

Moral Realities: Continuity, Narratives, and the Normative Self

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Abstract

This essay addresses personal identity and its role in sustaining moral responsibility. Against reductionist accounts, namely Derek Parfit's, which tie identity to degrees of psychological continuity, I argue that such views weaken the foundations of responsibility and risk, rendering practices like blame, praise, and obligation incoherent. If identity dissolves with psychological change, responsibility for past wrongs becomes negotiable, undermining ethical life. To respond to this danger, I develop the idea of the normative self: an identity constituted through the integration of past actions, present commitments, and future aspirations within a coherent narrative. Unlike reductionist models, this account does not merely approximate but in fact captures how selfhood is lived and understood—both from the first-person perspective of individuals who take ownership of their lives and from the third-person perspective of communities that hold one another responsible. Descriptive or reductionist models, I argue, ultimately fail precisely because they cannot adequately explain this dual orientation. I conclude that it is only by conceiving the self as normative that our practices of accountability, recognition, and renewal make coherent sense. Methodologically, I combine analytic critique with narrative and phenomenological approaches, engaging Parfit and Bernard Williams and testing their theories against real and hypothetical cases of wrongdoing, reform, and accountability. The result is a conception of the self that secures responsibility as both backward- and forward-looking, grounding our moral realities in a structure that preserves stability while enabling transformation.

Keywords

Identity, Morality, Responsibility, Normativity, Reductionism

1. Introduction

Moral responsibility, central to practices of praise, blame, and justice, depends fun-

damentally on the concept of moral agency: a structured coherence that allows agents to account for actions while leaving room for ethical growth. However, reducing personal identity to mere degrees of psychological continuity destabilizes this foundation, rendering the moral realities essential to communal trust incoherent. A non-reductive view of personal identity, by contrast, avoids this collapse, understanding identity as a normative construct actively constituted through a coherent narrative of moral agency—a *normative self*. This conception integrates psychological and physical continuity but situates these elements within a teleological framework that defines moral accountability as central to identity. Such an enduring self preserves the integrity of moral realities, allowing praise and blame to serve not only as retrospectives on past actions but also as mechanisms for ethical development, thereby sustaining the trust that forms the foundation of a moral community.

Responsibility, a marker of a moral community, necessitates the cohesion that is intrinsic to communal life. Cohesion, by its very nature, is a normative structure: an amalgam of shared values and obligations that unify its members. Consequently, responsibility, as a defining feature of a community, must itself partake in this normativity. The moral community, however, is constituted by agents whose actions sustain its cohesion. These agents, as the enactors of responsibility, are bound by the community's normative framework. Agency, as a prerequisite of moral action, presupposes an agent, and an agent necessarily embodies a self—that is, has an identity. If the self exists within a moral community whose foundations are normative, it cannot be ontologically distinct from this structure. Rather, the self is normatively constructed, embodying the principles that sustain responsibility, agency, and community. Hence, the self is not merely situated within normativity but is itself a product of it.

Therefore, treating personal identity as reducible to psychological connectedness, as proposed by Derek Parfit, undermines the coherence of moral responsibility.¹ If responsibility is contingent on psychological ties alone, its foundational role in a moral community diminishes, rendering justice all but arbitrary and ethical accountability disputable. In response, I propose that identity, as a cohesive structure, must be understood as being normatively constructed—that is to say, it actively integrates past actions, present commitments, and future aspirations within a unified moral framework.

Herein, I examine the practical implications of the preceding claims and of this normative conception of identity, demonstrating its resonance in the lived experience of moral agents. I argue that this understanding offers a more accurate reflection of human ontology: one in which selfhood encompasses continuity *and* accountability in synthesis. By rejecting reductionist views, which fail to account

¹One of my aims in challenging Parfit's theory is to expose how his theory could be co-opted to justify dangerous forms of subjectivism and relativism. In particular, it risks grounding moral justification in a *chosen* identity while discarding continuity with one's past—a tendency I take as a starting point for developing my own account.

for the moral dimensions of identity, this project establishes a model of the self as interdependent: responsible not only to itself but also to its relational commitments within a shared moral community. The significance of actions preserved through narrative coherence's endurance thus becomes a catalyst for moral agency and communal trust, essential for the flourishing of both individuals and societies. However, firstly, I will argue why this structure must not and cannot, in practice, be reduced.

2. Merely a Matter of Degree?

Parfit (1987: p. 316) states that “the identity of persons over time is [...] nothing more than the holding over time of various connections, some of which are matters of degrees”. This “nothing more than” qualifies a reduction of personal identity to “psychological continuity” and its connectedness, as opposed to the existence of a metaphysical self (Parfit, 1971: p. 24).² Psychological continuity, to Parfit, consists of “chains of overlapping relations” (Parfit, 1971: pp. 20-21)—“experience-memories,” intentions, and character traits—even if no “direct memory” links all temporal stages of a person (Parfit, 1987: p. 205). This suggests that moral responsibility can be grounded in (varying) degrees of connectedness (psychological links), thereby reframing personal identity (notably the restrictive nature of Locke's direct memory criterion) as a contingent and composite phenomenon rather than a metaphysical necessity.³ However, this premise (and reductions like it) creates significant tensions when applied to real-life moral practices—that is, *moral realities*. I argue that this type of continuity impedes accountability, and here, Parfit's reliance on connectedness provides an example of why moral practices like blame lose coherence under reductionism.

Consider John, who, as a younger man, kills a 12-year-old boy, Ethan, as a result of impaired driving. The crime devastates Ethan's family: his mother, overwhelmed by grief, withdraws into herself, her life defined by the void of her son's absence; his father, once methodical and industrious, abandons his passions and eventually his health. Ethan's peers, who had admired his kindness and talent, struggle to reconcile their loss. The death peals throughout the community, severing bonds of trust and amplifying fear.

Years later, John undergoes a radical and earnest psychological transformation. Therapy and reflection led him to adopt new, and now sober, values. He becomes a model citizen, dedicating his life to preventing impaired driving and the violence it causes. The John who exists now bears only tenuous psychological connections

²By metaphysical self, Parfit refers to the traditional notion of an enduring, indivisible subject that exists independently of its psychological states—that is, a core, unchanging entity often linked to personal identity in philosophical and religious traditions.

³In short, Locke's direct memory criterion states that an individual at a later time is the same person as an earlier individual if they can directly remember experiencing the earlier individual's thoughts, actions, or feelings.

to the John who killed Ethan.

If identity is merely a matter of degree, John's responsibility for the killing appears to diminish. He could claim that he is no longer the same person who committed the crime, for the chain of identity has corroded beyond moral recognition. Yet I argue such a claim trivializes the weight of the harm inflicted. Ethan's life, with all its unrealized potential, remains irrevocably extinguished. His parents' grief does not lessen with John's transformation, nor does the communal wound heal on its own. Insubstantial or dubious responsibility risks reducing Ethan's death to an unfortunate *event* in John's personal history (in effect, causally disconnected), rather than a significant moral wrong that requires enduring accountability (by all other accounts).

Drawing attention to the insufficiencies of psychological continuity, Bernard Williams (1970: p. 162) asserts that memory, as a basis for personal identity, "seems a necessary condition on *x*'s present knowledge of *x*'s earlier experiences constituting memory of those experiences that the causal chain linking the experiences and knowledge should not run outside *x*'s body".⁴ In other words, memory is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a causal process dependent on the continuity of the body.⁵ This points toward the idea that moral responsibility cannot rest on psychological traits alone, as their causal and justificatory force presupposes an underlying physical continuity.⁶ Bodily continuity thus provides a naturally occurring, unbroken causal chain for coherent moral practices by linking present knowledge to past experiences. Without this physical foundation, the causal connection between past actions and present accountability is—or risks being—severed, rendering moral responsibility incoherent. In such cases, the moral significance of the action becomes a detached narrative fragment, inoperable for blame and reparation.

Take, for instance, the hypothetical case of fission, where one person splits into two distinct individuals, and neither "Lefty" nor "Righty" "[committed] your crimes," but both are connected to you (Parfit, 1987: p. 324).⁷ This (in long-form) implies that as psychological ties weaken, responsibility for past actions diminishes or becomes more complex, such that, strictly speaking, "we do not deserve to be punished for our crimes" in the "old sense"—a claim Parfit (1987: p. 324) calls one of the "Extreme Claims" and which he examines without declaring it

⁴Parfit anticipates and answers these worries by careful treatment of memory via "quasi-memory" and causal conditions for Relation R in his discussion of Butler and his objection. He does this in attempts to block the charge that memory presupposes identity. See *Reasons and Persons*, pages 219-223.

⁵In John's case, while his psychological transformation distances him from the person who killed Ethan, his bodily continuity preserves the causal connection necessary to ground accountability.

⁶That is, a very real object to which responsibility is directed.

⁷In the story, Lefty and Righty each begin with one hemisphere of the brain and the corresponding half of the body, though it is unclear which belongs to which. After one dies, a surgeon transplants the surviving hemisphere of the other's brain into the remaining half of the body. Intuitively, Parfit argues, the important question is whether the surviving half is Lefty or Righty, or whether it is some new third person.

decisively settled.^{8,9,10} Parfit (1987: p. 324) acknowledges that “the deep further fact[s] of personal identity” is what “carries [...] responsibility for past crimes”. However, he ultimately denies this, for “there [are] no such facts” (that is, they are unsupported and unnecessary), thereby obviating supposed further facts, firmly grounding responsibility in psychological continuity (Parfit, 1987: p. 324).¹¹

In support of the exclusion of further facts, Parfit (1987: p. 201) claims that survival of psychological continuity, even across multiple future selves or “Replica[s],” suffices for what matters in personal identity and moral responsibility. However, would one not still dread “future pain,” even if told that their future self or Replica would not remember the current fear (Williams, 1970: p. 177)? Would this fear not demonstrate that bodily continuity plays a crucial role in our practical concerns and moral intuitions in the first person?¹² For even under conditions of psychological discontinuity (multiple future selves bearing mere or no resemblance to past selves or even John’s case), the physical self remains and therefore is enough of a locus of moral responsibility for its purposes to see fruition. What’s more, sidelining this notion does not adequately address individuals anticipating and bearing the consequences of their future suffering or deeds.

Now, even if we accept “psychological arguments,” the absence of bodily continuity renders moral desert unintelligible (Williams, 1970: p. 167).^{13,14} For if one person splits into Lefty and Righty, each sharing psychological continuity with the original person, neither can fully claim to be the original. And in such a case, responsibility cannot be coherently assigned to either successor, despite their shared connections, implying that psychological continuity alone cannot sustain moral desert.¹⁵

And what’s more, the subversion or incoherency of responsibility negates psychological change, for true transformation requires an acknowledgment of past actions as integral to the self. Psychological growth involves not only altering one’s

⁸In *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit uses the term “further facts” to refer to any additional details or circumstances that can potentially affect the moral importance of certain actions or outcomes. He argues that these further facts can influence the extent to which something is good or bad for the individuals involved, and that they are an important consideration in the determination of what we ought to do. In his discussions of personal identity, Parfit argues that identity itself might not matter as much as we think in moral reasoning. The “further facts” about an individual’s personal identity might not be as crucial as the outcomes of actions or the interests of sentient beings in general. This is part of his broader challenge to theories that rely heavily on subjective facts about individual identity, proposing that objective criteria (like well-being or suffering) should be prioritized instead.

⁹“Old sense” is to use Parfit’s language from *Reasons and Persons* page 290.

¹⁰For “Extreme Claim” see *Reasons and Persons* page 307.

¹¹Parfit recognizes, however, that this conclusion has disturbing implications (for desert and responsibility) and treats whether psychological continuity suffices for *all* our moral practices as an open contestable question.

¹²Williams’ argument points toward the inadequacy of psychological continuity alone in explaining first-person concerns, as it fails to account for the embodied nature of identity that grounds anticipatory emotions like fear and, therefore, moral responsibility.

¹³Desert here is viewed in the third person. That is, what one deserves—an incoming acknowledgment.

¹⁴What I am saying is Parfit, without completely obliterating desert, instead is allowing one to coherently make the claim of unintelligibility, and that the issue remains open.

¹⁵Parfit (1987) goes so far as to concede this fact in the story of Lefty and Righty.

values and behavior but also taking ownership of previous wrongs. By denying responsibility, an individual severs the *strong* link between past and present, undermining the very process of change. For change without responsibility is superficial, as it fails to integrate the moral weight of past actions into the naturally evolving self. Therefore, without replete accountability, psychological change lacks coherence, reducing it to mere behavioral shifts—a *numerical* behavioral shift, to use Parfit’s own language—rather than a substantive moral transformation.¹⁶ Therefore, rejecting responsibility invalidates the claim of genuine psychological growth, as the necessary link between past actions and present identity is broken.

Thus, without bodily continuity, the chain of personal identity—and thus the grounds for responsibility—breaks down. Even if Lefty and Righty retain psychological links, the absence of bodily unity renders the assignment of partial, let alone complete, responsibility, and in turn, blame, or desert (all of which constitute moral realities), unintelligible. Therefore, the reliance on psychological criteria alone fails to account for the moral realities of identity.

To favor purely psychological continuity would, pragmatically, destabilize the shared moral and legal frameworks within communities. Accountability would become arbitrary, and consequently, normative practices would lose their *force*. For instance, blame serves to reaffirm the moral significance of harm, and in John’s case, it upholds the weight of Ethan’s lost life and the suffering borne by his family and community. Diminishing John’s blame would signal that Ethan’s death—and the impact of that loss—carries less moral weight as time passes. Such a conclusion not only spoils the sense of justice for Ethan but also weakens the broader moral dais that situates individuals within a moral community.

Imagine for a moment a legal system where punishment is calibrated to the degree of psychological continuity between an offender and their past self. Reductionism has direct implications for such real, that is, enacted normative systems, particularly in cases involving long-past crimes or actions. Therein it is suggested, if a man aged ninety confesses to injuring a policeman in a drunken brawl at twenty, he “may not now deserve to be punished” (Parfit, 1987: p. 326). This raises the issue of whether diminished psychological continuity justifies light or no punishment for older crimes.¹⁷

Now, go on to imagine John confessing to causing Ethan’s death, but only years later, and only after undergoing this acute personal transformation. John claims, “I am no longer the person who committed that act.” If we adopt Parfit’s reductionism, John’s argument seems plausible: diminished psychological continuity

¹⁶In this appropriation of Parfit’s (1987) language, a numerical behavioral shift occurs when the same individual (numerical identity) undergoes superficial change. This is in keeping with Parfit’s definition of numerical change mentioned in fn.11—“[...] when one thing is replaced by another.”

¹⁷I acknowledge the fact there are charitable or sympathetic judges, juries, or magistrates who may take these things into account. However, here, I am speaking purely of written, enacted, statutes pertaining to law and the processes therein.

(overlap or direct memories) could weaken or even negate his responsibility.¹⁸ However, Ethan's grieving parents reject this reasoning. They ask, "Does your transformation undo our suffering or bring Ethan back?" Their reproach points out a decisive flaw in Parfit's framework: moral responsibility, tied solely to psychological connectedness, becomes arbitrary and evadable, insofar as it is a conflation and subsequent degradation of first- and third-person perspectives.¹⁹ While distinct, "compensation"—using Parfit's (1987: p. 345) language, albeit simply desert in the third person—and responsibility are closely linked, without compensation, responsibility loses its moral weight.²⁰ Compensation balances harms and benefits across time, making desert (first-person) actionable by rectifying moral debts. Without it, responsibility becomes hollow, reduced to mere acknowledgment—inert—without meaningful redress.

However, if pragmatic continuity (that is, as we use it) requires both body and mind, what then connects this first-person perspective to the third, thereby establishing our moral realities?

If further facts determine moral significance by shaping how actions impact individuals, their role is evaluative rather than descriptive, meaning they function as normative constructs rather than metaphysical conditions. Then, their necessity in moral reasoning stems not from an ontological essence but from their role in sustaining accountability across time. Therefore, I propose that moral realities persist (connecting first- and third-person perspectives) through such a normative understanding, one which binds past actions to present agency, avoiding the instability inherent in reductionism. This then provides a stable foundation, ensuring that moral practices retain their *normative force*.²¹ Thus, identity is not passively inherited from solely psychological or physical continuity; it is actively constituted through the individual's engagement in a coherent moral narrative, rejecting the dissolution of responsibility through change. For example, by integrating John's past action into a coherent *moral narrative*, his accountability is maintained. Despite his reform reflecting growth, he is not absolved of blame. This ensures the balance between justice for Ethan and recognition of John's capacity for ethical renewal—an equilibrium that reductionism cannot sustain. Moral

¹⁸Parfit (1987) would say John's "character has changed," meaning "[t]his numerically identical person is now qualitatively different" (p. 202). Where qualitative change is a change in the intrinsic properties of a thing, numerical change is when one thing is replaced by another.

¹⁹The *first-person* moral perspective focuses on an individual's subjective experience, with emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reflection on one's own moral obligation. In contrast, the *third-person* perspective is an external, impersonal viewpoint that considers the moral obligations and actions of others, often based on principles of societal norms. This distinction is used to delineate between personal moral reasoning and evaluative reasoning with regard to behaviors from an objective standpoint. These concepts were notably discussed by Thomas Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Scanlon, 1998).

²⁰Compensation functions as a third-person application of moral desert by operationalizing responsibility through the rectification of harms and benefits over time. It transforms desert from a subjective acknowledgment of moral standing into actions addressing past wrongs.

²¹Herein, *normative force* is the justificatory power that compels adherence to moral or legal principles, granting them legitimacy and authority in guiding actions or judgments.

desert becomes arbitrary when rejecting this interpretation of further facts, if it is sacrificing responsibility to any degree.²² Narrative coherence, therefore, forms the enduring self—that is, a moral agent whose responsibility persists over time while reflecting its temporal situatedness.²³

3. Responsibility, Moral Obligation, and the Concept of Ought

The necessity of moral responsibility lies in its role as the foundation of moral obligation. Without responsibility, moral duties become incoherent, as they presuppose an agent capable of being held accountable. *Feinberg (1974)* points out that a responsible agent is one who can understand and respond to reasons, and as such, this capacity links responsibility to obligations: it is not enough to know what morality requires; one must also be accountable for fulfilling those requirements.²⁴

Parfit (1987: pp. 478, 292, 478) poses the contrary to this idea of the necessity of a unified moral agent, stating, “what matters is not identity” nor the “uninterruption of a stream of consciousness,” “but some of these other relations” (referencing Robert Nozick’s Closest Continuer theory).²⁵ However, this raises further questions about whether moral responsibility can be sustained without a stable notion of self, or does it reduce responsibility to a function of degrees of connectedness? *Parfit (1987: p. 322)* does concede that in some cases, practices like desert and blame may require more than continuity, admitting that our moral practices may need a deeper assumption—that is, “*deep truth*” of identity—to work as intended.²⁶ That is to say, Parfit is not simply indifferent to moral practices, but is arguing that we must rethink which features ground those practices.

Nevertheless, the language of moral obligation is inherently tied to the concept of responsibility. When we say someone *ought* to do something, we imply their capacity to recognize and act upon that obligation, such that to say someone ought to do something is to assume that they are in a position to take responsibility for

²²*Parfit (1987)* claims that “[s]ince there is no such fact, there is no desert” (p. 324) and “[s]ince there is no such fact, there is no such compensation” (p. 345).

²³Identity remains insofar as it achieves stasis through an ongoing commitment to coherence, rather than being a static product of continuity. This stability is preserved through the active integration of past actions and values into a unified narrative.

²⁴*Feinberg (1974)* writes, for example, “[...] a competent responsible agent who has committed a crime and now regrets it [...] may wish to pay for his folly and get it over with [...]” (p. 73).

²⁵Nozick’s Closest Continuer theory is an account of personal identity that seeks to identify which future or past entity is the closest continuer of our current self. According to Nozick, identity is determined by a gradual connection of overlapping psychological characteristics over time. This connection can be visualized as a chain or series of overlapping selves, with the current self being directly connected to its closest possible continuer in the near future and the recent past. The theory attempts to solve the problem of personal identity by suggesting that it is not necessary for our future or past selves to be identical to our current self, but only that they are connected through these overlapping characteristics. See *Philosophical Explanations (Nozick, 1981)* pages 29-37.

²⁶Derived from *Parfit’s (1987)* statements, “There are many ways in which, if we have changed our view about personal identity, they may justify a change in our moral views” (p. 321) and “[...] it is a *deep truth* that all the parts of my life and *equally* parts of my life” (in reference to “Non-Reductionist” views) (p. 322).

that action (presupposing continuity).²⁷ Responsibility provides the normative force behind moral duties, ensuring they are more than abstract directives. Therefore, without responsibility, moral requirements lose their prescriptive power, such that if John, after killing Ethan, was deemed unaccountable due to his transformation, the normative force of the obligation he violated would diminish. This would not only absolve John retroactively, but also weaken the moral structure of obligation itself. Thus, responsibility ensures that the “ought” retains its practical and normative weight.

This, then, requires an understanding that moral obligations do not exist in isolation, but arise within relationships which depend on trust, accountability, and mutual respect—or better, as writes Roscoe Pound, “[the moral agent] is in relation to other beings like himself and to things external. On the other hand, he is, as it were, alone with himself” (Feinberg, 1974: p. 43). This presupposes holding individuals accountable, thereby affirming responsibility in a reciprocal nature in regard to these obligations.

Furthering this, Williams (1985: pp. 177-178) claims that moral obligation is inescapable, pointing out that the intrinsic and systemic nature of morality situates an agent such that they are bound by an obligation—whether “voluntarily,” as in making a promise, or involuntarily, through no direct choice—this obligation cannot be evaded merely by rejecting the system that imposes it. Moral obligations persist independently of an agent’s preferences, facilitating a notion of the objective structure of moral norms. This inescapability is fundamental to what Williams (1985: p. 177) terms the “morality system,” which operates through both internal and external mechanisms of accountability. Externally, the system involves the expression of blame by others, reinforcing the collective dimension of moral accountability.

Blame, then, is not a misunderstanding but a necessary reaction that confirms the inescapable nature of moral responsibility. Importantly, even agents who withhold blame or question their expression do not escape their moral obligations, for they remain within the system by virtue of their internal moral responses. Thus, the intercourse of the first-person and the interpersonal shows the comprehensive involuntary participation in a moral framework that defines what it is to be a *full* moral agent (immersion in one’s moral realities).

In John’s case, his obligation to acknowledge and atone for his past crime is not merely an individual burden but an inescapable moral duty that arises from his participation in a shared normative framework (his sharing in is evident in his remorse). The harm inflicted on Ethan’s family and the broader community demands recognition, not just as an act of personal contrition, but as a reaffirmation of the moral standards that govern their collective lives. If John evades responsibility, he not only neglects these relational obligations but also actively undermines the trust and mutual respect that sustain moral cohesion. This dynamic extends beyond negative obligations: when John is praised for his efforts to pre-

²⁷Derived from Feinberg’s (1974) robber and bank teller example/story. See pages 155-156.

vent impaired driving, he reinforces the very values that bind the community, illustrating that moral responsibility underlies both the blame associated with wrongdoing and the praise accorded for moral contributions.

Responsibility, then, is not merely a punitive reaction but a fundamental mechanism for reinforcing the inescapable nature of moral obligations. Responsibility operates to restore and uphold breached norms and to praise virtuous behavior, serving to reassert the normative framework, such that moral standards remain intact, thereby ensuring those very standards' continued authority within the moral system.²⁸

In John's case, the blame directed toward him for Ethan's death is essential not only to affirm the gravity of the harm done but also to preserve the integrity of the moral standards that protect the value of human life. By confronting blame, John participates in this reparative process, demonstrating his commitment to restoring the trust that his actions have fractured. Thus, a normative self adheres to the moral narrative of which it is a part. What's more, blame's reparative function is critical for maintaining the moral cohesion of the community. To withhold blame from John on the grounds of his psychological transformation would signal that moral norms are flexible, undermining their binding force.²⁹ Instead, blame, in this sense, serves not to isolate nor punish but to reintegrate the wrongdoer into the moral community, reaffirming shared values and ensuring that moral obligations remain inescapable and universally binding. Responsibility, therefore, is not contingent on personal transformation or subjective preference; it is a consistent and objective requirement for the preservation of moral authority.

4. Backward- and Forward-Looking Praise and Blame

Returning to the idea of whether moral practices can function without a stable notion of self:³⁰ If moral practices require both past *and* future considerations, and psychological connections alone do not provide strong claims to future selves (for example, Williams' "future pain"), then to care about a future self is necessarily to care about *this* body.³¹ Therefore, following Williams—and given psychological continuity fails to sustain obligations over time, and obligations, by their very nature, require such sustainment—the inclusion of bodily continuity is needed to ensure the persistence of relational obligations. For without a *unified self*, one which respects the relational and communal dimensions foundational to moral

²⁸Derived from Feinberg's (1974) section "The Expressive Function of Punishment" and more exactly his reference to "judgement of the 'people of Texas.'" See pages 102-103.

²⁹I use the term "flexible," but realistically, this is a type of vulgar relativism—the simplistic belief in morality that dismisses any basis for objective critique or universal standards, often leading to incoherent or self-defeating conclusions.

³⁰See "Successive Selves" in *Reasons and Persons*, 302-306.

³¹This contrasted with Williams' (1970) statement: "This seems to show that to care about what happens to me in the future is not necessarily to care about what happens to *this* body (the one I now have); and this in turn might be taken to show that in some sense of Descartes' obscure phrase, I and my body are 'really distinct' (though, of course, nothing in these considerations could support the idea that I could exist without a body at all)" (p. 164).

responsibility, obligations lose their normative force, and what follows is the moldering of morality, practically speaking.³²

I do concede, however, that as identities shift—shaped by evolving social, cultural, and political forces—the relational basis of morality is increasingly subjected to renegotiation. A conception of psychological identity that isolates individuals from their communities, however, risks undermining the renegotiation of relational biases. For an atomistic self can be argued to be severed from relational ties, which effectively anchor norms, therefore reducing blame and praise to tools of individual validation rather than mechanisms of communal accountability.

In order to achieve enduring accountability, and in turn, communal norms, and ultimately a moral community, what is required is more than the recognition of individual identity; it demands that individuals remain in a structure of mutual obligation. Thus, moral norms are preserved across differences by fostering interaction in which mutual respect for otherness is not only possible but necessary. And while Parfit reshapes the dynamics of recognition and, in effect, belonging, the forward-looking utility of moral practices must adapt. Therefore, the tension between shifting identities and enduring accountability points to a critical juncture: morality cannot exist without a communal structure, yet this structure must remain flexible enough to incorporate changing identities without dissolving into relativism.

Accordingly, while serving not merely to punish nor reward, blame and praise are indispensable components of moral responsibility, facets which guide future behavior and reinforce communal trust—that is, they are about holding individuals accountable in a way that reinforces normative moral realities. Blame confronts individuals with their moral failures, prompting reflection and corrective actions, while praise encourages virtuous conduct by affirming its value. Blame also presupposes a relational dynamic, one which has roots in the interdependence of individuals within a moral community. Therefore, these practices rely on a shared framework of norms, where mutual recognition of agency (and its inevitable changes) and respect for otherness sustain the possibility of accountability. For without this, morality either spalls into subject-relativism or collapses entirely, as it loses the intersubjective basis required to mediate conflicting perspectives and promote communal trust.

Whereas Parfit argues that blame and praise need not rest on a strong conception of personal identity to serve forward-looking purposes (alluding to the idea that blame should serve to correct future behavior rather than deal with past wrongs),³³ and while aligning with utilitarian sentiment, where moral practices

³²“Unified self” as in the unification of mind and body—a reconciliation of the Cartesian dualism mentioned by Williams above.

³³Parfit (1987) writes: “If it is morally justified to put me in prison, this can only be on utilitarian grounds. One such ground is that my imprisonment may deter others from committing crimes” (p. 325). Thus, Parfit’s focus is forward-looking blame and responsibility. Consequentialist in nature, insofar as the ultimate focus is on the consequences of blame and responsibility for improving outcomes and influencing future behaviors. Therefore, Parfit, while acknowledging backward-looking blame, ultimately argues against it being seen as a marker of responsibility.

aim to deter future wrongdoing or promote virtuous behavior, I argue that forward-looking responsibility must still be affixed to enduring accountability to maintain its normative force. For without a sufficient notion of a coherent self, blame risks becoming a purely instrumental mechanism, detached from the intrinsic moral significance of past actions.³⁴

Take blame in John's case: it operates as a moral signal. By assigning blame for Ethan's death, the moral community acknowledges the severity of the harm and reaffirms its commitment to moral standards. This blame compels John to confront his past actions, ensuring that the suffering of Ethan's family is neither erased nor minimized. At the same time, blame functions as a forward-looking tool. It challenges John to reconcile his actions with his moral obligations, fostering his ongoing ethical development. Therefore, responsibility is not merely backward-looking; it also plays a role in future moral obligations such that responsibility projects forward, guiding the agent's future actions in light of past failures.³⁵ John's case illustrates this dynamic: His responsibility for Ethan's death generates an obligation not only to acknowledge the harm but also to prevent similar harms in the future. This is seen in his dedication to sober living and advocacy for responsible practices and awareness (arguably virtuous characteristics that otherwise may not have manifested). Furthermore, his advocacy against impaired driving is a direct extension of his enduring responsibility. Without both ways of *looking* at the problem, moral growth would lack the normative stability provided by their different aspects of responsibility.

If blame were purely backward-looking, it might seem redundant once an individual begins to reform.³⁶ Its purpose would be limited to assigning fault for past actions, focusing solely on retribution or acknowledgment of harm already done. Thus, once an individual begins to reform—demonstrating a commitment to moral improvement and aligning their future actions with ethical norms—blame might appear inessential, for the individual has already recognized their wrongdoing and taken steps to correct it.³⁷ This narrow focus would alter the purpose and scope of moral and ethical frameworks, transforming them into mechanisms for cataloging transgressions rather than a dynamic tool for growth and harmony.

³⁴A “purely instrumental mechanism” refers to a practice or tool used solely for achieving external, often utilitarian outcomes without regard to its inherent moral or relational significance. In the context of blame, this means viewing it purely as a means to correct future behavior or deter wrongdoing, stripped of its retrospective role. This instrumentalization disregards the expressive function of blame, which communicates the seriousness of a moral breach. Consequently, blame becomes transactional, valued only for its effectiveness in modifying conduct rather than as a moral response. Such a reduction risks eroding normative foundations, as it no longer serves to reinforce the moral fabric, focusing instead on behavioral utility devoid of deeper ethical accountability.

³⁵Backward-looking responsibility focuses on accountability for past actions, holding agents answerable for what they have done.

³⁶This aligns somewhat with Parfit's (1987) critiques of backward-looking blame, where he states, “[w]hen some convict is now less closely connected to himself at the time of his crime, he deserves less punishment. If the [psychological] connections are very weak, he may deserve none” (p. 326).

³⁷This is similar, in many respects, to the discussion in Section 2 of whether one deserves punishment long after a crime. Though here, the discussion is about recognition leading to culpability, whereas in Section 2 the focus was on culpability exclusively.

Ethicality would be primarily concerned with the correction of past wrongs rather than the cultivation of virtuous character or the promotion of ethical behavior. Therefore, the transformative potential, that is, the capacity to guide individuals toward continuous improvement and reinforce societal trust, is diminished if not wholly illusory. For once, blame is seen as redundant; post-reform, the moral community's role in supporting and holding individuals accountable would weaken. Ethicality would no longer be restorative, relational, or reinforcing, but would instead become isolated acts of judgment, disconnected from the aims of development. Thus, defining moral responsibility in purely backward-looking terms reduces its efficacy as a guiding principle for sustained moral agency and community, delimiting their functions to punitive assessments rather than fostering a living, evolving ethical life.

Moral responsibility's forward-looking nature ensures that reform is not superficial. John's reform gains moral significance only when it arises from an acknowledgment of past wrongdoing. Without blame, moral growth lacks the necessary foundation of responsibility. Similarly, praise affirms and sustains moral progress. John's efforts to prevent impaired driving deserve praise, not as a counterbalance to blame but as recognition of his commitment to positive change.³⁸ Praise reinforces John's moral agency, encouraging him to persist in his ethical endeavors. Together, praise and blame function as mechanisms that uphold the moral community's trust, signaling that moral agents are held accountable while being supported in their growth.

On the other hand, "[t]rust [...] on which moral relations depend," enables cooperation and mutual accountability, for without it, agreed upon moral structures wither—this is the attention backward-looking provides (Walker, 2001: p. 124). It follows that practices of praise and blame sustain this trust by affirming shared values and ensuring that individuals are held to consistent moral standards. Blame for past wrongdoing thereby reassures the community that moral violations are taken seriously under a "common perspective" (Walker, 2001: p. 124). In John's case, blaming him for Ethan's death ensures that the harm inflicted on Ethan's family and community is neither ignored nor diminished. This act of blame communicates to the moral community that such actions remain morally reprehensible, even as John reforms.

Conversely, praise for John's reform fosters trust in his commitment to ethical conduct. It demonstrates that moral agents can evolve and contribute positively to the moral community, reinforcing communal confidence in the possibility of redemption. Praise and blame, when grounded in the normative self, maintain the

³⁸Change does not undo or alter the moral significance of past actions. Ethan's death and John's subsequent reform, though sequentially linked, represent distinct moral events requiring separate evaluations. Ethan's death remains a moral wrong, irreducible and demanding accountability, while John's reform, though laudable, does not diminish the weight of his prior actions. Acknowledging this distinction is critical to preserving the integrity of moral practices. Thus, these two moral dimensions—blame for past wrongs and praise for future reform—operate concurrently, ensuring that moral growth arises not as an erasure of past actions but as an ethical response to them.

delicate balance between justice and the recognition of human fallibility. This interaction between praise, blame, and trust points toward the essential role of moral responsibility in sustaining the social and ethical anatomy. However, responsibility does more than uphold communal trust; it also underpins the very structure of moral obligation. The prescriptive force of moral duties—our capacity to say that someone *ought* to act or refrain from acting—derives its strength from the assumption that individuals are responsible agents. Responsibility is what transforms moral expectations into binding obligations, ensuring that ethical standards are not merely aspirational but actionable.

5. Understanding the Normative Self

Reason, here, shows that moral responsibility requires individuals to actively integrate their actions into a coherent narrative of selfhood, as it is through regarding yourself as the author of your actions and valuing the integrity of your “practical identity” that you hold yourself responsible and “give rise to reasons and obligations” (Korsgaard, 1996: p. 101).³⁹ This integration forms the foundation of enduring accountability, where the normative self ensures that moral realities remain intact, even amidst personal transformation, by embedding past actions within an evolving ethical framework.

Imagine Ethan’s grieving parents confronting John. They ask, “Do you not bear the weight of our son’s death?” John responds, “I am not the same person. I have changed.” The parents retort, “Does your transformation undo our suffering? Does it restore Ethan’s life?” The *logic* of the parents’ argument reveals the flaw in John’s defense and, in turn, Parfit’s theory: moral responsibility cannot be contingent on psychological change without trivializing the lasting impact of wrongdoing on the greater moral community.⁴⁰ The normative self provides the structure to reject such evasion, maintaining accountability through narrative coherence, and thus respecting both the first- and third-person moral perspectives. This continuous responsibility counterbalances justice and redemption.⁴¹ Thus, the narrative coherence of the normative self ensures that neither past wrongs are forgotten nor moral process foreclosed.

To define the normative self, one must therefore transcend psychological continuity alone. Unlike Parfit, the normative self integrates past actions, present values, and future aspirations into a unified moral framework—essential for sustaining accountability, particularly when individuals undergo profound personal transformation. This temporal synthesis of psychological and bodily continuity represents one’s moral narrative in a coherent structure that thereby defines one’s identity. And as such, it is not, nor can it be, a static entity but requires of itself

³⁹“Practical Identity,” as defined by Korsgaard (1996), “is a complex matter and for the average person there will be a jumble of such conceptions. You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone’s lover or friend, and so on. And these identities give rise to reasons and obligations” (p. 101).

⁴⁰Here, “logic” is being used pragmatically.

⁴¹The synthesis of backward-looking and forward-looking principles.

and in itself a dynamic, temporally situated construction, one which integrates the evolving aspects of the body and mind while maintaining a unified agent. By contextualizing bodily and psychological changes within a narrative framework, the ethical and ontological integrity of the individual across time is preserved.⁴²

For both bodily and psychological aspects, considered in their isolation, are static—that is, they lack the integrative mechanism necessary to account for their own change over time. These corporeal and temporal aspects are individuated such that they are free from their own contextualization, given that they are not cognizing aspects of human life (more so, the mind cognizes; however, if given Parfitian logic, it does not hold itself accountable for its own change). The body, as a biological entity, is subject to measurable, momentary states: its cellular composition, physical form, and neurological processes are bound by temporally discrete conditions. While these may evolve, their evolution is reducible to physiological changes without an overarching structure to contextualize them as part of a unified experience. Similarly, psychological states—moments of cognition, emotion, or will—are self-contained and lack an inherent mechanism to connect meaningfully to prior or future states. While memory or projection might suggest continuity, these are themselves static impressions—snapshots of mental life—rather than dynamically integrative processes. By asserting—as Parfit does and as Nozick’s Closest Continuer Theory similarly posits—that identity is conferred upon the “closest continuer” or, similarly, “overlapping relations” based on resemblance and causal links, jackingstrawing of the self is reified, treating identity as the result of external comparison or, better, an external selection mechanism (Parfit, 1971: pp. 20-21).⁴³ This self and its discrete elements connect only by arbitrary links and neglect the internal dynamic process that unifies the various temporal stages of existence.

The problem with resemblance and causal continuity lies in their failure to account for the internal continuity (unity) of the self across time. While the closest continuer may resemble the previous *entity* or prior self, without an internal mechanism that ensures these resemblances are not merely contingent or accidental, this resemblance becomes a matter of external judgment, rather than a product of self-integration. The mind-body relationship, for instance, is not merely a question of finding the closest match between psychological states or bodily forms, but rather of understanding how those states are integrated into a single subject. If identity were merely a matter of external resemblance, the person

⁴²Ontological integrity refers to the coherence and unity of an individual’s *being* across time—that is, the ability of a person to persist as a singular, intelligible entity while accommodating the inevitable flux of states, thereby ensuring an individual remains recognizably the same while evolving. It is foundational for moral agency, accountability, and self-recognition, as seen in this essay.

⁴³While Parfit and Nozick differ in their views—psychological continuity and connectedness verses resemblance and causal continuity (respectively)—their theories are similar in that both reduce identity to external criteria. Parfit and Nozick both rely on *observable links* between different stages of a person’s existence, though neither explains how these links create a “self” over time. Hence, my addition of both in this argument, not only shows the sides of reductive theory but also the breadth of a normative non-reductive understanding in practice.

would be fragmented, composed of disparate elements connected by unmotivated links, rather than a unified self that maintains continuity through an internal, self-directed process. This is where Nozick's theory, like Parfit's, falters: treating identity as a product (in finality), neglecting the fact that personal identity is not something simply attributed by external comparison, but must arise from an internal process that preserves a sense of unity despite change. In effect, these theories reify states into a coherent, ongoing identity, while simultaneously reducing them to a superficial, externally determined categorization. Identity is not merely about finding the "closest" match but about understanding how the various parts of an individual—bodily, psychological, and otherwise—are continuously reintegrated and sustained by an internal principle of unity, which is exactly what both theories fail to explain. Thus, the reliance on resemblance and causal continuity ultimately renders the concept of identity incoherent and its logic insufficient for resolving the problem, as it overlooks the deeper, internal structure necessary for identity to endure meaningfully over time.⁴⁴

In this spirit, Parfit's (1987) reductionist view purports to complement this analysis, albeit not, as I have said, involving deep further facts, but instead hinging on connectedness—what he terms Relation R—"with the right kind of cause" (Parfit, 1987: p. 215).⁴⁵ While compelling on the surface, this fails to address the disjuncture inherent in isolating psychological continuity from a unified narrative framework. Parfit's contention that identity is reducible to relational continuity undermines the very coherence required to situate moral responsibility and ethical agency. Without a substantive organizing principle, Relation R is no more than a series of disconnected states, lacking the teleological structure necessary for moral growth and accountability.⁴⁶

Without a binding force, so to speak, to synthesize these discrete bodily and psychological elements, identity becomes parcelled or, at worst, relative. The body and mind, in isolation, offer only a series of independent events without an organizing principle; therefore, they are removed from their "practical considerations" (Feinberg, 1974: p. 30). Thus, without the temporal synthesis provided by a narrative, the bodily and psychological aspects remain static, unable to form the coherent continuity necessary for identity and, therefore, moral realities as defined herein.

Therefore, we must understand our normative selves as employing these moral

⁴⁴This would be a form of metacognition—that is, the self's understanding of the self.

⁴⁵It is worth noting that Parfit later (1985 reprint note) withdrew support for his original "Wide Psychological Criterion," admitting that it overextended the causal range; still, the essential claim—that identity is reducible to psychological continuity with the right kind of cause—remains central to his reductionism. See *Reasons and Persons* page x.

⁴⁶A substantive organizing principle provides coherence to Relation R, linking its states through a unifying value or purpose. This enables a teleological structure—an intrinsic goal-directedness crucial for moral growth and accountability—by situating actions within a structure oriented toward ethical ends. Absent such a principle, Relation R fragments into disjointed states, eroding the continuity necessary for deliberation and normative coherence, for there is no foundation for sustained growth or consistent normativity, reducing itself to mere episodic occurrences.

narratives as the binding element or force, integrating the distinct trajectories of bodily and psychological change; whereupon psychological continuity is characterized by evolving memories, values, beliefs, and so on—the Parfitian scheme—and bodily continuity reflects the physical alterations inherent in aging and transformations of the physical kind. The narrative does more than merely catalog these changes; it actively constructs a cohesive self that positions identity amidst temporal flux. [Feinberg \(1974: p. 66\)](#) considers this situatedness akin to a “continuum of desert” or better, a continuum of significance, where the normative weight of actions depends on integration into a cohesive framework of responsibility.⁴⁷ What’s more, the cohesive self emerges not merely as a passive product of integration but as the active synthesis of disparate elements through the interpretive function of moral narratives.

These narratives transcend the descriptive task of uniting past and present experiences by imposing an evaluative structure upon them, in lieu of removing agency from its relational depth. In doing so, they create a teleological scaffold that situates the self within a temporal continuum, wherein changes are not arbitrary disruptions but components of a larger, purposive trajectory. If it helps, think of a detective in a film or novel, pinning pictures, news clippings, letters, sketches, scribbles from a notepad, and so on, to a bulletin board, connecting them with string. This is a rudimentary example of the normative self (detective) expressed through narration (string).

Reductive approaches thus provide only limited insight into this evaluative structure by pointing toward how moral accountability *might* persist even in the absence of metaphysical unity. However, Parfit’s emphasis on causal dependence and psychological continuity fails to reconcile the relational with the normative. For instance, psychological continuity—with its causal dependence—suffices to preserve the moral significance of actions, so says Parfit, thereby situating actions within a continuum of *contained* relational importance rather than a singular self. This leaves the question of how such continuity can withstand the disjunction inherent in reductionist schemas unresolved. The narrative’s role in reframing past actions, as integral to ongoing moral development, is a task that Parfit inadequately supports.

To elaborate, the cohesive self is neither reducible to psychological continuity nor the biological persistence of the body, as stated. Psychological continuity, though necessary, is insufficient in isolation, for it provides only the raw material—insofar as memories, beliefs, values, and so on—without the organizing principle that confers coherence. Similarly, bodily continuity offers the substrate for existence but lacks any inherent capacity to articulate identity. It is through the interpretive process of moral narratives that these elements are unified, as the narrative does not merely reflect on the self but reconfigures its elements to align

⁴⁷Both Feinberg’s “continuum of desert” and my extension “continuum of significance” can be viewed from the first as well as the third person perspective, therefore strengthening the respective perspective’s role in the moral narrative.

with overarching moral and existential purposes. Hence, this synthesis involves the imposition of normative weight upon the flux of experiences. Moral narratives select, prioritize, and reframe events in light of values and commitments, effectively establishing a hierarchy of importance that defines what “matters” to the self (in relation). By doing so, they create a sense of unity not by denying change but by regarding it meaningfully within a stable moral horizon. The now cohesive self is found in the intercourse of the material and psychological, mediated by a narrative that positions both within a teleological and normative order.

In this sense, we return to the notion mentioned previously, that the cohesive self is not a static entity, but one continually reconstituted through the narrative’s ability to adapt to new experiences while preserving its fundamental orientation (our detective connecting yarn to new pushpins, creating a web of connections as events proceed). The process of narrativization thus reveals the self as fundamentally relational, defined through its engagement with temporal, moral, and existential dimensions. The cohesive self, therefore, is an emergent phenomenon of this interpretive and normative activity. That is to say, it is a synthesis that transcends its constituent parts to create a unified identity amidst perpetual change.

With this integration, we see the resolution of tension between discontinuity and accountability, as written of herein. For instance, a child who wins a chess tournament at age ten remains, decades later, the person who achieved this milestone, even though their body has aged and their psychological connection to that moment has weakened or is all but severed. Within an understanding of a normative self, such achievements are situated within a temporal framework that effectively transcends both the fading of memory and the transformations of the body over time, thereby ensuring past actions retain their significance not only to the agent but also to the moral community at large.

The normative self operating within a temporal dimension, grounding responsibility by linking all temporalities, as I have said, and with this linkage, pragmatically and necessarily rejects the reductionist view of diminishing responsibility. Instead, narrative coherence ensures that agents remain accountable as natural evolutions occur (as discussed). In John’s case, whose body physically connects him to the harm caused and whose psychological transformation reflects his ethical growth, the synthesis seen between these elements enables him to acknowledge his culpability while contextualizing his reform within a unified moral identity. This, in effect, prevents moral evasion, such that one cannot flee the significance of their actions, whether that fleeing is voluntary or not.⁴⁸ The embedding of actions in a temporal sense, in an ongoing narrative, therefore affirms that change does not negate but rather situates responsibility within a continuum of significance.

⁴⁸In John’s case, his lack of *fleeing* provides an inverse analogue: he neither escapes the consequences nor shirks responsibility, though his transformation exhibits both voluntary and involuntary aspects. Voluntary insofar as he made the effort to change his ways, so to speak, through his advocacy, seeking therapy, and achieving sobriety (arguably physical changes). Involuntary insofar as the temporal changes—that is, the passage of time—found John a mere husk of the man who killed Ethan (a psychological change).

From a narrative footing, the normative self reconciles the fluidity of bodily and psychological change with the need for moral continuity. For bodies age, memories fade, and psychological states transform, all of which agree with Parfit uncontroversially, of course; yet it is through the normative self, by situating these changes within a temporal moral structure, that integrity is retained. This, in turn, ensures the capacity for integration, one that does not see fragmentation caused by transformation but is instead enriched by its very change. This is insofar as the moral weight of past actions, such as a wrongdoing or an achievement, is preserved within the narrative even when the immediate markers of those actions fade, thereby not only being free from but resisting disjunctive tendencies of reductive theories, framing them instead as elements of the evolving identity: usable, and actionable, parts of the whole.

As a result, the normative self facilitates moral growth, providing, as [Feinberg \(1974: p. 98\)](#) puts it, “device[s] for the expression of attitudes”.⁴⁹ Transformations are then extensions of identity rather than disruptions, allowing individuals to reconcile their past actions with their present commitments and future aspirations. And what’s more, this adaptive and integrative practice situates identity within its own narrative—tethering ethical growth to accountability, always. This then promotes praiseworthiness and blameworthiness as emergent properties of “expressive functions” or moral realities, and not merely accounted for but evaluated in terms of their social and moral significance ([Feinberg, 1974: p. 98](#)). For John, reform is not an erasure of past wrongdoing but a reintegration of that harm into a narrative that reflects his commitments to preventing future harm (alluded to previously), in turn framing change as an integral and necessary aspect of moral agency, removed from the stasis of reduction, even fostering potential moral transformations. John’s conception of reform operates on the premise that moral progress requires not the obliteration of past transgressions but their integration into a broader, reflective narrative of accountability. This is all to say that we need blame and responsibility to grow, if we are to grow, that is. For “[h]ope of reward creates incentive to do worthy deeds, and the threat of punishment deters wrongdoing” ([Feinberg, 1974: p. 81](#)).

By acknowledging wrongdoing upon a scaffold of future-oriented commitments, we avoid the traps of reductive moral stasis, which might confine moral agency to a rigid, defensive posture aimed solely at blame avoidance (whether it be present or future, or even past). Instead, reform becomes dynamic, insofar as the process of reinterpreting past harms generates conditions for growth and ethical insight. Change, then, is reframed: not merely reactivity but a proactive and continuous element of moral agency, fostering transformations that are self-critical—therefore backward- and also forward-looking—where past harm functions as a catalyst for sustained moral evolution rather than as a static marker of failure,

⁴⁹While Feinberg uses this phrase to express how punishment is used in a community, the sentiment can be extended to autonomy and accountability rather easily. The negative aspects of retribution Feinberg writes of are merely the obverse to the positive force I argue accountability carries—positive accountability, so to speak.

seeing responses of reactive directive alterations or scurried corrective action. It is at the intersection of body, mind, and narrative, where the normative self provides coherence necessary for true ethical agency, a nexus through which transformation and accountability are reconciled pragmatically in one's moral life.

6. Closing Remarks

Recently, eight decades after the Netherlands was occupied by the Nazis and after three-quarters of the Dutch Jewish population were killed in the Holocaust, a Dutch government-funded group—the Huygens Institute—released the names of over four hundred thousand individuals who supposedly had collaborated with the Nazis during their occupation (Huygens Instituut, 2024). This points a finger at the interpersonal necessity, or the desire, to hold individuals accountable despite change—the very notion pressed herein. This action taken by the Huygens Institute's "War in Court" project shows the nature and resolve of the human spirit to implement—in the very real world—both backward-looking and forward-looking responsibility.⁵⁰ Backward, insofar as to hold those accountable for their actions, albeit many of them are deceased, thereby negating temporal extensions or statute of limitations, so to speak, which Parfit's own ninety-year-old man police assault thought experiment suggests. But also, forward-looking, insofar as creating a stimulus where the young Dutch population—twenty-three percent of whom believe the Holocaust was fabricated to whatever extent—can understand the actions of the past and, with hope, make necessary changes to promote more virtuous and ethical futures.

This then provides practical credence to the conceptual edifice of the normative self: an indispensable reconciliation between transformation and sustained moral accountability. Central to this is the assertion that ethical responsibility does not dissolve amidst the flux of change (or in the case of those hundreds of thousands of Axis collaborators: death), but is rather fortified through the integration of past actions into a coherent, evolving narrative of selfhood. For, as seen, if this were not to be the case, moral responsibility would be conceptually vacant, an illusion, or merely a yellow flag on events. Hence, this integrative process—the narrative formation—counters the centrifugal tendencies of identity fragmentation, ensuring that agency persists as the cohesive locus of moral obligations and aspirations, and therefore provides a structure for these moral realities. It is through this that the self emerges as not only a vessel of psychological continuity or physical persistence, but as a construct, actively authored through its very engagement with moral and temporal realities.

In a post-modern era marked by fluid and multifaceted identities, and as the intersections of cultural, social, and political forces continually reshape the con-

⁵⁰The *Oorlog voor de Rechter* ("War in Court") (Oorlog voor de Rechter, 2025) project examines the legal responses to war crimes and justice following World War II, focusing on international humanitarian law and judicial accountability. Combining archival research and historical analysis, it explores key trials and their impact on international law, societal memory, and the evolving role of courts in shaping norms of justice during and after conflict.

tours of selfhood, understanding the normative self resists the potential for reductive tendencies of atomistic or static conceptualizations. Instead, it situates identity as an evolving narrative, tethered to both individual agency and communal interdependence and the responsibility in kind. This tethering ensures that the obligations of the self remain intelligible and actionable, even as the context of identity shifts, and even more so, it is honed by this dual notion. By embedding transformations within a scaffold of moral realities, our normative selves have continuity enough to sustain ethical coherence in an increasingly pluralistic landscape. These very changes, ones that, while inevitable, do not absolve from the ethical weight of actions; rather, they amplify the imperative to integrate actions within a reflective narrative that aligns with present commitments and future aspirations. Such integration, the interpretive functions of which hold fast the normative dimensions of identity—the capacity to ascribe meaning, recognize obligations, and situate oneself within a temporal and moral continuum—thereby preserves the relational and communal dimensions of moral realities, and firmly situates its maxims within the shared norms and values that underpin collective ethical life.

Moreover, the normative self provides a mechanism for negotiating the tensions between personal autonomy and communal accountability. In doing so, it rejects the pitfalls of relativism that often accompany the emphasis on isolated identities. Instead, it insists on the intersubjective nature of moral norms, wherein individual identities are shaped and sustained through reciprocal recognition and mutual obligation. This then ensures that the moral community remains vigorous, capable of incorporating diverse perspectives without succumbing to incoherence, arbitrariness, passivity, or barbarous rigidity. Through its framing of identity as a relational and teleological structure, the normative self affirms the indispensability of accountability as both personal and communal. At a more granular level, this model pragmatically expresses how moral realities function as dual-temporal phenomena, ones that ground while allowing for substantive change, instead of one at the expense of the other.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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