

# Where knowledge is incomplete, practice imperfect and experience only dimly known: The self and its narration

Hank Stam  
University of Calgary

## Abstract

After more than a century of institutionalized psychology, psychoanalysis, and social science more generally, the self has remained a resilient and popular topic. While eluding objectifications, it has nonetheless been continuously reformulated throughout psychology's history as a necessary standpoint that connects the psychological subject to the popular and commonplace discourses of everyday life. Like the return of the repressed, it continues to move through the concerns of contemporary cognitivism and neuroscience just as it is an implied *topos* in the social, developmental and applied subdisciplines of psychology. Contemporary movements that re-articulate a dialogical, social self, narrative traditions of the self or a situated, embodied form of the self, have in their recollection and revision of older intellectual traditions implicitly put the lie to contemporary functional accounts of self-like structures in psychology. Here I take up several strands of this discussion, particularly the issue of the "knowability," subjectivation and ethics of the self.

---

## Summary-Draft

In one of the many revealing moments in his autobiography, B. F. Skinner sums up,

Can I tell you now what I really think of myself? I can at least offer some objective evidence. In many of my notes I record my failures and mistakes, and the explanations are never excuses. In 1966: 'I do not admire myself as a person my successes do not override my shortcomings last night at dinner [a friend] said that I was the one person she knew had not been changed by success. This morning I thought of a quip: "Yes, I was impossible *before* I was successful.'" (1983, p. 410).

Considering such contradictions in psychology as revealing, I will take as my point of departure the question of knowledge production, self and practice. In particular, I want to explore the way in which psychology has managed the problem of *the self*. What we refer to when we refer to 'the' self is not a single problem but a class of problems. Galen Strawson argues that there is a consensus around several poles in debates on the self, by which he means "the high-metaphysical pole and the Ecologically-Embedded-and-Embodied Lebenswelt pole."

If we allow that it is not a pseudo-problem and hangs on a genuine set of concerns we confront a class of problems that includes but is not limited to questions of identity, language, embodiment and existence itself that permeates and gives meaning to contemporary psychology. This meaning is largely implied or assumed

since to address this question is to address a number of unyielding questions on the nature of persons, the specificity of those persons (can psychology speak for all?), and the foundations of psychological knowledge. The problem of the self among contemporary scholars of the self is that it is in part a question of what it is a person might become in particular historical circumstances. By that I mean, it is a problem or question not about abstract entities, properties or objects but about the particulars of lives lived. This is the non-trivial question of what we might become and do, or what our capacities and possibilities are, that can only be articulated in the local versions of talk that make it possible to express oneself in the first instance. It is this paradox of the universal and the particular which lies at the center of the problem of the self, that evades and eludes a single definitive answer while at the same time making it entirely unsuitable to the program of functionalism that has reigned in psychology for the better part of the last half-century. Yet without the implied position of a self-lurking in the background, much of our psychology would be nonsensical.

How do we come to know about a self and in what way does this conception of self matter? The standard answer to both questions is that whatever we take the self to be is articulated in and through narrative. This turns out to be a complex question for three reasons: one is that narrative means more than just story telling, or emplotment. It entails a thesis that includes the notion that narrative is the fundamental form in which we articulate the question who we are, and without that narrative we are unable to create the conditions from which to live an ethical life. Hence narrative is a necessary condition for an ethical life. Second, there is a distinction between narrative and life. That is, to what degree is it necessary to narrate the possibilities of life in order to live it? This question involves a disagreement about the nature of language and its relationship to narrative. It also involves an ancillary question about the relationship between embodied selves and the stories they tell. Does it matter just what kind of body I am/I have that narrates. Third, presuming we can settle all of the above, just what is the relation between a self and a narrative? Is the articulation of a narrative of a life lived the same as a self? What about the inconsistencies of memory? The self-serving nature of self-representations? The contextual nature of narrative accounts? And so on.

I discuss this in the context of Galen Strawson's claim that those who argue for a narrative understanding of lived experience are merely articulating a preference 'for them' and should not universalize this preference. The fallibility of narrative claims argues Strawson is good reason not to trust the claim that narratives necessarily describe lives, even if they are continually revised. He maintains that the "ethical narrativity thesis," the claim that narrative is essential to a well-lived life, is false. I will confront Strawson's claim with Ricoeur's notion of "narrative identity," the temporal projection of self-constancy, and Charles Taylor's "inescapable frameworks." The question of narrative is not, in the first instance, a question of telling an individual life story but the developmental one, namely how do we take up the narratives in which our lives are formed and transform these into individual stories. Finally, I want to turn to the problem articulated as that of "ethical violence"

by Judith Butler. For it is in “suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence” that we can counter a certain “ethical violence”. It’s the violence that demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same. Indeed, to take up the problem as Butler argues it, we are always dependent on the other for our recognition and that recognition is always partial, incomplete, and opaque.