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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Køster, A. (2017). Personal History, Beyond Narrative: an Embodied Perspective. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 48(2), 163-187. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1163/15691624-12341327>

Publication metadata

Title:	Personal History, Beyond Narrative: an Embodied Perspective
Author(s):	Allan Køster
Journal:	Journal of phenomenological Psychology
DOI/Link:	https://doi.org/10.1163/15691624-12341327
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Personal history, beyond narrative – an embodied perspective

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October/November 2017

Abstract

Narrative theories currently dominate our understanding of how selfhood is constituted and concretely individuated throughout personal history. Despite this success, the narrative perspective has recently been exposed to a range of critiques. Whilst these critiques have been effective in pointing out the shortcomings of narrative theories of selfhood, they have been less willing and able to suggest alternative ways of understanding personal history. In this article, I assess the criticisms and argue that an adequate phenomenology of personal history must also go beyond narrative. Drawing on a distinction between history and narrative, I outline an account of historical becoming through a process of sedimentation and a rich notion of what I call historical selfhood on an embodied level. Five embodied existentials are suggested, sketching a preliminary understanding of how selves are concretely individuated on a pre-narrative level.

Keywords: Narrative; Personal History; Selfhood; Embodiment; Sedimentation; Responsivity

1. Introduction: The phenomenon of personal history

In this paper, I outline an analysis of the phenomenon of personal history. Though the term personal history might not be commonplace in the contemporary debate on selfhood and personal identity, I expect that most people immediately grasp the phenomenon, as what it

represents is part and parcel of our everyday understanding. Simply stated, personal history refers to the intuitive fact that, as an individual, I have led a specific life with particular experiences that I carry with me and which concretely individuates me as the person I am today. By choosing the term personal history to describe this phenomenon, I evoke two conceptual horizons: Firstly, the term *personal* refers to what Husserl called the *personal attitude*, designating my particular point of view, my existential perspective as a person living in a shared world. Secondly, by the term *history* I am broadly referring to the idea of historicity, as this term is used in the hermeneutic tradition ensuing from Martin Heidegger (2001); that is, human existence as a facticity resulting from a process of becoming. Hence, the concept of personal history can be specified as the *ontogenetic* and *existential* process through which somebody continuously becomes the person they are; the specific life-trajectory and preservation of experiences which make my existence *concretely individuated*.

With the exception of certain branches of the psychoanalytical tradition, the phenomenon of personal history has, in recent years, more or less exclusively belonged to the diverse field of narrative. One might say that personal history and narrative have been construed as co-extensive. The reasons for this identification are plenty and vary according to the context of debate. According to Hayden White (1980), history is identical with narrative, since meaning only emerges when events have been emplotted with ‘*the formal coherency that only stories can possess*’ (p. 19). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur (1984) has argued that time only becomes human in so far as it is articulated in a narrative mode (p. 52); an idea that is echoed by Mackenzie (2014) when she concludes that we are only ‘*concretely individuated as narrative persons*’ (p. 160).

In the following, I will question this strong identification of personal history with narrative and propose a broader understanding, where personal history is not only a matter of what is represented in a narrative logic, but a broader question of *how the past is present in the present* (Schatzki, 2003). In order to carve out this layer of a past that influences me, but which need not fit with narrative order, I will suggest a conceptual distinction between history and narrative, where history is conceived of as more encompassing than what is congealed in

narrative configurations. More specifically, I will suggest that we speak of a *historical self* as designating the *pre-narrative* level of how I am *concretely individuated* throughout ontogenesis. I shall argue that this level is very rich and inherently embodied.

I will structure the paper as follows: Due to the extremely common identification of personal history with narrative, I will start with a comprehensive assessment of the claim that the self is constituted through narrative. Though I concede that narrative plays important roles in understanding ourselves and others, I argue that the phenomenon of selfhood as concretely and historically individuated is broader and richer than can be represented in narrative configurations. After thereby having cleared conceptual space for a historical and pre-narrative level of selfhood, the next section will specify the distinction between history and narrative and put forward the concept of historical selfhood. I will then turn to the question of how we might conceive of the temporality of selfhood and preservation of past experiences if not through narrative. As I will show, the notion of sedimentation, particularly within the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, can serve as a framework for such an understanding. With this in place, the following section will attend to a more detailed description of the modalities through which personal history sediments to form historical selfhood. I shall suggest five embodied existentials as such modalities. In the closing remarks, I will briefly touch on the resulting question of how narrative relates to this level of embodied, historical selfhood.

2. Narrative selfhood and beyond

Attempting to gain an overview of the multitude of positions relating narrative to selfhood and identity can be a daunting experience. The problem is that the commitments and functions ascribed to narrative vary across the many strands of theories and their applications. Correlating this mosaic with the multitude of critiques of notions of narrative selfhood and pinpointing these critiques with a relevant position certainly does not make it any easier. To simplify the task, I will focus exclusively on an assessment of what one might call “the strong claim”, which

proposes that narrative is the only mode of temporally constituted selfhood and that selfhood, as such, arises from narrative order.

At the most basic level, the claim that selfhood is constituted through narrative is motivated by the demand to take the temporal nature of human existence seriously and give an account of how selfhood extends over time. As an array of psychologists and philosophers have proposed, narrative is the medium that makes this possible (e.g. MacIntyre, 1984; Polkingthorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1992; Sarbin, 1986). In order to get an adequate picture of this idea one needs to distinguish between two different interpretations in the contemporary debate which are often conflated: On the one hand, the claim that selfhood emerges through acts of *explicit* narration; on the other hand, that selfhood emerges through an *implicit* narrative organization of experience. In the following, I will discuss each of these positions in turn based on the contemporary debates in philosophy and theoretical psychology, as well as additional considerations I bring to the discussion.

Selfhood as explicit narration

From within narrative psychology, Jerome Bruner (1987, 1990, 2003) has persistently defended the idea that selfhood arises from and depends upon explicit acts of narration. As Bruner (2003) states: *‘Through narrative we create and recreate selfhood, the self is a product of our telling ...’* (p. 85). For Bruner, then, the self is a product of acts of “telling”, and hence: *‘...a verbalized event, a kind of meta-event that gives coherence and continuity to the scramble of experience’* (p. 85). This claim is to be taken quite literally, in so far as a loss of the capacity to narrate, for instance in states of dysnarrativa, implies the death of the self: *‘Individuals who have lost the ability to construct narratives have lost their selves. The construction of selfhood, it seems, cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate’* (p. 73).

In recent years, a range of critiques have been voiced against this position. Particularly persistent objections centre on the ambiguity of the very definition of a narrative. Such critiques have pointed to what they see as a radical inflation in the work we expect narrative to do. Both

Peter Lamarque (2004) and Pekka Tammi (2006) have, for instance, emphasized that once we realize how little is actually required to qualify as a narrative, attention will tend to shift away from narrative itself. According to Lamarque (2004), the minimal conditions for narrativity are that '*at least two events must be depicted...and that there must be some more or less loose, albeit non-logical, relation between events*' (p. 394). Whilst the debate on defining narrative seems to be nowhere near reaching any kind of consensus, Lamarque is definitely closer to a mainstream than a controversial view in this suggestion. Porter Abbot (2008), for instance, opts for an even more non-committal definition in his authoritative work, designating any representation of an event, that is, a process in time, as a narrative. If we accept this definition, however, and reduce narrativity to claiming that *b* is understood in the light of *a*, which came before it, and *c*, which comes after, then any trivial recounting of my day will qualify as a narrative, rendering the claim that selfhood arises out of narrative organization as trivial bordering on vacuous, since no noteworthy claim to an organization of experience is actually taking place apart from claiming that experience is temporal.

Not surprisingly, most narrativists have reacted to this critique by replying that this deflationary definition of narrative is in fact not what they have in mind when proposing that selfhood arises out of narrative configurations. The organization and intelligibility narratives provide to experience is generally considered more holistic, involving actual employment, and is hence non-trivial (e.g. Rudd, 2009; Schechtman, 2007). In his much-debated paper *Against narrativity* Galen Strawson has raised issues with this stronger notion of narrative. Strawson emphasises that, as a descriptive claim about human psychology, it is simply empirically wrong to claim that people generally make their experiences the object of explicit narration, thereby casting doubt upon the claim that narrative is constitutive of selfhood. While Strawson is willing to grant that some people might have what he calls a story-telling tendency, he refutes that it should be a general trait. To illustrate this, Strawson (2004) uses himself as an example:

I have a past, like any human being, and I know perfectly well that I have a past. I

have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about it, and I also remember some of my past experiences ‘from the inside’, as philosophers say. And yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future. (p. 431)

In order to account for this experience, Strawson draws a distinction between what he calls a diachronic and an episodic mode of self-experience. Whereas people with diachronic self-experiences tend to see their lives as having integral continuity, people with an episodic disposition tend not to construe themselves in this way. Whether one experiences oneself diachronically or episodically is a matter of a ‘*deep individual difference variable*’ (p. 431).

Whereas Strawson’s challenges seem critical of positions that claim selfhood arises from explicit narration, his claim that there is such a thing as a strictly episodic mode of self-experience has raised more than a few eyebrows in the narrative community, where doubt has been expressed about the consistency of the very notion of episodic selfhood. Mackenzie and Poltera (2010), for instance, argue that it is apparent from cases of psycho-pathology that loss of narrative integration in our self-experience ‘*not only results in a loss of agency, but is also a source of real suffering*’ (p. 32). What Strawson misses is that ‘*the lives of persons cannot be thought of as a series of discrete, disconnected experiences or events, but rather have an implicit narrative form*’ (Mackenzie, 2009, p. 106).

Narrative selfhood as implicit narration

This brings us to the claim that selfhood is constituted through a process of *implicit* narration. The notion of implicit narration has been systematically developed in, among others, the work of Marya Schechtman (1996), who claim that selfhood is constituted through an implicit organization of experience according to the linear logic of an unfolding story. Contrary to Bruner’s strong claim, Schechtman concedes that the narrative constitution of selfhood need not

be based on explicit nor even self-conscious acts of narration (p. 105). In fact, Schechtman agrees that people on average narrate very little of their lives in any self-conscious way (p. 116). The function of narrative is rather as an implicit mode of organizing and contextualizing experiences in the unfolding of life according to a story logic and thereby constituting oneself as a temporal unity in which past experiences and anticipations for the future are integrated to coherent wholes.

Although this position is able to avoid some of the most obvious objections against explicit narration, it is not unchallenged. Firstly, one might point to the formal problem that the claim that selfhood is constituted through an implicit narrative organization of experience seems caught in a self-identification problem (Bertram, 2013). It cannot explain why the discrete experiences that are integrated into a narrative unity should be attributed as belonging to me in the first place without presupposing a more fundamental level of selfhood as the subject of these experiences. As Richard Menary (2008) points out, it makes very little sense to attribute the experience of pain to a collection of narratives (p. 73). Rather, a more fundamental notion of a *pre-narrative, minimal* or *experiential* self seems to be required (Menary, 2008; Zahavi, 2007, 2014). In other words: Narrative cannot account for the emergence of selfhood as such, but must presume a subject whose experiences can achieve narrative organization in the first place¹.

Narrativists might grant this point, but respond by pointing out that such a concept of selfhood is all too minimal and lacks the contextual and historical dimension that narratives provide. Instead, they suggest, we should see the relationship between these two notions as one of mutual presupposition (Rudd, 2009). This is a clever response and takes us to the heart of the matter, namely 1) whether the very notion of ‘implicit narrative’ is conceptually sound, and 2) whether it is able to account for the entire range of temporal experiences.

Regarding the first question, the debate seems polarized. On the one hand, some commentators insist on the fundamental public role of narratives – that narrative needs an

¹ That such a distinction is necessary should *eo ipso* also be evident from the somewhat absurd consequence that a strictly narrative view would imply that selfhood could not be attributed to infants and young children who have not yet acquired narrative categories of understanding (Hutto, 2014)

audience and cannot be construed as cognitive processes '*hidden away in the brain..*', needing instead to be situated in interaction (Menary, 2008, p. 71). As Lamarque (2004) furthermore stresses: '*There can be no narrative without narration, a point sometimes overlooked by those who see human life in terms of narratives untold or waiting to be told*' (p. 395). This position is often supported from within the field of narratology (e.g. Ryan, 2007). On the other hand, there is the more cognitive approach where proponents argue that narrative needs neither '*text nor discourse*', but that the products of narrative can reside in mental representations alone (Goldie, 2012, p. 3). In the end, however, this discussion boils down to a matter of definition and preference in terminology. Personally, I agree with the preference of reserving the term narrative for the public arena, and thereby situating the fuzzy concept of narrative within a framework that provides some kind of delimitation so as to avoid the immanent problem that narrative means everything and thereby nothing. Disregarding the question of how widespread the phenomenon is, it is nevertheless hard to deny that we *can* engage in something that resembles narrative thinking without including a public audience. As P. Goldie (2012) points out, we often run through the particular events of our day reflectively. This reflective approach is, however, not how proponents of implicit narration typically construe the matter. Schechtman (1996) defines implicit narrative as '*the psychological organization from which experience and actions are actually flowing*' (p. 115). Obviously, this is not meant to state that experience is accompanied by a reflective and constant narrative commentary. The point is rather that experiences get more or less *automatically* organised according to a story logic. This leaves the question of the status of this implicit process – to what extent is it available to the person? Schechtman is careful to underline that self-constituting narratives may not always be available for articulation, but sometimes function as unconscious, implicit narratives that we are unable to bring to articulation (p. 115). Conceptually, this raises the question of how we are to understand an unconscious, implicit narrative; a narrative that *defies narration*, but nonetheless emplots and structures our experience and behaviour? As Daniel Hutto (2014) has recently argued, proponents of implicit narration do, in fact, not offer a positive account of this. Furthermore, we

should therefore ask: does it really make sense to insist on using narrative as a metaphor for this level of human experience, or does it push the meaning of narrative beyond what is helpful? Schechtman (1996) herself is aware of this issue and grants that it might not be obvious why we should call this level a self-narrative at all (p. 115). In response, however, she emphasises that such inaccessible narratives actually have very little bearing on the constitution of selfhood. Instead she poses as a requirement for self-constituting narratives that they are '*capable of local articulation*', meaning that, when prompted, '*the narrator should be able to explain why he does what he does, believes what he believes, and feels what he feels*' (p. 114). Whereas I understand the basic intuition of this "articulation constraint" when it comes to certain normative expectations in social interaction and to issues pertinent to personal autonomy, I believe it misses something essential about the phenomenon of selfhood as applicable to psychology. The problem is that it reduces the phenomenon of selfhood to encompass only that which is easily accessible to me, but this certainly does not cover the entire range of individual self-experience. The question we are left with, then, is how to conceptualize the levels of selfhood and self-experience which are not easily accessible to explicit narration?

This leads us to the *second* question of whether the notion of implicit narrative can account for the entire range of temporal experiences. From my experience as a practising narrative therapist, it is often confirmed to me that when clients seek help, they frequently have very little understanding of, or ability to narrate, what is going on in their lives. This lack of understanding and coherence in experience is exactly why they seek help. Careful and often strenuous attempts to assist in a systematic narration of experiences can, however, help provide such a contextualization. An example might be helpful: In therapy, a client recounts an experience where he became overwhelmed by a bodily state of anxiety and claustrophobia while grocery shopping in a local supermarket. This resulted in a need to leave the place immediately. Through careful retrospective, narrative examination of this experience, he achieved an understanding in which the reason for his embodied response could be traced back to the music playing in the background which resonated with emotions from a particularly hard break-up

earlier in his life. This connection – narrative in nature as it may be – was only made *post hoc* through a systematic, narrative contextualization. From the actual lived perspective, the situation appeared beyond narrative representation — it was instead an experience of an *embodied mode of responding*.

I believe this example encourages two considerations: Firstly, I think it is a mistake to exclude such self-experiences from being integral to the constitution of selfhood, simply based on the fact that they do not easily offer themselves to narration. Doing so would amount to a fallacy of letting the theoretical framework define the phenomenon rather than the other way around. In the example, the embodied response appears as a very tangible part of that person's self-experience and personal reality - of *who* he is. I suspect that these kinds of experiences, of being unclear about *what* we are feeling or *why*, constitute an integral part of the broader context of our lives. Secondly, experiences like these should be considered as *pre-narrative* in the sense that, although they are conditioned by events in the personal past, they have not yet obtained narrative configuration, but rather manifest as *embodied responses*. The body has already responded *prior* to any narrative interpretation. This is, of course, not to claim that the embodied response is disconnected from the conscious choice to leave the store. Clearly the need to leave was instigated by the embodied response. The claim is only that it did so in a non-narrative modality. In this sense, the lived body can be the carrier of my personal past and of meaning that precedes narrative configuration.

Proponents of implicit narration might object at this point, stating that the above example illustrates precisely how implicit narration works; i.e., as an unconscious script that integrates events and thereby structures my experience. However, I believe this position is problematic and faces the same dilemma of triviality as with explicit narration: First, if the sheer fact that two events are sequential is supposed to render them a narrative, then the claim to narrative becomes trivial and we are not really saying anything substantial about the organization of experience apart from the fact that it is temporal. As a minimum, we should expect that the events are not merely connected, but that they are identified under a description that indicates a

meaningful connection between the events (Köppe, 2014). This meaningful connection is exactly what is lacking in the example. Second, if – as most narrativists would agree – narrative implies such non-trivial connections between events, then the position runs dangerously close to a structuralist account similar to the one found in classical narratology with its rigid separation between surface and depth structures. From this perspective, the post hoc narration in therapy is nothing more than rendering explicit what exists as an unconscious, pre-existing story: a story I “already have”, so to speak. This kind of structuralist thinking leaves very little space for the “storytelling context”; i.e. sensitivity to the complex social processes under which narratives are constructed, and alludes to the idea that explicit narration merely mirrors or represents internal processes rather than being produced in interaction and to fit the situation.

One might, however, accept the importance of embodiment and embodied responding, but reject that this entails a pre-narrative level of the lived body. Mackenzie (2014), for instance, claims that our ‘*lived bodily experience is always already mediated via narrative self-interpretation*’ (p. 162). While I agree that bodily experiences can be mediated via narrative self-interpretation, I take issue with the claim that this is always or even primarily so. Firstly, as illustrated in the case above, there are clearly significant embodied experiences and responses in which narrative integration is an achievement, rather than integral to the experience. Secondly, as Meyers (2014) has forcefully argued in response to Mackenzie’s claim, we need to distinguish psycho-corporeal meaning and understanding from the conceptual and propositional modes of understanding on which narratives relies. The idea that embodied experience in this way encodes implicit self-narrative is not only ‘*sufficiently murky to warrant scrutiny*’, but also imposes an overly mentalistic and Cartesian description on our bodily experiences (p. 149).

Rather than insisting on the presence of narrative throughout selfhood, I would suggest that we follow Bernhard Waldenfels’ account of embodied selfhood and speak of a “split-self”. What Waldenfels points to is that my embodied self-experience is inherently one of both familiarity and alienness [Fremdheit]; of narrative order and that which has not yet come to a narrative order (Waldenfels, 2002, 2004). Such self-experience of alterity may range in intensity

and character, from states of neurologically based twitches or obtrusive fidgeting, to excessive nail biting, existential anxiety or panicking without quite knowing why, or experiences of having sudden and unexpected reactions to seemingly innocuous events, in line with what Freud termed “*Nachträglichkeit*” (Freud, 2001). The range of these experiences often has a historical context – in a certain sense they make me experience my own historicity – but may initially evade narrative form. Nevertheless, they are profound in constituting my experience of my own existence.

Based on the above considerations, I find it reasonable to conclude that, although narrative is important to a variety of modes of experiencing and self-understanding, the strong claim that narrative constitutes and exhausts the notion of selfhood is untenable. Not only must selfhood be presupposed before narration, narrative is also insufficient in conceptualizing the many layers of selfhood that do not allow for explication. In the remainder of this paper, I will turn to a more detailed description of how we are concretely individuated on a pre-narrative, personal level. I will do so by first drawing a distinction between the historical and the narrative in the next section. Following this, I will suggest sedimentation as a way of understanding the process of individual becoming on a historical level. In the final section, I will turn my attention to a more substantial account and suggest five embodied existentials through which personal history sediments to a concrete, non-narrative individuation.

3. Towards a Concept of Historical Selfhood

I ended the previous section by concluding that the phenomenon of temporally organised selfhood is broader than what is ordered in narrative configurations. This conclusion echoes the range of commentators who emphasize the need for a pre-narrative notion of selfhood, such as an embodied or experiential self (e.g. Bertram, 2013; Menary, 2008; Meyers, 2014; Zahavi, 2014).

However, there seems to be a tendency in the contemporary debate to present only two options, sharply separated from each other: On the one hand, a pre-narrative level of selfhood – an experiential or minimal self – which designates the fairly abstract notion that any experience is always accompanied by an embodied sense of *mineness* (e.g. Zahavi, 2007); on the other hand, full-scale narrative selfhood. As stated already, I do not think that this provides us with an adequate picture. Mackenzie (2014) is therefore right in sounding a note of caution about making too sharp a distinction between these two levels of selfhood, since life is not only always *experientially* individuated, as these commentators emphasize, it is also ‘*concretely individuated*’ (p. 159). I can fully commit to this claim, but I thoroughly disagree with Mackenzie’s subsequent conclusion that ‘*We are only concretely individuated as narrative persons*’ (p. 160). Contrary to this claim, and in line with the limitations on narrative selfhood exposed in the last section, I believe that we need a notion of embodied selfhood that is prior to narrative configuration, but nonetheless concretely individuated through personal history. To capture this dimension conceptually, I suggest the term *historical selfhood*.

Off hand, this distinction might raise a few eyebrows: After all, ever since Hayden White’s (1980) ground-breaking work on narrative and history in the early 80’s, we have become used to considering history and narrative as co-extensive. However, I believe that there are good reasons for maintaining such a distinction, particularly in relation to embodied selfhood, since, as we have seen, not all temporally constituted bodily modes of being lend themselves to narrative without friction².

Roughly speaking, I think we can identify two levels on which the historicity of embodied selfhood exceeds the narrative dimension: *Firstly*, we should point to the dimension that the formative history of any individual is characterised by an inevitable *excess* and *opacity*. In her work of self-narration, Judith Butler (2005) takes up this point and states, complementary

² From the perspective of narratology perspective, Porter Abbott (2013) draw a similar distinction in regards to literary narratives when he describes narratives by analogy to the universe. The universe is not only comprised of stars in the sky, but also the all-pervasive “dark” matter and energy, which leads him to conclude ‘*There is always much history that a story does not need*’ (p. 109)

to my argument so far, that selfhood should be understood as ‘*a singular exposed body to which narrative refers*’ (p. 20), and that this singular exposed body has a formative history which cannot be captured by a full narration. As Butler states:

The stories do not capture the body to which they refer. Even the history of this body is not fully narratable. To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one’s life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection. (p. 38)

Hence, according to Butler we need to recognise a fundamental opacity inherent to our self-relation rooted in a formative history, that exceeds that which can be captured in narrative orders. This means that there is a history of the self, which is outside the reach of the self, but which nevertheless exerts its influence on the experiential life of the self. This point is also recognized by Waldenfels (2000; 2002) in his extensive work on embodied selfhood. According to Waldenfels, we need to acknowledge that the human body [Leib] has a history that institutes an excessive surplus of meaning which can never be fully captured in a collection of narratives. Importantly, the fact that essential parts of this history lie outside the conscious reach of the self, does not imply that it is left as a relic in a distant childhood. Rather, the history of the self constitutes its particular facticity as an ever-present reality of the embodied self, exerting an unsettling or even traumatising influence on individual existence (Waldenfels, 2000, p. 187).

Secondly, there is the formative history of embodied selfhood which has to do with familiarity and habituality. This dimension has surely been most thoroughly explored in the work of Merleau-Ponty (2012) and his proposal that embodiment is our general means of *having* a world (p. 147). What characterises human embodiment, according to Merleau-Ponty, is its ambiguity; embodiment cannot be unequivocally determined as either nature or culture, but rather as a nature which, in the same moment, is transformed by culture (p. 205). This fundamental ambiguity is rooted in the fact that human embodiment is not endowed or imposed

with definite instincts from birth, but instead given the ability to prolong personal acts into stable dispositions (p. 147). This process is richly described by Merleau-Ponty as a gradual process of habituation into a world through an adaption and extension of my body schemes to create a world of acquaintance and familiarity. In his extensive work on embodiment and implicit memory, Thomas Fuchs (2000, 2007, 2008, 2012) takes up this idea and argues that the particular plasticity of embodiment allows us to speak of a *historical body* [der geschichtliche Leib]. Fuchs arrives at this term through a distinction between biography and embodiment: whereas biography refers to a reflective stance that relies on representation and explicit memories, embodiment designates an implicit and tacit dimension, which manifests through *enactive* modalities, rather than representations (such as narratives), and where memories are evoked from particular situational affordances and interactions. Hence, the historical body refers to the result of a process of individual concretion and self-formation made possible through the implicit shaping of the embodied self which, in turn, can be made the object of a biographical reflective stance.

Importantly, though this latter dimension of the historicity of the embodied self designates a sphere of self-familiarity and acquaintance, it is important to emphasise that it need not be organised in narrative orders. As Meyers (2014) rightly pointed out in her critique sketched above, there is a range of embodied modes of being that do not align with a narrative mode of ordering³. Rather, and this goes for both the dimension of excess and opacity and the dimension of familiarity and habituality, the historicity of embodiment should not be considered as something belonging to our reflective possession. Instead, it constitutes an existential facticity; the historicity of embodiment is, as Fuchs remarks, not a past that we *have*, it is a past that we *are* (Fuchs, 2008, p. 43).

From this, I believe it is clear why I think we need a distinction between history and narrative in relation to embodied selfhood. Whereas narrative is a selective mode of ordering, embodied selfhood is inherently an exposed facticity, and the entire spectrum of temporal

³ See also (Køster, 2016)

exposure constituting embodied selfhood is not captured by that which has attained narrative orders. Hence, when I speak of historical selfhood on an embodied level, I am referring to this embodied facticity which is a result of a process of formation. This notion is perhaps best understood in line with Merleau-Ponty's (2012) claim that the very experiential structure of the self is always already concretely individuated to a specific mode of *being-towards-the-world*. This process of formation results in a notion of selfhood that is pre-reflectively personal, in the sense that it is already in place when I start to relate to myself reflectively and thereby constitutes what Merleau-Ponty calls the '*atmosphere of my present*' (p. 465).

Whereas I take *personal history* to signify the process of formation of the individual across ontogenesis, *historical selfhood* designates a person's present style of being on a pre-narrative, *embodied* level.

4. Sedimentation and the structure of historical becoming

The pivotal motivation for the claim that selfhood is constituted through narrative is that a person is essentially a temporal being. Rudd (2012) even goes so far as to identify narrative with experiential time (p. 199). If this is true, it certainly poses a problem for the suggested distinction between historical and narrative selfhood, since the notion of historical selfhood obviously, rests on an understanding of selfhood as inherently temporal. From a phenomenological perspective, however, narrative is not the only conceivable mode of temporal structuring of experience. Rather than turning to narrative, in dealing with the pre-reflective level of human experience, both Husserl (1970) and Merleau-Ponty (2012) oriented themselves towards metaphors taken from geology; specifically the notions of *ground*, *underground* and *sedimentation*. I will unpack the idea that these metaphors can be a basis for understanding how we are concretely individuated on a pre-narrative level throughout personal history.

The imagery of geological processes can provide us with a rich vocabulary for grasping how past experiences can be deposited to gradually create a structural, concrete whole in such a

way that the ambiguity of human experience as simultaneously ever-changing and stable is grasped. Particularly the notion of sedimentation is helpful, since it provides us with a way of envisioning how stable structures can emerge from a fundamentally contingent, temporal and historical process. More precisely: *How synchronic structures emerge from a diachronic dynamic*. From the perspective of sedimentation, the concrete personal mode of individual experience is a result of a gradual process of experiential deposition throughout ontogenesis. Importantly, this implies that selfhood consists of a layered structure, of a patent surface of fluctuating manifestations resting on more latent depth structures which are much more stable, though also moveable and always changeable: A surface of fluctuations supported by underground substructures (Sommer, 1998). Like the example used by both Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey of a child that perceives a candle differently after having burnt himself, or how a girl brought up by a strict father perceives men in a certain way, experiential life is precisely not flat and immediate; it has depth and contours. From this perspective, the structure of our individual experiencing is a result of a historical process. Hence, like narrative, sedimentation is a structuring principle. Contrary to narrative, however, the structure of sedimentations is not ordered according to the integrating logic of a story structure, but rather the result of a more contingent order much like a mosaic. More specifically, the sedimented structure is a result of responses to external forces of adequate *gravitas*. What counts as adequate may, of course, vary along a spectrum from *repetitive* through *significant* impact; i.e., the repetitive nature of learning a specific skill like riding a bike versus the strong imprint of a traumatic experience that immediately alters the structure of my experience.

Whereas some layers are deeply rooted and not easily disposed of, others might be mere superficial indentations, more prone to erosion. Though the metaphor of sedimentation allows for a distinction between depth and surface, the whole structure can obviously also be exposed to sudden ruptures and dramatic reconfigurations; the result of an earthquake, to remain within the geological metaphor. As such, the sedimented structure of experience is a mosaic in constant flux, resting on a deeply rooted foundation that is nevertheless also susceptible to dramatic and

sudden reconfigurations. New experiences do not just sediment upon older experiences, but are constituted through being entangled with the existing experiential structure, creating a new configuration altogether.

The critical reader might start to worry at this point: Isn't a geological metaphor too static and inflexible to capture the more dynamic aspects of human experience? It should be noted that any use of metaphors demands appropriate caution since metaphorical imagery always both reveals and conceals simultaneously. In regard to the principle of sedimentation, it can clearly allude to a somewhat static imagery of a structure consisting of layers upon layers. Merleau-Ponty was already aware of this danger in his extensive use of the sedimentation metaphor, but, as he emphasises, the notion of sedimentation is intended as a *process* metaphor, one that accounts for the way past experiences constantly feed into and shape the interaction and the atmosphere of my present moment:

But this word "sedimentation" must not trick us: this contracted knowledge is not an inert mass at the foundation of our consciousness. For me, my apartment is not a series of strongly connected images. It only remains around me as my familiar domain if I still hold "in my hands" or "in my legs" its principal distances and directions, and only if a multitude of intentional threads run out toward it from my body. Likewise, my acquired thoughts are not an absolute acquisition; they feed off my present thought at each moment; they offer me a sense, but this is a sense that I reflect back to them. In fact, the acquisition that is available to us expresses, at each moment, the energy of our present consciousness. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 133)

What Merleau-Ponty specifies is that the metaphor of sedimentation should be understood as describing the particular way the past persists in what one might call 'process form' (BCPSG, 2007; Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009); as designating the specific mode of being-towards-the-world

of the person. Furthermore, sedimentation is not to be interpreted as a primarily inhibiting phenomenon, one that freezes life in static and immovable patterns; sedimentations are rather what make nuanced and rich experiences possible in the first place. As Philip Buckley (2012) reminds us:

Life in general is not uniform but consists of layers; it is not flat, but laden with meaning. These layers of meaning serve as a reservoir from which our future is determined. In a way, the more sedimentation, the more possibilities for the future. The richer the past, the brighter the future. (p. 91)

Though Buckley displays a certain blindness to the darker sides of experiential sedimentations, such as traumatic experiences, the fundamental function of sedimentations is positive. Sedimentations provide a basic scaffold, a mode of being-towards-the-world, that relieves the individual from the impossible task of thinking everything simultaneously and constantly anew (Woelert, 2011).

As already stated, the intention in introducing sedimentation as a formative principle was to provide metaphorical imagery for understanding how historical selfhood is concretely individuated throughout ontogenesis. It is the process through which an individual gradually acquires a personal mode of experiencing, an individual being-towards-the-world.

5. Embodied existentials of historical selfhood

Inspired by the phenomenological tradition in general and elements of T. Fuchs' phenomenology of embodied memory in particular (Fuchs, 2008, 2012), I would like to suggest five *embodied existentials* as basic gravitational centres through which personal history sediments to shape a historical self. This account is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative, and makes no claims to completeness. The motivation for suggesting these

particular five levels is that, taken together, they cover the individual's relation to the *material* world, to *others*, to *culture*, to *meaning* and to *oneself*. I explicitly use the Heideggerian notion of existentials to emphasize that I am addressing the very structure of individual being and that the levels are inseparable moments of individual experience, only separable analytically, and which do not express any transitive order of priority or hierarchy. They should be seen as deeply intertwined, mutually dependent and co-emerging. They are what Heidegger, using a technical term, calls equiprimordial [gleichursprünglich].

a) Habituation:

At the basic existential level, one might refer to the very process through which we acquire our fundamental being-towards-the-world. Starting from infancy, and from what Heidegger calls our pre-intentional openness [Erschlossenheit] towards the world, we engage in a constant and never-ending process of inhabiting the world around us through the adaptation of basic body schemes to the surroundings. Though each case is ontogenetically specific, this process is, from the onset, thoroughly socio-cultural, since our ecological environment is always already culturally and historically pre-structured. Through becoming familiar with the forms, functions, smells, sounds, colours and sensory feel of the surroundings, our body-schemes gradually become enriched and achieve a specific and contingent organization, characterized by an automation of motor skills and perceptual structures (Fuchs, 2000). As the word “habituation” suggests, this is not only a process that involves the acquisition of basic *habits* or skills, but also the very way in which I *inhabit* my world: that my world acquires an air of familiarity and I *feel at home*. In this sense, “place” becomes essential to our most basic sense of self, since it is very much distributed into our environment. On the habitual level, I am the socio-cultural places that I occupy to the extent that one, with Kirsten Jacobsen, might say that ‘*We have a sense of self, because we build a home for ourselves*’ (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 32). Separation from one's habitat might, then, to some degree imply a temporary diminished sense of self, or even a state of self-alienation as one might recognize in feelings of homesickness or even dissociation. Though

certain habits and habitats might be more deeply entrenched, the process of habituation is continuous throughout one's lifetime, where certain inclinations might erode whilst others become sedimented.

b) Inter-corporeity:

Simultaneously and intertwined with basic habituation arises what Merleau-Ponty calls *inter-corporeity*, referring to our embodied entanglement with others. From the perspective of inter-corporeity, we are, from the very onset, social beings, in so far as embodiment breaks down any clear distinction between the inner and the outer. Instead, self and other appear as deeply intertwined, where the other always already occupies part of my embodied existence (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 368). This phenomenological perspective resonates well with studies in developmental psychology that indicate that infants are born with a basic mimetic capacity and register for resonating with the expressivity of others (Fuchs, 2008). Through inter-corporeity, our personal existence is shaped from the beginning by the relations we *are*. As Daniel Stern (2000) has advocated, the interaction patterns that the child develops with its caretakers establish basic schemes of '*being-with-others*'; a kind of generalized understanding of how to engage in relations which sediments as patterns that are re-enacted throughout life. Fuchs (2012), in turn, describes these as pre-reflective, embodied structures; a '*temporally organised, musical memory for the rhythm, dynamics, and undertones inaudibly present in interactions with others*' (p. 14). Contrary to interpretations that view these structures as "mentalizing models" (e.g. Bateman & Fonagy, 2012), or even narrative structures, the perspective of inter-corporeity would emphasize them as an *enacted and embodied response and interaction repertoire*. As in the case of habituation, these structures of inter-corporeity are dynamic and changing throughout a lifetime, though some might be more deeply entrenched and somewhat resistant to change, such as attachment research has often claimed (e.g. Lyons-Ruth, 2006).

c) Incorporation:

The term incorporation is suggested by Fuchs (2012) to express the process through which we incorporate cultural and social norms and attitudes to bodily habits. Incorporation involves at least two kinds of processes: Firstly, it refers to the broad process of how we incorporate socio-cultural norms, cogently described and analysed in the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu with their notions of discipline, docile bodies and habitus. Though only analytically separable from processes of habituation and inter-corporeality, incorporation refers to the fundamental enculturation of the body that includes broad socio-cultural processes, such as how we appropriate and embody gender roles (Young, 1990) or shape our bodies according to discursive aesthetic ideals (Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007)⁴, but also to more minute processes, such as how we learn to restrict the use of a fork to our left hand etc. (Fuchs, 2008). As such, incorporation accounts for how I pre-reflectively integrate the normative, pragmatic context I am situated in to an embodied repertoire, which can furthermore be seen as a basis for most everyday social understanding (Gallagher & Hutto, 2008; Ratcliffe, 2007). Incorporation is also ontogenetically specific, in the sense that we, through the processes of habituation and inter-corporeity, incorporate the specific habits and ways of our immediate relations and circumstances. We typically see this when bodily postures or the mimicry of parents are taken up in the physiognomy of their children, or when individuals' bodies are shaped by the specific activities they engage in, such as the strong hands of a carpenter etc. As such, the body is a living display upon which the history of the individual is continuously inscribed, preserved and enacted.

d) Existential-hermeneutic repertoire:

With an existential-hermeneutic repertoire, I designate what in phenomenology has been analysed as pre-linguistic sense formation. As Heidegger notably claimed, prior to any thematic,

⁴ In so far as this level is strongly discursive, one might claim an overlap with narrative. For such an account see Mackenzie (2014) and Brandon (2014). As already discussed in section 2, however, much depends on how one delimits narrative.

predicative expression, our experience is structured by what he called the “*as-structure*” (Heidegger, 2001). In order to enter my experiential horizon, something has to appear ‘*as something*’; that is, in a certain mode of differentiation and particularity – this piece of wood appears *as* a pencil etc. Throughout the various experiences sedimented in personal history, a generalized experiential horizon is gradually shaped and reshaped in a dynamic process that sediments to inherent anticipatory features of *how things appear to me*. Although I may exceptionally pay notice to this process when experiencing ruptures or frustrations of previous expectations, it is generally a process that takes place pre-reflectively (Tengelyi, 2004, p. 9). As such, the existential-hermeneutic repertoire is a generalized and embodied tendency to perceive things in a particular way. It is important to notice that, though primarily constituted through my socio-cultural embeddedness, my existential-hermeneutic repertoire is vitally coloured by my personal history. This is perhaps best illustrated by experiences at the margins of existence. For instance, in traumatic experiences where a particular event has such a significant impact that it narrows or arrests the interpretative repertoire in an entire domain, such as the sexually assaulted woman who perceives all flirtations *as threatening*, or perhaps inversely starts to see all expressions *as sexual*. An existential-hermeneutic repertoire is, then, a particular shaping of the very structure of intentionality of the person.

e) Affective register:

Finally, I would like to suggest what I call an *affective register* as a constituent of the historical self. Again drawing on Heidegger, I suggest that personal existence is always affectively attuned: what Heidegger with a neologism calls “*Befindlichkeit*” (Heidegger, 2001). Notoriously difficult to translate into English, *Befindlichkeit* refers to “how I find myself” in a particular situation. In German, the reflexive verb *sich befinden* refers both to *where I am* and to the affective question of *how I find myself to be*. According to Heidegger, because personal existence is in this way attuned [*Gestimmt*], I always find myself in a particular mood. My affective reality is not something I can escape, but the very way my existence announces itself

to me. Whereas Heidegger neglects to see the fundamentally embodied character of this kind of affective attunement, Waldenfels, among others, has recently attempted to articulate this dimension of existence through the notion of the *pathic* character of embodied subjectivity, designating receptive existence as our affective exposedness (Waldenfels, 2006, 2008).

Using the notion of an affective *register*, I draw on the music metaphor already implied in the notion of attunement (to be in tune with, to tune an instrument) to emphasize that our embodied existence is always affectively attuned to certain moods and resonates with the surroundings in a certain way. Though this affective register constitutes an actual personal reality, it is nonetheless still inherently socio-cultural in nature, as shown in the shifting affective atmospheres across cultures, i.e. the allegedly easygoing moods of Italians in contrast to the cold and closed off Northern European mode of relating. Inseparable from the development of the other four embodied existentials, a particular register of moods is gradually shaped as a result of both my socio-cultural embeddedness and my specific personal experiences. Once more, experiences at the margin of existence can be illustrative: For instance, a state of perpetual and arrested anxiety as a result of traumatic experiences (Van der Kolk, 2014), or how bipolar affective disorder is provoked by specific events in personal history (Blankenburg, 1964). An affective register, then, is the basic repertoire of moods that governs an individual's mode of resonance with the world and others, and is the result of sedimentations of both the individual's personal history and her broader entanglement in a culture.

Taken together, the embodied existentials should give us some impression of how personal history can sediment to form historical selfhood throughout ontogenesis. Arguably, none of these embodied existentials exhibit modes of personal being that depend on explicit narrative form, and I find it debatable whether any adequate narrative representation could possibly be given.

6. Closing remarks and unresolved questions

My aim has been to show that we need a rich concept of pre-narrative selfhood; one that accounts for how I am concretely individuated throughout my personal history in a way that is prior to narrative order. I have suggested that we construe such a notion of selfhood on an embodied level, applying a distinction between the historical and the narrative. From this point of view, my past is not only present in the present through narrative representations, but is also vitally alive in the shape of embodied sedimentations that subsist by being evoked or called forth through concrete, contextual interactions. Or stated differently: Sedimentations are preserved in *process form*, rather than *content form*. Understood in this way, personal history resembles a mosaic of experience and interaction modalities which taken together constitute what we with Merleau-Ponty might call the *style of being* or the *mental panorama* of the individual (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 187).

Without being able to go into a detailed elaboration, I would like to suggest the term *sedimented response registers* as a way of combining this mosaic of experience and interaction modalities to a unified concept. With the term *sedimented response registers*, I aim to describe our personal and pre-narrative being-towards-the-world as a result of the impacts on our personal life throughout ontogenesis. It is the characteristic style through which an individual engages in and resonates with the world, and which has a salient tendency to persist throughout shifting contexts, practices and relations, though also susceptible to modification and change of varying degrees. This is not to suggest a structure that is immovable and context independent, but, as Merleau-Ponty (2012) says of historical structures: '*History is neither a perpetual novelty nor a perpetual repetition, but rather the unique movement that both creates stable forms and shatters them*' (p. 90). Hence, though irreversible and perhaps even characterizable through its existential *Weight* (Landes, 2015), the sedimentation of personal history is fundamentally a dynamic phenomenon.

One issue which remains unresolved in the proposed distinction between historical and narrative selfhood is how to construe the relation between narrative and the embodied existentials. Giving an adequate account of this complex interrelation would, however, greatly exceed the scope of this paper, and a few indicative remarks will therefore have to suffice. Contrary to a tendency to perceive embodied experiences as having a pre-narrative quality making them “ripe for narrative”(Hutto, 2006; Kerby, 1991; Menary, 2008), I believe that this relation is better understood if we once more follow Waldenfels and understand the relation between embodiment and narrative as a continuum of increasing accessibility and alienness (Waldenfels, 1997, p. 35)⁵. Whereas some levels of psychocorporeal meaning easily flow into narrative order, others might resist and require systematic effort. Some will even evade narrative order altogether. Furthermore, we also need to consider the fact that some embodied experiences might actually *call* for narrative order, in the sense that the incomprehensibility of one’s own embodied state might appear so unsettling that it requires a narrative interpretation. As in the case-example presented in section II, we might speculate that what actually led the client to address the situation in therapy was because he was left with what Porter Abbott (2013) has recently termed an “egregious gap” in his self-narrative; that is, a moment of incomprehensibility that irritates the self-relation to such a degree that it calls for narration to re-establish a coherent narrative sense of self.

This understanding of the relation between narrative and embodiment should also be consistent with experiences from the field of psychotherapy where it is widely recognized that a range of psychological problems can be traced back to a lack of understanding of one’s own psychological states (i.e. bring one’s experiences to narrative order) and that therapy can help alleviate these issues through a process of coming to an understating of these states (e.g. Bateman & Fonagy, 2012). I suggest that narration play an indispensable role in this process, but that it is by no means always an easy task. Narrating the intricacies of my sedimentations,

⁵ I have developed this line of thought in detail in (Anonymous, 2016)

the historical mosaic of complex patterns of thinking, acting or feeling, is a rather demanding endeavour. It is a process that brings thematic order and coherence to that which otherwise exists only as a messy sedimented response register.

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