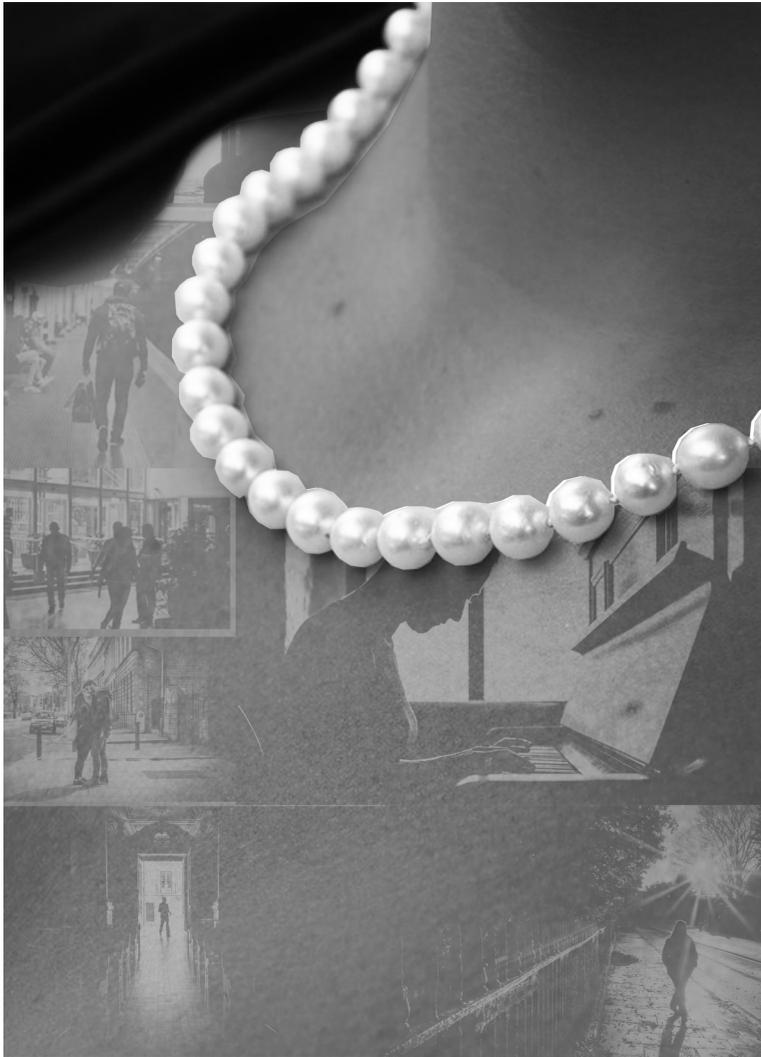


# THE NECKLACE VIEW OF THE SELF



## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I provide a framework for accounting for the self, based on a reconstruction of Galen Strawson's "theory of SESMETs," or the Pearl view, with Barry Dainton's continuous consciousness thesis. I argue that the framework I provide adequately accounts for the self and is preferable to solely adopting either Strawson's or Dainton's theory. I call my reconstruction the "Necklace" view of the self.

In everyone's daily experience of the world, there seems to be an "I" that exists. It is usually assumed that person must feel, understand, and act from the perspective of their "I," and the "I" is "the self" of that person. Many philosophers have been concerned about the questions, "What is the self?" or "Who am I?" and a popular claim today is that one experiences one's self as a narrative. Galen Strawson argues against the narrativity view in favour of his materialist "theory of SESMETs (subjects of experience that are single mental things)."<sup>1</sup> I consider Strawson's theory important, except for the counterintuitive consequence that a person's past selves are completely different selves from the person's current self. Although I agree with Strawson that self-experience does not necessarily have the nature of narrativity, and that one's self could often be episodic, I regard the theory of SESMETs as problematic because it eliminates a first-personal claim on past selves in one's history. Since I regard the feature of first-person to be essential to any account of the self, Strawson's theory of the self cannot be a complete one. This paper endeavours to solve this incompleteness by arguing for two states of the self—the diachronic self and the episodic self as one and the same self under different conditions—by combining Strawson's SESMETs theory and Barry Dainton's "continuous consciousness thesis."

Before making criticisms of Strawson's theory, I shall briefly introduce the background of the SESMETs. Strawson challenges the commonly-held view that there is no such thing as the self, and "the self" we speak of in our language is merely a fictional character used for descriptions about human life experience. According to Strawson, such a categorisation of the self—together with the presupposition behind the categorisation that self-experience is a narrative about a person—is mistaken. First, a person does not necessarily have the self-experience which is like a human-life-long narrative, and it is wrong to make the normative claim that one should have one's self-experience as a narrative. There are people who do not consider their selves "as a

<sup>1</sup> Galen Strawson, "The Self and the SESMET," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, no. 4 (1999): 118; See also Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio (new series)* XVII 4, no. 0034–0006 (2004): 428–52.



human being as a whole” but “principally as an inner mental entity.”<sup>2</sup> Strawson insists that, for such a person, there certainly exists a “self,” and the person’s self is not considered as a narrative.<sup>3</sup> Second, Strawson denies the claim that the self is fictional. He argues for the existence of the self from a material stance, starting with an investigation of people’s phenomenological experience about “the mental self” and ends with what he calls “the Pearl view,” which “suggests that many mental selves exist, one at a time and one after another, like pearls on a string... each is a fully distinct existence, an individual physical thing or object, though they may exist for considerably different lengths of time.”<sup>4</sup> He believes this to be the best one can do to explain what the self is if there is such a (material) thing as “the self.”<sup>5</sup>

From my point of view, Strawson deserves credit in arguing against the narrative claim about self-experience and the well-organised investigation of the self as SESMETs. Nevertheless, I disagree with him on the conclusion that his Pearl view is a full account of the self, even from a materialist stance which Strawson holds. The problem with such a conclusion is due to Strawson’s claim that the self is not diachronically considered. By “diachronically considered,” I mean the feature of long-term continuity which Strawson finds as well as rejects in the narrativity camp’s account of the self.<sup>6</sup> Strawson distinguishes two forms of self-experience: the diachronic form—“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”—and the episodic form—“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.”<sup>7</sup> As Strawson argues against narrativity, he not only argues that the self is a (material) thing rather than a fictional character, but he also denies the idea that the self should be considered to persist over a long time. The “long time” here might sound controversial. The narrativity camp suggests the time to be human-life-long, but my use of diachronic self in this paper—though within the definition given by

2 Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 429.

3 Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 428-52.

4 Strawson, “The Self,” 405-28. By arguing from the material stance, Strawson further clarifies that, according to his materialism, the mental is within the physical realm—which is the only realm—but belongs to the experiential aspects of the physical, distinct from the non-experiential aspects. In other words, Strawson denies the claim made by some materialists that experience is merely neurons firing.

5 Strawson, “The Self,” 405-28. Strawson denies the claim made by some materialists that experience is merely neurons firing. He clarifies that, according to his materialism, the mental is within the physical realm—which is the only realm—but belongs to the experiential aspects of the physical, distinct from the non-experiential.

6 Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 430.

7 Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 430.

Strawson—is only to contrast Strawson’s episodic self, and it does not have such an implication.

In “Against Narrativity,” Strawson makes the convincing argument that *many* people experience their selves synchronically (viz. they experience their selves as something only at present and not in the past or future), and their self-experiences are episodic. So far, his claim sounds plausible and adequate. However, in “The Self,” Strawson radicalises that claim by asserting that the self should *only* be considered as “the single mental self at any given time without thinking of the self as something that has long-term continuity.”<sup>8</sup> Our consciousness, according to Strawson, constantly slips from the consciousness about the self from time to time, meaning that every person must have multiple episodic self-experiences no matter how long each episode is. Since each phenomenological experience of the self must be episodic instead of diachronic, the metaphysical self must be accounted for episodically.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is psychological continuity through each episode—i.e. the continuity in the mental state of experiencing the self—that defines the persistence of the self. It seems that Strawson presupposes the sufficiency of cognitive phenomenology to the metaphysical account of the self. Therefore, he comes up with the Pearl view. For Strawson, the self is identical to the episodic self, and each episodic self is independent from all other selves. Although Strawson uses the analogy of a pearl string, it would not make any difference if he simply called the selves “pearls without a string”—which might even be more accurate. If one insists on interpreting “the string,” Strawson himself seems to give a suggestion, which is that “the string” represents the history of the biological human being who carries all the mental selves.<sup>10</sup> However, based on the SESMETs theory, such a string analogy seems redundant, because the string is nothing more than a temporal recorder of the selves that are argued to be independent existents. A person’s history as a mere timeline would have no effect on any of the person’s episodic selves. Correspondingly, the existence and any change of the string has no effect on any of the pearls.

We shall observe a radical separation made by Strawson’s SESMETs theory, which is the separation of a person’s episodic self-experiences in the past or future from the person at present. Because Strawson has

8 Strawson, “The Self,” 423.

9 Strawson, “The Self,” 421-4.

10 Strawson does not explain how the string works in the article, but from his footnote 30, he seems to suggest that Dennett’s account of the self would be analogous to a pearl string with only one long pearl (Strawson, “The Self,” 425). Since Dennett treats the self as the “centre” of a human narrative, it is probably the case that Strawson makes human history analogous to the string of a pearl string (Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity”).



made the “string of the pearls” nothing but a temporal axis, it becomes the case that, for example, I cannot claim the episodic self which is experienced by the teenage me, YF, from 14 to 15 years old to be “a self of mine” since “my self” can only refer to the episodic self I am experiencing now, and “my self” is an independent existent from “that self” of the teenage YF. The only relationship between the two selves is that they occupy a sequential timeline—which is the history of YF—so that they do not overlap. There seems to be no difference between my recognition of the teenage YF’s self and my recognition of any random self which existed around my teenage years. Such a consequence is certainly counterintuitive. Based on the fact that Strawson’s Pearl view on its own must face this problem, is there a way to resolve the counterintuitiveness so that the string of mental selves share a more integrated relationship than mere temporal continuity, as well as preserve the distinctions between each two episodic selves?

I suggest a reconstruction of the Pearl view to achieve the aim, by replacing what “the string of the necklace” represents. On the basis of this idea, I bring in Barry Dainton’s “continuous consciousness thesis” about the self and combine it with Strawson’s SESMETs to become a complete view of the self. Dainton defines the consciousness stream to be the potential for experience, and he claims that a person’s self persists as long as their consciousness stays in a continuous stream, despite what happens to their physical body as a consciousness carrier in the middle of the stream. In other words, a person’s self can persist even though the person has experiences without a self-experience temporally in between the consciousness stream, so long as the potential for experience is continuous. Dainton regards his view as having an implication that the self is “nothing other than the potential... a continuous potential for experience”—namely, nothing more than a continuous consciousness stream.<sup>11</sup> Notice that, according to this claim, phenomenal continuity is sufficient for the persistence of a self, and psychological continuity (which Strawson argues for) is not necessary. Although such a view is different from Strawson’s SESMETs view, Dainton’s theory of the self in its nature does not deny SESMETs as selves but accounts for another type of the self; I call it “the diachronic self” because it fits into Strawson’s definition of the diachronic form of self-experience and it contrasts with Strawson’s episodic self. Besides, Dainton’s theory holds a neutral position on whether the self is a material thing in the Strawsonian sense, because it would depend on whether experience—which the self is capable of being

conscious of—is material, so Dainton’s theory certainly does not challenge Strawson’s materialist stance.<sup>12</sup>

All these features in Dainton’s theory provide the possibility for a reconstruction of the Pearl view. Instead of regarding Dainton’s and Strawson’s theories as different views on one thing (the self), I suggest that we should regard them as two states of the self: the episodic self and the diachronic self. Since it is a reconstruction of the Pearl view, I choose to use an analogy of “a pearl necklace:” the pearls on the necklace represent episodic selves that Strawson argues for (the SESMETs), and the string of the necklace represents the continuous potential for experience shared by the SESMETs. When I say that the diachronic self and the episodic self are two states, I mean that they are essentially the same self—the consciousness that is capable of experiencing—but under different conditions; the diachronic self is the whole stream of consciousness which can potentially be the subject of all experiences including self-experience, while an episodic self is the same consciousness only at the time of being the subject of a self-experience. What the string provides is a more integrated relationship between the episodic selves, meaning that the episodic selves on a same necklace are not only linked by a sequential history but also connected by a co-consciousness (i.e. the sole continuous potential for experiences). Although my recognition of my present self is distinct from my recognition of the teenage YF’s self psychologically, it is a distinction between episodic selves but not necessarily a distinction between diachronic selves. As long as my consciousness at present is still the same potential for experience as the teenage YF’s consciousness, I share the same diachronic self with the teenage YF.

The reconstruction also survives several concerns about what can happen to a person’s physical body. For example, a dreamless sleep would cause an interruption to a psychological continuity so that the episodic self before the sleep would be independent from the episodic self after the sleep. Using the pearl necklace analogy, these two episodic selves are represented by two individual pearls. Nevertheless, the two pearls can still be connected by the necklace string by being the same diachronic self as long as the two episodic selves constitute a continuous consciousness stream. More cases are suggested by Dainton such as mental transfer between physical bodies, space transmission, and transhumanism through biological technologies.<sup>13</sup> For all of these cases, there are disputes on whether one’s self can be kept after such changes are made to one’s physical body. The Necklace view gives an assertive answer: the diachronic self persists as long as the consciousness

11 Barry Dainton, *Self*, trans. Wang, Youlu (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, 2016), 89; 95.

12 Dainton, *Self*, 90-216.

13 Dainton, *Self*, 141-216.



is continuous, and the episodic self persists as long as the psychological cognition is continuous. From this answer we shall see that the self is freed from any temporal physical carrier of it, because the persistence of the self does not depend on the persistence of any human body (or transhuman body). A self may perish even though the human body is maintained (e.g. if one's consciousness stream ends as one's human body enters the vegetative state, the self no longer persists). On the contrary, a self may persist—diachronically, or both diachronically and episodically—though the physical carrier is destroyed.

The idea of reconstructing Strawson's theory roots in the concern that an account of the self—which I take as an attempt to answer the question, "Who am I?"—should be thought about from an "I-perspective." If we accept the claim given by the narrativity camp that the self is merely a fictional character used in a narrative, we would be committed to accounting "who I am" from a completely third-personal view: whatever we say about ourselves, we would speak as a storyteller describing a series of events. To me, this is absurd. Strawson, aiming at a metaphysical account of the self, starts his argument from everyone's self-experience. From this point, I think Strawson is at least on a more correct path. The endeavour I made to reconstruct Strawson's theory in this paper has been based on the will to make the theory more plausible so that we could apply it to answer the question "Who am I?" from an I-perspective. However, one may find an underlying assumption inherent in all three theories—Strawson's view, Dainton's view, my Necklace view—that the persistence of the self is objectively and, therefore, third-personally verifiable. The question would then become, "Since it is agreed that the feature of first-person is essential to the self, is it even possible for one to talk about someone else's self?" The Necklace view clearly suggests that we can at least verify the existence and persistence of any self, but if one holds the idea that a person's self should not be accountable by anyone but the person, one would be likely to deny the possibility. Leke Adeofe, for example, spells out his concern in the article "Personal Identity in African Metaphysics:"

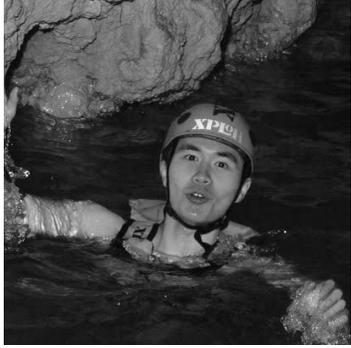
Western metaphysics... formulations of schemata for continuity theories... neglect the first-person perspective... Yet concerns about, say, my personal identity, are about me, and one would expect personal identity discussions to reflect this subjective aspect of the issue... there is nothing personal about personal identity without the person.<sup>14</sup>

The Necklace view would surely count as one of the "Western metaphysics" Adeofe refers to. According to Adeofe's concern, our attempt to account the self has been mistaken from the very beginning because we

should not have regarded the self to be accountable fully from a third-person perspective at all. Nevertheless, if we assume that the self can be accounted for from a third-person perspective, the framework provided by the "Necklace view" is more adequate than either Strawson's SESMETs or Dainton's continuous consciousness thesis.

14 Leke Adeofe, "Personal Identity in African Metaphysics," *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. Lee M. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).





**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**  
Xu, Yifeng (aka YF) is a senior in the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio, double majoring in Philosophy and East Asian Studies. Academically educated in both Chinese and English, YF's philosophic interest lies in phenomenology, East/West comparative philosophy, and philosophy of mind.

