“Self is a perpetually rewritten story”, according to the psychologist Jerry Bruner: we are all constantly engaged in “self-making narrative” and “in the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives”. Oliver Sacks concurs: each of us “constructs and lives a ‘narrative’ [and] “this narrative is us, our identities”. A vast chorus of assent rises from the humanities—from literary studies, psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, political theory, religious studies, echoed back by psychotherapy, medicine, law, marketing, design…: human beings typically experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories.

I'll call this the Psychological Narrativity thesis. It is a straightforwardly empirical thesis about the way ordinary human beings experience their lives—this is how we are, it says, this is our nature—and it's often coupled with a normative thesis, which I'll call the Ethical Narrativity thesis, according to which a richly Narrative outlook on one’s life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood.

To take this further, one needs to distinguish between one’s sense of oneself as a human being considered as a whole and one’s sense of oneself as an inner mental entity or “self” of some sort—I'll call this one’s “self-experience”. When Henry James says of one of his early books, in a letter written in 1915, “I think of...the masterpiece in question...as the work of quite another person than myself...a rich...relation, say, who...suffers me still to claim a shy fourth cousinship”, he has no doubt that he is the same human being as the author of that book, but he doesn’t feel he is the same self or person as the author of that book. One of the most important ways in which people tend to think of themselves (wholly independently of religious belief) is as things whose persistence conditions are not obviously or automatically the same as the persistence conditions of a human being considered as a whole. Petrarch, Proust, Derek Parfit and thousands of others have given this idea vivid expression. I'm going to take its viability for granted and set up another distinction—between “Episodic” and “Diachronic” self-experience—in terms of it. The basic form of Diachronic self-experience [D] is that 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. I take it that many people are naturally Diachronic, and that many who are Diachronic are also Narrative.

If one is Episodic [E], by contrast, 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, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being. Episodics are likely to have no
particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms (the Episodic/Diachronic
distinction is not the same as the Narrative/non-Narrative distinction, but there are
marked correlations between them).

The Episodic and Diachronic styles of temporal being are radically opposed,
but they are not absolute or exceptionless. Predominantly Episodic individuals
may sometimes connect to charged events in their pasts in such a way that they
feel that those events happened to them (consider embarrassing memories) and
anticipate events in their futures in such a way that they think that those events are
going to happen to them (thoughts of future death can be a good example). So too
predominantly Diachronic individuals may sometimes experience an Episodic lack
of linkage with well remembered parts of their past. Many factors may induce
variations in individuals. Nevertheless I believe that the basics of temporal
temperament are genetically determined and that we have here a fundamental
“individual difference variable”. Individual variation in psychological time-style,
Episodic or Diachronic, Narrative or non-Narrative, will be found across all
cultures.

Diachronics and Episodics are likely to misunderstand one another.
Diachronics may find something chilling, empty and deficient in the Episodic life.
They may fear it, although it is no less full or emotionally articulated than the
Diachronic life, no less thoughtful or sensitive, no less open to friendship, love and
loyalty. The two forms of life differ importantly in their ethical and emotional
close. It would, however, be a great mistake to think that the Episodic life is
bound to be less vital or less engaged, or less humane, or humanly fulfilled, or less
moral (there is a very strong temptation for Diachronics to make this last charge).
And if Episodics are moved to respond by casting aspersions on the Diachronic
life—finding it somehow macerated or clogged, say, or excessively selfconcerned,
inauthentically second-order—they too will be mistaken if they think it
an essentially inferior form of human life.

There is one sense in which Episodics are by definition more located in the
present than Diachronics, but it does not follow, and is not true, that Diachronics
are less present in the present moment than Episodics, any more than it follows, or
is true, that in the Episodic life the present is somehow less informed by or
responsible to the past than in the Diachronic life. What is true is that the
informing and the responsiveness have different characteristics and different
consequences in the two cases.

Faced with sceptical Diachronics, who think that Episodics are essentially
dysfunctional in the way they relate to the past, Episodics reply that the past can be
present or alive in the present without being present or alive as the past. The past
can be alive—arguably more genuinely alive—in the present simply in so far as it
has helped to shape the way one is in the present, just as musicians’ playing can
incorporate and body forth their past practice without being mediated by any
explicit memory of it. What goes for musical development goes equally for ethical
development, and Rilke’s remarks on poetry and memory, which have a natural application to the ethical case, suggest one way in which the Episodic attitude to the past may have an advantage over the Diachronic: “For the sake of a single poem”, he writes, “you must have... many... memories.... And yet it is not enough to have memories.... For the memories themselves are not important.” They give rise to a good poem “only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves.”

Among those whose writings show them to be markedly Episodic I propose Michel de Montaigne, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Laurence Sterne, Coleridge, Stendhal, Hazlitt, Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, Jorge-Luis Borges, Fernando Pessoa, Iris Murdoch (a strongly Episodic person who is a natural story teller), Freddie Ayer, Bob Dylan. Proust is another candidate, for all his remembrance (which may be inspired by his Episodicity); also Emily Dickinson. Diachronicity stands out less clearly, because it is I take it the accepted norm, the “unmarked position”; but one may begin with Plato, St. Augustine, Heidegger, Wordsworth, Dostoeievski, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Patrick O’Brian, and all the champions of Narrativity in the current ethico-psychological debate. I find it easy to classify my friends, many of whom are intensely Diachronic, unlike my parents, who are on the Episodic side.

Given that the Diachronic outlook is the norm, and comparatively well understood, I need to say more about the Episodic outlook. And since I find myself to be relatively Episodic, I’ll use myself as an example. I have a past, like any human being, I have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about my past, and I also remember some of my past experiences “from the inside”, as philosophers say. And yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.

That’s one way to put it—to speak in terms of limited interest. Another way is to say that it seems clear to me, when I am apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future in question is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS the human being. This is more dramatic, but I think it is equally correct, when I am figuring myself as a self. I have no significant sense that I—the I now considering this question—was there in the further past. And it seems clear to me that this is not a failure of feeling. It is, rather, a registration of a fact about what I am—about what the thing that is currently considering this problem is.

I’ll use “I*” to represent: that which I now experience myself to be when I’m apprehending myself specifically as an inner mental presence or self. “I*” comes with a large family of cognate forms—‘me*”, “my*”, “you*” “oneself*”, “themselves*”, and so on. The assumption built into these terms is that they
succeed in making genuine reference to an inner mental something that is reasonably called a “self”, but they can be used to convey the content of a form of experience that incorporates this assumption even if it is false.

It’s clear to me that events in my remoter past didn’t happen to me*. But what does this amount to? It certainly doesn’t mean that I don’t have any “autobiographical” memories of these past experiences. I do. And they are certainly the experiences of the human being that I am. It does not, however, follow from this that I experience them as having happened to me*, or indeed that they did happen to me*. They certainly do not present as things that happened to me*, and I think I’m strictly, literally correct in thinking that they did not happen to me*.

Objection: if a remembered experience has a from-the-inside character it must be experienced by you as something that happened to you*. Reply: this seems plausible at first, but it’s not so. The from-the-inside character of a memory can detach completely from any sense that one is the subject of the remembered experience. My memory of falling out of a punt has an essentially from-the-inside character, visually (the water rushing up to meet me), kinaesthetically and so on. It’s not like seeing a film of myself falling taken by a third party (“from-theoutside”). But it certainly does not follow that it carries any feeling or belief that what is remembered happened to me*, to that which I now apprehend myself to be when apprehending myself specifically as a self.

Actually, this doesn’t follow even when emotion figures in the from-the-inside character of the memory. The inference from [1] “The memory has a from-theinside character in emotional respects” to [2] “The memory is experienced as something that happened to me*” is simply not valid, although for many people [1] and [2] are often or usually true together.

For me this is a plain fact of experience. I’m well aware that my past is mine in so far as I’m 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. As for my practical concern for my future, which I believe to be within the normal human range (low end), it is biologically—viscerally—grounded and autonomous in such a way that I can experience it as something immediately felt even though I have no significant sense that I* will be there in the future.