Stories and Selves: A Twisted Love Story about the Meaning of Life[1]

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Abstract

I argue that stories are 'equipment for living' in two senses: retrospectively, they provide 'configurational comprehension' of a temporal sequence of events; prospectively, they offer templates for action. Narrative conceptions of the self appear well poised to leverage these functional roles for stories into an intuitively compelling view of self-construction as self-construal. However, the narrative conception defines selves in terms of the lives they live: a self is the protagonist in a lifelong story. And narrative structure is itself defined by 'retrospective necessity': the meaning of events within a story is given by their contribution to that story's ending. Together, this entails that life stories hold selves metaphysically, epistemically, and practically hostage to their ends. Fortunately, narratives are just one species of interpretive frame. I suggest some alternative types of frames, including identity labels and metaphors, that support configurational comprehension, action guidance, and self construction without shackling selves to their lives' ends.

1. Why We Tell Stories

It is a truth universally acknowledged that people love stories. From the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad* to *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Paul Revere's Ride*, from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to *The Handmaiden's Tale* – across times, cultures, and media; in art high and low; in myth, fiction, and history; on college applications, at family reunions and office parties – we are drawn to tell and consume stories. Indeed, the anthropologist John Niles (1999) proposes 'Homo narrans' as a more fitting label to capture our essential differentiating characteristic than *Homo sapiens*.

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Why are we such inveterate makers and consumers of story? For many reasons, including the sheer imaginative pleasure of filling our minds with something other than the exigencies of the everyday. But beyond this, it's natural to ask how stories work as 'equipment for living', in literary critic Kenneth Burke (1938)'s phrase. In this section, I tease out two functional roles for stories, which relate to time and telling in different ways.

The first role is expressed by the psychologist Jerome Bruner's descriptions of stories as part of 'our armamentarium for dealing with surprise' (2002, p. 29). More specifically, Bruner (2002, p. 31) says that

> Narrative is a recounting of human plans gone off track, expectations gone awry. It conventionalizes the common forms of human mishap into genres – comedy, tragedy, romance, irony, or whatever format may lessen the sting of our fortuity. Stories reassert a kind of conventional wisdom about what can be expected, even (or especially) what can be expected to go wrong, and what might be done to restore or cope with the situation.

Translating this line of thought into Burke's equipment metaphor, we might say that stories are wayfinding instructions for navigating life. They specify recurring types of events, situations, and characters, and offer diagnostics for recognizing them. They tell us what to expect next, and offer strategies for response: reasons to select one path over another, and techniques for getting back on track.

On this model, stories' functional role is essentially prospective and practical. However, this doesn't explain why we *re*tell stories, or care so much about the details of different stories that instantiate the same basic template. We don't just tell a story until we have internalized its moral. Rather, we retrace past events repeatedly, in loving detail, even with the end clearly in mind and even when we don't expect a similar type of situation to arise again. The philosopher Louis Mink (1970, p. 554) proposes that we engage in such retrospective rumination

> Because [we] aim at producing and strengthening the act of understanding in which actions and events, although represented as occurring in the order of time, can be surveyed as it were in a single glance as bound together in an order of significance, a representation of the *totum simul* which we can never more than partially achieve.

On Mink's model, we make and consume stories because they give us a cognitive grip on a sequence of events by knitting them together into a coherent explanatory pattern. As he puts it:

> In the configurational comprehension of a story which one has followed, the end is connected with the promise of the beginning as well as the beginning with the promise of the end, and the necessity of the backward references cancels out, so to speak, the contingency of the forward references. [T]ime is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey.

Thus, if Bruner treats stories as wayfinding instructions, Mink construes them as satellite maps. Just as having a map of a spatial region scaffolds understanding, recall, and reasoning in a way that even an exhaustive set of turn-by-turn navigational instructions does not (Camp, 2007a), so too does a story's 'configurational comprehension' scaffold explanation and prediction by situating events in relation to one another. Moreover, in contrast to Bruner's culturally conventional templates, Mink's 'configurational comprehensions' can be highly specific, connecting fine-grained details of the particular events they recount in complex, nuanced ways. This is especially relevant for Mink as a philosopher of history who aims to justify stories as providing a species of understanding distinct from scientific categorization and causal generalization. I think this insight about particularist explanation is profound, not just for history but for the humanities more generally (Ismael, 2017), though the nature of explanation is not my focus here.

2. What Is a Story?

In §1, we identified two roles for stories as 'equipment for living': as comprehensive configurations and as templates for action. In §3, I'll consider stories as tools specifically for constructing selves. But first, we need to get clearer about how stories function, such that they can perform these two roles. Both Bruner and Mink take stories to be useful because they offer us a structure for understanding a collection of otherwise disparate events. What is this structure? Fully addressing this question would require an extensive journey through narratology; for current purposes we need just three basic points, all following from Aristotle's famous claim that a story has a *beginning, middle, and end*.

While this observation might appear trivial, it entails a substantive relationship to time, with significant implications for what stories can do. A story is temporally bounded: it selects out a portion of the universe's vast continuum of space-time possibilities. It is also

essentially about events: the sorts of things that start and stop at times and involve change. While stories also describe states, these occur as the background conditions and consequences of those events. Further, a story connects multiple events into a temporal sequence. Thus, just as maps represent by placing entities in spatial relation (Camp, 2007a) and family trees represent by locating entities in ancestral relation (Camp, 2009a), so stories represent by placing events in temporal relation.

So, stories describe *temporally bounded sequences of events*. But they don't just list events, as annals do, or even events related to a single subject, as chronicles do (Carroll, 2001; Fraser, 2021). A beginning is more than a starting point, and an end is more than a stopping point: together, they delimit a span of time as an integrated unit. More importantly, as Mink emphasizes, a story connects the described events into a configuration that renders both the events themselves and their dynamics comprehensible, by placing them in explanatory relation.

Aristotle maintained that the principle of 'narrative connection' is causal: later events are necessary or probable consequences of earlier ones. While there is something intuitively right about this, causation cannot be necessary for narrative connection, given that many satisfying stories are driven by remarkable coincidences (Carroll, 2001). Nor is causation sufficient for narrative connection on its own: a recounting of the paths of billiard balls across a table in terms of the transfer of kinetic force constitutes a narrative only in the weakest sense. Rather, recall that Mink speaks of a story's end being rendered 'necessary' by the 'promise' of the beginning and the beginning by the promise of the end, through a kind of interactive 'backward reference'.

Retrospective necessity, then, is the second crucial feature of narrative structure: a story's end provides an interpretive principle for selecting, describing, and explaining events in its beginning and middle. In the simplest case, retrospective necessity is achieved by describing one agent pursuing one goal, beginning with the goal's formation and specifying crucial causal steps to its fulfillment. This is the canonical case of teleological explanation, sometimes described as backward causation. Obviously, most stories don't hew to this simple, linear, straightforwardly causal format. However, we just need the weaker point that stories interpret a sequence of events as contributing somehow to the story's ending, where these contributions are related to agents trying to make things happen, and the ending somehow resolves those attempts.

As fictions like *Lolita* or *Ender's Game* and films like *Rashomon* and *Sixth Sense* relish demonstrating, substantively different narratives of

the same temporal interval will be generated by attributing different goals to the same agent, by shifting the explanatory focus to different agents, or by raising different explanatory questions about their actions. Different narrative frames select different events in a sequence as relevant for inclusion in a story. They warrant different descriptions of a given event, by subsuming it under different nexuses of causal 'joints and sockets' (Dennett, 1991). And they prioritize and connect events in different ways – as initiating, forestalling, foreshadowing, or otherwise motivating or impeding each other – which may not be causal or even explanatory in a more narrowly metaphysical sense. Moreover, selecting, describing, or connecting particular events in a certain way affects the appropriate selection, description, and connections among other events in a global holistic way, so that the significance of the whole both influences and is influenced by the significance of its constituent events. As a result, shifting a story's narrative focus can dramatically transform, not just which events deserve to be mentioned, but what those events fundamentally mean (Camp, 2017).

The third feature of narrative structure is that stories don't merely explain the dynamics of a bounded temporal sequence of events involving agents making and undergoing change. Those agents and events are presented as *mattering*, in a way that engages emotional and evaluative response. More specifically, stories embed a dynamic sequence of events within an emotional or epistemic cadence – what David Velleman (2003), following Frank Kermode (1967), calls the narrative 'tick tock'. Bruner's 'sting of fortuity' displays this cadence in its most basic form: we have hopes and dreams, and feel anger or grief when they are stymied. Again, obviously most narratives are not so simple: we experience emotions on behalf of a story's protagonist that they don't themselves feel, or gloat at a villain's downfall. Stories often also engage epistemic emotions, like curiosity about why the Roman Empire fell (Carroll, 2007; Fraser, 2021). The crucial point is that narrative closure – the 'sense of an ending', as Kermode puts it – involves an engaged, dynamic investment in the story's guiding concerns.

Here, then, is where we've arrived. We use stories to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a temporally bounded sequence of events, sometimes at least partly in order to guide action. Stories accomplish this by selecting, describing, and connecting those events into a coherent, holistic configuration that explains them in terms of their contribution to the story's ending, which resolves the story's operative concerns in a viscerally satisfying way. Various genres – comedy, tragedy, etc. – offer more specific templates for

types of events and characters, guiding concerns, and resolving cadences. And particular stories implement and tweak those templates by recounting particular characters encountering particular suites of obstacles and opportunities in ways that elicit particular constellations of epistemic, emotional, and evaluative cadences.

3. Stories for Selves

So far, I've been discussing stories as tools for managing our engagement with the world in general. Some theorists treat stories as 'equipment for living' in a more specific sense: as tools for building selves. A minimal version of this view follows naturally from Bruner's point that we use stories to navigate unexpected events: if we regularly use stories to guide action, and our selves are the products of our actions, then stories often play a role in creating our selves. And indeed, Bruner claims that 'self-making is a narrative art'; '[i]t is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood' (2002, pp. 65, 85).

By itself, the core idea that we use stories to create selves might just amount to the claim that stories create selves by guiding action at critical junctures of our lives. But this invites the question of what unites the self we thereby create into a coherent whole. And given what we've said so far, a natural answer is that this unity is provided by an overarching narrative of the self's life. Thus, Marya Schechtman claims that 'a person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative' (1996, p. 93); 'constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and the logic of a story […] where "story" is understood as a conventional, linear narrative' (1996, p. 96).

By itself, the core idea might also just amount to the claim that stories are one tool within a richer 'armamentarium' for self-construction. But again, given what we've said so far, it's natural to take a further step. In §2, we saw that narrative structure is essentially teleological, in the broad sense of selecting, describing, explaining, and evaluating constituent events in terms of an overarching structure defined by 'retrospective necessity'. Stories in general need not be teleological in the narrow sense of recounting an agent's pursuit of a goal. But it is plausible that stories focused on selves will focus on the goals and concerns of those selves. Moreover, one might think that any description of actions *as* actions will be teleological in the stricter sense of explaining them in terms of an agent's intention to achieve a goal. Together, these points might seem to suggest that,

as Alisdair MacIntyre says, 'narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human action' (1981, p. 208).

If we amplify the core idea in these two ways, we end up with a view on which articulating an overarching autobiographical narrative is the essential mechanism for constructing selves as agents. It follows from this amplified view that it is essential to having a self that one actualize such a life narrative. It also follows, perhaps less directly but still fairly naturally, that selves have value insofar as they do implement that identity-constituting narrative. As MacIntyre (1981, p. 203) puts it:

> The unity of an individual life is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask 'What is the good for me?' is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion [...]. The only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria for success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.

I want to note three things about this amplified view of stories as tools for self-construction. First, it is remarkably strong: it holds that the essential principle of a self is the explicit articulation of a narrative of a lifelong quest in pursuit of an overarching goal. While the overarching goal that drives an agent's lifelong quest may be complex and the path to its achievement indirect, failing in that quest means failing to be a self in the full sense of the term. For many of us, this is starkly counter-intuitive. We ordinarily take many selves that fail to satisfy this criterion to be successful, including 'Episodics' who live for the moment (Strawson, 2004); 'characters' who simply instantiate a stable identity across a long period; and those with cognitive deficits that prevent them from articulating an overarching quest either prospectively or retrospectively (Camp, 2011).

Second, we arrived at this amplified view through a series of plausible, if hardly incontrovertible steps: starting from the core observation that story-telling plays a central role in our ordinary practices of self-interpretation and action-guidance; noting that narrative structure is teleological in the broad sense of being defined by retrospective necessity; and adding a pair of motivations for interpreting that broadly teleological structure in a more robust way, as a lifelong quest. We also moved from a claim about interpreting selves to a claim about constituting them, justified by the implicit assumption that well-grounded interpretations reflect reality, and from there to a claim about evaluating selves.

Third, strong as it is, the conclusion is not just a philosopher's abstract concoction: it articulates an intuition that runs deep and

wide. The idea of a Hero's Journey is especially prevalent in Western Romantic culture, as reflected in the long-standing admiration for figures like Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Wordsworth. But practitioners of 'mythopoetics' including Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Robert Bly have traced out variations on the basic genre across cultures. More recently, it has thrived in the neo-Jefferson American myth of the self-made man, evinced by figures like Abraham Lincoln, Booker T. Washington, Henry Ford, and Elon Musk. And it animates various self-help therapies and movements with broad contemporary popularity, like *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

4. Narrative Hostage-Taking

We stand, then, on the edge of a dark forest, having followed a fairly well-trodden path, with a hidden dragon's lair marked out just around the bend. My primary interest here is not to assess the narrative conception of self on metaphysical or normative grounds. As we noted in §3, there is ample room to worry about whether the narrative conception, in the amplified form it does and arguably needs to take to perform the explanatory work assigned to it by theorists like Schechtman and MacIntyre, is committed to an implausibly pervasive error theory about our ordinary practices of describing and valuing selves (Camp, 2011). There is also room to worry that narratives are epistemically suspect because they lead us to confabulate an unwarranted grounding basis for the emotional cadences that make them so viscerally compelling (Velleman, 2003), when really they are just epiphenomenal fictions (Dennett, 1988). I want to put these more general concerns to the side, to focus on how the narrative conception interacts with stories' ability to perform the functional roles we identified in §1.

The fundamental problem is that the narrative conception of selfhood saddles stories with an explanatory burden that compromises their capacity to perform the functional roles of configurational comprehension and guiding action. Because narrative structure involves retrospective dependence, a narrative's overall meaning is only determined, and only accessible, given the story's ending. By defining selves in terms of life narratives, the narrative conception holds the meaning and value of those selves hostage to their lives' ends, in a way that leaves radically underdetermined not just who we might become, but who we are and what we should do right now.

More explicitly, as we saw in §2, the comprehensive configuration offered by narrative is complex, holistic, and broadly teleological: it selects, individuates, and connects a sequence of disparate events in terms of their contribution to the story's ending. A constituent event can contribute to that ending in many ways: in the simplest case, by causally facilitating the protagonist's focal goal, but also by explaining or motivating the ending in non-causal ways, or by reinforcing or qualifying its broader epistemic or emotional significance. What matters is just that the complex, holistic structure for an entire life narrative depends essentially on its end. The consequence is that, as the literary theorist Peter Brooks (1985, p. 95) puts it, 'All narrative may be in essence obituary in that [...] the retrospective knowledge that it seeks [...] stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death.'

Epistemically, this means that as we move through our lives, the narrative meanings we assign to past and present events can be no more than guesses about their ultimate contribution to our life's end. Brooks says that we read novels 'in anticipation of retrospection' (2005, p. 23). This basic point also applies to life narratives. As we might put it, in interpreting our lives just as in reading a novel or history, we are attempting to solve a multivariable equation in which the value of each particular event is constrained by the values of other events in relation to the whole, by way of their relation to the end.

But this basic similarity cloaks a significant difference. An essential condition on the anticipation of retrospection we perform while reading a fictional or historical narrative is our trust that an intentional agent has constructed or imposed a comprehensive, epistemically and emotionally satisfying structure on the narrative's constituent events. Again, we are often deeply unsure how the author will manage to build that satisfying structure; and they can manage it in many, often unexpected ways. We may also question, while reading and at the end, whether our trust is well placed. Still, the act of reading a completed narrative constitutively involves a basic level of trust that the equation does have a satisfying solution. At the most basic level, this trust imbues the story's constituent events with a minimal level of significance: we assume that if an event has been mentioned at all, it must contribute in some substantial way to the story's end.

When we transfer narrative understanding from these sorts of authoritatively authored texts to real life, the anticipation of retrospection that governs our provisional interpretations of unfolding events becomes considerably more fraught. Some people experience a basic authorial trust for real life, typically via belief in a personal God; but

many do not. But absent a faith that the events of our life will ultimately be subsumed into some coherent holistic configuration, we lose even the provisional constraints on events' narrative meanings that we deploy while reading novels and histories. Indeed, unless we assume that some intentional agent has engineered a coherent ending which is already determined albeit inaccessible to us, the unfolding events of our lives can't even *have* the sort of robust, descriptively thick, and emotionally resonant meaning that narrative promises to provide until our lives have ended. And in turn, if life narratives define selves, then this further entails that stories can only bring selves into being at life's end.

The facts that the narrative meanings of unfolding events are contingent on faith that those events contribute to a satisfying ending, and that their meanings are constrained only by our assumptions about what that ending might be, also makes trouble for narratives' capacity to guide action. The basic challenge here is, in Kierkegaard's pithy (1843, p. 306) motto, that 'life must be understood backwards but lived forwards'. At any given moment, I must act based on my understanding of my current situation. A narrative conception of selfhood promises to assist in this task by individuating and prioritizing a profile of options for action for *me*, defined in terms of my particular life. But the anticipatory retrospection of narrative comprehension *in medias res* entails that this profile of options is only defined in terms of its contribution to my life's end. Thus, I can at best guess at what I should do now by guessing at an ending that is determined but as yet unknown. And the more indeterminate that ending is, the more indeterminate what I should do now becomes and the less guidance a life narrative can provide.

This indeterminacy does not undermine Bruner's less ambitious point that stories are templates for action. For Bruner, stories are conventionalized tropes that guide action by assimilating my particular situation to a more generic one, which is itself defined by its contribution to a generic ending. Thus, if I assume my life is a comedy, then it makes sense that *this* must be the 'meet-cute' with my future spouse with whom I will live happily ever after; while if I assume that it is a tragedy, then *this* must be the fateful error that ultimately unravels my career and leaves me slobbering drunk in a dank hotel. Because Bruner's 'cultural coins' don't traffic in the narrative conception's highly individualized selves, the options for action they deliver are also commensurately generic.

So, the retrospective dependence of narrative structure entails that stories can offer specific guidance for action *in medias res* only insofar as they treat life's ending as itself determinate and specific. Beyond its

epistemic and metaphysical implications, this point has an important practical consequence. Precisely in order to individuate and prioritize what we should do now, narratives must foreclose other options for action, defined by other potential endings. In this sense, the very feature that makes stories powerful equipment for living also makes them constricting shackles: they highlight a particular path forward only by concealing alternative paths. Given an assumed life story, it can palpably feel like *this* is what will happen next, and so that *this* is what I must do now. If events don't then transpire as anticipated, this raises the stakes for future action: it may seem that *this* is the only remaining path for me to achieve the 'right' ending. And if my life's guiding *telos* becomes unattainable, I may feel that I am an utter failure – echoing Marlon Brando's Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*: 'I could have been a contender. I could have been somebody instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it.'

The risk is that by blinding us to alternative paths, an assumed life narrative becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This dynamic is particularly insidious for those who undergo trauma, like rape or war. Trauma is by definition a profound disruption of the anticipated course of events, in which a person's agency is undermined at least temporarily. This is inherently disorienting. But this acute local disruption often generates a broader narrative disruption, which compounds the initial insult by threatening to undermine the person's entire self-conception. Moreover, the traumatic event's acute local significance also makes it an especially tempting locus for a new narrative, one that imposes the additional penalty of holding the rest of the person's life and self to its intuitive narrative schema, often in the form of self-blame (Brison, 2002).

5. Antidotes to Narrative Foreclosure

In §1, I identified two functional roles for stories: configurational comprehension and action guidance. In §2, I identified the basic contours of narrative structure: a complex, holistic configuration of a temporal sequence of events, presented as mattering in virtue of their contribution to an emotionally and epistemically satisfying ending. In §3, I introduced an apparently natural extension of the core idea that stories are 'equipment for living': the view that selves are constituted by narratives of their lives. In §4, I argued that given the retrospective dependence of narrative structure, this view ends up holding selves interpretively and practically hostage to their life's endings.

For many people, the retrospective dependence of a life story may be benign or beneficial. Some have an abiding faith in Fate or a personal Author. Some stumble into a critical event that they take to have been highly contingent but that sets them off on a quest they fully embrace. However, we also saw in §3 that many people's lives fail to conform to a familiar narrative template, or to ever come together into any overarching structure defined in terms of a satisfying ending. For them, defining their selves in terms of their lives' stories can be disorienting or defeating.

The problem is that we do need 'equipment for living'. We need to construe an overwhelmingly complex world in a way that renders it intuitively coherent and personally meaningful; and we need to act fluently in real time in service of our personal goals and values (Camp, 2019). If narrative is our only tool for doing this, then the price of assuming a hidden ending engineered by a remote author may not be too steep to pay. Even if it dooms many of us to being erstwhile contenders, at least our lives have some meaning, insofar as there is somebody we *might* have been and something we should have done.

But must we pay that price? In this section, I suggest that the narrative conception is driven by two plausible but pernicious assumptions: that narrative is our only tool for making meaning; and that selves are defined by their lives. We can achieve a healthy flexibility for constructing selves, and rehabilitate stories as equipment for living, if we abandon these assumptions.

5.1 Kinds of Frames

Bruner, Mink, and others are right to observe that stories are among our most basic interpretive tools. Indeed, MacIntyre is arguably correct that the basic task of interpreting agents as taking action ascribes some narrative structure, however implicit and minimal. However, stories are not our only equipment for comprehending the world; and the world does not consist entirely of agents pursuing goals.

Narratives are just one species within the broader genus of what I call *frames* (Camp, 2019). As I understand them, frames are representational devices that crystallize perspectives, guiding intuitive cognition by orienting attention, explanation, and response in terms of a focal principle. We use frames to express, communicate, and negotiate perspectives across a wide array of domains, including politics, science, religion, and art. Familiar examples include mantras ('Boys will be boys'; 'It's the economy, stupid'; 'Minds are computers';

Camp, 2020); metaphors ('Juliet is the sun'; 'John is a pit bull; Camp, 2006); and identity labels ('Black'; 'queer'; 'evangelical'; Camp and Flores, forthcoming a, b).

Frames in general exhibit three key features, producing a characteristic profile of cognitive benefits and risks. First, they *schematize* intuitive cognition by offering heuristics for parsing, prioritizing, connecting, and responding to information. A frame offers a principle for deciding what matters about a domain and why: 'all you need to know' in order to get an interpretive grip on objects, individuals, and situations in that domain. The benefit is that frames focus attention on important features, preventing us from being overwhelmed by irrelevant clutter. The risk is myopic complacency: we smugly explain away or fail to notice features that really do matter, even by our own lights, but that fail to fit the frame (Nguyen, 2021; Camp, forthcoming).

Second, frames *stabilize* intuitive cognition by anchoring an open-ended perspective in a tangible vehicle. The benefit is that they enable us to coordinate interpretation across agents and times. Intuitive cognition is typically highly malleable by contextual factors; and individuals often bring significantly different assumptions to a conversation. Frames help us to get and stay on the same page, individually and collectively. Individually, a frame can help us to recall and stick to our avowed principles in the face of contextual temptation; for instance, someone trying to leave a dysfunctional relationship might remind themselves 'He's just not that into you'. Collectively, a frame can introduce a rich body of intuitive assumptions into a conversation without their needing to be explicitly articulated. The risk is rigid ossification: a frame that works well enough in some contexts can become so cognitively or communicatively entrenched that it dominates interpretation across the board (Camp and Flores, forthcoming a).

Third, frames *activate* intuitive cognition in ways that are partly, but only partly, under voluntary control. Perspectival interpretation in general is intuitive, in the sense that one's actual cognitive processes are governed by the perspective's operative dispositions unless actively inhibited. 'Getting' a frame requires actually implementing the perspective it expresses, so that one is actually, if only temporarily, disposed to notice, recall, explain, and respond to situations or individuals of the relevant kind in its terms. One can try to employ a frame, by focusing attention and activating certain thoughts and images. But as the experience of Gestalt perception palpably demonstrates, trying is neither necessary nor sufficient for 'getting'. On the one hand, one may sincerely believe that a situation

should be construed in terms of a certain frame – say, 'equal pay for equal work' – without that belief being reflected in one's intuitive, detailed patterns of attention, explanation, and response. And on the other hand, a frame – say, 'children should be seen but not heard' – may intrude into one's intuitive interpretations unbidden, despite one's efforts to inhibit it. The benefit of intuitive activation is that it streamlines processing and amplifies the motivational immediacy of emotional, evaluative, and practical response. The risk is that one's visceral reactions are out of kilter with one's reflectively avowed principles.

In §§1 and 2, we saw that stories fit the model of frames, in a way that explains their functional roles: they offer focal principles for parsing, selecting, explaining, and responding to a complex body of information in an intuitive, holistic way. Stories bear retelling because activating their overarching schematic structure reinforces cognitive dispositions that support a robust, stable, intuitive understanding of its constituent events, rendering their details meaningful in a way that facilitates individual recall and collective communication. And they help us cope with surprise by explaining individual events in terms of larger structures that support fluent, flexible, open-ended prediction, and by parsing and prioritizing a profile of options for action presented in a motivationally engaged way.

At the same time, these interpretive benefits also induce frames' characteristic perils: their viscerally compelling construals blind us to details that don't fit and lure us into self-fulfilling prophecies. So far, these are just the perils of frames generally. Given that we need 'equipment for living' that streamlines and stabilizes the processing of information in light of our goals and values, it would be counterproductive to try to dispense with frames entirely (Camp 2019, forthcoming). We also saw in §4, though, that the retrospective dependence of narrative structure generates a more specific profile of risks: when life stories are tasked with defining selves, they hold those selves metaphysically, epistemically, and practically hostage to their lives' ends.

Abandoning the narrative conception's identification of selves with lives frees us to deploy other species of frames to comprehend our selves and to guide action without importing the baggage of the narrative conception. Each species of frame carries its own profile of interpretive strengths and weaknesses. None is inherently better or worse. But by analyzing how they work, we can choose among them in ways that amplify their distinctive strengths and mitigate their distinctive risks. I'll briefly mention four kinds of frame that may be especially useful for self-construction.

First, *identity labels* like 'Mom', 'queer', 'Latina', 'evangelical', or 'doctor' frame individuals in terms of social kinds, offering cultural templates for being an instance of that kind. Some of these kinds, like *doctor*, are achievements, which evoke corresponding narratives about pursuing their *telos*. Others, like *woman* or *Black*, are unchosen categories that one (typically) inhabits throughout life. And still others, like *teenager* or *mother*, are temporary, or ambiguously telic. As generic categorical terms, identity labels risk erasing the particularity of individual selves: treating someone as 'nothing but' an instance of that kind, inappropriately centering features of their identity that may actually be peripheral to them, and importing unwarranted assumptions about what further features they possess (Whiteley, 2023; Camp and Flores, forthcoming a). However, identity labels can also construct selves in more positive ways, by offering intuitive, open-ended scripts for how to perform being that kind (Butler, 1988). The risk of flattening is greatest when others apply a label for a coarse-grained, socially disempowered social kind to an individual, as with weapon uses of slurs (Camp, 2013). But when labels are self-applied, especially when they are fine-grained and flexible, they can scaffold individual and collective agency (Camp and Flores, forthcoming b).

Second, *metaphors* like 'I am a butterfly', 'I am a snowplow', or 'I am Anna Karenina' frame an individual in terms of a 'twofold' lens of similarity and difference, by highlighting features in the target that can be matched in some way to features of the frame (Camp, 2006, 2009b). Unlike identity labels, which are essentially generic and static, metaphors involve an open-ended, dynamic interaction between frame and target (Black, 1955). As a result, the same metaphorical phrase can induce dramatically distinct configurations when applied to different targets or in different interpretive contexts: thus, the metaphor of 'the sun' highlights and imputes very different features when applied to Juliet, Achilles, Louis XIV, and Richard III (Camp, 2005). Because metaphors wear their non-literality on their sleeves, they are less likely than either identity labels or life stories to ossify into rigid frames that purport to capture the whole truth about an individual. On the other hand, because metaphors are non-literal, context-dependent, and open-ended, they are less likely to offer clear, stable scripts for action.

Third, *telling details* like 'He was climbing ladders before he could talk' or 'She rolls the socks and underwear in her drawers' frame an individual by displaying a particular feature as exemplifying a broader pattern (Camp 2007b, 2019). Their actual, concrete instantiation makes telling details especially specific, vivid, and visceral; and

they can be deeply evocative and resonant. However, because they leave unarticulated how to extrapolate from the presented detail to a more general structure, telling details tend to be less productive as guides for action: they neither encode schematic scripts, like identity labels and generic narratives, nor suggest open-ended filters for mapping new situations, like metaphors.

Finally, *games* crystallize modes of agency: intuitive patterns of attention and profiles of goals, along with sets of skills for achieving them (Nguyen, 2020). Because games enact schematized scripts for action, often in the form of explicit, formal rules, they inculcate ways of being and acting in an especially direct way: one actually, albeit temporarily, inhabits a certain role. However, by 'sealing off' that enactment from reality, games risk seducing us away from the gritty, confusing messiness of life (Nguyen, 2021; Camp, 2023).

5.2 Framing Selves

Noticing that there are other kinds of frames besides narrative gives us more tools for achieving configurational comprehension, guiding action, and constructing selves. Still, given that all frames are interpretively risky and that each species of frame carries its own profile of interpretive risks, we might wonder why we should think that other kinds of frames will help us escape narrative conception's problematic consequences. Maybe the problem is more fundamental, in the very idea of self-creation as an art of self-interpretation.

At a basic level, one might think that the narrative conception's core claim – that we construct ourselves by construing ourselves – is inherently paradoxical. Narrative's retrospective dependence entails that selves only ever *are* at the end of life. The individual who works to actualize that self cannot be that self, because that self does not yet exist; and yet there is someone *now* who is creating that self, by construing what the appropriate course of action for that future self to have done would be.[2] Surely telling a story can't have that kind of bootstrapping power; perhaps the selves we create through stories are just epiphenomenal fictions (Dennett, 1988).

I think the appropriate response to the general worry about the paradox of self-creation is that telling a story about one's self can have causal looping effects, affecting one's actions at a local level in a way that anchors selves in reality (Velleman, 2006). Deploying a frame to comprehend myself involves highlighting certain of my

[2] Thanks to Justin Khoo for pressing this worry.

existing features and downplaying others, connecting features together into explanatory patterns; and prioritizing certain goals and values within my current cognitive dispositions. Actually configuring my intuitive thinking about my self in the frame's terms at this moment directly influences my current behavior, by influencing which options for action I intuitively entertain and am motivated to perform, and habituates me into deploying those same patterns of perspectival thought and modes of agency downstream.

However, because the narrative conception defines selves in terms of life narratives, it lengthens the operative causal loops through to the end of life, in a way that renders the selves we construct through self-construal temporally precarious. By contrast, because alternative species of frame don't involve retrospective dependency, they shorten those loops, in a way that allows selves to *be* at each moment. I actually am, now, a white female philosophy professor and a mother; our Dean really is (metaphorically) a pit bull; my mother really is the kind of person who organizes her rolled-up underwear in careful columns.

Even if other kinds of frames make the idea of self-construction less metaphysically and epistemically paradoxical, they might still hold selves hostage. We might smugly deploy an inaccurate or unfitting identity label, metaphor, or telling detail to construe ourselves, all the while conveniently ignoring or explaining away less flattering features. Or we might trap ourselves in a self-fulfilling prophecy, molding our self to fit a frame that prevents us from acheiving a better possibility. Why think identity labels and metaphors do any better at liberating us from interpretive shackles than stories?

The risk of myopic complacency is the basic, besetting sin of perspectival cognition; as I said in §5.1, it is an inevitable corollary to the intuitive, flexible streamlining of cognition that perspectives bring. The most powerful antidote to myopic complacency is playful open-mindedness: trying on a range of frames in an exploratory way (Camp, forthcoming). Playfulness carries its own risks. We may end up seduced or habituated into a frame we intended to try on only instrumentally (Camp, 2017, 2023); or we may flit among frames without deeply inhabiting any, ironically distancing ourselves from the very project of authentic self-construction. At a deeper level, as María Lugones (Lugones, 1987) emphasizes, playfulness involves vulnerability: to being surprised, to being foolish, to being construed in ways one rejects by hostile and oppressive interpreters. In the wrong environments, such vulnerability can be dangerously unwise. Nor is playfulness always necessary. Many people flourish by embracing a culturally established narrative or identity label. For others, such as 'strivers' climbing the socio-economic ladder,

blinkering one's self-construal with a frame that doesn't fit may be a productive form of bootstrapping (Morton, 2019).

However, many people at some point in their lives feel that they lack a good frame for their selves, either because their available options are all unfitting or oppressive, or because they are too complex to fit any one story, label, or metaphor. And such cases, it can be productive to try on a variety of frames with a playful attitude. Performed in a supportive context and with due critical humility, playful framing can scaffold self-construction by highlighting neglected properties, suggesting novel connections and sources of value, and offering new scripts for action. By feeling out which properties and configurations feel most resonant within and across frames, one can cultivate a more nuanced and robust self, and glimpse opportunities for understanding and transforming one's self in heretofore unforeseen ways (Camp and Flores, forthcoming b). Such playfulness may be deeply serious: thus, Joshua Landy (2022) argues that in *The Periodic Table*, Primo Levi deploys the identity label of *chemist* as a way to reclaim his own distinctive self from the traumatic life narrative imposed by the Holocaust.

Assuming that narrative is the unique, essential mechanism for self-construction makes it easy to assume that one's job is to articulate and enact the true narrative of one's life and to treat that narrative as given and fixed. Acknowledging other kinds of frames makes it easier to liberate ourselves from taking any one frame as hegemonically authoritative. We can also take a more playful attitude toward stories themselves. Once we abandon the identification of selves with lives, we can employ shorter stories as telling details that exemplify a strand of one's identity without defining one's full self. We can also take a more flexible stance toward our entire life story, by toggling among different narratological roles. We navigate life *in medias res* as protagonists. But we can also extricate ourselves from the flow of time to adopt the role of narrator, shifting our focus to other characters, raising alternative guiding questions, and prioritizing different values. And at least sometimes, we can step into an authorial role, actively revisiting and revising the guiding genre of our life's story or the ending toward which we assume we are hurtling.

The easiest way to liberate ourselves from the shackles of an imprisoning frame is to try on an alternative one. Perhaps we will then be fortunate enough to discover a cultural template that fits, or creative enough to construct an idiosyncratic frame that we can wholeheartedly employ to comprehend our selves and guide our actions. However, some people find no single frame to be adequate to their full nuance and complexity, either at a time or over time. And for

them, the specter of disunity that motivated us in §3 to amplify the core idea of stories as tools for self-construction into lifelong narratives rises again: what coherent principle of self-constitution might we appeal to, if neither narratives nor alternative frames are available?

Although frames are valuable technologies for schematizing and stabilizing cognition, they are not essential to interpretation as such. Nor are they essential for self-construction: we can work to build and modify our selves directly, by intervening on what Iris Murdoch (1956, p. 39) calls our 'texture of being': our intuitive way of inhabiting and responding to the world.

To make sense of frameless self-construction, sculpting offers a better analogy than storytelling. Just as a sculptor must work with the affordances of the materials they have, but can still creatively transform those materials into an aesthetically satisfying object, so can we take the profile of characteristics that we are born with and have acquired through life, and creatively augment, eliminate, and modulate them to produce a coherent whole that embeds a complex configuration of disparate features into a satisfying configuration.

Thus, Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1886/1966, §290) recommends the 'great and rare art' of 'giv[ing] style to one's character' through 'long practice and daily work'. 'In the end,' he says, 'when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!' Just as on the narrative conception, Nietzsche allows that a self is not finished until life's end. But where the narrative conception requires a knowing author who engineers intermediate events into meaningful relation by describing them in terms of their contribution to the life's ultimate end, a sculptural model allows the unifying, meaning-making principle to be actually and directly operative throughout the course of life.

We might prioritize moral and practical constraints more than Nietzsche does; in particular, I would lean more heavily on Murdoch's 'vision of morality' than on Nietzsche's 'will to power' in configuring my texture of being. However, the basic model of self-construction as incrementally sculpting a richly textured character offers a way to capture the narrative conception's core insight that self-construal can constitute self-construction. But it does this in a non-paradoxical way that allows selves to already *be* at each moment, and not merely insofar as they contribute to an eventual actualization. At the same time, unlike identity labels, a sculpting model captures the dynamic, prospective promise of *becoming*.

Finally, as both Nietzsche and Murdoch emphasize, it centers our primary locus of being and agency less in heroic questing and more in the 'daily work' of habituating ourselves into intuitive patterns of interpretation and action.

6. Conclusion

What do I hope you to take forward from this discussion on your life's journey? In §1, following Burke, Bruner, and Mink, we identified two functional roles for stories as 'equipment for living': configurational comprehension and guiding action. We should celebrate stories' power at performing these tasks. However, the way that stories accomplish this is by imposing retrospective necessity on a temporal sequence of events, so that beginning and intervening events are defined and explained in terms of their contribution to the story's ending. As a result, when those functional roles are coupled with a narrative conception of selves, stories end up holding selves metaphysically, epistemically, and practically hostage to their lives' ends. Our understanding and options for action become at best glimpses 'in anticipation of retrospection', dooming many people to disorientation and despair.

Once we distinguish selves from the lives they live, we are free to employ stories as one tool in a larger armamentarium of frames for self-construction. We should do so in awareness of their distinctive profiles of peril and payoff, and in the recognition that the complex configurations of our actual selves often resist reduction to any easy formula.

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