospects of their business. When the attempt to rebuild the business fails, they refuse to come to terms with the failure and insist on retrying over and over again, leading to more financial debts and more damage to their personal relationships. It is also possible that after years of comfortable living, the individual is in fact not that resilient or adaptive anymore. It may even be the case that the individual never demonstrated resilience or adaptability in their past and that such characters are only a projection of what they want to think of themselves. The self-image created in the process of the construction of self-narratives about the past can then end up becoming a delusion or fantasy that blinds the individual to the limitations of their current self, thereby preventing them from learning to come to terms with failures.

I agree that affective connections in the above examples can *potentially* lead to inflexible self-images and thus prevent rather than promote personal well-being. Furthermore, the inflexible self-images prevent personal well-being because they become inaccurate. However, claiming that affective identification can *potentially* lead to inflexible self-images is not the same as claiming that they will *necessarily* lead to inflexible self-images. Instead, I believe that the self-images created through affective identification can be flexible under certain conditions. To enjoy the benefits of fostering affective connections to the personal past without suffering from the harms of having inflexible self-images is then to ensure that the self-images created through affective identification are flexible. Furthermore, to ensure that self-images are flexible is also to ensure that self-images are accurate.

The second objection concerns whether the businessperson would have been better off if they had retained a static image of themselves as resilient. According to this objection, perhaps what promotes personal well-being is not a flexible self-image, but a particular kind of static self-image, such as the static image of oneself as resilient. However, as explained above, a static image of oneself as resilient can lead to various problems, including unrealistic optimism. A static self-image also tends to become inaccurate, because it makes an individual unable to update their self-image in light of feedback and counterevidence, such as the indication that they are perhaps not as resilient as they thought they were. For these reasons, a flexible self-image, rather than a particular kind of static self-image, is what constitutes a healthy self-narrative and promotes personal well-being.

## 5. Healthy Self-Narratives

In this section, I explain what it means to have a flexible self-image and how the flexibility of a self-image ensures the accuracy of a self-image. I then suggest that a flexible self-image is what constitutes a healthy self-narrative, namely, one that preserves the benefits of affective identification while avoiding its problems.

Self-images are flexible when they are subject to modification in light of counterevidence. Unlike inflexible self-images, which direct one's attention away from the things that can be presented as counterevidence and distort one's interpretations of them, flexible self-images allow one to remain open to reflection and scrutiny. To have a flexible self-image is to be aware that the self-images we construct through narratives are subject to errors given our limitations and biases and that we need to engage actively in self-scrutiny to modify our self-images when needed. To put it differently, a self-image is flexible under the conditions that the individual is aware of the fallibility of their self-narrative and can deconstruct their self-narratives when their self-narrative no longer serves them well.

Such conditions in turn ensure the accuracy of a self-image. In being aware of the fallibility of their self-narrative, an individual understands that their self-image may not reflect facts about themselves and that their interpretation of others' feedback may be distorted due to the self-reinforcing nature of self-narratives. Such understandings allow an individual to remain critical about how they conceive of themselves and to seek feedback to update their self-image or self-conception. Furthermore, in being able to deconstruct their self-narrative, an individual can analyze how they come to have a particular self-image or why they feel attached to a particular self-image, when their self-image no longer serves them well. Such analysis allows an individual to step away from their current self-image to explore and embrace the possibility of creating a new self-image.

The flexibility of a self-image ensures a healthy self-narrative, namely, a narrative that preserves the benefits of affective identification but avoids its problems. In the businessperson example, if the individual is flexible with their image of themselves as resilient, they will not become overly optimistic about their abilities to survive the current crisis. As long as they are also aware of the fallibility of their constructed self-image, the constructed self-image will not become a delusion or

fantasy that blinds them to the limitations of their current self. Instead, the individual will be able to revise their self-image by accepting that they are perhaps not that resilient or adaptive anymore. Or they will be able to reinterpret the meanings of resilience and adaptivity by realizing that resilience and adaptivity are not always about finding success but sometimes about learning to come to terms with personal limitations and failures.

Similar points can be made about the examples of the imposter syndrome and rationalization. In the example of the imposter syndrome, having a flexible self-image would allow the graduate student to see that they have been overly fixated on the minor mistakes they made, but the reality is that they are capable in many ways. Having a flexible self-image would also allow them to reflect on the reasons why they consider their achievements a result of luck rather than ability and others' compliments a result of affirmative action rather than sincere acknowledgment. In other words, they would learn to value their work on its merit. As for the example of rationalization, having a flexible self-image would allow the scientist to let go of the need to be a genius, and thus she would have a better opportunity to achieve excellence through collaborating with others to improve the research program.

Going back to the disagreement between Strawson and Schechtman, I believe that having a flexible self-image strikes a middle ground between Strawson's and Schechtman's views about affective identification. Strawson's view is correct in suggesting that affective identification can be problematic. As suggested in section 3, the problem is that affective identification can lead to an inflexible self-image, a self-image that is at least partly unreliable in light of the evidence and therefore tends to become inaccurate. As a result, such a self-image can prevent self-improvement and self-growth. However, Schechtman is also right in claiming that affective identification is important for a rich and meaningful life. As suggested in section 4, affective identification is important because it supports agency by informing current decisions and relationships in light of past experiences. To have affective identification that supports agency while avoiding the problems of unrevisability and inaccuracy, then, is to have a flexible self-image, namely, one that allows us to be aware of our fallibility and to remodel our self-images when the existing self-images no longer serve us well.

My discussions addressed all the three questions arising from the exchange between Strawson and Schechtman. I addressed the first question 'What is it that can make affective identification bad for an individual?' by suggesting that the tendency to create an inflexible self-image makes affective identification bad for an individual. Furthermore, I addressed the second question 'In what way is affective identification important for a meaningful life?' by suggesting that affective identification supports agency by informing current decisions and relationships in light of past experiences. Finally, I answered the third question 'Is there a middle ground between Strawson's and Schechtman's views?' by arguing that a flexible self-image provides such a middle ground because it allows affective identification without having it getting in the way of personal well-being.

The final point about the middle ground can be further developed by reference to the discussion on cognitive awareness versus affective identification in section 2.

While Schechtman believes that a life with affective identification other than mere cognitive awareness is richer and smoother, Strawson appears to believe that a life with mere cognitive awareness is equally rich and can even be richer than a life involving affective identification. From the perspective of the argument developed here, Strawson's emphasis on cognitive awareness raises the question of how cognitive awareness interacts with affective identification and the question of how such interaction potentially helps with the development and maintenance of a flexible and accurate self-image. Further research regarding these questions will deepen our understanding about the middle ground described above, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Better understanding of the middle ground calls for a hybrid view, in which the significance of affective identification needs to be understood in relation to cognitive and social factors. Such a hybrid view does not seek to explain self-images and their associated phenomena merely through the discussions of affective identification, but it points to further research directions regarding how affective identification may bias our perspectives toward particular information and styles of reasoning, how such biases are often strengthened through social discourses and interactions, and how we may better construct or reconstruct affective identification to foster healthy self-narratives.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I explained the narrative view and an important debate between Schechtman and Strawson to pose three questions about narrative, affective identification, and personal well-being. I addressed the three questions by suggesting that, first, affective identification impedes personal well-being when it leads to inflexible self-images or self-conceptions. Furthermore, affective identification is important for personal well-being because it supports agency by informing current decisions and relationships in light of past experiences. Finally, the possession of flexible self-images indicates healthy self-narratives, namely, self-narratives with constructive affective identification.

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