3

Narrative Self-Constitution

3.1 Introduction

Over the coming chapters, I will argue that thinking of our identities as narratives provides a compelling way of understanding both the roles that personal bioinformation can play in the development of our identities and our significant identity-related interests in whether and how we encounter this information. These arguments, however, are not the focus of this chapter. The aim here is to establish the picture of identity on which they will be based. This picture will draw on philosophical accounts of narrative identity, specifically ones that hold that our identities – understood as practically oriented self-characterisations – are constituted by our own first-person accounts of who we are. I will not seek here to provide a fresh or unassailable defence of this particular way of conceiving of identity but to lay the groundwork for my arguments to come. Existing philosophical theories of narrative self-constitution do not themselves claim a particular role for personal bioinformation as I have defined it. The task of this chapter is to outline the key features of these theories that will provide the conceptual and normative foundations for my own subsequent claims about the ethical significance of information access. The tasks at hand here are, first, to establish what an identity narrative is; second, to explore what makes a narrative self-constituting; and third, to make clear what is at stake in being able to construct such a narrative.

Narrative theories of identity are found in a number of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology,[1] and sociology.[2] My own arguments will be grounded in a family of conceptions of narrative self-constitution discussed in the philosophical and bioethics literature. This overview draws principally on the work of Marya Schechtman – most prominently

[1] For example, Gergen and Gergen 1988; Hardcastle 2008.
[2] For example, Giddens 1991; Somers 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108652599.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the arguments developed in her 1996 monograph *The Constitution of Selves* – and Catriona Mackenzie and her co-authors, including Kim Atkins, Jacqui Poltera, and Mary Walker.[3] It also owes much to arguments developed by David de Grazia, Hilde Lindemann, Alasdair Macintyre, Charles Taylor, and David Velleman, amongst others.[4] These accounts variously build upon insights from, amongst other sources, philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, cultural studies, feminist theory, and personal memoir. And they are distinctive amongst much philosophical writing on identity in that they are chiefly concerned with the ethical, social, and practical implications of what makes us who we are. They are notable for focusing upon why identity matters to us from a first-person perspective, rather than with abstract metaphysical questions relating to numerical identity and the reidentification and persistence of persons. They emphasise the evaluative and interpretive parts played by our identity narratives in our lives, agency, and experiences and the qualities exhibited by narratives that are best equipped to play these parts. As such, they offer the kind of theoretically detailed and, crucially, *normative* conceptions that are well-equipped to contribute to a robust explanatory and critical framework for interrogating the nature and scope of our interests in constructing our identities. The authors whose work I discuss below inevitably diverge in their views on some specifics of what makes a narrative one that constitutes an identity and what role such a narrative plays in our lives. It will not be possible to resolve these disagreements here, and I will not seek to do so. My aim is to capture core commonalities, highlight relevant divergences where they are salient to my later arguments, and address questions and concerns insofar as this is needed to establish firm foundations for my proposals in subsequent chapters.

3.2 Identity Narratives

What, then, is 'an identity narrative' according to the accounts to be reviewed here? The first thing to recall from previous chapters is that in this enquiry I am concerned with identity understood in the

[3] Schechtman 1996 and other works as cited below. In her more recent work, Schechtman has offered a more circumscribed role for self-narrative than she does in *The Constitution of Selves*, allowing that it still serves to illuminate practical and ethical questions about selfhood but less so questions about personhood and the numerical identity of persons, see Schechtman 2014.

[4] These authors' publications are cited in context below.

characterisation sense, as that which captures someone's qualities as a particular individual – what they are like and which features make them *them*.[5] This sense of identity is associated with the idea of selfhood and I shall use the language of self and identity interchangeably in what follows. As noted in the previous chapter, the conception of identity to be explored here is not merely concerned with monadic, inert descriptions or classifications. I shall use 'identity' to refer to the whole of who someone is, in all their multifaceted complexity and through changes occurring over the course of their lives. I am interested in the ways that issues of identity engage our first-person concerns – that is, where it matters to us what we are like, who we have been, and what we will come to be, and where we have something at stake in how well our identities serve us in helping us to make sense of and navigate our lives. Self-characterisation in this context is also intimately connected to our practical and moral existence. Our identities are implicated in 'practical and evaluative' aspects of our lives: the judgements we make; the reasons we have for doing or feeling one thing rather than another; and determinations of which behaviours are expressive of who we are and which actions we may appropriately be held responsible for.[6] These practical and evaluative aspects will be key to the implicit normativity of the particular conception of narrative identity to be described below.

As the phrase 'narrative self-constitution' suggests, narrative theories do not hold that our identities are preordained, awaiting discovery. One's self-narrative does not merely describe who one already or essentially is. Rather, we constitute, or *create*, our identities through developing and revising our own interpretive accounts of who we are and by enacting these accounts.[7] The answer to the question of what makes me *me* lies in the contents of and particular perspective supplied by my own narrative of who I am. And my characteristics are *mine* because, and to the degree to which, they contribute to and shape this narrative. Schechtman expresses the core contention of her account as follows, '[o]n this view a person's identity (in the sense at issue in the characterization question) is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers'.[8] And Mackenzie elucidates a related conception when she says that '[f]rom the person's perspective they not only define who she is, what she stands for,

[5] Schechtman 1996.
[6] Mackenzie 2007, p. 264.
[7] Schechtman 1996.
[8] Schechtman 1996, p. 94.

and what makes her life meaningful, but they also shape the interpretive framework in terms of which she understands and engages with the world'.[9]

Perspectives differ on the extent to which our identity-constituting self-narratives can be understood as our 'life stories'.[10] However, these narratives are emphatically not intended to be understood as straightforward, comprehensive catalogues of everything that happens to us. Instead, narrative is the form in which we understand who we are and the means by which we interpret, prioritise, and bind together the constituent parts of our lives.[11] Narrative is the means by which we ascribe intelligibility, meaning, and significance to these constituents. This binding together and meaning-making takes place across two dimensions: between the various aspects of an individual's characteristics at any one time and over the course of our lives.[12] With respect to the latter, Mackenzie explains that, '[b]y appropriating our past, anticipating our future actions and experiences, and identifying or distancing ourselves from certain characteristics, emotions, desires and values, we develop a self-conception that brings about the integration of the self over time'.[13]

These processes of synchronic and longitudinal appropriation and integration are the means by which one's identity narrative is constructed. I will take it in what follows that there is a one-to-one correspondence between someone's identity and their self-narrative.[14] If there is a sharp enough and irrevocable bifurcation – not merely change or evolution – in someone's account of who they are, such that they cannot make sense of or access one part from the perspective of another, this might be taken to be a breakdown of identity for practical, psychological, and ethical purposes, if not metaphysical ones.[15] I will return below to examine the matter of narrative integration and coherence more closely.

[9] Mackenzie 2007, p. 267.
[10] Cf. MacIntyre 1985.
[11] Schechtman 1996.
[12] Mackenzie 2007.
[13] Mackenzie 2008a, p. 12.
[14] This one-to-one correspondence is not universally accepted. For example, Hilde Lindemann argues instead that we have a 'tissue' of narratives (Lindemann 2001) and Velleman holds that our lives are made up of many episodic stories, not one long extended account (Velleman 2005a). However, the absence of interactions between these successive or parallel accounts presents some challenges in making sense of the practical roles these authors suggest they fulfil.
[15] Schechtman 1996.

First, I want to look at more basic questions, including those concerning what populates our identity narratives, and how they come about.

Narrative Contents

I will look first to the 'contents' or threads from which a self-narrative is constructed. Schechtman refers to these collectively as our 'characteristics' – they are the narrative constituents that characterise us.[16] Schechtman describes these as comprising our 'actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits … [and] other psychological features'.[17] Mackenzie widens this list to include 'certain commitments, cares, beliefs, motivations, values, principles … religious beliefs, political convictions … and personal attachments'.[18] We may unpack further items implied by this list, so that it includes relationships to others; the social, professional, and relational roles that we occupy, such as being a parent, a friend, or a teacher; and the social groups to which we recognise ourselves as belonging, such as our gender, ethnicity, faith, profession, nationality, or class. Crucially, each of the characteristics listed here is only part of someone's identity to the extent that it is included in and contributes to their self-narrative, not just because it occurs in the course of their life or because – or not solely because – other people ascribe these to them.[19] In the next chapter, I will argue that the absence from many existing theories of explicit mention of traits and experiences relating to our bodies, (dis)abilities, cognitive and physical capacities and dispositions, and health represents a notable omission from these lists of narrative contents and underestimates the extent to which our narratives are those of inescapably embodied beings.

Narrative Construction

This brings me to perhaps the most distinctive feature of identity-constituting narratives – they are not comprehensive or 'crude, literal

[16] Schechtman 1996, p. 73.
[17] Schechtman 1996, p. 73.
[18] Mackenzie 2007, p. 266.
[19] There are different views about whether traits or motives that the subject herself does not acknowledge are part of her identity-constituting narrative. For example, in *The Constitution of Selves*, Schechtman has suggested that they are not. Meanwhile, Mackenzie and Poltera have suggested that characteristics that comprise part of our identities (which may include unacknowledged ones that give rise to characteristic patterns of behaviour) can be distinguished from those with respect to which we are not autonomous (Mackenzie and Poltera 2010).

reproductions' of everything that one does and experiences.[20] Nor are they just descriptions of ready-structured proto-narratives presented to us by the world. In Schechtman's terminology, they are not cut from 'wholecloth'.[21] Instead, our self-narratives are constructed from disparate, chosen, and mutually informing components. They are *selective and interpretive*. As authors of our narratives, we edit their contents by 'appropriating' or excluding characteristics and experiences.[22] These are not merely collated but organised and modified by the interpretive activity of narrativity itself. The construction of a self-narrative is a practice of meaning-making – or attempted meaning-making – amongst the bewildering richness of our experiences and attributes. It is an attempt to integrate constituent elements into a more or less intelligible whole.[23] The individual's existing, remembered, and projected account of who they are provides the interpretive framework or 'lens' through which they judge the meaning and relevance of potential narrative contents.[24] The interpretive and integrative nature of self-narratives may be seen as operating in three directions: drawing together the contemporaneous experience of self at any one time, while also interpreting past behaviours and experiences retrospectively, and anticipating future plans and experiences prospectively. As Schechtman says, 'creating an autobiographical narrative is not simply composing a story of one's life – it is organizing and processing one's experience in a way that presupposes an implicit understanding of oneself as an evolving protagonist'.[25]

Schechtman suggests that an apt metaphor here is one of cooking, rather than compiling. The meaning and significance of narrative elements are flavoured and shaped by their role in the overall narrative of which they become a part. One key implication of this is that the 'same' characteristics will play different roles in each of our identities depending on the rest of our narrative. A second implication is that not all of our characteristics occupy equally pronounced or enduring positions in our own narratives. Their prominence admits of degrees, and the extent to which we are identifiable with particular characteristics varies accordingly.[26]

[20] Schechtman 1996, p. 125.
[21] Schechtman 2012, p. 75.
[22] Schechtman 1996, p. 125.
[23] Walker 2019.
[24] Schechtman 1996, p. 142.
[25] Schechtman 1996, p. 142.
[26] Schechtman 1996, p. 142.

Recognising these interpretive and prioritising aspects of our self-narratives helps explain the concern expressed in the previous chapter – that we are at risk of missing something important if we conceive of identity and identity-related interests solely in terms of discrete self-descriptors, rather than as related parts of a wider story.

As this suggests, an identity narrative is something that an individual *does* – that they create, sustain, modify, inhabit, and enact through their interpretations, choices, and actions – not just a cluster of 'static and passive features' that they *have*.[27] Emphases differ, however, as to whether 'narrative' refers solely to a reflective and interpretive activity or includes the evolving product of such an approach.[28] In what is to come, I will sometimes refer to it as a product. There are perhaps sound reasons to avoid this construal, to the extent that this might erroneously imply that our identities are metaphysically distinct entities, separable from our activities of making sense of ourselves or that our self-narratives can in some sense be 'completed'. The role and integration of particular elements within our narratives are never more than conditional, responding to and changing with new experiences and priorities.[29] Our identities evolve and change accordingly. In what is to come, I will follow Genevieve Lloyd in recognising that narrativity entails the 'perpetual weaving of fresh threads'[30] and Charles Taylor in holding that 'our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we *are*, because we are always changing and *becoming*'.[31] Nevertheless, the distinction between activity and entity should not be overstated. Recognising the intertwined nature of these two aspects will prove useful when I come to consider how bioinformation may be a tool in the activity of narrative self-constitution without necessarily ending up as *part* of someone's identity.

Relational Narrativity

Our identity narratives are not developed through solo introspection. They are inescapably socially and culturally embedded. We do not and cannot work out who we are in isolation from others and the stories they tell about us and about themselves and third parties. There are several interlinking senses in which this is the case with respect to both the

[27] Schechtman 1996, pp. 142, 117.
[28] Cf. Velleman 2005.
[29] Mackenzie 2008a.
[30] Lloyd 2003, p. 144.
[31] Taylor 1989, p. 47 (emphasis in source).

practice and skills of self-constitution and the contributing materials. Perhaps, most obviously, our relationships and relational roles are likely to supply features and plot lines to our accounts of who we are.[32] Then, at a more fundamental level, the norms and evaluative standards we use to make sense of ourselves are relationally developed, as are the conceptual frameworks of selfhood.[33] Taylor describes our communities as supplying a 'common language' with which to reflect upon and articulate what it means to have an identity, what we value, and what kind of selves we want to be.[34] Similarly, Schechtman holds that self-constitution entails the adoption of a culturally shared – and perhaps culturally specific – template of what it is to live 'the life of a person'.[35]

When it comes to 'colouring in' this template, Lindemann suggests we draw, for better and worse, on shared, culturally pervasive tropes or 'master narratives' containing 'stock plots and character types'.[36] These inform our understanding of the kinds of people it is possible to be. Macintyre, meanwhile, observes that 'the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity', and that 'asking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in constituting narratives'.[37] This is echoed by Taylor's characterisation of self-constitution as 'fundamentally *dialogical*'.[38] We cannot work out who we are by introspection alone. Lindemann and others suggest that those close to us may play a role in helping 'hold' us in our identities, by recognising our stories or helping us piece them together when our own capacities to do so falter.[39]

The stories others tell about who we are can then have a significant impact on our own. They can reflect and reinforce those we tell about ourselves, but they can also constrain or undermine them. Taylor observes that we 'define [ourselves] always in dialogue with and sometimes in struggle against the identities our significant others want to recognise in us'.[40] As Lindemann pithily puts it, 'who I am depends to

[32] Mackenzie 2007.
[33] MacIntyre 1985. Parallels may be observed here with relational views of autonomy, in which it is argued that socialisation and personal relationships are necessary in order to develop the competencies for being autonomous. See, for example, Barclay 2000.
[34] Taylor 1989, p. 35.
[35] Schechtman 1996, p. 95.
[36] Lindemann 2001, p. 72.
[37] MacIntyre 1985, pp. 221, 218.
[38] Taylor 1992, p. 33.
[39] Lindemann 2016; Mackenzie and Poltera 2010.
[40] Taylor 1992, p. 33.

some extent on who other people will let me be'.[41] Others may reject particular aspects of our own stories – perhaps refusing to recognise that we are chronically unwell when our illness is not readily visible. They may even reject our story as an intelligible account of a person's life altogether – for example, by refusing to recognise the possibility of non-binary gender identity. Non-recognition of identity can be seen as a harm in itself. It is not merely a form of disrespect.[42] If we are prevented from enacting our self-characterisations, our abilities to claim and feel at home in these and to continue to constitute them through our commitments and conduct are likely to be seriously hindered.[43]

First-Personal Narration

In what follows, I will take it that our identities are constituted by our own, subjective narratives.[44] This emphasis on first-personal narration stands in contrast to, for example, suggestions that our own stories have no greater claim to authority in defining who we are than those of others. Not all narrative identity theorists prioritise the first-person perspective. For example, Françoise Baylis holds that our identity lies at a point of 'equilibrium' between how we see ourselves and how others see us.[45] The view of self-constitution I will adopt recognises that our narratives are inescapably relationally forged in all the ways described above. Moreover, if we are to comfortably inhabit our self-conceptions in a social world, these must, in Schechtman's terms, be 'in synch with the view of one held by others' and to some extent recognisable and intelligible to them.[46]

Nevertheless, allowing for these important provisos, I will take it that a first-person perspective is needed to fulfil the kinds of evaluative and perspectival functions noted above. This perspective best captures the phenomenology – the 'what it is like' – of selfhood and of 'living a human life from the inside'.[47] Furthermore, we ourselves are usually best positioned to capture the kinds of experiences and traits that are core to who

[41] Lindemann 2001, p. 99.
[42] Taylor 1992.
[43] Lindemann 2001.
[44] DeGrazia 2005.
[45] Baylis 2012, p. 118. Hilde Lindemann argues that our own stories of what we are like carrying greater weight but do not *necessarily* have precedence over those others tell about us. The legitimacy of each must be adjudicated by external 'credibility' criteria (Lindemann 2001).
[46] Schechtman 1996, p. 95.
[47] Mackenzie 2008a, p. 14.

we are, that motivate us, and without which we would feel alienated. This does not mean we cannot be mistaken about which of our characteristics are most typical or prominent – but other people are no less likely to be biased or fallible in this regard. It is also important to resist too great a concession to the role of others' perspectives in identity constitution given that these perspectives could be oppressive or harmful.[48] As Lindemann suggests, we have most at stake in making the best of who we are.[49] Perhaps, most importantly, the construction of a self-narrative is, as described above, an interpretive undertaking in which the roles and significance of the various constituents of our stories are understood in relation to the whole and each other. As Mary Walker explains, '[c]haracteristics are part of the same narrative when they are mutually influential and interdependent, each contributing to the context through which the others are interpreted'.[50] Interpretation of this kind requires a perspective from which these connections can be understood, felt, and made – the perspective of the subject who experiences them all.[51] And, if our identity-constituting narratives are to provide the foundations for our practical judgements and agency, then they must be accessible and intelligible *to us,* the people who judge and act.

3.3 Two Objections

I will turn shortly to consider further features that are considered necessary if a narrative is to be identity-constituting. Before doing so, I want to address two possible lines of objection to the picture outlined so far. The first of these is the charge that this picture reflects neither most people's experiences of self nor their approaches to self-understanding. For example, Jonathan Glover observes, '[m]ost of us do not spend our lives on endless landscape-gardening of the self'.[52] John Christman raises the more pointed objection that the requirement that our identities have a narrative structure – particularly where this entails exhibiting thematic unity and an orientation towards a particular goal – is both implausible and too demanding for many people.[53] Meanwhile, Galen Strawson asserts that it is simply empirically false to assert that everyone

[48] Christman 2015.
[49] Lindemann 2001.
[50] Walker 2019, p. 82.
[51] DeGrazia 2005.
[52] Glover1988, p. 132.
[53] Christman 2004.

experiences their lives or thinks of themselves in the form of a continuing, thematically linked narrative. He himself professes instead to have only discrete short-lived 'episodic' self-experiences,[54] maintaining that 'I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with a form, or indeed as a narrative without a form .... Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.'[55] These kinds of objections suggest that narrative theories paint an unattractive and unrealistically rationalist, onerous, or self-absorbed picture of self-constitution, one that depends on the privilege of time and leisure for self-examination, as well as a particular kind of psychological disposition.

These lines of critique would be serious if they met their mark, but there are several reasons to see them as misplaced.[56] Chief amongst these is that they set too high and literal a threshold for what counts as a self-narrative, imagining that these must resemble polished literary texts.[57] Narrativity in the present context involves something less formal and less teleological than the construction of a novel with a well-defined plot or achieving the neat arc of a conventional memoir. It is better understood in terms of the pursuit of connections and meaning in one's life, making sense of its multiple threads as part of a whole, and experiencing one's self as extended over time and through change. I will return below to consider what might be made of Strawson's purported episodic experiences. However, as noted above, identity development is, crucially, not about isolated navel-gazing or self-absorption. And the selection and interpretation involved need not be – and is perhaps only rarely – an entirely conscious or rationalised endeavour. It does not entail that we constantly mull over our pasts, nor think of our identities as stories. Rather, identity development takes place through the business of living, feeling, and acting. The connections we forge between the parts of our stories are rooted as much, if not more, in felt significance, practical concerns, emotional resonance, and how we act and interact with others than in intellectual analysis.[58] As Schechtman explains, '[narrative] is the lens

[54] Strawson 2008, p. 430.
[55] Strawson 2008, p. 433.
[56] There is insufficient space here to do justice to the detail of the responses of narrative identity to these kinds of objections. For further discussion, see Mackenzie and Poltera 2010 and Schechtman 2007.
[57] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010.
[58] Mackenzie 2008a.

through which we filter our experiences and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours'.[59]

A second line of objection, also lodged by Strawson, is that composing experiences and characteristics into a narrative allows for the wholesale invention of fictitious or confected identities and militates against, rather than promotes, the development of an authentic or reliable account of who one is.[60] Several interconnected responses may be made here. First, it is not obvious how we could make sense of all the different aspects of our lives *without* prioritisation and interpretation.[61] Excessive inclusivity and richness of detail or lack of an interpretive overlay would preclude rather than support clarity of self-understanding and the development of a useful interpretive framework. Second, if we understand our narratives as *constituting* our identities rather than as describing us, then we simply do not have more basic, or more 'true' pre-existing identities with respect to which our self-narratives could be found inauthentic.[62] It is, of course, possible that we can be fantasists, self-deceiving, or mistaken about or oblivious to which characteristics are prominent in our lives. Narrative theories recognise this and incorporate constraints that preclude identity narratives from incorporating unfettered invention, misappropriations, and misinterpretations, or at least preclude them from being self-constituting. These are not arbitrary limits but ones that are required if identity is not just to be something we *have* but something that functions as part of our practical lives. I will turn to consider these limits now.

3.4 Limits on Identity-Constituting Narratives

Schechtman proposes two 'constraints' on identity-constituting narratives. The first is that we must be capable of articulating them. The second is that they must 'cohere with reality'.[63] The 'articulation constraint' requires that we are able to explain the connections between our self-narratives and their constituent parts in ways that are intelligible to ourselves and to others. This does not mean that we must perpetually and self-consciously recount stories of who we are or that every detail must always be transparently present to our consciousness.[64] But the

[59] Schechtman 1996, p. 113.
[60] Strawson 2008.
[61] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010.
[62] Schechtman 2012.
[63] Schechtman 1996, p. 119.
[64] Schechtman 1996, p. 114.

connections between our experiences, actions, beliefs, and values, and their places in our narratives must at least be *amenable* to 'local articulation'.[65] That is, we must be able to explain why in a given circumstance we feel or act as we do and how these elements fit into 'an intelligible life story with a comprehensible and well-drawn subject as its protagonist'.[66] Schechtman's justification for the articulation constraint is grounded in the fact that being able to understand the roles played by the characteristics that comprise our narratives in the context of our wider story is key to our abilities to make sense of who we are, what we care about, and the motives from which we act. For these reasons, as described further below, this kind of intelligibility is key to realising the capacities and experiences of practically and morally engaged beings.

The second constraint is that our self-narratives 'cohere with the basic contours of reality'.[67] The reality in question here is not facts about identities or selves – this would be circular – but about the world, including facts about ourselves as organisms and actors. Specifically, it requires that our narratives do not seriously depart from events and states of affairs as others experience them. The grounds for this constraint are that such departures would make it difficult to maintain accounts of who we are that are intelligible to and recognisable by others and thus hinder our abilities to operate in the world, particularly the social world. Schechtman argues that '[t]he failure to be tuned into basic facts about the world one inhabits – and hence the failure to inhabit a world in common with one's fellows – interferes with the capacities and activities that define the lives of persons'.[68]

A realistic self-narrative does not, however, entail comprehensive inclusion of all such facts. And departures from reality that threaten identity can be distinguished from those that may reasonably be accommodated in a functioning identity. In the first category are gross and 'recalcitrant' mistakes about matters of fact or interpretations of facts, such as the belief that one is immortal, or delusions about being under surveillance.[69] Minor errors of observation or memory that we could readily revise, if brought to our attention, do not compromise our identities. Similarly, Schechtman suggests that minor interpretive differences – for example, seeing life through an optimistic lens – far from being obstacles to intelligibility, are

[65] Schechtman 1996, p. 114.
[66] Schechtman 1996, p. 114.
[67] Schechtman 1996, p. 123.
[68] Schechtman 1996, p. 122.
[69] Schechtman 1996, p. 123.

intrinsic to the idiosyncratic interpretive nature of our narrative endeavours.[70]

These two constraints are, in one form or another, broadly endorsed by many proponents of a narrative conception of identity. And they, or a version of them, will play a central part in what I will say later about the role of personal bioinformation in contributing to identity narratives that remain coherent and intelligible in the context of our lives, which are not only socially embedded but also inescapably *embodied*. In the literature, these constraints are joined by a varying selection of cognate qualities, which are also variously proposed as hallmarks or necessary features of identity-constituting narratives. For example, Schechtman herself requires that identity-constituting narratives are integrated and internally consistent such that they 'hang together' in a way that makes them intelligible.[71] Mackenzie invokes the idea of 'stability'.[72] She also, in common with Walker and Poltera, emphasises the importance of the 'unity' and 'integration' of our self-narratives and the requirement that they exhibit some degree of 'coherence' while also displaying – from our own and others' perspectives – 'intelligibility'.[73] Lindemann, meanwhile, holds that our identity narratives must be 'credible'.[74] Of course, neither in everyday usage nor in the narrative identity literature do articulability, unity, integration, intelligibility, stability, realism, credibility, and coherence mean precisely the same thing or carry the same connotations. I cannot do justice to every possible nuance and point of departure between the various uses of these terms by the authors whose accounts I draw on here. Instead, I will sketch out the cluster of qualities that will be pertinent to what I go on to say about the role of personal bioinformation in our narratives, before turning to address the crucial question of *why* these qualities are important.

Narrative Coherence

I will take it that an identity-constituting self-narrative is one that is intelligible as a whole to the person to whom it belongs, even if it is not immediately readable and intelligibility takes some work. Our narratives must also be relatively coherent and integrated, not in the sense of being

[70] Schechtman 1996, p. 123.
[71] Schechtman 1996, p. 97.
[72] Mackenzie 2008a.
[73] Mackenzie 2008a; Mackenzie and Poltera 2010; Walker 2019.
[74] Lindemann 2001.

a neat, locked-in tessellation of parts but in the sense that these different parts inform and shape each other. This then implies a kind of unity. Unification involves more than a cluster of characteristics that happen to be subsumed within a single life story but less than an insistence on a perfectly homogeneous whole. Unity requires that many threads contribute to one story. The meaning and significance of these threads are defined by their role in that single story and their relationships to each other, even as these threads are gained and lost and these relationships shift. The intelligibility, integration, and unity of an identity-constituting narrative hold both through time and synchronically.

In the discussions to follow, I shall take it that – all being well – an individual's identity is constituted by a single temporally extended narrative, albeit one with myriad interwoven and shifting threads and characteristics. Echoing the ideas of articulability and realism, the requirements for integration and intelligibility are held to apply both internally to an identity narrative on its own terms and externally with respect to the world. In Velleman's words, our self-narratives must be 'both consonant with the facts [of one's life] and sufficiently consonant with itself'.[75] To avoid repeating the full list of adjectives denoting these qualities each time in the remainder of this book, I will often use 'coherence' as shorthand. While this risks sacrificing some nuance, it allows me to exploit the dual hermeneutic and structural connotations of coherence, capturing the importance of a self-narrative being both something that we can make sense of and something that is integrated, rather than made up of discrete parts. In the following section, I will look at why coherence matters at all, before examining what *degree* of coherence is required for a practical, identity-constituting narrative.

3.5 Practical and Evaluative Capacities

The requirement for identity-constituting narratives to exhibit some degree of coherence – and the associated qualities above – is neither an arbitrary nor merely an aesthetic stipulation. To appreciate this, we must recall that the conception of identity outlined in this chapter is more than a mere description of who someone is, it is a *normative* and *practical* one. It is the framework through which we interpret our experiences, navigate the world and our relationships with others, and make choices about what to do. The value to the individual of developing and maintaining

[75] Velleman 2005, p. 67.

a coherent self-narrative lies in the kind of engaged, practical, evaluative life that it supports. In Schechtman's terms, this is the 'life of a person'.[76] 'Person' here should be understood as describing the subject of particular kinds of self-conscious, reflective, and evaluative capacities and first-person experiences, rather than referring to the ascription of moral status and determinations of whose lives and interests warrant protection.[77] The coherence of our self-narratives is held to be a critical – though not a sufficient – quality for self-narratives that are capable of providing the foundations for a range of experiences and practical capacities that contribute in no small way to the richness of our lives and our well-being. These claims need to be unpacked a little further.

Perhaps the most basic – and self-evident – of the capacities underpinned by coherent self-narratives is that of being able to make sense of who we are. As Mackenzie and Walker describe it, '[b]ecause self-narratives are selective and interpretive, they enable us to make psychological and evaluative sense of our selves, forging patterns of coherence and psychological intelligibility in response to the changing and fragmentary nature of our lived experience'.[78] As Walker notes, a unified narrative offers a kind of 'epistemological strength' – the opportunity to make sense of ourselves and our experiences and explain why we acted as we did or why we value particular things.[79] Unification allows us to think of our lives as a whole and to interpret our experiences in light of the wider context of who we are. It helps us locate our 'central qualities' within the bewildering array accrued over a life course.[80] It also makes readable the connections between our past, present, and future, thus, for example, allowing us to understand how the 'me' in the past is continuous with the present 'me', despite having undergone perhaps quite significant changes.[81] This grounds our investment in our survival and 'self-interested concern' for what will happen to us in the future.[82] This, in turn, supports the kinds of long-term commitments, such as friendships, political allegiances, and life-long projects, that take time to develop and whose worth lies in part in their longevity.[83] Jeanette

[76] Schechtman 1996, p. 95.
[77] Schechtman 2014.
[78] Mackenzie and Walker 2015, p. 380.
[79] Walker 2012, p. 64.
[80] DeGrazia 2005, p. 83.
[81] Walker 2019.
[82] Schechtman 1996, p. 136.
[83] DeGrazia 2005.

Kennett and Steve Matthews highlight the particular kinds of well-being and rewards that come from being able to achieve and sustain enduring commitments and bonds like these.[84]

An integrated and intelligible self-narrative can also be recognised as central to our capacities for autonomy and our identities as moral agents. Autonomy here is intended in the 'thick' sense of the capacity of a person to be the author of their own actions, rather than merely the property of isolated 'free choice'. On many accounts, a condition for being an autonomous agent is that one's motives are the product of critical reflection on one's goals, commitments, and values.[85] This requires the capacity for what Charles Taylor calls 'strong evaluation'.[86] Taylor holds that while the autonomy in the thin sense of 'simply weighing' options in an ad hoc fashion could be exhibited by someone who does not have a clear sense of who they are, autonomy in the thick sense is reliant on a reasonably coherent self-narrative that provides the framework through which they can interpret their experiences, work out what they value, and determine what a worthwhile life looks like for them. Our self-narratives provide the foundations from which we can develop and articulate what Schechtman refers to as the 'stable pattern of value, desires, goals and character traits' that makes autonomous agency possible and the kind of self-trust that allows us to act from this.[87] As I shall explore shortly, *perfect* coherence may be an unobtainable or even undesirable goal. However, less dogmatic – though perhaps no less demanding – is the more plausible assertion that the ongoing pursuit of integration, accompanied by what Diana Meyers terms 'emergent intelligibility', provides the context in which to decide whether we identify with one value or course of action rather than another and to reflect upon and try to resolve tensions between multiple motives.[88] None of this entails an individualistic conception of autonomy or isolation from external influence and support. On the contrary, as already discussed, the narrative foundations and reflective activities on which our strong evaluations are based depend on and are shaped through dialogue and relationships with others.

The significance of knowing who one is and where one stands on matters of value is not, however, reducible solely to supporting our

[84] Kenett and Matthews 2008.
[85] Christman 1991; Dworkin 1988.
[86] Taylor 1989, p. 42.
[87] Schechtman 1996, p. 159.
[88] Meyers 2000, p. 173.

agency and autonomy. As Iris Murdoch observes, our moral characters are constituted not only by the exercise of what we do but also by our attitudes and ways of attending to and seeing the world and other people.[89] Integrated, intelligible self-narratives provide the foundation for our moral outlook and the interpretive frameworks through which we attend to the moral character of situations and the needs of others.[90] Taylor meanwhile reminds us that '[t]o know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand' and that '[o]ur identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not'.[91] Mackenzie further suggests that being able to make sense of who we are and what we value fosters what she terms 'internal goods', such as confidence and self-esteem, as well as virtuous traits such as compassion and generosity.[92]

Our abilities to make strong evaluations; to act, feel, and judge in concert with these; and to engage in enduring commitments are not only the *products* of our self-narratives but also the *means* by which we select and enact the components of our self-narratives and thereby shape their evolving course into the future. The ability to make sense of who we are and exercise autonomy is critical to our ability to continue to develop who we are and to consolidate or reassess the constitutive characteristics we value. And, as noted in Chapter 1, the nature of our practical identities and the characteristics that comprise them are not separable from how we act. Our roles and self-descriptors are constituted by what we do and undermined by behaviours that cannot be intelligibly integrated with them. In other words, we cannot include characteristics in our self-narratives if we never act on them without reasonable and intelligible reasons for failing to do so. Narrative identity development is inherently reflexive – the creator and created are the same, existing in a cycle of self-constitution.[93] As DeGrazia neatly describes it, 'self-creation projects flow from narrative identity and, as they do so, continue to write and often edit the narratives from which they flow'.[94]

The picture outlined here captures the essentially normative nature of the version of narrative self-constitution on which my later arguments will be based. This normativity has two aspects. First, there is something personally and ethically important at stake in being in a position to

[89] Murdoch 2013.
[90] Mackenzie 2007, p. 267.
[91] Taylor 1989, pp. 27, 30.
[92] Mackenzie 2008a, p. 16.
[93] Velleman 2005.
[94] DeGrazia 2005, p. 106.

develop and maintain an identity-constituting narrative. At stake is the ability to realise the kinds of experiences and practical and evaluative capabilities just described. I shall take it that these capacities are valuable because they contribute to our well-being and to rich, meaningful, and practically engaged lives. Mackenzie describes them as the 'goods that flow from a coherent practical identity'.[95] This brings in the second normative aspect. Realisation of these capacities or 'goods' is not inevitable. It is contingent, in part, upon our developing or pursuing a particular kind of self-narrative, one that is integrated and intelligible, both on its own terms and with respect to our own and others' experiences; one that is, in short, coherent. And this, again, is not inevitable. A number of factors – as I go on to describe below and in subsequent chapters – mean that the pursuit of a coherent identity narrative can go better or worse. The two normative aspects just described are key to the picture I will paint in Chapter 4 of the nature of our identity interests and the potential roles of personal bioinformation in serving these interests.

3.6 The Trouble with Coherence

It is not uncontroversial to propose that we need to have an integrated and intelligible sense of our lives and characteristics in order to lead a full, practically engaged human existence, given the groups of people who are potentially excluded by this requirement. So, at this point, I want to address a further pair of possible concerns about the normative conception of narrative self-constitution offered above. The first of these is rooted in scepticism about whether narrative coherence is actually necessary for a fulfilling, morally engaged life. The second is the worry that the requirement for coherence excludes those who do not lead neat, conventional, secure existences from having identity-constituting narratives.

The Value of Coherence

As evidence of the superfluity of an integrated narrative experience of self, Strawson cites his own facility for commitment and friendship despite – as noted above – having only discrete episodic experiences of self, rather than temporarily extended, unified ones.[96] Meanwhile, John Christman observes that even people who live under oppressive

[95] Mackenzie 2008a, p. 17.
[96] Strawson 2008.

conditions that preclude the construction of neatly structured self-narratives that are straightforwardly intelligible to others are nevertheless capable of having practical identities and being autonomous agents.[97] As with objections to the foundational claims of narrative self-constitution considered above, one response to these objections is that they are addressing a straw person by setting too high a bar for what counts as a coherent narrative capable of supporting valuable, practical aspects of our lives.[98] Mackenzie and Poltera suggest that Strawson reports sufficient connectivity between his experiences to meet conditions of narrativity less caricatured than those he erroneously imagines are required.[99]A second, more trenchant response to those, such as Strawson, who question the value of narrative integration altogether is to consider the challenges of living without a reasonably unified and intelligible foundation from which to interpret our experiences, to judge, decide, act, and navigate our lives. As Jonathan Glover describes it, '[o]ur inner story lets us get our bearings when we act. Without it, all decisions would be like steering at sea without a map or compass.'[100]

As a stark illustration of this sense of being adrift, Mackenzie and Poltera discuss the example of Elyn Saks, who recounts in her memoir her experiences of living with schizophrenic psychosis. Saks recalls how her illness removed any 'vantage point' or 'core' from which she was able to organise or interpret her experiences or locate herself amongst them.[101] Mackenzie and Poltera offer this as an example of the 'loss of agency' and 'real suffering' caused by a disintegrated and disrupted self-conception and experienced by Saks not only during her periods of psychosis but also as she struggled to make sense of her experiences and decide how to characterise herself in between these episodes.[102] Mackenzie and Poltera suggest that Saks's rehabilitation was dependent on her ability to reconstruct a narrative that incorporated acknowledgement of her illness as a means of making sense of its place in – and destructive effects on – the totality of who she is. This is undoubtedly an extreme example, but it indicates how a fragmented self may place the kinds of practical and evaluative capacities cited above largely beyond someone's reach – even if in many cases it is only for limited periods. For

[97] Christman 2015.
[98] Mackenzie and Poltera 2011.
[99] Mackenzie and Poltera 2011.
[100] Glover 1988, p. 152.
[101] Saks 2007, p. 12, cited in Mackenzie and Poltera 2010.
[102] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, p. 32.

example, we may imagine the experience of undergoing an 'identity crisis' following the loss of a job, during which one loses the parameters within which one is able to determine who one is or what one values. Self-understanding and autonomy may also be hindered by the kinds of decisional paralysis or self-alienation that accompany deep compartmentalisation or irresoluble conflict between commitments and values. As Diana Meyers argues, 'if one cannot decide what one really wants, one cannot do what one really wants – one cannot be "true to oneself"'.[103]

Setting the Bar Too High

This brings me to the second line of concern. All of us have lives made up of diverse, sometimes contrasting, characteristics that change, often dramatically, over the course of our lives. Tensions between our self-descriptors, commitments, and what is required of us under our diverse roles are almost inevitable. If the bar for narrative coherence is set so high that it is attainable only by the very few, this would threaten the plausibility of the normative conception of identity set out above. The first thing to note in response to this concern is that narrative (in)coherence and (un)intelligibility are not all-or-nothing but admit of degrees and can be more, or less, pervasive and enduring. For example, the inability to recognise oneself or work out what really matters after losing a job to which one has dedicated one's life may unsettle almost every part of one's self-narrative but be resoluble over time. Meanwhile, an inability to reconcile one's sexuality with the teachings of a faith that is central to one's family and cultural life may sow deep and enduring conflict in some areas, but not all dimensions of one's self-narrative. Authors differ on how much coherence is required for a self-narrative to be identity-constituting and to support the kinds of practical and evaluative capacities and experiences discussed above. Schechtman acknowledges that 'perfect intelligibility' is an unattainable ideal but still insists on a 'high degree'.[104] Many, though, see this as too demanding. For example, Meyers points out that all of us have intersectional identities, comprising multiple group affiliations or social identifiers, such as class, gender, or ethnicity, which may variously be sources of estrangement or empowerment, mutually compounding or in tension with each other.[105] For this

[103] Meyers 2000, p. 158.
[104] Schechtman 1996, pp. 97–98.
[105] Meyers 2000.

reason, Meyers insists, the notion of a 'transparent' or 'homogeneous' self is a hyperbolic distortion.[106]

An Achievable Pursuit

The picture of identity narratives outlined above does not depend on unattainable ideals of transparency or homogeneity. Mackenzie and Poltera suggest that an identity-constituting narrative needs only be 'relatively integrated'.[107] What matters is that it is 'meaningful' or 'satisfying', with constituent elements that make sense as parts of a whole story that is 'psychologically intelligible' to us, even if – or perhaps especially when – it is a story containing multiple threads and plot twists.[108] Simply possessing a mix of diverse characteristics is not in itself antithetical to developing and inhabiting a functioning and fulfilling practical identity. The very concept of narrativity is one that entails trying to make sense of precisely the kinds of complexity, diversity, and changes in our traits, experiences, and roles that typify most of our lives. And the intelligibility of the constituent characteristics comes not from these taken in isolation but their situation in the wider story. Crucially, the requirement for coherence should not be understood to require a neat or rigid structure, the immutability or preservation of characteristics at all costs, or the linear pursuit of a single goal. Our narratives must adapt and respond to new experiences, so any coherence is only ever 'dynamic and provisional'.[109] As Mackenzie says, 'part of what is involved in constituting oneself as a persisting subject is to create an identity that has *a degree of* permanence and coherence. This identity takes the form of character or a set of *relatively* stable and integrated traits, habits, dispositions, and emotional attitudes.'[110]

Nevertheless, concerns might persist that even a qualified and precarious degree of coherence could still be beyond the reach of many. It seems to exclude those without the cognitive capacities that would allow them to make interpretive connections between different threads of their lives, such as the very young or those with profound learning disabilities or dementia. It also potentially excludes those whose lives and characteristics do not conform to, or do not find echoes in, the master narratives that

[106] Meyers 2000, p. 152.
[107] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, p. 33.
[108] Mackenzie 2008a, p. 12; Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, p. 47.
[109] Mackenzie and Walker 2015, p. 381.
[110] Mackenzie 2009, p. 107 (emphasis added).

are available to them in the cultures in which they live – those whose modes of self-characterisations are disparaged, unrecognised, or regarded as profoundly internally incompatible. Here, we might think, for example, of a young woman who chooses to pursue higher education when no one in her family or community have done so, or a trans man whose desire to be identified as 'father' to his child is not reinforced by others or the law.

In such cases – which are perhaps not at all uncommon – it has been suggested that a relative degree of integration and internal intelligibility is attainable but requires effort. Mackenzie and Poltera describe narrative coherence as 'an achievement', and a fragile one at that, only ever attained provisionally.[111] Meyers similarly talks about the ongoing, 'open-ended' endeavour of forging integration and intelligibility amongst the facets of our intersectional selves.[112] While himself eschewing the language of narrativity, Christman allows that a practical identity may be achievable even under oppressive conditions, provided one is able to be 'a reflecting subject whose self-interpretations make enough sense of those events that a consistent character can be seen at their center'.[113] Walker, meanwhile, describes how intelligibility and unity may be achievable within a life that contains seismic changes in values, outlook, behaviour, and traits – such as that which might be precipitated by wholesale religious conversion in adulthood – through reflecting upon and accounting for the ways in which the disparate, even conflicting, parts of one's life fit together. Here, coherence consists not in stability or permanence but in the ability of the individual to *explain* how their conversion came about and to *understand* their former beliefs and behaviours and their current ones in light of each other.[114] What matters is not a neat fit between the different parts of the individual's life but their mutual interpretive accessibility. In some circumstances, this kind of explanation and accommodation may be 'fraught' and a struggle.[115] Meyers maintains that this struggle requires frank acknowledgement by the individual themselves of the diversity of descriptors and conflict between them, as well as any internalised subjugation or privilege that comes with these. She also echoes Lindemann in suggesting that recognition by others and collective efforts to foster alternative, more explanatory or enabling 'emancipatory group images' – in Lindemann's

[111] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, p. 38.
[112] Meyers 2000, p. 168.
[113] Christman 2004, p. 710.
[114] Walker 2019.
[115] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010, p. 48.

terminology, 'counterstories' – may be of assistance here.[116] As this suggests, our interpretive and reconciliatory efforts are not pursued alone or solely through introspection and independent resolve. Communication, allegiance with others, and shared narrative tools – for example, wide recognition of trans fatherhood, or increased visibility of working-class female academics – can help us make sense of who we are.

The language of 'achievement' introduced above implies that developing and maintaining a coherent sense of self is a product of our agency. It is worth noting, however, that while this is partially true, coherence is by no means wholly within our control. Circumstances over which we have little or no power shape the contexts in which our narratives and self-descriptors are invested with or denied particular meanings. And events such as job loss, bereavement, or parenthood disrupt formerly well-integrated narratives or derail their anticipated future trajectories. Also, instrumental are the ways that others behave towards us, their recognition, rejection, or contradiction of our own self-conceptions and the social structures and norms that imbue particular roles or characteristics with esteem or disrespect or worse. As I shall go on to discuss in detail over the coming chapters, prominent amongst the kinds of characteristics, events, and experiences that may jeopardise the coherence of our self-conceptions, while lying largely beyond our control, are those arising from our bodies and our physical and mental health.

It is not inevitable that efforts to attain or retain even a realistically tempered level of provisional narrative integration and intelligibility will be successful. What then should be said about the state of someone's identity? Again, views on the specific hierarchy of consequences following various degrees of (in)coherence vary. Mackenzie and Poltera, for example, suggest the coherence conditions for preserving a sense of who we are may be less demanding than those for autonomy.[117] Schechtman, meanwhile, holds that our sense of connection to our past may be more resilient than our subjective sense of self.[118] What matters for the discussions to come in this book – and what I will say about the impacts of denials or disclosures of personal bioinformation in particular – is that narrative integration and intelligibility admit of degrees, and incoherence that stops short of a wholesale and catastrophic inability to recognise or locate oneself is neither uncommon nor need obviate our identities

[116] Meyers 2000, p. 167; Lindemann 2001, p. 150.
[117] Mackenzie and Poltera 2010.
[118] Schechtman 1996.

entirely. However, as I shall demonstrate, consequences falling short of identity loss nevertheless carry personal and ethical significance.

It is also important to recognise that narrative coherence is not necessarily an unalloyed good. To illustrate this, Mary Walker and Wendy Rogers consider potential responses to receiving unexpected diagnoses of asymptomatic disease. These authors suggest that in their urge to restore coherence to their self-narratives, to reconcile their diagnosis with apparent experiences of being healthy, people receiving such diagnosis may be led to mistrust or reinterpret their bodily experiences, to become overvigilant, or to experience anxiety.[119] As I will introduce below and explore further in later chapters, coherence is not the only valuable quality of an inhabitable, identity-constituting self-narrative, and its achievement must be balanced against other qualities. I shall further suggest that coherence constructed around partially apprehended insights, or in the absence of interpretive support, may be of questionable value.

Even if narrative coherence may not be *sufficient* for a fulfilling and practically engaged life, is it *necessary*? Schechtman stops short of saying that the life of someone with the practical capacities listed above is objectively better than that of someone without them. However, she argues that when we do have these capacities, we care about retaining them.[120] I will broadly follow Schechtman in this regard. The life of someone who lacks the cognitive capabilities, freedom, time, or means to achieve a realistic level of relative narrative integration and intelligibility could be a happy one, valued by the individual themselves and by those with whom they share their lives. And the life and well-being of such a person would certainly be no less worthy of respect, recognition, and protection by others. But, for those who are in a position to achieve or lose the kinds of practical and experiential capacities listed above, I will take it that these really are valuable. This assertion echoes familiar claims that the foundations of our well-being can be understood in terms of particular kinds of core capabilities. In Martha Nussbaum's rendition of these capabilities, she includes the capabilities for '[b]eing able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves', '[b]eing able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life' and '[b]eing able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show

[119] Walker and Rogers 2017.
[120] Schechtman 1996.

concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction'.[121] As with this subset of capabilities identified by Nussbaum, the capacities and experiences enabled by a coherent self-narrative may not be sufficient on their own for a happy, rich, or fulfilling life, and they require an enabling and supportive environment for their realisation. Nevertheless, lacking them has non-trivial and undesirable impacts on the trajectories of our lives and relationships with others, and on our abilities to flourish, to make sense of who we are, and to interpret and navigate the world. In other words, it carries consequences that do not comprise and need not be described as wholesale identity loss but are nonetheless real identity harms.

3.7 Beyond Coherence

The preceding discussion invites the question of whether narrative coherence is the only factor relevant to achieving an identity that supports a rich and fulfilling practical identity or whether the nature of the narrative's contents is equally important. I will return to discuss this question in greater detail in Chapter 6, but it will be useful briefly to review here what narrative identity theorists have said on this subject.

Narrative theories tend to be clear about the 'structural conditions' for practical identity narratives – how the constituent parts fit together and fit with the world – but less prescriptive when it comes to the qualities of their substantive contents. Schechtman's account, for example, is notably quiet about the qualities of the characteristics that make up identity-constituting narratives, except insofar as these are relevant to meeting the articulation and reality constraints described above. However, narrativity is often seen as inextricably bound up with the pursuit of meaning. And it is common to find claims that the pursuit of *value* provides the necessary organising and motivating principle for the development of our practical identities. For example, Taylor argues that an identity built solely upon individualistic or ephemeral concerns, divorced from social engagement and contexts, would be a limited and impoverished one.[122] And engagement in long-term projects and deep commitments are often seen as part of what grounds our sense of self and propels us into the future.[123] Paul Ricoeur, meanwhile, sets the

[121] Nussbaum 2006, p. 76–77.
[122] Taylor 1992.
[123] Calhoun 2000.

rather modest condition that requires our self-narratives to be 'bearable', although this too is connected to the pursuit of meaning.[124]

These kinds of claims do not set explicit objective criteria for what counts as meaningful or worthwhile narrative contents.[125] Much like Nussbaum's capabilities approach, they are neutral as to the particular characteristics, priorities, and pursuits that make up our practical identities. What matters is that *we ourselves* experience our identities as meaningful and worthwhile. This relative value-neutrality contributes to the appeal and plausibility of narrative identity theory. However, it is vital to recognise that the contents and tenor of a person's narrative, how comfortable someone feels occupying and 'owning-up' to their identity, are often critical to their well-being and to how their life and projects of self-constitution go. Lindemann, for example, draws attention to the ways that our identities can be damaged by the adoption of oppressive master narratives – such as those that embody racist or transphobic attitudes.[126] These kinds of oppression may not only cause distress or shame but also limit the scope of our lives and our opportunities to act and define ourselves beyond stereotypes. As such, they undermine precisely the kinds of valued capacities described above, including those for agency, self-respect, and self-constitution.

Accordingly, in the discussions to come I shall not adopt a wholly neutral view of the kinds of templates, characteristics, and commitments that make up inhabitable self-narratives. We cannot overlook that some kinds of narrative contents may be oppressive or destructive and bad for us. It is also worth noting that these kinds of damaging master narratives or modes of self-description – if sufficiently internalised and socially pervasive – could be consistent with a relatively coherent self-narrative. And, while it is possible to recognise a multiplicity of contents that contribute to desirable self-narratives, it is also important to acknowledge that we benefit when our identities are meaningful and worthwhile to us. Recalling Christine Korsgaard's words noted in Chapter 1, a practical identity is a 'description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking'.[127] I will follow many of the accounts discussed above

[124] Ricoeur 1992, p. 158.

[125] Not all such theories are quite so neutral. Macintyre and Taylor, for example, each hold that identity-constituting narratives are defined by a 'quest' for a morally good life – though this is not a position I shall adopt here (MacIntyre 1985; Taylor 1989).

[126] Lindemann 2001.

[127] Korsgaard 1996, p. 101.

in proposing that it *is* important to be in a position to develop and maintain reasonable narrative coherence. This brings an interpretive framework and binding logic to our myriad, diverse characteristics, activities, and experiences, such that these comprise an intelligible, temporally extended practical identity, albeit one that involves complexity and change. However coherence is not all that matters for inhabitable identities that support us in pursuing fulfilling and practically engaged lives, and it is not an unequivocal good. I will go on to substantiate these claims further in the coming chapters.

3.8 A Practical, Normative Conception of Identity

At the close of the last chapter, I outlined several reasons why a narrative conception of self-constitution offers a promising way of thinking about our identity-related interests and the role of personal bioinformation in fulfilling these. These included the fact that conceptualising identity in narrative terms allows us to think of identity in a holistic, interconnected way, which highlights the ways that changes to our defining characteristics may have wider-reaching, more entangled, and more significant implications for our sense of who we are and our lives than mere edits to discrete self-descriptors. A narrative conception, I submit, also reflects the phenomenology of what it is like to make sense of ourselves and the belief that we create rather than discover who we are. As such, it allows us to move away from implausible essentialist or prescriptive conceptions of what substantive contents a flourishing or 'authentic' identity must contain. It also leaves ample room for recognising, respecting, and supporting diverse ways of characterising ourselves. This chapter has sought not only to fill out the picture of what an identity narrative looks like but also to make plain the inherent normativity of narrative accounts of practical identity constitution and to set out *what is at stake* in constructing such a narrative. It allows us to understand how our identities may fare better or worse and support us more or less effectively in understanding ourselves, living amongst others, and navigating the world. This normativity is key to the case I shall build for the nature and weight of our interests in accessing personal bioinformation. As I will go on to explain, it accounts for the ethically significant roles that personal bioinformation may play in our identities, without recourse to biologically essentialist conceptions of the self. It also illuminates how a wide range of different kinds of bioinformation may play these roles, to different extents, without falling into arbitrary exceptionalism.