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„WE HAVE NO FUTURE“: TEACHING PHILOSOPHY TO NARRATOSCEPTIC STUDENTS

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Abstract: The paper will deal with a challenge presented to the standard conceptions of philosophy as the art of living. Since the conceptions of a fulfilled/happy/authentic life rest on the conception of a temporally continuous self, Galen Strawson narratosceptic position and a view of the Episodic self require us to rethink the standard methods of teaching philosophy. We will assess Strawson's position and attempt to provide a possible answer.

Keywords: *the art of living, narrativism, Galen Strawson, teaching philosophy*

1. Introduction: What (teaching) philosophy relied on

Throughout its long history, philosophy has been taught and passed on in numerous ways, many of them being quite odd, measured by today's standards. From Pythagorean brotherhoods and sophistic circles, via the Academia and Lycaenum to modern-day Universities and Youtube channels, the forms, techniques and goals of philosophy lectures varied as much as the content that was passed on. However, one could argue that there have been a few common traits that can be identified, at least in what has come to be accepted as standard conceptions of philosophy. I will focus on one such trait, and that is a certain kind of rationality that philosophy (most often) identifies as *the* rationality, adequate and/or unique to human beings. That act of identification is not only meant to be descriptive, but also provides a normative standard to which all human being should conform. The basis for that standard has changed throughout history, but a certain dominant tendency can be noticed. Most standard conceptions of philosophy refer to a temporally continuous entity or process within human beings (*psyche*, Ego, the Subject, *I*, Self,...) that pertains to a specific kind of natural and/or intelligible principle (or set of principles), which in turn now serves as *the* principle of knowledge and/or action. The task of teaching philosophy (as seen within this tradition) is now to provide compelling arguments for accepting that conception of Self (I will use that name for all the various conceptions of the temporally continuous entity/process mentioned above) and the subsequent principle of (theoretical or practical) rationality. The focus in this paper will be on a

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tendency present within this tradition that envisions philosophy as *the art of living* (Nehamas, 1998): a tendency thought to be founded by Socrates. So we will for our purposes turn away from the questions of theoretical rationality and limit ourselves to the concept of „the (un)examined life“ (*The Apology*, 38a5–6), and the Apollonic-Socratic imperative „Know thyself“ (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). The underlying assumption of this concept/imperative pair is the one of a Self that we can come to know and that has a temporally continuous existence throughout one’s lifetime. A recent challenge to this very assumption will be the main focus of this paper. There have been similar challenges proposed even by Socrates’s contemporaries. According to Xenophone, Socrates warns Aristippus the Cyrenaic: „try to worry somewhat also about the future things of your life“ (Xenophon, 1994:42) as the latter apparently holds an anti-eudaimonistic position. Terrence Irwin provides an account of the foundation of Cyrenaic anti-eudaimonism as one based on their doubt about the temporally continuous self. (Irwin: 2007: 53-5) If *eudaimonia* includes my well-being during my life as a whole, it would cease to be a reasonable goal if we lack the belief that we are the same self from our birth to our death. Of course, *eudaimonia* is not the goal of our lives today (at least not in the ways that *eudaimonia* was conceived by Socrates, Plato or Aristotle). However, the goals that we set before ourselves today (or at least, the characteristics of a desirable life) are in many ways analogous to it. There is no universal substantive conception of „the good life“, but there is a set of goods that we deem generally (if not universally) desirable: love, physical and mental health, self-respect etc. Thus, philosophy conceived as the *art of living*, on the one hand, has set as its task the formation of a self that can live a „happy“, „authentic“ or „fulfilled“ life that would include such goods. Let’s call this the prudence task. On the other hand, there is an essential moral aspect of the Socratic tradition. Morality can be founded, according to this position, only on a temporally continuous self. The characteristic that we consider virtues are available to us only if we conceive ourselves as the same being throughout our entire lifetimes (or at least, significant portions of our lifetimes). Thus, our task as philosophy teachers (as seen by this tradition) should be to alert students to the fact that they can be neither happy/authentic/fulfilled nor moral agents unless they conceive of themselves in this way.

Another line of this tradition has been prominent since the 1980s. The so-called narrativistic conception of the self, notably popularized by Alasdair MacIntyre’s work *After Virtue*, published in 1981, proposes that being a self requires a specific unity.

„The unity of an individual life (...) is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is the good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasize that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. (MacIntyre, 2007:218-9)

Similar accounts have been proposed by MacIntyre's fellow narrativists Charles Taylor² and Marya Schechtman.³ Narrative conceptions followed in psychology and psychotherapy (Sarbin, 1986; Bruner, 1990.). However, soon a reaction came: Galen Strawson challenges both the narrative conception of the self and the foundation of moral responsibility on the self. In the rest of the paper, I will present his progressing critique of the narrativistic conception and contextualize and assess it. Finally, I will attempt to suggest a suggestion of the way philosophy can be taught given the impact of Strawson's criticism.

2. Strawson's Narratosceptic position

First, we might ask, how does the dispute between narrativists and narratosceptics such as Strawson impact philosophy teaching at all? The answer should be fairly simple. First of all, it is easy to see that the conception of philosophy we have depicted earlier requires a continuous self. Although that self, as we shall see, need not be narratively constructed to be continuous, Strawson's criticism challenges that sort of continuity as well. Second, although it is easy to blame the social networks and video-games for the happy-go-lucky character emerging in the personae of the millennial generations, one should take Strawson's account seriously, especially his most recent counter-attacks on the narrativistic conception of the self altogether. If Strawson's criticism is sound, then significant changes should be made in the forms and techniques of philosophy teaching, especially when it comes to ethics.

Strawson's first treatment of the problem of Self is in his 1996. text „The Sense of the Self“, where he starts his discussion from a position that the sense of the self is innate to all normal human beings, independent of cultural influences.

„By the ‘sense of the self’ I mean the sense that people have of themselves as being, specifically, a mental presence, a mental someone, a conscious subject that has a certain character or personality, and is distinct from all its particular experiences, thoughts, hopes, wishes, feelings and so on. I've no doubt that this sense comes to every normal human being, in some form, in childhood.” (Strawson, 1996:1)

However, the basic assumptions about the self – that it is a thing, specifically mental, that is single, has a certain character or personality, that it is ontologically distinct of all other things and that it is a subject of experience and of choice – mustn't pass without scrutiny. Strawson focuses on the assumption that the self is single, especially diachronically. His initial criticism rests on the formal possibility that a „life without any significant sense of the long-term continuity is possible... and lies well within human experience“ (Strawson, 1996: 4). Separating the experience of our corporal continuity from the experience of the continuity of the self, Strawson

² „But this is to state basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a narrative... our lives exist in a space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer“. (Taylor. 2006: 47)

³ „(A) person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life“. (Schechtman, 1997: 93)

admits that the sense of the continuity of the body is „hard-wired, connected with the instinct for self-preservation... biologically grounded“ (Strawson, 1996: 6) and can as such be the source of anxiety. However, the sense of the continuity of the self need not be of the same nature. The differences in sense of the self might be conceived as individual, and are similar to differences in the quality of memory.

„When it comes to the differences I am about to discuss, I believe that there are others quite unlike myself... Some people live in narrative mode, and wrongly assume that everyone else does the same: they experience their lives in terms of something that has shape and story, a narrative trajectory. Some of them keep diaries with posterity in mind, and imagine future biographies. Some are self-narrators in a stronger sense: they regularly rehearse and revise their interpretations of their lives. Some are great planners, and knit up their lives with long-term projects. Others have no early ambition, no later sense of vocation, no interest in climbing a career ladder, no tendency to see their life as constituting a story or development. Some merely go from one thing to another, living life in a picaresque or episodic fashion. Some people make few plans and are little concerned with the future. Some live intensely in the present, some are simply aimless. This can be a basic fact of character or the outcome of spiritual discipline; it can be a response to economic destitution – a devastating lack of opportunities – or vast wealth.“ (Strawson, 1996: 5)

Strawson’s account thus rests on his own first-person experience, as he claims that the position of the narrativistic authors does as well. However, he continues, his advantage is that he does not universalize his own sense of the self.

„My experience of the self is just one kind among others; no doubt some people have it in a more extreme form. It matters here only insofar as it supports the claim that a sense of the self need not necessarily involve experience of it as something with long-term continuity. This experience may be common, but it is not universal, it fades over time in some, and is withered, in others, by reflection.“ (Strawson, 1996: 6)

The self Strawson claims to experience has no continuity, as opposed to the continuity of his experience of himself as an embodied human being. However, at this point he is ready to concede that he may be a part of a minority of people that share the same experience. The fact that it is thought to be an unusual experience, an „unnatural result of doing philosophy, or drugs“ (Strawson, 1996: 9) does not imply that the experience is any less accurate than the ones that are thought to be „more natural“.

Strawson’s critique of narrativistic conceptions of the self continues and widens in his famous 2004 text „Against Narrativity“, and now includes criticism of other, non-narrativistic conceptions that hold that the self is continuous. He now distinguishes between what he calls „the psychological Narrativity thesis“ and „the ethical Narrativity thesis“. The first one is a „empirical, descriptive thesis about the way ordinary human beings actually experience their lives. This is how we are, it says, this is our nature“ (Strawson, 2004:428). The second one is a normative thesis that states, “that experiencing or conceiving one’s life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood”

(Strawson, 2004:428). Strawson's view is that both of these theses are wrong, and the main focus of his criticism is the opposite view: that both theses are true. According to his account, that view would state the following:

“(O)ne may think that all normal non-pathological human beings are naturally Narrative and also that Narrativity is crucial to a good life. This is the dominant view in the academy today, followed by the second view. It does not entail that everything is as it should be; it leaves plenty of room for the idea that many of us would profit from being more Narrative than we are, and the idea that we can get our self-narratives wrong in one way or another.” (Strawson, 2004:429)

In opposing this view, Strawson maintains again that there are individual differences in the first-person experience that a person has of his own self (in order not to confuse it with our experience of ourselves as embodied human beings taken as a whole, he calls this former experience “self-experience”). These differences are not to be *a priori* taken as pathological. Quite the contrary, asserts Strawson, pathologies may arise as the result of the repressive treatment of individuals that do not conform to the imposed standard of narrativity.

“It's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative. I think the second and third views hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.” (Strawson, 2004:429)

In addition to the distinction mentioned above, Strawson introduces another important one: a distinction that widens his criticism of narrativity to other conceptions of the self. It is a distinction between two forms of self-understanding: the „Episodic“ and „Diachronic“.

„The basic form of Diachronic self-experience is that [D] one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future – something that has relatively long-term diachronic continuity, something that persists over a long stretch of time, perhaps for life... If one is Episodic, by contrast, [E] one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future. One has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future” (Strawson, 2004:430)

These forms of self-understanding are actually two poles of a continuum and one's position in the continuum is „natural“, that is to say, it is not a matter of choice or deviation from a natural norm. The distinction is present in all cultures and allows for individual variations that may depend on circumstances, health, age etc. However, Strawson suggests, there are significant „misunderstandings“ between Diachronics and Episodics.

“Diachronics may feel that there is something chilling, empty and deficient about the Episodic life... But it would be a great mistake to think that the Episodic life is bound

to be less vital or in some way less engaged, or less humane, or less humanly fulfilled. If Heideggerians think that Episodics are necessarily ‘inauthentic’ in their experience of being in time, so much the worse for their notion of authenticity.” (Strawson, 2004:431)

At first, Strawson seems to argue in favour of equality of these two outlooks. Neither of them should be deemed neither inferior than the other nor a pathological aberration from the proper mode of self-understanding. Neither the Diachronic’s prejudice of the Episodic life as „less full or emotionally articulated, thoughtful and sensitive, open to friendship, love and loyalty“ nor the Episodic’s prejudice about the Diachronic life as „macerated or clogged, excessively self-concerned, inauthentically second-order“ (Strawson, 2004:431) are true. However, when it comes to Strawson position towards Narrativists, he expresses a different position, and at times, launches counter-attacks.

First, he assumes that the belief in the normative narrativity thesis represents „yet another deep divider of the human race“. (Strawson, 2004:437) Narrativists are making the mistake of generalizing „from their own case with that special, fabulously misplaced confidence that people feel when, considering elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them, they take it that they must also be fundamental for everyone else.“ (Strawson, 2004:431) He sees those who think in this way as “motivated by a sense of their own importance or significance that is absent in other human beings.” (Strawson, 2004:437) In addition to that, the activity of “story-telling”, constitutive to the narrativistic self, carries with it another deep problem: “that one is almost certain to get one’s ‘story’ wrong ... unless, perhaps, one has the help of a truly gifted therapist.” (Strawson, 2004:437) Thus, Strawson turns the table and objects to the practice of narrativistic psychotherapy as being in fact detrimental to the mental health of the individual: “many are likely to be thrown right off their own truth by being led to believe that Narrativity is necessary for a good life.” (Strawson, 2004:437)

However, one need not be narrativistic in order to be diachronic. Some „form-finding“ tendency is required to have an apprehension of one’s life and the „deep personal constancies that do in fact exist in the life of every human being.“ (Strawson, 2004:443) Strawson concedes to this fact as long as it is not construed in the form of normativistic activity of story-telling.

„The aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some – for some, perhaps, it may even be helpful – but in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous. My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good – that the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one’s life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one’s nature” (Strawson, 2004:447)

As opposed to the narrativistic/diachronic outlook, Strawson explains what it looks like to be an Episodic. Although an Episodic person has autobiographical, first-person memory of his past experiences inasmuch as they are the experiences of him as the whole human being (which he calls „I“), he does not have the sense that he is the self that experienced them (which he calls „I*“).

For me this is a plain fact of experience. I'm well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there's a sense in which it has special relevance to me* now, including special emotional and moral relevance. At the same time I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact. (Strawson, 2004:434)

As far as the future of the self is concerned, Strawson reiterates that it has no (distant) future. So one's practical concern for the future is actually the concern for myself as the whole human being, and is, according to Strawson, „biologically – viscerally – grounded and autonomous that I can experience it as something immediately felt even though I have no significant sense that I* will be there in the future.” (Strawson, 2004:434)

Two practical questions arise: is the Episodic self capable of leading a fulfilled life, and is it capable of being moral? Strawson argues that the answers to both questions are undeniably “Yes”.

“Narrativity is not a necessary part of the ‘examined life’ (nor is Diachronicity), and it is in any case most unclear that the examined life, thought by Socrates to be essential to human existence, is always a good thing... Granted that certain sorts of self-understanding are necessary for a good human life, they need involve nothing more than form-finding, which can exist in the absence of Narrativity” (Strawson, 2004:448)

Even when we turn to more up-to-date conceptions of the „fulfilled life“, Strawson sees no obstacle for the Episodic self to be capable of it.

“[Heidegger] seems to me false: false as a universal claim about human life, false as a claim about what it is for human beings to be what or who they are, false as a normative claim about what good or authentic human life must be like, false about what any self-understanding must involve, and false about what self-understanding is at its best.” (Strawson, 2004:448)

Strawson directs his attention to the second question, about whether Episodics can be properly moral beings, in his 2007 text „Episodic Ethics“ (Strawson, 2007:85-116). First he addresses the prejudice that „a good human life must be both Narrative and Diachronic“, as the Episodic person „cannot properly inhabit the realms of responsibility, duty and obligation—not to mention those of friendship, loyalty, and so on.” (Strawson, 2007:87) Strawson start his argument with the moral emotions of remorse and contrition. Although he doubts the range of instrumental effectiveness of moral emotions („Susceptibility to such feelings is not, however, a necessary ground of future good behaviour, nor a very good one, even when it is practically effective” (Strawson, 2007:93), he argues that these emotions are available to Episodics as well as Diachronics.

(T)hought about the past can bring it on because I am as I know a person of a certain kind and my GS-past [i.e. the past of Galen Strawson as a whole human being] can be a very good indicator of what kind of person I(*) am (it is an understatement to say that my GS-past has special relevance to me as I am now)... I* was not there in the past. But this is not to say that I(*) cannot feel bad about past harm I have done to others; I(*) can. (Strawson, 2007:92)

The grounds this fact on what he calls *The Emotional Priority Thesis*. According to it, it is not Diachronic outlook that serves as a basis for moral emotions: it is the other way around. „The grounds of the mechanisms—the feeling-mechanisms—of conscience and responsibility are ancient. They predate the Diachronic sense of self, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, and they are in that straightforward sense independent of it and can operate without it.” (Strawson, 2007:97-8)

Strawson then turns to the concept of responsibility. Since he conceives the heart of moral responsibility (as a psychological phenomenon) to be „a sort of instinctive *responsiveness* to things.“ (Strawson, 2007:100) All that is required of us for a proper sense of responsibility is for others to have legitimate expectations of us in the present. „If my past acts have given me obligations, including obligations of reparation, these are obligations I* now fully feel myself to have without any sense that I* performed those actions. This is an experiential fact for many Episodics, make of it what you will.” (Strawson, 2007:100) Thus the basis of ethics is not the self (most frequently connected with the notion of free will), but the entirety of my being, including its social aspects.

“I am and now experience myself as myself*, who was not there in the past, but I am also GS, and I know this, and I know that others know this, and I know that I am for others fundamentally GS, the continuing person and human being, and there is for this reason alone a straightforward respect in which that is how I primarily figure myself when I am engaged with others.” (Strawson, 2007:101)

Strawson addresses concepts of loyalty, vengefulness, resentment, hatred, friendship, gratitude, fidelity, love and forgiveness in a similar manner. Showing that neither a Diachronic nor a Narrative outlook is required for possessing those traits, he rebuts the objection that Episodic persons are not capable of leading a fully moral life.

3. Should we be sceptical about Narratosceptics?

Strawson’s position is based on two assumptions. First is that there are people who immediately perceive their selves as non-continuous. He provides a list of people who have, at least in their literary accounts, described themselves in a way that Strawson identifies as episodic. Among them are Montaigne, Shaftesbury, Stendhal, Virginia Woolf, Borges, Iris Murdoch, Bob Dylan, Proust, Emily Dickinson,... The second assumption is that this way of perceiving oneself is natural. Thus, any designation of this form of self-experience as pathological would be repression. But should we believe this to be true? Is there an alternative account of the genesis of an Episodic self? Slavoj Žižek, in his 2001 book *On Belief* mentions an important phenomenon of neoliberal ideology:

“The ruling ideology endeavors to sell us the insecurity caused by the dismantling of the Welfare State as the opportunity for new freedoms: you have to change jobs every year, relying on short-term contracts instead of a long-term stable appointment. Why

not see it as the liberation from the constraints of a fixed job, as the chance to reinvent yourself again and again.” (Žizek, 2001:116)

If we follow Žižek’s line of argument, we may find that the rise of the narrativistic movement followed briefly after the first neoliberal deregulation processes in the United States and may present a reaction to the mentioned impact of neoliberal ideology on the way individuals perceive themselves. Strawson’s narratoscepticism and his subsequent attack on narrativism would then be but a part of an ideological debate (frequent appeals to „nature“ being a significant strategy in such debates) rather than merely a „phenomenological“ dispute about self-experience.

How does this reflect in our practices of philosophy teaching? First, we’ve seen that Strawson’s position could imply that we should shift the focus of our arguments (primarily, our justifications) when dealing with the questions of philosophy as art of living. Strawson himself does not think this should present a problem. The narratosceptic still cares about his future, the future of other people or the ecological future of the planet. He just doesn’t think that this concern is based on a conception of a free, rational self. Thus, while dealing with narratosceptic or episodic students, the focus should perhaps shift to the questions of embodiment or social aspects of the self or morality. That is to say, a focus on the ontological or phenomenological account of the self (as presented both in our immediate experience and our reflected theoretical positions) should give way to a holistic account of our existence, emphasizing the sociopolitical and corporeal aspects of the human life.

Second, Strawson’s position only proves that a happy/fulfilled/authentic life is not *in principle* inaccessible to Episodics (i.e. that the opposite is not an analytical truth). Although we should be wary of the perils of normativization of narrativity or similar projects, the opposite option of indifference is equally perilous if adopted as an educational standard.

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„MI NEMAMO BUDUĆNOST“: DRŽANJE NASTAVE FILOZOFIJE NARATOSKEPTIČKIM UČENICIMA

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Rezime: Tema ovog rada je jedan izazov koji je upućen standardnoj koncepciji filozofije kao umetnosti življenja. Kako koncepcije ispunjenog/srećnog/autentičnog života počivaju na koncepciji vremenski kontinuiranog sopstva, Gejlen Strosonova naratoskeptička pozicija i perspektiva epizodičnog sopstva zahtevaju da preispitamo standardne metode nastave filozofije. Ponudićemo prikaz Strosonove pozicije i pokušati da pronađemo moguće odgovore na nju.

Ključne reči: *umetnost življenja, narativizam, Galen Stroson, nastava filozofije*

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