Chapter 5 – Narrative identity and moral agency

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the purpose of self-realization, i.e., the best in human beings that is developed in the process of realizing oneself, was conceived in terms of moral self-development. The latter is a process culminating in the optimization of one's potential for moral agency, defined tentatively in the context of human practices as the expression of one's moral identity in actions. The concept of moral agency has already been introduced earlier in the discussion of cultural counter narratives (see §3.2.3). But the notion of moral agency, particularly in the definition advanced by this study, still awaits further consideration. This is provided in the current chapter. Importantly however, this study's understanding of moral agency rests upon a specific view of personal identity that needs to be addressed first. As already mentioned in §4.2.2, a narrative conception of identity seems most aptly suited to the goals and assumptions fueling this study. However, this choice of perspective, as well as the content of such a narrative conception still await explanation. These are the other aspects covered in this chapter.

The current chapter is organized as follows. First, I present an argument in favor of a narrative conception of identity (§5.2). This starts with a general introduction on the narrative view of identity (§5.2.1), followed by a consideration of the relation between narrative and life (§5.2.2), a discussion of the complex theme of narrative integration or unified selfhood usually assumed to be conditional for identity-constituting narratives (§5.2.3), and a justification of my preference for a narrative view in the context of aging (§5.2.4). Second, three selected philosophical interpretations of narrative identity are discussed and evaluated: the narrative self-constitution view by Schechtman (1996) (§5.3.1), a view on narrative identity as a social practice by Lindemann (2014) (§5.3.2), and a view on narrative identity in its relation to moral identity by Atkins (2008) (§5.3.3). Third, I discuss how Ricoeur's philosophy of identity (1992) offers the opportunity to relate the narrative conception of identity to moral agency (§5.4).

Fourth and finally, I draw together the arguments that result in my proposed definition of moral agency as *the ability to live well, with and for others, according to one's deepest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community* (§5.5).

5.2 INTRODUCING NARRATIVE IDENTITY

5.2.1 Life and self as stories

Among the varied interpretations of personal identity, the narrative view stands out for its rich and nuanced, yet practical conceptualization of what it implies to answer the fundamental question of personal identity: *Who am I?* Instead of engaging in metaphysical and rather abstract reflections about what it means for an entity (person or otherwise) to be identical at two distinct points in time (see for instance Parfit, 1984), the narrative view focuses on what is seen as a fundamental feature of human life, namely the ability and inclination to engage in *storytelling*. The narrative view assumes that there exists an intrinsic connection between our lives, our personal identities, and the stories we tell about ourselves. In the process of narrating, arbitrary and unconnected experiences and events are transformed into a cohesive configuration, with a plot and characters and an ideological setting that enables us to experience meaning (McAdams, 1993). By selecting and interpreting, omitting and highlighting, we present a more or less coherent image of ourselves that we communicate to others through our stories.

Among the most interesting exponents of the narrative view of identity in philosophy are Schechtman (1996), Ricoeur (1991, 1992), C. Taylor (1989), MacIntyre (1984), Thomä (1998), Atkins (2008; Atkins & Mackenzie, 2008) and Lindemann (2014). Additionally, McAdams (1993; McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006) has provided an interesting account of narrative identity from a psychological point of view, whereas Gubrium and Holstein (2000) discuss the merits of a narrative account of identity in a postmodern context. According to these narrative thinkers, human beings are "story-telling animals" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 216). That is, they cannot help but understand and present their lives and selves in the form of stories. Stories are thus granted a constitutive function in our personal identities. We answer the question who we are by telling stories about ourselves. We make our life choices and our actions intelligible both to ourselves and to others by telling stories. We integrate the things that befall us in our lives by weaving them into our stories. All these stories can differ depending on who is listening, on the context of telling, on our socio-cultural position or the life phase that we are in. Identity-constituting stories are thus dynamic and constantly in flux. Yet they also safeguard the sense of coherence

which we experience in our lives. That is, narratives enable us to see our lives in terms of more or less intelligible and connective unities. Following from this brief sketch, we can tentatively define the term narrative as a story (in the broadest possible sense) with a plot that brings together events and experiences we encounter in our lives, in a more or less ordered configuration that grants them intelligibility both in our own eyes as well as in the eyes of others.

As C. Taylor (1989), MacIntyre (1984), McAdams (1993) and many others emphasize, the narrative view presupposes an intrinsic connection between the coherence that narratives provide our lives with and our ability to experience meaning. It is assumed that the stories we tell about our lives order the events, experiences, relationships and feelings that make up our daily lives into a configuration that is meaningful to us. According to MacIntyre (1984), this is typically a story with a beginning, a middle and an end; but his ideas about the encompassing integrative function of narrative have been problematized (see §5.2.3). Disrupting events, such as illness or loss, tend to perturb our life stories. In response to such events, coherence needs to be restored by integrating the event into our narratives about ourselves, in order to experience them as meaningful again.

The narrative process of identity-constitution presupposes a dialogical, hermeneutic endeavor in which we interpret ourselves and our motivations and choices in light of our present and (aspired) future identity. This is a multivoiced process in which not only our self-evaluations, but also the way we relate to others and the way these others position us are implicated. A narrative, as MacIntyre (1984) reminds us, is never solely an individual creation. Instead, we are only the co-authors of our own life stories. This addresses the fundamental social character of narrative identity, but it also touches upon the theme of agency, since, as MacIntyre (1984) states, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" (p. 216).

An important advantage of a narrative conception of identity for my purposes is that it encompasses all aspects of the self of relevance to self-realization that have been discussed in §4.2.2. This makes the narrative view particularly well-suited to the reframed understanding of self-realization that this study aims at. *Reflexivity* is presupposed by the fact that in order to tell a story about our lives, we have to be able to distance ourselves from the immediacy of our experiences, look back at them and order them into a coherent narrative plot. Importantly, the intersubjective character of narrativity suggests that this reflexivity is not only a matter of the individual, but is something that arises in social interactions. *Temporality* and *continuity* are inherent in the very idea of life narratives because they stress the lifelong nature of the process of narrative self-constitution and focus on drawing connections between the temporal dimensions of past, present and future. *Embodiment* is implicitly covered by the

fact that the narrative view takes the lived reality of people as its starting point, instead of abstract metaphysical assumptions and hypothetical scenarios (Benson, 1994). The *social character* of the narrative view of identity has already been emphasized by observing that narrative identity-constitution is something that engages other people as well – as listeners and co-constituters of our identities. Finally, as explained in §5.3.3 and §5.4, the *ethical/moral aim* of the self is also covered in the views of narrative identity that have been selected for discussion in this study, notably the accounts of Atkins (2008) and Ricoeur (1992). These views emphasize the fact that our narrative identity mediates our moral identity, and thereby enables our moral agency, through which we express this moral identity in our concrete choices and actions.

A narrative conception of identity also conveniently provides opportunities to make a connection with the theory about cultural narratives discussed in chapter 3. By stressing the social processes influencing narrative identity-constitution, as well as the historicity of the self and the vulnerability of its narrative integration, the narrative conception of identity acknowledges the interaction between the individual self and its socio-cultural context. Ewing (1990) reminds us of the deeply social and culturally constituted character of the process of identity construction in itself: "[...] we can observe that individuals are continuously reconstituting themselves into new selves in response to internal and external stimuli. They construct these new selves from their available set of self-representations, which are based on cultural constructs" (p. 258). The insight that cultural narratives play a quintessential role in providing or denying access to identity-constituting resources is essential to understanding how our individual experiences of identity and meaning in life are enabled or impaired.

5.2.2 The relation between life and narrative

A particularly complicated question that has been much debated in narrative philosophy pertains to the relation between life and narrative. The most general way to formulate the connection between life and narrative is by saying that through telling stories (narratives) we bring a certain order to the experiences that make up our lives. In this process, we shape who we are by telling our stories. We understand our own past by interpreting it in narrative terms and we narratively project onto the future who we wish to become. Narratives enable us to place our different "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) in an intelligible framework. The famous saying by Kierkegaard (2007) that life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards, expresses some of the complexity of this narrative process of ordering our lives into a coherent and meaningful configuration that is capable of establishing our identity. Schechtman (1996) emphasizes the importance of the connection between life and narrative by stating that "the sense of one's life as unfolding to the logic of

a narrative is not just an *idea* we have, it is an organizing principle of our lives. It is the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours" (p. 113).

Yet the supposed connection between life and narrative also raises a lot of questions. Do we live our stories naturally as we tell them, or are our stories mainly *post factum* constructions, bringing artificial ordering to a life reality that is first experienced and then told? Do our identities coincide completely with the stories we tell about them, or are our narratives only partially capable of expressing who we are? Is telling stories an inescapable psychological mechanism that all human beings use to bring order and meaning to their lives and to understand who they are (McAdams, 1993), or is telling stories just an optional activity that we can also omit? Moreover, are lives and selves that are narratively configured somehow better able to safeguard a meaningful moral identity, as authors like C. Taylor (1989) have suggested, or are both the psychological, factual claim and the normative, philosophical claim regarding the necessary and inescapable relationship between life and narrative built on biased and faulty assumptions about how people (should) live their lives, as Strawson (2004) has argued?

Thomä (1998) has provided an insightful analysis regarding the relationship between life and narrative that covers some of these questions. He describes how on the one hand, the process of telling a narrative about ourselves implies that we become an "object" to ourselves. It requires the capacity to view one's life from a reflexive distance. On the other hand, we are, as subjects, deeply interwoven with the object of our story. We tell a narrative about ourselves, about our lives, and in this narrative we present what is important and valuable to us. This suggests that our lives and our narratives are both separate as well as intertwined. We might say that our narrative identity represents our own mediation of the relation between life and narrative, which is necessarily dynamic and flexible. Thomä perceives the activity of self-narration to take place in the so-called "autobiographic triad", a dynamic and dialogical structure which engages the narrator or the author of the story, the protagonist figuring in it, and the person leading the life that the story is about. But the relationship between the self as living person, narrator and protagonist on the one hand, and the actual story being told on the other hand, is highly complex.

Thomä argues that telling stories about our lives and selves not only helps us understand who we currently are, but that stories also express something about who we want to become. There is a constant tension between these different possible selves that our narratives try to reconcile. According to Thomä, we relate to this tension by engaging in a continuous narrative search for coherence, meaning and self-understanding. How we shape our identities and our lives fundamentally depends upon narrative structures, which suggests a strong connection between life and narrative. On the other hand, Thomä

reminds us not to forget that the protagonist, the main character of our stories, does not cover all relevant aspects of the person who is living the life that is told in the story. Correspondingly, life cannot be totally identified with narrative. The role and function of narratives in life thus has its limits. Nevertheless, narratives play an important role, since they can help us relate to the situations we find ourselves in and to integrate the unexpected existential events confronting us in our lives.

5.2.3 Narrative integration and unified personhood

Another particularly complicated and important question raised by the discourse on narrative identity concerns the notions of narrative integration and unified personhood, which are formulated by authors like C. Taylor (1989) and MacIntyre (1984) as ideals. For instance, MacIntyre (1984) claims that narrative identity presupposes "a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (p. 205). But is it necessary that we integrate our experiences into such a full, life-encompassing coherent narrative unity? While most authors do not deny the importance of a certain form of narrative coherence in one's life story (Strawson (2004) being one of the exceptions), the idea that our lives should, or even could, form fully coherent narrative "wholes", or that such unity is a necessary condition for experiencing a meaningful life, is rightly questioned. Thomä (1998) for instance, rejects the idea that life and identity could be captured in one overarching, coherent narrative that ascribes meaning to them. There are always elements in our lives escaping the context and structure of the narrative. We are not only agents, narratively structuring our lives, we are also what Ricoeur (1992) calls "patients" of action, beings "suffering" or enduring things beyond our own control as narrative agents (p. 157). This implies that our lives also contain many contingent forces that disrupt or overrule the narrative organization of our lives. The news of a sudden illness, accidents and other blows of fate, confrontations with injustice, et cetera, all confront human beings with the limits of their agential scope of control. It can be difficult to integrate these experiences into our narrative self-understanding.

This vulnerability of human lives to existential contingencies implies, as Mackenzie (2000) notes, that as far as we can speak about an integrated or unified self, this integration cannot be seen as static, although it does imply a certain stability. Instead, she argues that "the process of self-integration is an ongoing and dynamic process precisely because of inevitable tensions and inconsistencies within the self and because the different elements of the self are constantly undergoing transformation. The notion of stability does imply, however, that an agent who is persistently internally divided or whose sense of self is seriously fragmented cannot achieve the kind of reflective equilibrium

necessary for unified agency. By unified agency I mean the kind of practical unity necessary to deliberate, make decisions and choices, and act" (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 135). It follows from these reflections that our existential vulnerability as human beings which necessitates a flexible responsiveness in dealing with life's inevitable contingencies (see also §2.4.6; §3.3.4; §4.4.2) precludes our ever arriving at a full life-encompassing narrative integration. Instead, our existential vulnerability necessitates that we find an attitude that Thomä (1998) has called "*Selbstliebe* [loving self-acceptance]" (p. 180). This attitude is characterized by the acknowledgment that our lives consists of both elements we can consciously control and elements that need to be endured. An attitude of loving self-acceptance is intended to help us ask and answer the question which Thomä (1998) formulates as "*wie man mit sich selbst auskommt* [how one gets by with oneself]" (p. 174). This attitude implies a more modest and flexible interpretation of narrative integration. When interpreted in this way, narrative integration is seen as a process of continuing *attunement* to oneself: who am I, how do my choices and actions relate to who I want to be, both to myself and to others? How do I deal with the things that befall me? How can I retain or regain a sense of meaning in my life in the face of adversities and existential contingencies? As discussed earlier (§4.4.2), it is typically in moments of existential crisis, moments in which the coherence of our life stories is threatened, that such questions confront us most urgently.

M. Walker (1999a, 2007) has formulated another critique against a strong form of narrative integration. In particular, she responds to the views of C. Taylor (1989) on narrative unity, Williams (1981) on constitutive projects considered to be essential for a viable identity, and Rawls (1971) on the notion of a life plan. M. Walker's (2007) critical argument is that these type of ethics impose implicit standards of what a good life is on people whose life reality does not match these norms. These standards that are based on the archetypical "career self" associated with the dominant Western, male, white and affluent minority, fit "none of us at all times, and many of us at no times" (M. Walker, 2007, p. 22). The implicit norm of narrative unity can therefore be criticized for unjustly denigrating or dismissing the lives of people (often women or members of minority groups) unable to live up to its unrealistically high standards. Instead, M. Walker pleads for more sensitivity to the local and temporary forms of narrative integrity that characterize most people's life. A clarifying distinction drawn in this regard comes from Meyers (1989), who states that people direct and organize their lives both *episodically* and *programmatically* (p. 48). Whereas Meyers assumes that a coherent life plan is necessary to function as an autonomous agent, she also acknowledges that there are many situations in which it is not the overarching programmatic question *how do I want to live my life* that directs our actions, but the concrete considerations raised by a specific situation, which may differ from moment to moment.

Contrary to the strong views of narrative integration by C. Taylor (1989) and MacIntyre (1984) cited above, the notion of narrative integration that I would suggest, following the critiques by Thomä (1998) and M. Walker (1999a, 2007), allows for the possibility that our lives and selves are built of multiple storylines. Some of them cover large parts of our lives, others only short episodes. Some of our storylines fit together harmoniously, while others may be conflictive. None of these storylines encompasses the entirety of who we are, our lives "from beginning to middle to end" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 205). Still, in order to contribute to a viable sense of narrative identity, the different storylines that figure therein need to interact in such a way that enough coherence emerges to "get by with ourselves". Only then can narrative agents experience and present their life and self as a meaningful configuration. The resulting integration will always be a vulnerable, partial, fragmented and temporary constellation, but one that is nevertheless indispensable.

We seem to be confronted with a paradox then between the striving for some sense of order and coherence necessarily implied by the narrative conceptualization of identity on the one hand, and the fact that the result will always be an incomplete, partial and temporary unity on the other hand. Again, the conclusion should be that the process of narrative identity-constitution is never finished and always liable to failure. As Atkins (2008) puts it, "The unity of one's life is the product of a perpetual synthesis. However, narrative cannot guarantee a happy outcome and a coherent identity. It cannot guarantee coherent identity because it is a tensive, collaborative effort that can fail" (p. 77). At the same time, a sense of unified selfhood is indispensable if we want to realize our potential for moral agency. In Atkins' (2008) words "[...] unified selfhood is the condition of possibility for having a perspective from which to perceive, deliberate, and act. In other words, it is a condition of possibility of morality" (p. 6). I will return to this point in §5.4.

5.2.4 Narrativity and aging

The narrative view seems to have a natural affinity with the theme of aging. This affinity offers an extra argument in favor of the narrative conception of identity over other alternatives in the context of this study. The close link between the narrative view and aging can be recognized in the fact that a narrative perspective has found particular resonance in the field of aging studies in recent decades. A whole new field of scholarship has arisen that can be described as "narrative gerontology" (Kenyon, Clark & De Vries, 2001; Randall & Kenyon, 2001; Randall & McKim, 2008; Kenyon, Bohlmeijer & Randall, 2011; De Medeiros, 2014). In gerontological discourse, narrativity and aging are often connected because aging is associated with *retrospection*, looking back at one's life and drawing up the balance of one's experiences, typically in the form of

telling or writing one's life story. Classic approaches such as Erikson's (1997) notion of *ego-integrity*, and Butler's (1963) *life-review approach* draw upon the link between narrative retrospection and aging, as do many contemporary interventions developed in narrative gerontology (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer & Randall, 2011; De Medeiros, 2014). These approaches see reminiscence and memory as quintessential for our identity-constitution. It needs to be noted however, that this strong focus on reminiscence seems insufficiently capable of acknowledging other possibly important dimensions of the narrative view that will be discussed later. For instance, the focus on reminiscence problematically seems to presuppose a rather traditional, Lockean idea of identity that is based on the psychological continuity of memory. The narrative view of identity defended in this study on the other hand, presents a more embodied and socially embedded image. Also, the potential that narratives offer to connect our past, present and future selves is not given sufficient attention when the focus is solely on retrospection.

An important advantage of the narrative view in the context of aging is the fact that it presupposes a lifelong process of narrative self-constitution, thereby emphasizing the continuing potential for development in later life. This encompassing temporal scope is highly congenial to an approach of aging as a social-existential process of living in time (Baars, 2012a; see also §1.5). Moreover, it can be argued that the narrative perspective is particularly apt to address the dynamics of aging simply because, as De Medeiros (2014) emphasizes, "the more years one has, the more one has to draw on in the form of stories" (p. 18). In addition, the narrative perspective enables a study of aging from the perspective of meaning that offers a welcome alternative to more biomedical or sociological approaches in gerontology (De Medeiros, 2014).

The focus on meaning that the narrative view enables has two aspects that are relevant from the perspective of aging. First, as our lives extend through time (i.e., as we age), our stories also tend to get richer and more complex in layers of meaning. This process of enrichment ideally deepens our self-insight and our competency to navigate through our lives. As Randall (2011) puts it, as we age our stories are "continually thickening with potential for meaning" (p. 22). Cohen (2005, 2010) even suggests that the aging brain undergoes specific transformations that stimulate the drive to engage with one's life in an autobiographical manner, and thereby find new and creative ways to integrate painful or problematic experiences into the coherence of one's life story. Second, Randall (2011) suggests that the importance of meaning-making increases in later life, since "the older we get, the more meaning we require in order to cope with, and grow through, the losses and challenges (physical, financial, emotional) that later life can bring" (p. 24). The focus of the narrative perspective on meaning-making therefore suggests extra relevance when it comes to the integration of experiences of existential vulnerability, formulated as an important concern

for this study's perspective on self-realization (see §2.5.2). It is important to mention however, that the urgency of creating viable meaning-making narratives in later life also makes us vulnerable. It has been argued that older people may suffer from *narrative foreclosure* (Freeman, 2000, 2011), a term describing a situation in which older people feel that their life stories are ended or stagnate while they are still alive. This phenomenon problematically impedes their experience of their life as meaningful and can result in passivity and depression. Narrative foreclosure can have many possible causes, including, of course, detrimental socio-cultural positioning through marginalizing cultural master narratives (see §3.3.4).

A final important point to mention regarding the connections between narrativity and aging concerns the recognition of later life's potential for growth and flourishing, one of the points emphasized as an important condition for this study's developing account of self-realization. The narrative view is particularly well-suited to acknowledge this potential. Randall & McKim (2008) for instance, see the narrative engagement with oneself in later life as an important source of deepening wisdom and self-knowledge. Since the narrative approach focuses on the particularity and biographical richness of individual lives, it enables us to call attention to the uniqueness and value of the lives of older persons (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer & Randall, 2011). An added advantage is that the attention to unique life stories of aging individuals can serve as an antidote against the adverse effect of stereotyping cultural images such as decline narratives (see §3.3.2).

5.3 Three interpretations of narrative identity

In this part of the chapter, three distinct interpretations of narrative identity relevant to the context of this study are discussed. These three interpretations address, in succession, the views of Schechtman (1996), Lindemann (2014) and Atkins (2008).

5.3.1 Marya Schechtman – Narrative self-constitution

Schechtman (1996) defends what she calls a *narrative self-constitution* view, according to which "a person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative" (p. 93). Schechtman argues that philosophical accounts of personal identity have a tendency to conflate two matters that should be distinguished. These two issues are termed the *reidentification question* and the *characterization question*. The reidentification question is concerned with "how a single entity persists through change" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 7). It takes a "time slice" approach to identity, in which a comparison of the person at time 1 and time 2

decides whether the crucial features that enable us to speak of identity are present. The classic view of the person by Locke (1689/1979) counts as an influential example here, as does the contemporary approach of Parfit (1984). Schechtman (1996) criticizes the reidentification approach for its reductionist image of the person. She contends that according to strong commonsensical intuition, it is what characterizes persons as they live through time in the rich practical contexts of their daily lives that is essential to questions of identity, and not their features at isolated moments of comparison. What characterizes a person through time is addressed by the characterization question, which investigates "what it means to say that a particular characteristic is that of a given person" (Schechtman, 1996, p. 73). Schechtman's own narrative self-constitution view provides the opportunity to address this characterization question.

The narrative self-constitution view contends that it is characteristic of human *persons* (as distinct from human individuals or human beings) that they organize their experiences and thus their life in a narrative manner. This implies that people understand and interpret their experiences by placing them in the context of a self-narrative, a story about their life that is able to provide a meaningful and more or less coherent background for their actions, choices, preferences, et cetera. According to Schechtman (1996), "individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs" (p. 94). The framework of the narrative or narratives enables persons to distinguish between what is and what is not essential to who they are. In our stories about ourselves, we select and highlight those experiences, choices, actions and value orientations that contribute most to how we perceive ourselves. For instance, if I am a person who deeply values freedom and independence, my life stories may emphasize how I stood up against the authority of my father and my teachers when I was sixteen, how I adventurously traveled the world on my own during my twenties, how my marriage is characterized by the joining of two equal partners with their own incomes and social lives, how in parenthood I strive to stimulate my children's assertiveness and independent thinking, and how the cancer that struck me in my fifties did not manage to break my fighting spirit and zest for life. On the other hand, if I am a person who values solidarity and justice, or love and care, the narratives I tell about my life will expectedly accentuate rather different highlights and experiences.

Schechtman (1996) emphasizes, however, that not just any narrative qualifies to provide a person with a coherent and meaningful sense of identity. Narratives that can function as identity-constituting do have to comply with certain constraints. In particular, she distinguishes the *articulation constraint* (p. 114) and the *reality constraint* (p. 119). These constraints respectively emphasize that it should be possible to articulate our identity-constituting narratives

when required, and that they should sufficiently match both the objective facts of our lives and the narratives that others tell about us. Moreover, Schechtman claims that identity-constituting narratives should have a certain form that matches the *linear narrative structure* characteristic of conventional (life) stories (p. 96). They should also show sufficient *coherence* (p. 98). Mackenzie and Poltera (2010) argue that Schechtman's (1996) constraints are too restrictive. They think the formulated constraints unjustly assume that a self-narrative must be totally coherent and unified, and that a person must fully identity with it, for the narrative to play a role in someone's identity-formation. These demands neglect the possibility of internal conflicts, alienating experiences or emotional distance towards elements of the multitude of one's past or future selves. However, Schechtman defends her view by stating that her constraints do not presuppose that one is totally transparent to oneself, or self-consciously working on an autobiographical narrative all the time. Her account also allows for a variety of narrative styles. Moreover, she acknowledges that coherence and intelligibility are no "all-or-nothing" conditions, but rather matters of degree (Schechtman, 1996, p. 98). Her view does presume, however, that one has an implicit narrative organization of one's life story available. This account should be in accordance with reality and one should be able to articulate and clarify it upon request.

Besides the formal constraints that apply to identity-constituting stories, the narrative self-constitution view also presupposes that a person has certain capacities such as consciousness, reflexivity and the use of language, that are needed to form a narrative identity. Atkins (2008) has called the collection of such capacities *narrative competence*, which forms the basis of our narrative agency (Atkins, 2008; Atkins & Mackenzie, 2008). Following Schechtman's (1996) account, lacking the basic capacities that contribute to one's narrative competence would mean that one does not qualify as a (full) human person and a narrative agent. This is characteristic of infants, for instance. They still need to develop the capacity to distinguish themselves from their surroundings and to perceive themselves as continuing entities with a recognizable identity encompassing a past, present and future. Lack of essential narrative capacities can also be recognized in adults suffering from certain pathologies. Dementia or Alzheimer's disease are examples of such conditions that are acutely relevant in the context of aging. Schechtman (1996) states that "those who suffer from dementia are robbed of precisely the ability to pull their lives together in a coherent story; they become terrified and confused because they cannot put the pieces together" (p. 147). Although Schechtman's description of the anxiety and confusion that befall people who are no longer able to put the pieces of their lives together in a narratively ordered coherent configuration will certainly be familiar to anyone having encountered people with dementia, her theoretical claim that such people can thus not qualify as (full) persons anymore seems

rather bold. However, this claim may be influenced by the fact that her concept of the human person relies strongly on individual rational consciousness. In the next section, I present another view of narrative identity that takes a rather different standpoint in this regard.

5.3.2 Hilde Lindemann – Narrative identity as a social practice

Lindemann (2014) suggests a view of narrative identity that is able to recognize something often overlooked in mainstream philosophical accounts of identity: the fact that being human is an essentially *interpersonal* phenomenon. She contends that our personal identities are conferred upon us by the way others hold us in our personhood. Consequently, she describes our personal identity as a social practice which is expressed through narrative means. What Lindemann describes as the social practice of personal identity consists of four interrelated elements: 1) someone has the basic *mental activity* necessary to constitute a personality, 2) this personality is *expressed* in a human *body*, 3) this bodily expression is *recognized* by others, and 4) these others *respond* to the expression. Note that the first criterion is very basic and not modeled on the usual philosophical ideas of what it means to have a personality. For instance, speech or rational reflection are not necessary to this account. The ability to make eye contact or other non-verbal, bodily expressions of humanness can be sufficient to be held in personhood by others.

The focus on recognition and responsiveness in particular, distinguishes Lindemann's view from other narrative accounts of personal identity. Through our relations with other persons that are characterized by recognition and responsiveness, we are "initiated into personhood [...] and we simultaneously develop and maintain personal identities through interactions with others who hold us in our identities." (Lindemann, 2014, p. x). This initiation starts even before we are born, as a mother develops a relationship with her unborn child, and the process of holding continues after our death as long as "who we were" is preserved in the memories of those who have outlived us. Through our engagement in the social practice of identity, made up of continuous processes of recognition and response, a "narrative tissue" is created that expresses who we are, both to ourselves and to others (Lindemann, 2014, p. ix).

Narrative identity as a social practice involves both *holding* and *letting go*. By holding, Lindemann refers to a social process of weaving a network of stories around persons, stories that express who they are and what they mean to us. This weaving of storylines enables their admission to the realm of human personhood. The stories provide the resources for developing their identity, which is understood as a concretization of their personhood that is characteristically "them". Importantly, only beings equipped with the basic features of humanness can and should be held in personhood – the practice does not extend to

animals or insentient objects, even though they can be very meaningful to us. In principle, Lindemann (2014) argues that we are morally obliged to hold everyone in personhood who can so be held, since "letting them go casts them out of social and moral life, and to live outside that is to have no kind of human life at all" (p. 120). The same emphasis on the importance of social recognition and being granted a participant status in moral life is encountered here that was discussed earlier drawing on Honneth's (1995, 2008) ideas (§3.2.3).

Holding someone in personhood can be done both well and badly. Good holding implies supporting the person in shaping and maintaining an identity that leads to personal flourishing and valuable social relationships. It can be said that good holding is an indispensable condition for actualizing people's potential for moral agency as it is defined in this study, i.e., that holding enables people to lead *a good life with and for others, according to their own deepest aspirations and highest capacities, as full participating members of a society/community.* Bad holding, on the other hand, means that people are being held captive in narratives that are damaging or restrictive. This has been illustrated in our discussion of oppressive cultural master narratives in chapter 3.

No matter how essential holding is, in some cases, the social practice of identity may require what seems to be the opposite, namely, letting go. This applies for instance, when a certain identity from the past (e.g., the shy girl who hid herself in the closet whenever someone visited) no longer matches who a person currently is (e.g., the self-conscious mature woman who has overcome her extreme shyness, although she will never become an extrovert); it would be an injustice and morally faulty if we persisted in holding a person in their previous identity. But letting go may also be required when people have lost all mental characteristics on which their personhood could be based, such as when someone is in an irreversible coma or in the end-stage of dementia. Letting them go may then be the best possible way to honor our relationship with them.

In Lindemann's (2014) account, identity as a social practice need not necessarily involve the first-person perspective of an individual human agent. In some cases, people derive their personhood and identity solely by the fact that others hold them in it. Lindemann illustrates this with the example of her younger sister Carla who was severely disabled as a result of hydrocephaly and lived for only 18 months. Despite the fact that Carla never possessed any of the first-person competencies usually thought to be indispensable to qualify as an agent and acquire an identity (such as language, rational reflection or second-order desires), Lindemann argues that her sister was nevertheless held in personhood and invested with a specific identity from the third-person point of view of her parents, siblings and nurses. A similar argument could be made for people who do not yet or no longer possess relevant first-person competencies, for instance, infants and young children or people with cognitive disabilities such as Alzheimer's disease. The possibility that identity could be something

one-sidedly invested on human beings from a third-person point of view, without an active contribution from the person itself, distinguishes Lindemann's account from many other philosophical views of personal identity, including the narrative self-constitution view by Schechtman (1996). Although Schechtman's account of narrative identity acknowledges that narrative identity-constitution is not done in social isolation, her view relies strongly on a first-person agential perspective. The fact that Lindemann (2014) takes a different position makes her view particularly interesting when thinking about cases in which processes of senescing gradually compromise or diminish our ability to exert a first-person influence on the world, such as in cases of dementia.

As seen, Schechtman (1996) problematizes the personhood and identity of sufferers from Alzheimer's disease (§5.3.1). By contrast, Lindemann (2014) views such cases from a very different angle. She sketches a moving example of how caregivers hold a woman with Alzheimer's disease in the identity that she can no longer maintain by herself. This is perfectly imaginable when we realize that we start our lives in a very similar situation, argues Lindemann (2014): "When she was so young that she could not yet take part in the practice herself, [she] was held in personhood by the people who cared for her. Then, her ability to express frustration, pleasure, or other mental states gave her parents and other caregivers something on which to anchor their recognition and response – they engaged in a one-sided practice of personhood. Now that she once again lacks the capacity for active participation in the practice, she may still retain enough mental functioning to be held in personhood by the other persons who touch her life" (p. 155-156). Not only are sufferers of Alzheimer's disease held in personhood by others, they also keep contributing to the practice of holding themselves, albeit, as Lindemann terms it, "clumsily" (p. 125). Note that Lindemann's account enables us to see how the loss of self usually associated with dementia and related conditions can be nuanced if this self is perceived as a social practice of holding and letting go. Having (or being ascribed with) a self is of course a necessary condition for the moral ideal of self-realization. But naturally, it is not a sufficient condition. The question whether being held in identity by others when one can no longer do so by oneself, also offers people opportunities for self-realization, is too complex to be addressed in this chapter dedicated to the theme of identity. Some thoughts on this matter are given in the final chapter of this study, where the merits and problems of self-realization discourse in the context of aging are drawn together (see §9.4.6).

The value of Lindemann's view is that it draws our attention to social facets of the practice of personhood, without denying the importance of individual human agency and the first-person perspective for our identities. She claims that the archetypical image of the self-sufficient human moral agent overlooks other equally relevant aspects of our identities that emerge from the social practices of personhood, and identities in which we are continuously involved.

She contends that the "chosen" (representing our agency, free choice, will and self-determination, et cetera) and the "given" (representing our social context, relationships, the historical and cultural situation in which we are born, et cetera) should be granted equal weight in our understanding of what it means to have an identity, because "other things being equal, a self-understanding that values both these strands is better equipped to permit each of them to serve as a check on the excesses of the other" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 210). This standpoint makes her account highly relevant to the view of self-realization developed in this study, which aims for a similar position.

5.3.3 Kim Atkins – Narrative identity and moral identity

Atkins' (2008) account of narrative identity stands out because of the connection she draws between our narrative identity and our moral identity. Our moral identity is reflected in the value orientation that we appropriate (C. Taylor, 1989) but it is also expressed through our relationships with others (see §4.2.2). Our moral agency can be regarded as the expression of our moral identity in practice. This underscores the importance of Atkins' view, connecting narrative and moral identity, in the context of this chapter. At first sight, Atkins' account of narrative identity seems rather similar to Schechtman's (1996) narrative self-constitution view, since she states that "selfhood is, essentially, an activity of self-constitution and self-understanding articulated narratively" (Atkins, 2008, p. 7). However, Atkins (2008) criticizes Schechtman (1996) for placing too much weight on the first-person perspective and the self-preservation of the individual agent through time. By contrast, Atkins (2008) proposes a more relational and phenomenological account, based on Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) among others. Phenomenology emphasizes both our embodiment and our social embedding as fundamental to our identity. This implies that our identities are no individual creations, nor can they only be understood in cognitive or mental terms. The interventions or even sheer presence of others in our lives influence who we perceive ourselves to be. As Atkins (2008) puts it, "our interpersonal and social relations mediate our experience of ourselves and the world" (p. 44).

Atkins sees our identity as a narratively constituted, embodied continuity. She states that "Narrative identity is not simply a first-person report but a complex structure that interweaves first-, second-, and third-person perspectives into a semantic and temporal unity with a subject who attests to that identity and in doing so constitutes it as her own" (Atkins, 2008, p. 57). To this end, narrative competencies, i.e., late-developing cognitive, linguistic and communicative skills, are seen as indispensable, because they enable us to present and understand our lives as meaningful constellations of events, relationships, motives, circumstances, et cetera. According to Atkins (2008), our identity is best

understood as an embodied, practical "unity of first-, second- and third-person-al concerns" (p. 87). This is a complex formula that requires some elaboration. Traditional accounts of identity usually depart from the assumption that we qualify as human agents by virtue of our ability to take a *first-person perspective*. Through our ability to perceive ourselves as an "I", as exemplified in expressions such as "I can" or "I do", we see ourselves as the originator of actions. This agential self-perception is generally perceived to be a necessary condition for taking both practical and moral responsibility for our actions.

Besides the ability to take a first-person perspective, traditional accounts of identity also presuppose the ability to take a *third-person perspective*. This implies that we are able to reflect on our own choices, values and preferences as if we were seeing them from the perspective of a stranger, a third person outside ourselves. The (critical) evaluation of one's own motivations and choices that this perspective enables is traditionally believed to be essential to realize autonomous human agency (Frankfurt, 1971; C. Taylor, 1985a; see also §4.2.2, §6.2.2). The third-person perspective thus equips us to act as human agents by enabling us to make well-founded choices about our own actions and motivations. It also serves as a corrective to the self-deception that may characterize our first-person perspective.

Generally, narrative views of identity assume some form of dynamics between the first-person and the third-person perspective in the process of narrating one's life, although Lindemann's (2014) account suggests the possibility of a narrative identity being held by others in cases where a conventional understanding of the first-person perspective is absent. Traditionally, the first-person point of view represents the agent living the experiences in practice, i.e., the protagonist of the story, whereas the distance presupposed by the third-person point of view represents the narrator who organizes these experiences into a coherent plot. Atkins' (2008) view also stresses the importance of the first-person and third-person perspective in our understanding of identity. However, on two important (and interrelated) issues Atkins presents a different image of narrative identity that is of great relevance for the purposes of this study:

- First, whereas the traditional views situate our ability to take a first-person perspective in the cognitive realm of our mind or rational consciousness, Atkins emphasizes the constitutive role of our embodiment. In the phenomenological account, our first-person perspective is rooted in our embodied being, through which we are pre-reflexively related to and embedded in the world surrounding us. In this sense, Atkins' account seems to match well with Lindemann's (2014) perspective on the basic criteria someone needs to answer to in order to be a participant in the social practice of identity (see §5.3.2). For Atkins (2008), our third-person perspective is only possible by virtue of our pre-reflexive embodied being-in-the-world. Although our

narrative competency is regarded as quintessential in the creation of our identities, the emphasis on embodiment makes us aware that this competency is something we develop gradually. We are not born with narrative competence, and our ability to acquire it is rooted in our embodied relation to the world that precedes our reflexive and narrative self.

- Second, Atkins claims that if we want to fully understand the nature of our identity we should include a *second-person perspective* in addition to the first- and third-person point of view. This second-person perspective represents our concrete, practical moral relations to other people, which are rooted in our embodied being. For Atkins, the acquisition of a third-person perspective on ourselves is necessarily preceded by the second-person relations we are engaged in, as is expressed in the following quote: "to arrive at a conception of myself as a generalized other [i.e., the third-person perspective, HL], I must also be a concrete other for a concrete someone; that is, I must stand in a second-personal relationship. It is one's embodiment that lays the groundwork for this experience" (Atkins, 2008, p. 45).

Our second-person concerns describe our intersubjective moral engagement with other people. Similar to Lindemann's (2014) views discussed in the previous section, this implies that recognition and response to another person and their needs are seen as crucial for our identities by Atkins (2008) as well. Our recognition and responsiveness provide the fundamental basis for our moral relationships with other people. A resemblance can be found here with the work of philosophers like Levinas (2003) or Buber (1958). For them too, answering the second-person appeal of the other, forms the beginning of morality. What Buber calls an "I-Thou" relationship has a transcendent character that enables recognition of the invaluable particularity of the other person.

The aforementioned position suggests that the second-person perspective confronts us with a fundamental difference in relating to the world of objects and relating to another person. As Atkins (2008) underscores: "The presence of another person immediately affects the constitutive relations of my situation in ways that a mere object never does because I experience another person, not as an object, but as an agency within my world, a self-originating power of change within my world. The appearance of another person does not simply add to my perceptual field; he fundamentally alters the orientation of my world and the organization of my experiential field. [...] In this way my sense of own agency is affected by my interaction with another's" (p. 51). By engaging in second-person relationships, we honor what the other person means to us. At the same time we also establish and maintain our commitment to who we want to be ourselves. We principally open ourselves up to the possibility of being touched and transformed by our relationships with other people. A friend questioning my loyalty to her when I get too absorbed in my work calls for a practical response

to her needs, of course, but can (and maybe should) also make me reconsider my priorities in life and decide that I need to change something. Thus, how I choose to react to the second-person appeal that others make on me expresses something about the relationship between myself and the other. It also expresses something vital about who I am and who I strive to be. My moral identity and my relationships with others are thus intrinsically interconnected. This indicates that my relationships with others exercise an imperatival force on my identity-constitution, and not just on my actions.

In addition to the first-person dimension and the third-person dimension of our identity, the second-person dimension draws our attention to the fact that our identities do not solely depend on our own rational choice or our ability for reflection; they are also created *in* and *through* our relationships with others.

Consequently, by introducing the second-person perspective in her narrative view of identity, Atkins (2008) not only acknowledges the social dimension of identity (which is also already partially included in the third-person perspective), but its moral dimension as well. The second-person perspective expresses our ability to be touched by others in an ethical sense, to take an interest in their well-being and to feel the moral appeal to respond to their needs. It is in the process of developing our narrative identity then, characterized by connecting the first-, second- and third-person perspective, that we realize our agency as a moral agency.

5.4 From narrative identity to moral agency

So far, I have argued in favor of a narrative interpretation of identity, because such interpretation appears to be an auspicious match with the account of self-realization that is developed in this study. One element of this match pertains to the congeniality of the narrative view with the concept of the self that has been defended in §4.2.2. A second element of this match pertains to the opportunity that the narrative view offers of drawing a connection between the selves we strive to realize and, broadly defined, *morality*. Given this study's interpretation of self-realization as a process of moral self-development aimed at the optimization of our potential for moral agency (see §4.2.1), this is highly relevant.

So far two relevant positions regarding the connection between our identity and morality have been discussed. Both views assume that narratives play a vital role in constituting this connection. The first is the view of C. Taylor (1989), who claims that in order to know who we are, we have to be able to articulate our position relative to the good (see §4.2.2). Importantly, this need for articulation is one of the reasons that C. Taylor prefers a narrative conception of identity. He believes that it is only through articulating our motivations and

experiences in the context of a coherent narrative that we gradually arrive at a proper understanding of ourselves and what we regard as worthy moral goals to strive for. The second view that was discussed regarding the relationship between narrative identity and morality is that of Atkins (2008; see §5.3.3). Her addition of the second-person perspective as an intrinsic part of our narrative identity draws attention to another aspect of our moral identity, namely our relationships with other people. Both C. Taylor's and Atkins' accounts suggest an intrinsic connection between narrative identity and moral identity. However, a transition still needs to be made from these narratively mediated views of moral identity to moral *agency*. Tentatively, moral agency has been described so far as the way we express our moral identities in the context of human practices. Only by translating our identity-constituting orientation towards a certain good and our commitment to others into *actions* (or refraining from action), can we complete the process of moral self-development that represents our self-realization.

A philosopher who may help us understand the connection between human action, narrative identity and morality is Ricoeur (1991, 1992). His work is very rich in layers of meaning and its complexity far exceeds what can be discussed in the context of this chapter. Still, a discussion of some of his insights can enhance and deepen the understanding of the potential connections between narrative identity and moral agency. Ricoeur's view, even if it can only be discussed briefly and incompletely here, provides an invaluable bridge towards my own composition of a viable understanding of moral agency in §5.5. In his impressive set of studies combined under the title *Oneself as another*, Ricoeur (1992) engages in what he calls a "hermeneutics of the self". He provides a sophisticated account of what it means to have an identity. His account aims to escape the pitfalls of both the "exaltation" of the individual subject characteristic of the Cartesian cogito (and its modern heirs), and the "humiliation" of the subject characteristic of the Nietzschean anticogito (and its postmodern heirs) (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 4). By suggesting a narrative view of identity that does not presuppose any core essential self, while at the same time stressing the ethical necessity of constituting a narratively unified selfhood, Ricoeur tries to find a middle road between these two extreme positions.

In order to understand the value of Ricoeur's account for the concept of moral agency, at least four elements of his view need to be discussed in more detail: 1) his distinction between identity as sameness and identity as selfhood; 2) his thoughts about the relationship between the self and other; 3) the mediating role that narrative plays between the realm of action and the realm of ethics; and 4) his distinction between ethics and morality, including his definition of what he terms the ethical aim of human life.

1. *Sameness and selfhood*

    Ricoeur (1992) distinguishes two meanings in which the concept of identity can be used. The first is identity as sameness, or idem-identity. The second is identity as selfhood, or ipse-identity. Though these two meanings may sometimes seem to overlap, they are not the same. Identity as sameness provides an answer to the question *what* the individual is. By contrast, identity as selfhood provides an answer to the question *who* the person is. It is in particular Ricoeur's concept of identity as selfhood that enriches our understanding, since it introduces an interpretation of the moral self that, though often overlooked in philosophical discourses of identity, is very congenial to the interpretation of self-realization.

    Identity as sameness and identity as selfhood overlap at the component that Ricoeur calls *permanence in time.* He argues that permanence in time can be understood in two distinct ways, one corresponding to identity as sameness, the other corresponding to identity as selfhood. The first meaning of permanence in time is what is manifested if we speak about someone's character, defined by Ricoeur (1992) as "the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (p. 121). These dispositions may be expressed in the habits a person has acquired, that have gained a certain "sedimentation" in the form of character traits. It is through these dispositions that the continuity of our identity through time is safeguarded. People recognize us by our character, and are surprised if we act "out of character". What is manifested in this meaning of permanence in time is comparable to what Schechtman (1996) describes as the characterization question (see §5.3.1). With the second meaning of permanence in time we leave the realm of sameness and enter the realm of selfhood. This second meaning describes a very different concern than the continuity underlying our character. This concern is symbolized by Ricoeur in terms of "keeping one's word" or *self-constancy* (p. 118). Whereas the permanence of character (sameness) can in principle be described in generalizing terms (for example, someone is a shy person, or a quick-tempered one), the permanence of self-constancy (selfhood) requires an individual answer to the question *who do I want to be?* This question is suited for the concrete practical situation, and answering it calls for practical wisdom rather than the application of moral principles. Our answer is uniquely personal and cannot be generalized.

    According to Ricoeur, our narrative identity is characterized by a constant dialectic between sameness and selfhood. Character and self-constancy stand in mutual connection and are constantly renegotiated in relation to one another. For example, frugality may be a defining feature of my character, something I value and something others recognize me by. But if I have made a promise to help refugees in need (a commitment that I need to honor in order to maintain self-constancy), I may be prompted to re-

consider my own habit of frugality and generously spend my money on food and blankets. Both my habits and my ethical commitments are identity-concerns that deserve to be honored and taken seriously, but in the one case, we are dealing with identity as sameness (character) whereas in the other case, we are dealing with identity as selfhood (self-constancy). The required means to reconcile possibly conflicting tendencies in the dialectic between selfhood and sameness into a coherent identity is *narrative*. In our example, this may lead me to refine my narrative self-presentation in the sense that while I am normally characterized by frugality, I will set this habit aside when a cause I consider worthy requires so. Note that these reflections on self-constancy take us from the realm of moral *identity* to the realm of moral *agency*, and illustrate the intrinsic connection between the two. Our answer to the question who we are requires not only the ability to articulate our position in relation to what we regard as good (our moral identity), but also our commitment to live up to this moral orientation and act upon it in concrete practical situations (our moral agency). If we lack either the motivation, the ability or the opportunity to live up to our own ethical commitments, our self-constancy – our identity as selfhood – is inevitably compromised. From my perspective of self-realization as directed towards optimizing our ability for moral agency, this is a relevant observation. It emphasizes how important it is to be able to formulate purposes that represent a good life for us, as well as live up to these ideals in concrete practical circumstances. If there are causes that impede this striving, either internal or external to ourselves, these need to be overcome for us to realize the best within us and lead a good life.

2. *Self and other*

   In Ricoeur's view, what we conceive as the good life is not an individual, isolated construction, but a dynamic ideal we share with others. We are engaged with other people in a continuing striving for a good life. Through our relationships with other people, we inevitably enter a moral field in which we aim to realize the good life in interaction with them. This is not to say, of course, that all our relationships are automatically morally valuable or beneficial. There are many possible relationships that are in fact morally detrimental to the people involved, such as relations between the oppressor and the oppressed, or relationships characterized by indifference or neglect. What is difficult to imagine following Ricoeur's account, however, are relationships that fall outside of any moral field. Identity as selfhood presupposes that there is always something at stake in our relationships with others. What is at stake, for instance, are the different forms of recognition (which can be either present or absent) that have been described by Honneth (1995, see §3.2.3). The crucial role of recognition was also encountered in the views of narrative identity by Lindemann (2014) and Atkins (2008)

discussed above (see §5.3.2 and §5.3.3). Ricoeur (1992) too, uses the term recognition to characterize what is manifested in what he terms the dialectic between selfhood and otherness, another of the fundamental "dialectics" involved in his hermeneutics of the self (p. 296).

It follows that our relationships can never be morally neutral and, consequently, neither can our identities. Our relationships make us enter a domain in which we strive for what Ricoeur (1992) has called the "ethical aim": "a good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (p. 172; see below). Ricoeur assumes that when identity as selfhood is manifested, the other cannot be viewed as something external, simply that which is different or distinct from the self. Instead, otherness should be viewed as something that is constitutive of identity as selfhood. As Ricoeur (1992) puts it, "the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other" (p. 3). In his account of self-constancy or identity as selfhood, Ricoeur uses the analogy of friendship to describe the ethical commitment rooted in our identities that underlies the dialectic between the self and other. This seems to point to an Aristotelian inspiration. For Aristotle (*Ethica Nicomachea*, VIII-IX, 1155a1-1172a15) friendship was a very important virtue. In particular, the analogy of friendship underscores that for Ricoeur (1992), our selfhood is an essentially relational phenomenon.

Consequently, Ricoeur emphasizes that the faithfulness to our promises that constitutes our self-constancy is both a faithfulness to ourselves and a faithfulness to others. After all, self-constancy assumes that we are engaged in relationships with others to whom we feel dedicated enough to keep our promises. In this sense, Ricoeur rejects the suggestion that a concern for our own identity is a selfish concern. Instead, a concern for the other is always included in our concern for our own identity (as selfhood or self-constancy). What can be learned here from Ricoeur is that our identity is necessarily a moral identity, not only because of the fact that we position ourselves in relation to the good (C. Taylor, 1989), but also because our identities, in their very structure, presuppose an ethical engagement with the good of others that prompts us to act in a certain manner. According to Ricoeur (1992), the other is not an "externality" outside us, but is instead "enjoined as the structure of selfhood" (p. 354).

3. *Narrative as mediator between action and ethics/morality*
    Narrative, for Ricoeur, has a mediating function between the realm of human action and the realm of ethics and morality. Actions are ordered and interpreted by placing them in a narrative configuration by a process that Ricoeur (1992) terms *emplotment* (p. 141-142). Through emplotment, we can integrate our actions, together with contingent events, characters, motivations, et cetera into a coherent narrative that provides the foundation for a

unified experience of the self. As said in §5.2.3, a meaningful sense of identity requires a certain ordering of facts and events, which Ricoeur (1992) calls *concordance*. On the other hand, he acknowledges that our lives are in fact characterized by many forms of *discordance*, elements that challenge the continuity and coherence of our identity as sameness. Both the discordant and concordant elements of our lives need to be brought together in a narrative structure. It is this narrative that provides us with a sense of who we are, a viable sense of identity that we can rely on when we navigate our lives. As Ricoeur (1992) puts it, "It is indeed in the story recounted, with its qualities of unity, internal structure, and completeness which are conferred by emplotment, that the character preserves throughout the story an identity correlative to that of the story itself" (p. 143).

Importantly, it follows that narrative integration or unified selfhood are, in Ricoeur's view, not so much a transcendental condition of identity that describes an essential "core" of our selves or a life-encompassing whole – the view that rightly raises critique (see §5.2.3). Instead, narrative integration points towards a dynamic, unstable and fluctuating, but nevertheless indispensable pragmatic condition for upholding a moral identity, which in its turn is required for exercising moral agency. The importance and indeed the indispensability of a notion of unified selfhood is expressed by Ricoeur (1992) through the following rhetorical question: "How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole, if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?" (p.158).

Through our narratives, we also articulate what constitutes a good life for us. From this emerges an orientation towards certain ends that we identify with and want to strive for. Our narratives not only hold a retrospective importance, by ordering experiences after the fact, they also prospectively help us orient ourselves towards future goals. This orientation implicitly forms the guiding principle in how we choose to act in the present, which further underscores the mediating role of narrative between action and our ethical commitments. As Ricoeur (1992) puts it, "Is not the choice among several courses of action a choice about ends, that is, about whether they conform more or less closely to an ideal in life – conform, that is, to what each person considers his or her aim of happiness, his or her conception of the 'good life'?" (p. 174). By virtue of its connections with our conception of the good life, a narrative can therefore never be ethically neutral, but functions as "the first laboratory of moral judgment" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 140). We learn to distinguish between right and wrong, and formulate what is valuable to us, what we want to remain true to, by constructing our narrative identity through telling stories about our experiences and relating them to who we wish to become. For instance, if I have made a mistake which I regret, this

causes tensions with my narrative self-image, because my action is not in sync with how I want to be. This situation calls for narrative repair. By articulating (to myself or to others) what I have learned from my mistake and how I hope to avoid it in the future, I accomplish three things: I restore the coherence of my self-image that was threatened by my mistake, I transform a disruptive experience into a purpose for the future, and I communicate this intention (either to myself or to others, depending on who I address my narrative to) which helps me keep it. Through our narratives then, we communicate our ethical commitments to others and, in dialogue with them, participate in a lifelong continuing common striving towards a good life. For Ricoeur (1992) it is the *narrative* that enables us to make connections between the *descriptive* level of our actions and the *prescriptive* level of morality and ethics (p. 170).

4. *Ethics, morality and the "ethical aim"*

Ricoeur makes an important distinction between the dimension of *morality* and the dimension of *ethics*. Usually, in moral philosophy the term ethics is simply understood to describe the study of morality, or ethics and morality are even treated as synonyms. But Ricoeur takes another perspective. Morality as he understands it represents the domain of rules, principles and rights that is dominant in many contemporary approaches to moral philosophy, for example, in Kantian deontological perspectives. Ethics, on the other hand, pertains to our common concern to lead a good life. This matches the teleological Aristotelian tradition in moral philosophy. As Ricoeur (1992) puts it, ethics is concerned with "that which is considered to be good" while morality pertains to "that which imposes itself as obligatory" (p. 170). It is ethics, then, that is concerned with the aim of a fulfilled or well-accomplished life, the best at stake in self-realization (§4.3).

Ricoeur regards the ethical teleological dimension to have fundamental primacy over the moral dimension. He emphasizes, however, that our ethical concerns and considerations should pass through the sieve of norms and principles of morality in order to ensure their validity. This serves to test the actions and intentions that flow from our ethical concerns for their moral permissibility. Someone advancing an image of the good that involves morally illegitimate actions such as the oppression or extirpation of other people (as in the case of dictatorial regimes with an ideologically driven ideal of "racial purity", for instance) can be argued to hold a deluded image of a good that is not worthy to guide people's lives.

Moral norms, celebrated by the deontological tradition in moral philosophy, should be granted their rightful place according to Ricoeur, but they cannot have the final word. The teleological "ethical aim" is granted primacy. In cases where moral norms lead to impasses in solving concrete moral dilemmas in practice, we should take recourse to the Aristotelian tradition

of practical wisdom, searching for the course of action that best contributes to the realization of the ethical aim of human life. This ethical aim is formulated by Ricoeur (1992) as "a good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (p. 172). However, what this broadly and rather vaguely formulated ethical aim of human life means for a particular human agent in a particular situation needs to be decided in the context of concrete practices, which have their characteristic internal good. This concretization requires what Ricoeur (1992) calls "moving back and forth between far-off ideals, which have to be made more precise, and the weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of the choice of a given life plan on the level of practice" (p. 177). Again, narrative seems to play an important role, since it is through narrative that we are able to make our choices and actions intelligible in light of our ethical commitments to what we perceive as the good life.

According to Ricoeur (1992), there is a sort of "hermeneutic circle" between our ethical aim of a good life and our concrete daily life choices in the context of human practice, where our actions should ideally be in accordance with our overarching ethical aim (p. 179). This requires a constant interpretation and reinterpretation of ourselves, of what we want to be faithful to. Narrative is, as previously observed, the perfect mediating instance for this hermeneutic activity of the self. The first part of the phrase Ricoeur (1992) uses to describe the ethical aim, *the good life*, is "for each of us, the nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievements with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled" (p. 179). This formulation shows interesting parallels with how the purpose of self-realization is described in this study in §4.2.1. It was argued there that the purpose of self-realization involves our "highest aspirations" and/or "best capacities" (compare with Ricoeur's "ideals and dreams"), the successful realization of which contributes to fulfilling the "best" that is within us (compare Ricoeur's "fulfilled or unfulfilled life"). The good life presupposes our identification with certain moral ideals, values, or aspirations, an identification that everyone is called to make on the level of their own individual life, against the background of a social and cultural horizon of meaning that provides the resources.

The second part of the phrase describing the ethical aim, *with and for others*, points towards the fundamentally social and interpersonal character of the striving for a good life. In Ricoeur's view, the good life can only be good if we acknowledge that it is a life of shared goods that can only be constituted and realized through our relations with others, which he characterizes with the term *solicitude*. This term expresses a relationship of mutual concern for each other, which is founded on the fact that human beings are intrinsically vulnerable beings. Solicitude is modeled on an Aristotelian understanding of friendship, in particular the non-instrumental, non-hedonic type of friendship in which we strive with and for others for a good life. Friendship,

argues Ricoeur, fills a lack at the root of human existence; we need each other to fulfill ourselves. This implies a mutual, symmetrical relationship between the self and other, which does not grant primacy to either one. In this sense, Ricoeur's account differs from both individualistic "egological" interpretations and from ethical accounts such as Levinas' (2003) who presumes an asymmetrical primacy of the other. It is through the mutuality of solicitude, which describes our relationship to others under the pretext of the ethical aim, that we become aware of both the irreplaceable value and the inescapable existential vulnerability of human existence. According to Ricoeur (1992), "Solicitude adds the dimension of value, whereby each person is irreplaceable in our affection and our esteem. In this respect, it is in experiencing the irreparable loss of the loved other that we learn, through the transfer of the other onto ourselves, the irreplaceable character of our own life. It is first for the other that I am irreplaceable" (p. 193).

The third part of the phrase describing the ethical aim, *in just institutions*, brings the ethical aim to the societal plane. It gives voice to the intuition that a good life needs to be shared with all members of a historical community, and should be safeguarded by just institutions, individual-transcending structures of living together that ensure equality for all. Thus, in the formulation of the ethical aim the individual, interpersonal and societal dimension of the good life are intrinsically connected.

5.5 CONCLUSION: COMPOSING A DEFINITION OF MORAL AGENCY

In this chapter a selection of narrative accounts of identity has been discussed, that may serve to clarify a specific aspect of the interpretation of self-realization developed in this study, namely its *purpose*, which I have defined as the *optimization of one's potential for moral agency* in §4.2.1. Let me start with a short recapitulation of the relevance of the discussed views for our purposes.

Schechtman's (1996) view put us on a specific track that emphasizes how our personal identity should be seen as a process developing through time, which defines how people can be characterized. Narrative was presented as the means through which we constitute this evolving identity. Schechtman's focus on the characterization question is very valuable in drawing connections between self-realization and aging. After all, it emphasizes that narrative self-constitution is a lifelong process that connects the different temporal dimensions of existence. This also facilitates ascribing the potential for growth and development not only to youth, but also to later life. However, the fact that her account relies on a rather cognitive and rational image of the agent was argued to be problematic. Lindemann's (2014) account helped us overcome this limitation by offering an alternative image of personal identity as a social practice. Her view

draws attention to something about our identities that appears to be so self-evident that it tends to be overlooked: the fact that we cannot form or maintain a personal identity without the contribution of others. If we disregard the social dimension of our identity-constitution and the way our self-narratives are connected with the narratives of others, we risk succumbing to precisely the problematically atomistic, self-sufficient image of the human agent that this study's reframed account of self-realization wishes to leave behind. Atkins' (2008) view too, is sensitive to the social dimension of identity. Her account emphasizes the pre-narrative foundation of our human being, rooted in our embodiment. But even more importantly, Atkins' view enables us to see the intrinsic connection between our narrative identity and our moral identity, by bringing into high relief our intersubjective engagement with others, through the introduction of the second-person perspective in addition to the first-person and third-person perspectives that figure in other accounts of identity and agency as well.

Ricoeur's (1992) view helps us raise the connection between narrative identity and the ethical or moral dimension of our lives to a different level. By introducing the distinction between sameness and selfhood he draws attention to an aspect of identity that could not be addressed through Schechtman's (1996) characterization question. His focus on selfhood and self-constancy underscores the importance of what we want to be true to in our lives. Besides drawing attention to our identification with certain values, aspirations or capacities that we regard as best or highest, Ricoeur (1992) also emphasizes that self-constancy prompts us to live up to our ethical commitments in the practice of daily life. This extends the scope of attention to include not only moral identity but also moral agency. Moreover, his formulation of the ethical aim of human life also emphasizes the crucial connection between the individual, social and societal dimension that is indispensable in our understanding of a good life. Ricoeur's distinction between ethics and morality is highly conducive to this study's developing view of self-realization, because it offers an account of ethics as fundamentally concerned with a good life, without taking a polarizing position towards more deontological or procedural accounts. Moral rules and principles are important, but they should be embedded in the broader ethical aim of human life. The resulting inclusive account of ethics provides a welcome match with the interpretation of self-realization that this study advances.

The philosophical positions discussed in this chapter have assisted me in composing a definition of moral agency as the purpose of self-realization – in this study's interpretation of that concept. Although moral agency is often understood as the ability to act according to the principles and rules prescribed by morality, I conceive it in a broader manner. Drawing on several intuitions and arguments encountered so far in my search for a viable reinterpretation of self-realization, I suggest a definition of moral agency as an ability that unites four distinct components: 1) to lead a good life 2) with and for others, 3) ac-

cording to one's deepest aspirations and best capacities, 4) as full participating members of a society/community. Let me consider the four elements of this definition in turn.

1. First of all, making the phrase *a good life* central to my definition of moral agency expresses that this study's view of self-realization is rooted in an understanding of ethics as fundamentally engaged with leading a good life, instead of focusing on rules, principles and procedures for legitimating actions (see §1.6.1). As seen, the good life also has a prominent place in Ricoeur's (1992) formulation of the ethical aim of human life. Defining moral agency broadly as the ability to lead a good life, however, raises the question *what a good life is*. The insights discussed in this and the previous chapter suggest that this is not for the individuals to decide by themselves alone. This is because in the first place we live our lives as fundamentally socially embedded creatures, as argued in §4.2.2 and also confirmed by Lindemann (2014; see §5.3.2). A good life is a life shared with others, who have a say in what is perceived as "good". In the second place, ascribing value to something presupposes a cultural horizon of meanings that transcends the individual realm, as also argued by C. Taylor (1989).

   On the other hand, my conceptualization of self-realization requires that maximal space is offered for individual appropriation and differentiation of the candidate goods that are available in a given social, cultural and historical context. Self-realization in circumstances of late modern moral pluralism requires that people can formulate and strive for their own deepest aspirations and best capacities. Being subjected to a conceptualization of the good that is not self-appropriated will impede one's chances for self-realization. Therefore, we should be very reticent about prescribing or imposing specific conceptions of the good as normative for everyone. The important exception to this reservation is, of course, that the individual appropriation of a value orientation is itself stimulated as necessary and valuable. This suggests a normative position in which a life with a self-appropriated orientation towards the good (however its concrete interpretation!) is perceived as better than a life without such an orientation. This normativity is legitimated in my view by the thought that it is a very fundamental feature and longing of human existence to aim for a good life, and that lacking any orientation (no matter how implicit it remains most of the time) is likely to undermine such striving.

   Importantly, the criterion of self-appropriation of what is good does not necessitate an atomistic image of the human moral agent as fully self-sufficient. What we conceive as good in life can only truly qualify as a good if it can be intersubjectively legitimated. The insights in this chapter have highlighted that narratives play a quintessential role in this regard, because

they help us to articulate what we regard as good, and communicate this with others.

2. The second part of my definition of moral agency *with and for others*, borrows from Ricoeur's (1992) formulation of the ethical aim, and underscores the social dimension of the self to be realized in self-realization. My formulation of moral agency thereby aims to provide an alternative to the late modern account of the purpose of self-realization which, as we have observed, tends to disregard this social dimension (see §2.2). As we have seen, Ricoeur emphasizes that the role of the other in our identities is not restricted to concrete other people external to ourselves, but that the perspective of the other is also integrated in our own identities. Emphasizing that moral agency not only assumes that we strive for a good life *with* others, but also *for* others, implies that the best in human beings (the purpose to be realized in self-realization, see 4.2) includes the ability to engage with the good of others, and through this engagement realize our own fulfillment.

The phrase *with and for others* is not only meant to do justice to the social dimension of the self in self-realization, but also to its moral dimension, which has been discussed by Atkins (2008) through her introduction of the second-person dimension (§5.3.3), and by Ricoeur (1992) through his notion of solicitude (§5.4). Importantly, it seems to be this moral dimension that confronts us with both the inalienable value and the intrinsic existential vulnerability of our existence. In this sense, the *with and for others* part of my definition of moral agency repairs one of the shortcomings that I observed in the late modern discourse of self-realization, namely, its inability to meaningfully integrate the dimension of existential vulnerability (see §2.2, §2.5). Lacking the objectifying distance of the third-person perspective or the agential self-sufficiency of the first-person perspective, the second-person ethical commitment to answer to the appeal of others makes us aware of the fact that we may hurt or damage other people, or be hurt or damaged by them. We also realize that our commitment and engagement with other people makes us vulnerable to losing them – and thereby losing something of highest value in our lives, a part of ourselves. Paradoxically, the ability to lead a good life with and for others thus includes acknowledging the limitations of our own scope of agency, the insight that we are not only acting but also suffering beings (Ricoeur, 1992).

3. The third component of my suggested definition of moral agency, *according to one's deepest aspirations and best capacities*, refers back to the discussion of the purpose of self-realization in §4.2.1, notably to Gewirth's (1998) distinction between aspiration-fulfillment and capacity-fulfillment. The phrase expresses that it is crucial for our moral agency that we have the opportunity to form the type of deep aspirations that are constitutive of our identities. As I have discussed in the current chapter, I propose an account in which

these identity-constituting orientations towards certain purposes and values in life are formed along narrative lines. A strong parallel can be seen between Gewirth's notion of identity-defining aspirations, Schechtman's (1996) self-constituting narratives, and Ricoeur's (1992) notion of self-constancy, for example.

However, as I have observed in my discussion of the work of Ricoeur (1992), moral agency not only assumes that we develop aspirations and commitments that guide our identity-formation, it also presupposes that we have the capacities to live up to them. Translating our identity-constituting orientation into concrete choices and actions presupposes that we possess those fundamental qualities that are expressed in my definition of moral agency by the phrase *best capacities*. As has been discussed, opinions may differ on what our best or most crucial capacities are when it comes to self-realization. Gewirth (1998) has a preference for reason as a distinctive and superior human quality, whereas others criticize what they regard as a rationalistic bias, and suggest capacities of care and sympathy as more fundamental. The views discussed in this chapter seem to suggest a central place for what Atkins (2008) has called narrative competence, as conditional for articulating our ethical commitments, and for Ricoeur's (1992) notion of self-constancy as our capacity to be true to our word. These seem quintessential capacities in order to realize what is best in ourselves and actualize our potential for becoming a moral agent.

4. The fourth and final component of my definition describes an indispensable condition that needs to be fulfilled in order to optimally realize moral agency. The phrase *as full participating members of a society/community* is inspired by Lindemann Nelson's (2001) views about repairing identity damage and thereby enhancing people's moral agency (see §3.2.4). This repair necessitates restoring people's opportunities to strive for the lives they value and the purposes they appropriate. Enhancing moral agency assumes, however, that people are given maximal opportunity to participate in society as full and equally valued members. Without such opportunity for participation, we can expect that people experience problems with freely appropriating purposes that are valuable to them, or forming the relationships with others that are crucial to their flourishing.

Full participation relies on recognition on all three levels that were distinguished by Honneth (1995, see §3.2.3). Moreover, it also presumes the availability of what Ricoeur (1992) in his ethical aim calls "just institutions", which should "govern the apportionment of roles, tasks, and advantages or disadvantages between the members of society" (p. 200). Depending on these advantages and disadvantages, our chances for full participation in society are decided. Thus, to realize moral agency, everyone should ideally

be given the support they need to articulate what constitutes a good life for them, and be given the opportunity to live up to what this requires.

Optimally realizing one's potential for moral agency as defined above is not an easy task. It requires enduring efforts on the part of the individual (which may fail), it requires the availability and accessibility of needed resources (which is certainly not self-evident), and it requires advantageous social conditions (but our relations with others are fragile and vulnerable to loss and break-ups). Self-realization emerges, once again, as a precarious striving which is susceptible to both contingent and existential vulnerabilities. However, it is the promise of a good life inherent in Ricoeur's (1992) formulation of the ethical aim that prompts me to keep underscoring the value of striving to enhance our opportunities for moral agency, even though they may never be completely fulfilled.